

# Ten

Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs

**WE RECOMMEND** a renewed commitment to adult education opportunities, one that supplements existing basic skills training and General Educational Development opportunities with a new “honors GED,” and better coordination of federal and state efforts to provide adult education, veterans benefits, outreach programs and student aid.

Adult education generally refers to any form of continuing education beyond the traditional school years. Thus, whether an individual is returning to college to complete a degree, enrolling in college for the first time, taking an occasional postsecondary class or pursuing a GED certificate, he or she is participating in adult education.

In accordance with the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of the Workforce Investment Act passed in 1998, states must report on participation and outcomes of federally funded adult education programs through the Office of Vocational and Adult Education's National Reporting System (NRS). NRS tracks four core follow-up outcome measures to determine the number of participants who enter employment, retain employment, receive a secondary school diploma or GED, or are placed in postsecondary education or training. The system is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the varying goals, objectives, data collection and reporting constraints of the states. Because of these inconsistencies, researchers are somewhat limited in their ability to compare state outcomes through NRS.

Two primary limitations emerge for using NRS as a source for this recommendation. First, the data of interest are not disaggregated by age range. While adult education encompasses a broader age range (e.g., 25 to 64 when looking at the workforce as a whole), the indicators in this chapter are limited to young adults, ages 25 to 34, in order to understand the role of adult education programs in achieving the overall commission goal. States appear to have differential participation in adult education from various age groups. Thus, while outcomes may be largely driven by younger adults in some states, they are a function of older adults in other states. Second, the collection and reporting of data make it impossible to separate postsecondary education from postsecondary training, which is also critical to the nature of this recommendation and the overall goal. Postsecondary training is defined as an occupational skills program building on previously received services or training.

Despite these limitations for using NRS data in the current publication, policymakers should familiarize themselves with this source, as several general findings raise concerns about the potential for increasing degree attainment among adult learners. For example, NRS classifies a learner's adult education goal into the following categories: obtain a job, retain current job, improve current job, earn a secondary school diploma or GED, enter postsecondary education or training, improve basic literacy skills, improve English language skills, citizenship, work-based project learner goal, or other personal goals. The data suggest that only a small portion of participants come into adult education programs with the goal of entering postsecondary education or training. For most states, the vast majority of participants aim to earn a GED or secondary school diploma. The remaining participants indicate, in descending order, a goal of entering employment, retaining employment, and entering postsecondary education or training.

In addition, only a portion of those with the initial objective of entering postsecondary education or training appear to achieve this goal. States track core outcome achievement through follow-up surveys or through matching data with other sources (e.g., workforce data systems). Therefore, differences in their outcomes may stem from differential success in obtaining follow-up data for participants in adult education programs.

The American Council on Education (ACE), which owns and administers the GED, is in the midst of several changes that aim to improve GED attainment and further connect adult learners with postsecondary education and career opportunities. For example, the test will transition to a computer-based platform by 2013. ACE also recently announced the development of a new GED test to be introduced in 2014 that will align with the Common Core State Standards.

**Three indicators are presented for this recommendation:**

- Educational attainment for adults ages 25 to 34;
- Adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma who attain a GED; and
- Enrollment of nontraditional students in postsecondary education.

## General Findings for This Recommendation

- As of 2009, 61.4 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 do not have a college degree.
- As of 2009, 2.7 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma are GED candidates.
- As of 2009, 1.6 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma attain a GED.
- As of 2007, 6.9 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 are enrolled in undergraduate study at postsecondary institutions in the United States.

# 61.3%

As of 2009, 61.3 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 do not have a college degree.

▼ **1.0ppts** 2008–2009

## Educational Attainment for Adults Ages 25 to 34

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** This measure provides insight into the challenges and opportunities for increasing educational attainment among adults ages 25 to 34 in states and across the nation as a whole. The population without a college degree is composed of several groups — individuals without a high school diploma (or its equivalent), individuals with a high school diploma (or its equivalent) who have not attended college and individuals with some college but who have not earned a degree. This measure illustrates why states need to differentiate their strategies for increasing educational attainment, as the needs of the first group are substantially different from those of the last group.

**What are the policy issues associated with this measure?** The composition of young adults who have yet to earn a college degree differs across states based on race/ethnicity, educational progress, socioeconomic status and a variety of other factors. In order to raise educational attainment, states need to implement different policies and approaches, depending on which specific populations they need to target. For example, as reflected in the eight-year graduation rates in Recommendation Nine and enrollment in undergraduate education in the final indicator of this chapter, a portion of young adults with some college are on the verge of earning a degree. However, others have exited postsecondary education altogether.

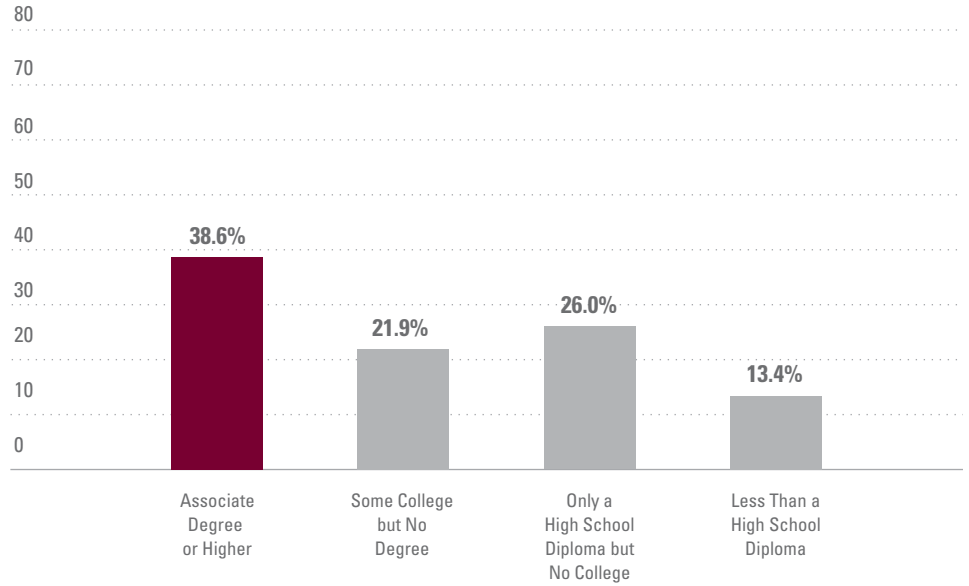
States should consider the financial challenges that young adults face when pursuing educational opportunities in order to better understand how this age group pays for college and what incentives might be provided to institutions, individuals or employers to help support state and national educational attainment goals.

**Where are we now?** As of 2009, 61.3 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 in the United States do not have a college degree. Specifically, 13.4 percent do not have a high school diploma (or its equivalent), 26.0 percent have a high school diploma (or its equivalent) but have not attended college, 21.9 percent have some college but no degree, and 38.6 percent have an associate degree or higher (Figure 10.1a). About 69.1 percent of Asian and 48.7 percent of white young adults have earned an associate degree or higher, compared to only 29.4 percent of African American and 19.2 percent of Hispanic young adults (Figure 10.1b). In addition, young Hispanic adults have the highest percentage without a high school diploma (or its equivalent).

### 10.1a

### National Educational Attainment of Adults Ages 25–34, 2009

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

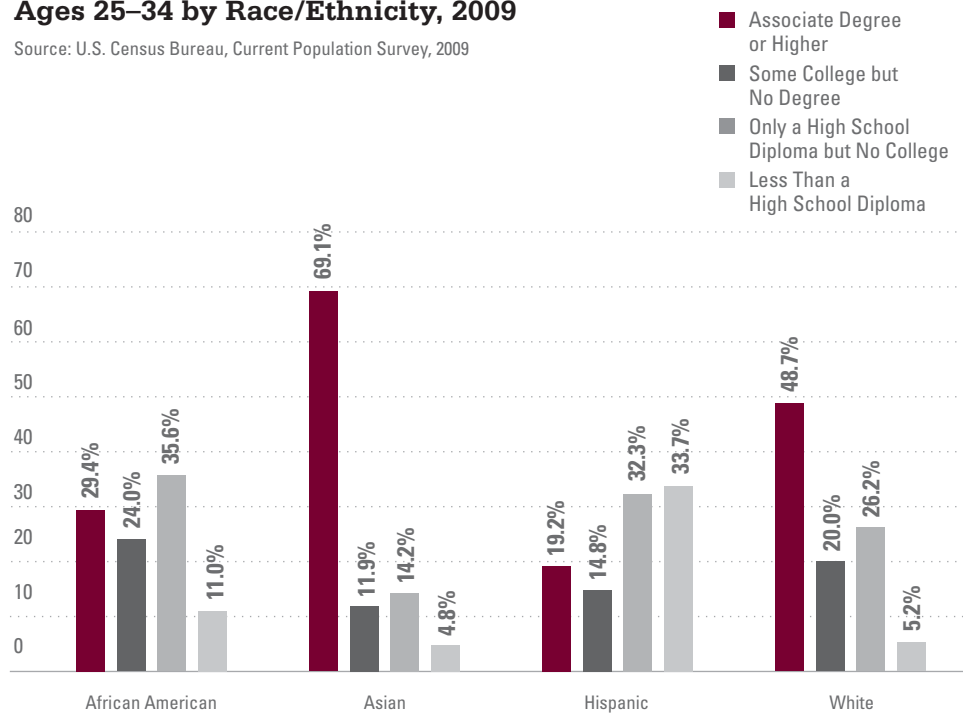


### 10.1b

### National Educational Attainment of Adults Ages 25–34 by Race/Ethnicity, 2009

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2009

New figure +



When disaggregated by state, the percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with less than a high school diploma (or its equivalent) ranges from 4.0 percent in North Dakota to 19.5 percent in Texas (Figure 10.1c). When placed in rank order, the states with the lowest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 without a high school diploma (or its equivalent) are North Dakota, Hawaii, Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire. The states with the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 without a high school diploma (or its equivalent) are Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico.

When disaggregated by state, the percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with a high school diploma (or its equivalent) but no college ranges from 15.6 in the District of Columbia to 37.9 percent in West Virginia (Figure 10.1d). When placed in rank order, the states with the lowest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with a high school diploma (or its equivalent) but no college are the District of Columbia, Minnesota, Nebraska, Massachusetts and Colorado. The states with the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with a high school diploma (or its equivalent) but no college are West Virginia, Arkansas, Maine, Tennessee and Louisiana.

When disaggregated by state, the percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with some college but no degree ranges from 12.1 percent in the District of Columbia to 31.5 in Alaska (Figure 10.1e). When placed in rank order, the states with the lowest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with some college but no degree are the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, New York, Vermont and Pennsylvania. The states with the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with some college but no degree are Alaska, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and New Mexico.

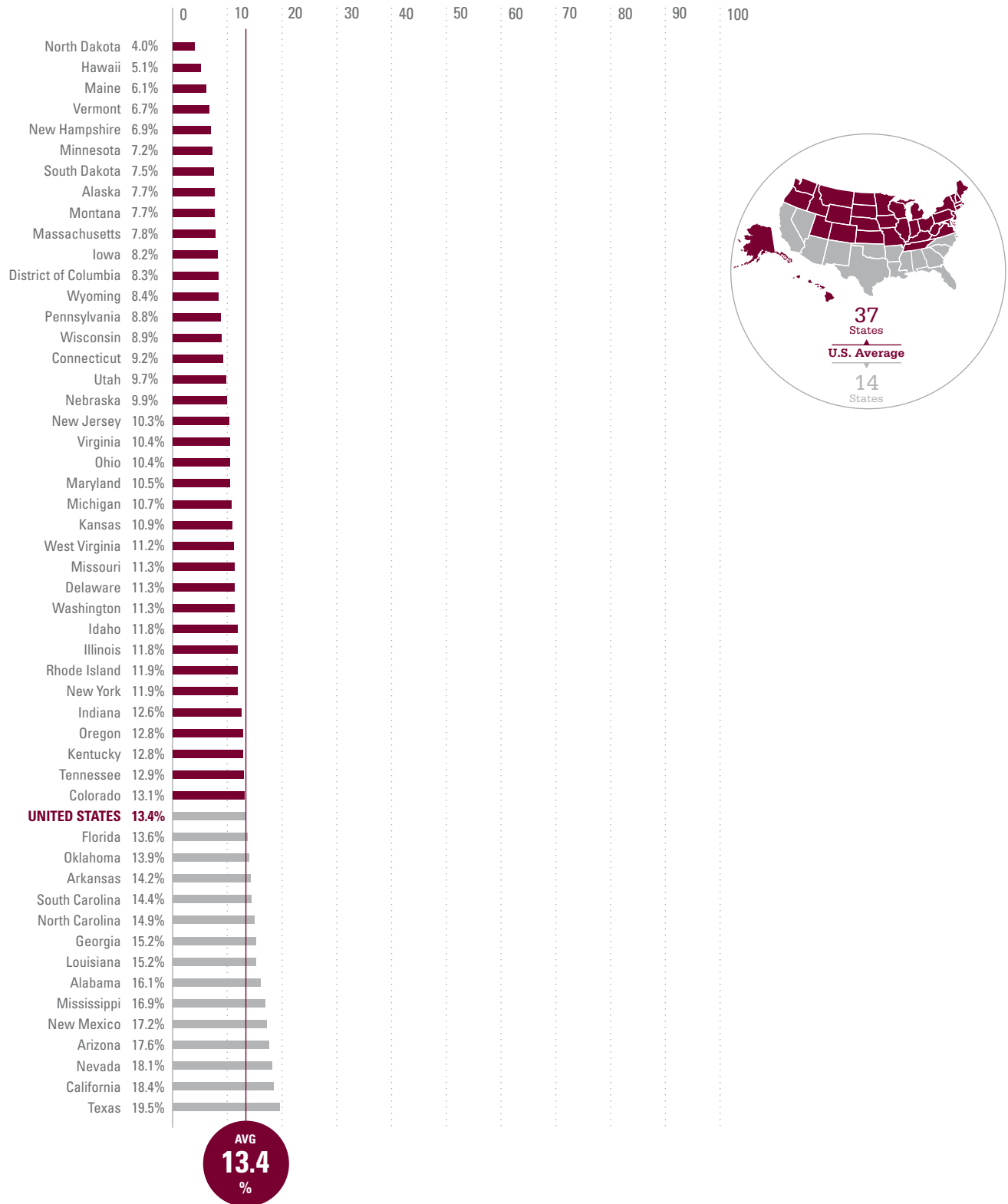
### **When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?**

Methodological differences between the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) and the American Community Survey (ACS) result in slightly different estimates of college degree attainment between this indicator and that presented in Figure D of the overview. Both surveys are subject to sampling errors, which should be considered when interpreting estimates. Compared to the one- and three-year ACS estimates, the five-year ACS estimates show the lowest margin of error. Estimates by race/ethnicity in Figure 10.1b are from CPS data, as they are not available by race/ethnicity in the ACS. Finally, "high school diploma" includes high school graduates as well as those who earned a GED or alternative high school equivalency certificate.

10.1c

**Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 with Less Than a High School Diploma by State Rank, 2009**

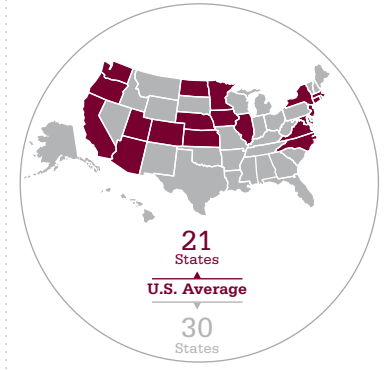
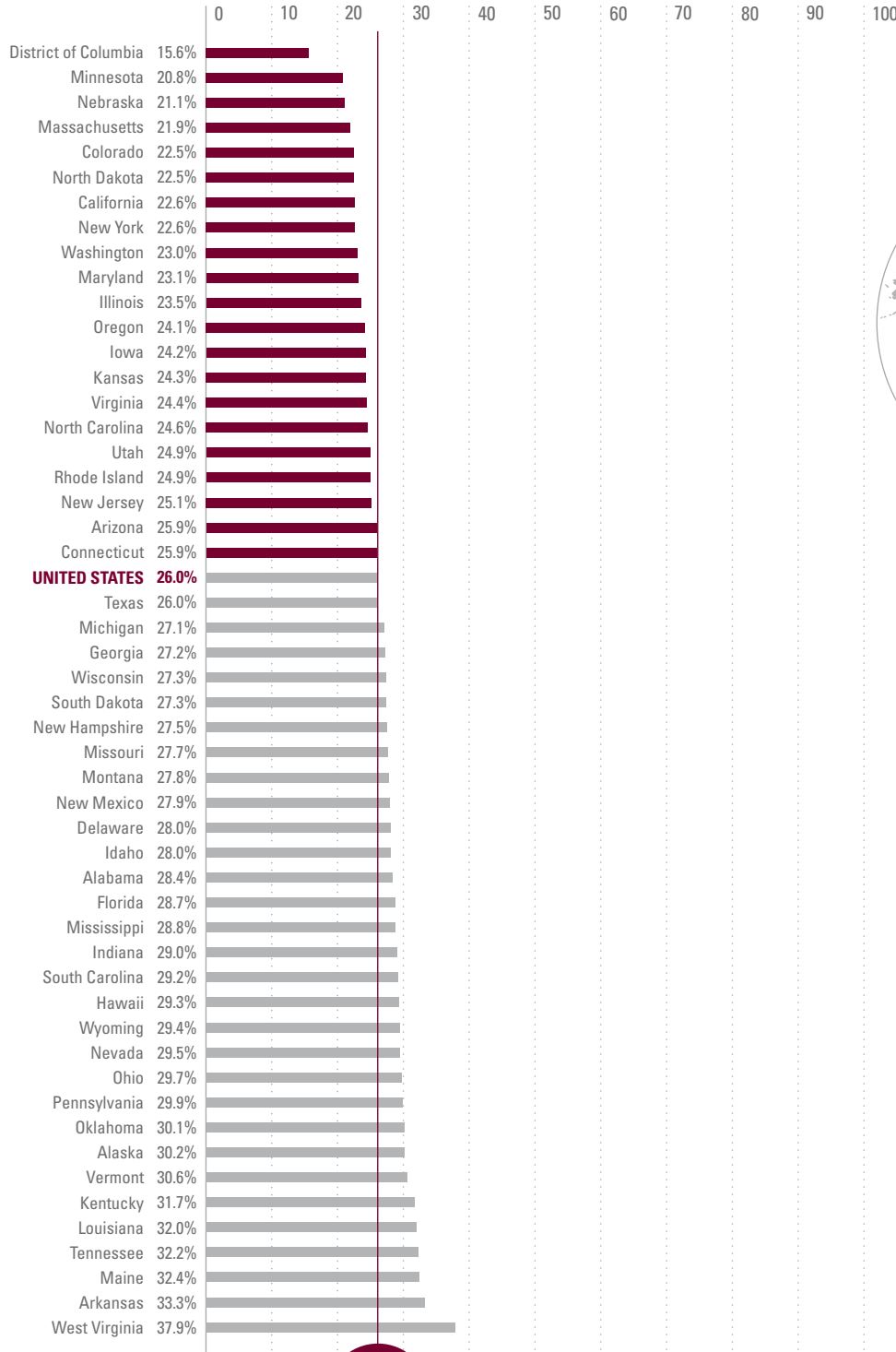
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates



10.1d

**Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 with Only a High School Diploma but No College by State Rank, 2009**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

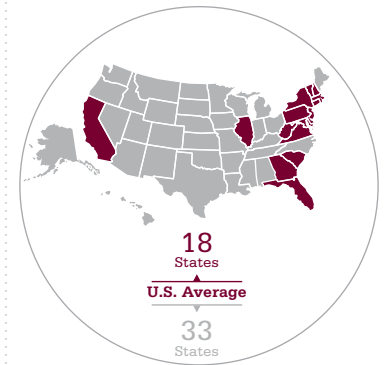
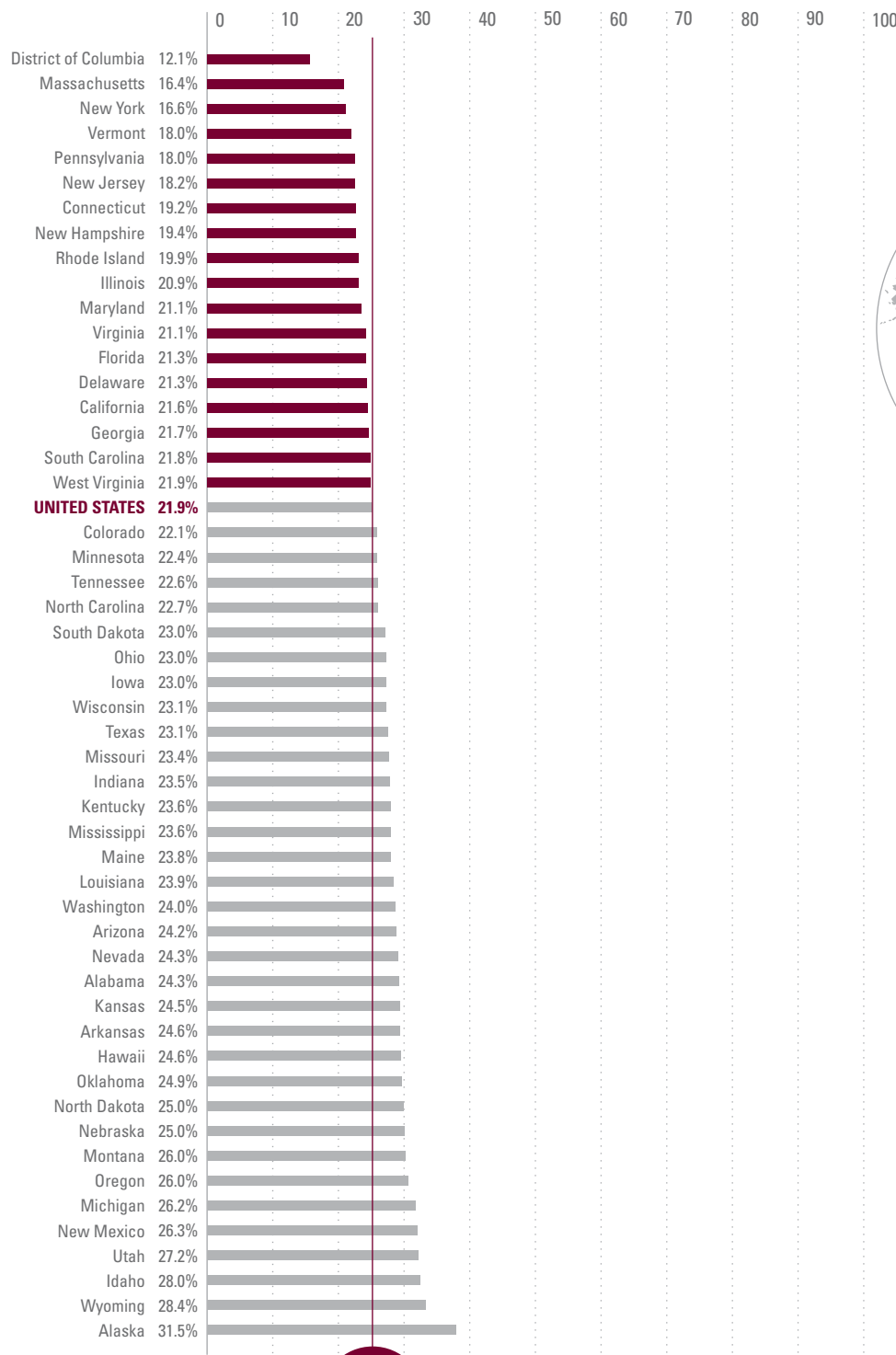


AVG  
**26.0**  
%

10.1e

**Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 with Some College but No Degree by State Rank, 2009**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates



AVG  
**21.9**  
%

# 2.7%

As of 2009, 2.7 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma are GED candidates.

◀▶ 2008–2009

# 1.6%

As of 2009, 1.6 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma attain a GED.

◀▶ 2008–2009

## Adults Ages 25 to 34 with No High School Diploma Who Attain a GED

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** One of the primary focuses of most adult basic education programs is helping individuals earn a high school equivalency certificate or GED. The GED provides a path to certify high-school-level academic knowledge and skills attainment, which can open the door to better job opportunities and/or postsecondary education. Adults ages 25 to 34 may choose to pursue a GED for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to having dropped out of high school or failed to pass required state assessments that lead to a standard high school diploma, immigration, home schooling, the desire to improve job prospects and so forth.

As shown in the previous indicator, on the path to college degree attainment, earning a high school equivalency certificate represents the first hurdle that must be overcome for roughly one in eight adults ages 25 to 34. This measure is important because it helps states understand the degree to which this group of young adults is taking steps to improve their educational attainment. It shows the proportion of the target population who are attempting a GED and earning a GED.

**What are the policy issues associated with this measure?** A high school diploma or its equivalent provides a foundation for basic job skills, but in order to create a highly qualified workforce, states should strive to help young adults use a high school diploma or GED attainment as a launching point for further education and training as opposed to an endpoint of an educational journey. States should develop or enhance outreach programs to target segments of the population who have not yet earned a high school credential and examine existing policies and programs to identify potential barriers to participation in adult basic education programs. Although there is a need to increase access across states, it is also clear that many states need to develop strategies to improve pass rates for young adults who are already accessing basic adult education services.

**Where are we now?** As of 2009, 2.7 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma are GED candidates (Figure 10.2a). When disaggregated by state, the percentage of young adults with no high school diploma who are GED candidates ranges from 1.4 percent in California to 8.8 percent in Maine (Figure 10.2b). When placed in rank order, the states with the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma who are GED candidates are Maine, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming and Montana. The states with the lowest percentage are California, Kansas, Texas, Delaware and Nevada.

As of 2009, 1.6 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma attained a GED (Figure 10.2c). When disaggregated by state, the percentage of young adults with no high school diploma who attain a GED ranges from 0.8 percent in California to 4.7 percent in North Dakota (Figure 10.2d). When placed in rank order, the states with the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma who attain a GED are North Dakota, Maine, Wyoming, Montana and West Virginia. The states with the lowest percentage are California, Texas, the District of Columbia, Maryland and Rhode Island.

**When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?** The GED test battery is composed of five separate assessments in reading, writing, mathematics, science and the social sciences. To earn a GED, a test-taker must earn a minimum passing score within each content area and surpass a minimum total score across the five areas. Passing scores are set by individual states. ACE defines a “candidate” as any individual who attempts at least one of the five tests. The test-taker must neither finish a test nor achieve the minimum score in order to be included as a candidate. “Completers” are defined as those who test in all five content areas, and “passers” have met the requirements set forth by their state and are awarded a GED. Completion and pass rates vary by state. Figure 10.2a focuses on candidates in order to show the proportion of state’s target population who are taking the first step toward a GED. Figure 10.2b focuses on passers in order to show the proportion of the target population that achieves the goal of a GED. Comparable information for completers is not presented in the ACE annual statistical reports.

Estimates of the number of adults ages 25 to 34 with no high school diploma are from the five-year American Community Survey data, as it contains the lowest margin of error of the three options available from the U.S. Census Bureau. Thus, the same denominator is used for all years included in this indicator. Although it is unlikely that the actual number of adults without a high school diploma in this age range remained exactly stable, the size of the margin of error in the one-year estimates relative to the size of the population of adults in the same age range attempting or earning a GED is of concern. State-level ranked data in particular should be interpreted with caution, as the margin of error in estimating the size of the target population of interest is, for some states, nearly as large as the estimate of the number of adults ages 25 to 34 attempting or earning a GED. However, both the raw numbers and the calculated estimates suggest that for the vast majority of states, only a small portion of adults without a high school diploma are taking the first step toward becoming eligible for entry into postsecondary education.

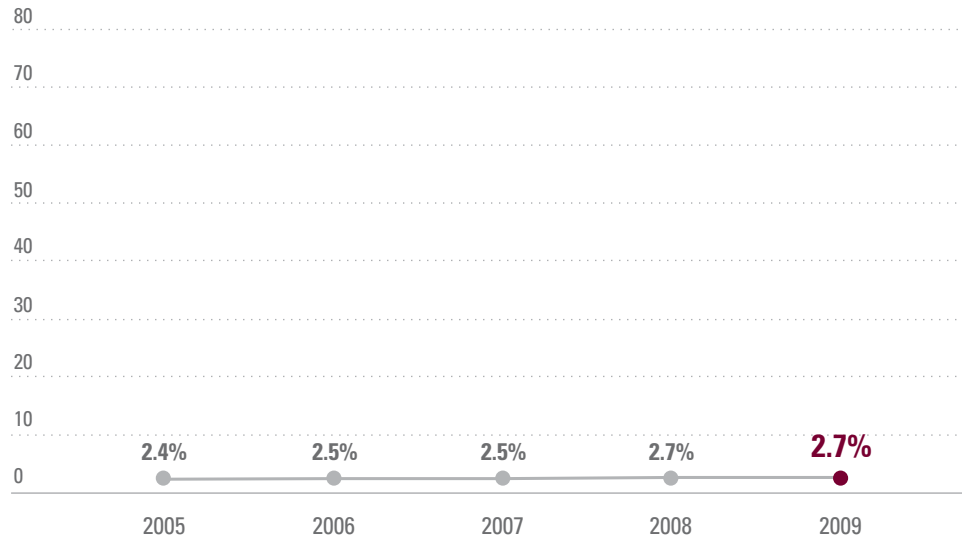
10.2a

**National Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34  
with No High School Diploma Who Were GED  
Candidates, 2005–2009**

Updated data source



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates; American Council on Education 2005–2009 Annual Statistical Reports



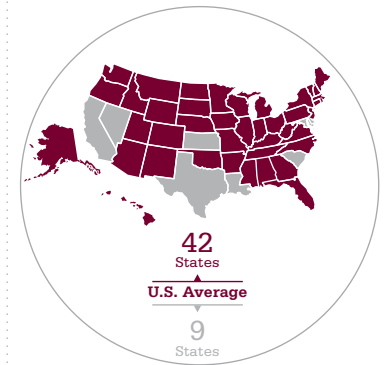
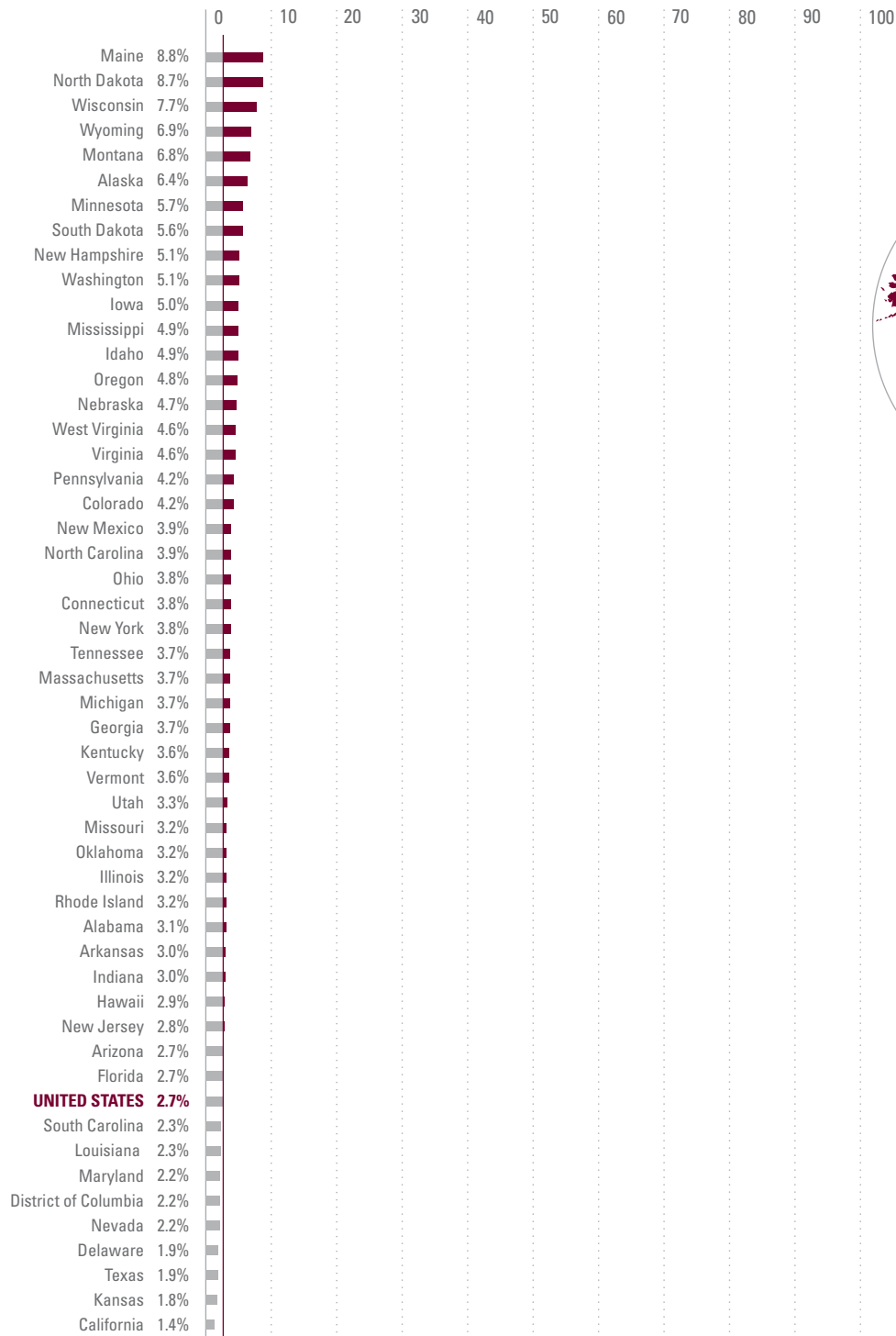
10.2b

**Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 with No High School Diploma Who Were GED Candidates by State Rank, 2009**

Updated data source



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates; American Council on Education 2009 Annual Statistical Report



AVG  
**2.7**  
%

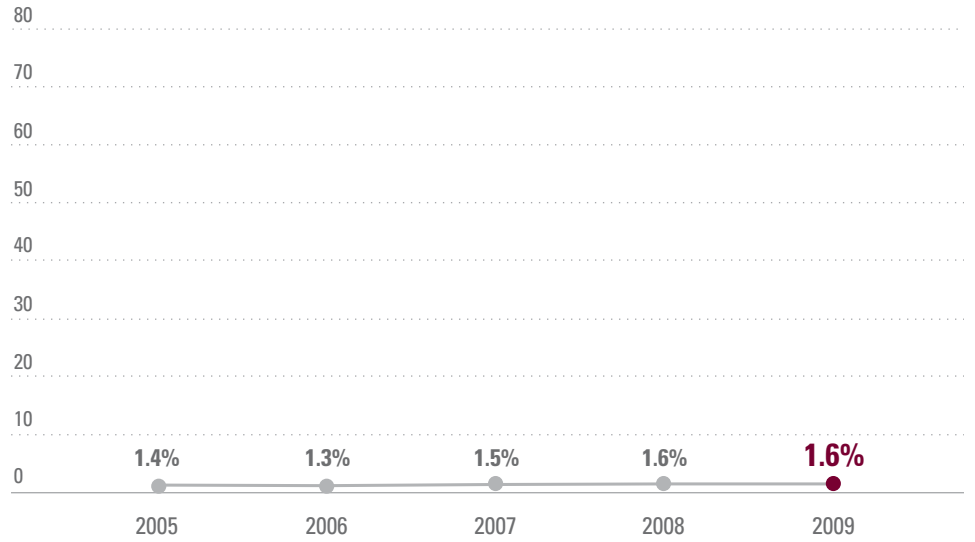
10.2c

**National Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 with No High School Diploma Who Attained a GED, 2005–2009**

Updated data source



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates; American Council on Education 2005–2009 Annual Statistical Reports



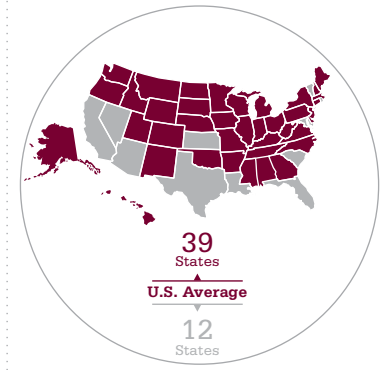
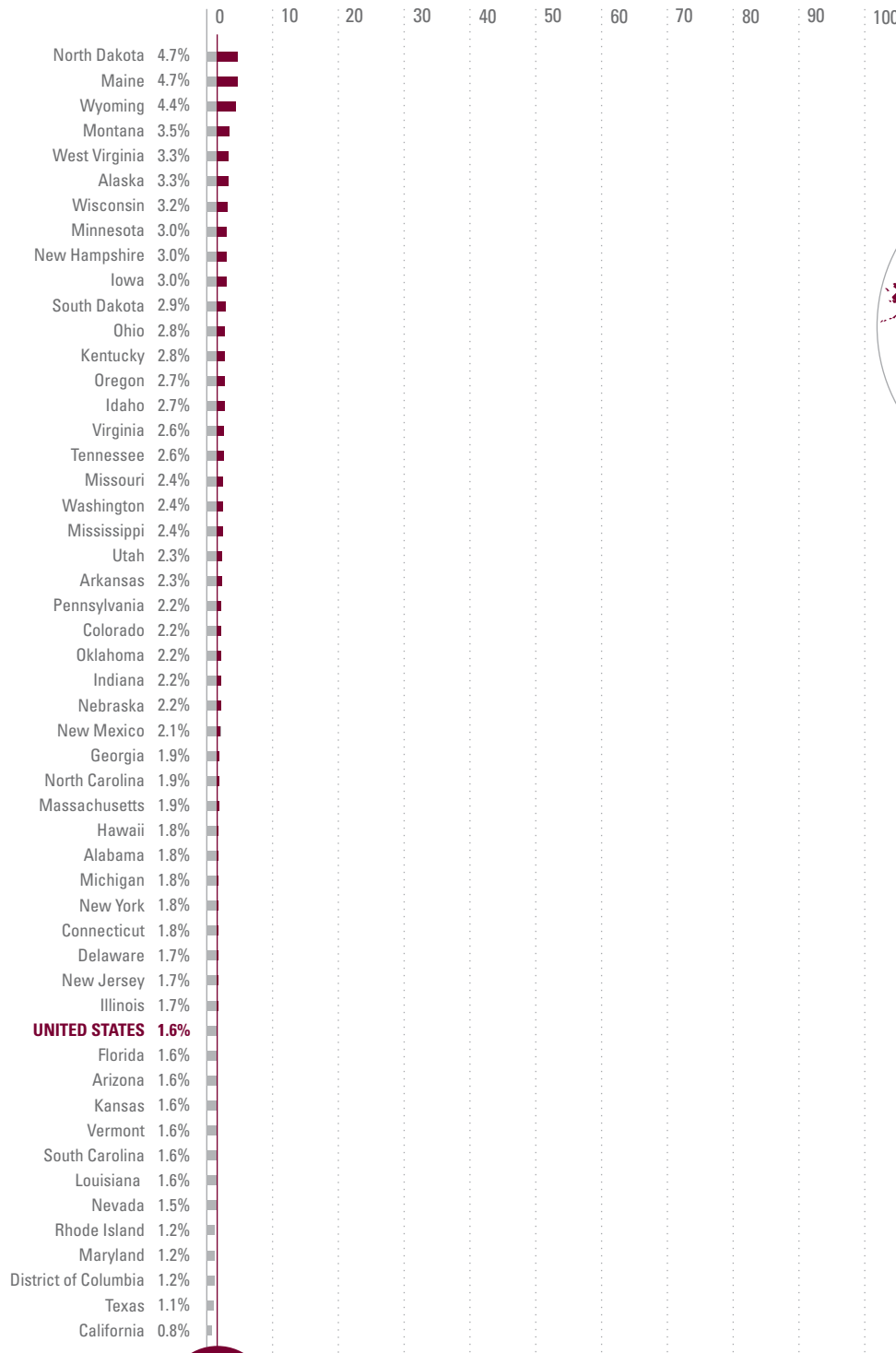
10.2d

**Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 with No High School Diploma Who Attained a GED by State Rank, 2009**

Updated data source



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates; American Council on Education 2009 Annual Statistical Report



AVG  
**1.6**  
%



# 6.9%

As of 2007, 6.9 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 are enrolled in undergraduate study at postsecondary institutions in the United States.

## Enrollment of Nontraditional Students in Postsecondary Education

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** This measure examines the percentage of nontraditional students ages 25 to 34 seeking undergraduate postsecondary education. It provides insight into the immediate potential for increasing the college-degree attainment outcomes discussed earlier in this chapter and in the overall goal. Young adults enrolled in undergraduate postsecondary education may fall into one of several categories: students who enroll immediately after high school and have not yet completed their degrees; students who entered higher education at a later, nontraditional time; or students who are returning to school for additional study after earning a prior associate or bachelor's degree.

Alternatively, one could examine the ratio of the number of young adults enrolled in undergraduate postsecondary education to the number of young adults without a high school diploma, to the number of young adults with some college but no degree, or to some combination thereof. These alternatives cannot be interpreted directly as percentages, since we have no knowledge of the educational background of the young adults enrolled in undergraduate studies. The results of the current indicator can be interpreted in a more straightforward manner.

**What are the policy issues associated with this measure?** Young adults ages 25 to 34 are a crucial part of the adult education community. Pursuing further education in early adulthood affords the learner decades of economic stability and opportunity. Chances for nontraditional students to train and retrain are imperative for upward mobility and for meeting the needs of a changing economy.

**Where are we now?** As of 2007, 6.9 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 are enrolled in undergraduate study at postsecondary institutions in the United States (Figure 10.3a). When disaggregated by state, the percentage of young adults enrolling in undergraduate study ranges from 4.2 percent in New Hampshire to 15.7 percent in Arizona (Figure 10.3b). When placed in rank order, the states with the highest percentage of young adults ages 25 to 34 enrolling in undergraduate study are Arizona, District of Columbia, Iowa, Utah and New Mexico. The states with the lowest percentage are New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

### When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?

Many students attend college in a state other than their home state. Thus, the numerator in this indicator may be composed of both in-state and out-of-state students, while the denominator may reflect mostly state residents. It is possible that adult undergraduate students are more likely to be state residents, but this should be considered when interpreting state-level outcomes of this measure. In addition, the growth of online educational programs, which tend to attract nontraditional aged students, may skew the results for certain states. For example, several large online institutions are based in Arizona. The proportion of young adults in Arizona's undergraduate enrollment who are state residents is unknown.

Some caution is warranted in interpreting trends associated with this measure, given the margin of error in calculating the 25- to 34-year-old population with the American Community Survey's one-year estimates. Figure 10.3a is based on the one-year ACS population estimates. Figure 10.3b is based on the five-year ACS estimates in order to reduce the margin of error in the population estimates, which is of concern in some states. Lastly, institutions are required to report enrollment by age to IPEDS every other survey year.

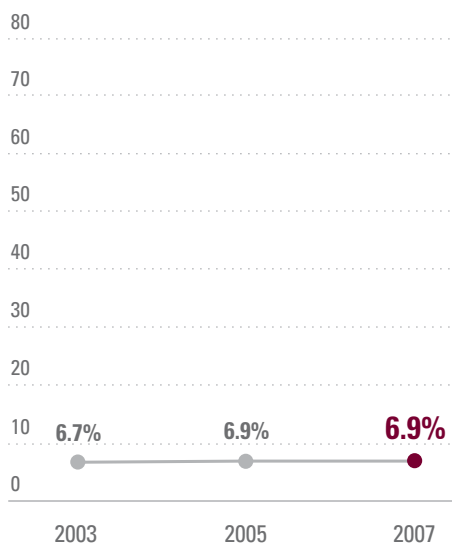
## 10.3a

### National Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, 2003–2007

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment Survey, 2003–2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003–2007 American Community Survey One-Year-Estimates



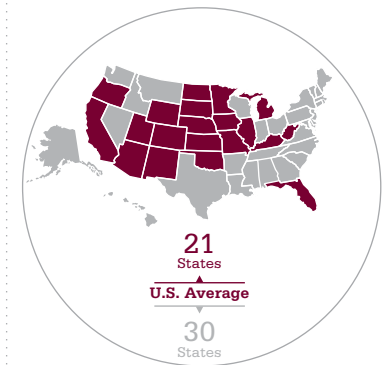
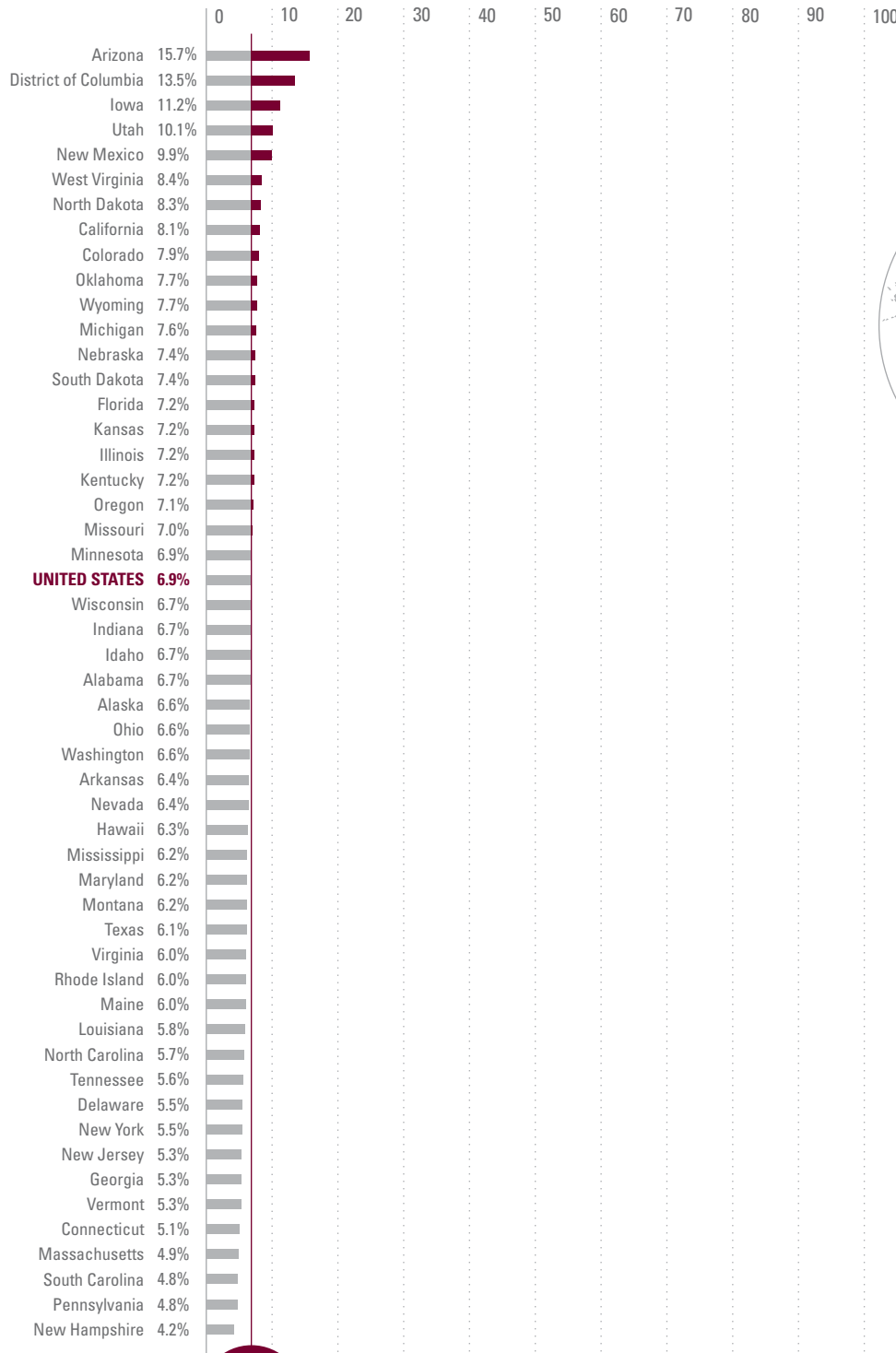
10.3b

**Percentage of Adults Ages 25–34 Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, 2007**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment Survey, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2009 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates



AVG  
**6.9**  
%