



Everybody's Problem

A Closer Look at Arizona's High School Graduation Rate

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March 2007

Executive Summary

According to a range of national studies, Arizona's graduation rate is below the national average. Some might suggest that because Arizona has a higher proportion of ethnic minority students, and those students traditionally graduate at lower levels, their academic performance lowers the state graduation rate. This paper demonstrates that the lower than average graduation rates in Arizona are prevalent across all racial/ethnic groups, and not only among ethnic minority students. Using the graduation rate formula recommended by the National Governor's Association, this paper presents comparisons of Arizona's graduation rate with the graduation rates of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Texas. These comparisons indicate that across all ethnic groups, Arizona's graduation rate is lagging behind "high performing states" such as Iowa and Wisconsin as well as behind demographically similar states such as Texas. We conclude that multiple strategies will be required in order to improve the educational performance of students in the state of Arizona and to raise graduation rates overall. The unique challenges facing Arizona's multiple ethnic groups must be addressed. At the same time, Arizona's high ethnic minority population can not be used as an "excuse" in explaining low graduation rates.

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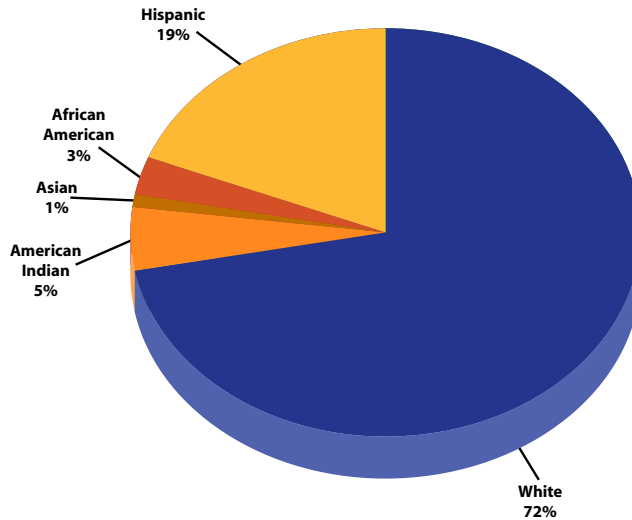
Recent attention to Arizona’s low average graduation rate has caused heightened concern among legislators, educators, parents, and students. The evidence from a variety of research reports indicates that Arizona’s graduation rate falls below the national average, and when compared nationally to other states Arizona is often found near the bottom of the list (see Table 1).

Table 1: Graduation/Completion Rates by Different Methodologies and how Arizona Ranks Nationally			
<u>Organization</u>	<u>Arizona’s Graduation Rate</u>	<u>National Graduation Rate</u>	<u>Arizona’s National Rank</u>
Manhattan Institute (Greene & Winters)	70.0% (2002)	71%	33 rd out of 50
Urban Institute (Swanson)	67.3% (2001)	68%	33 rd out of 51
Education Commission of the States (Rupert)	59.0% (2000)	67%	41 st out of 50

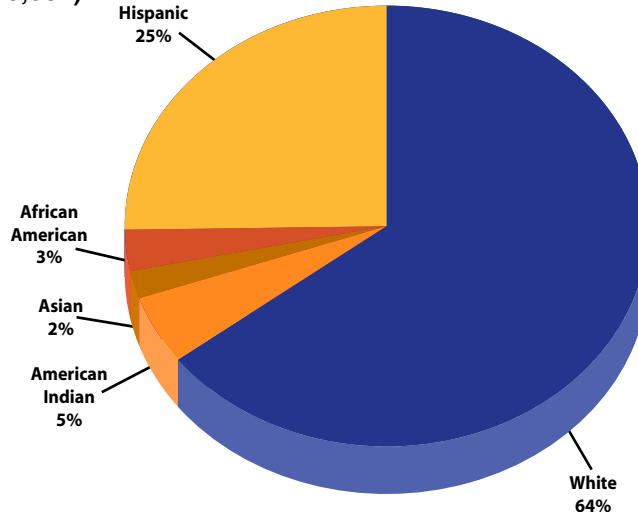
Because the quality of education and the academic outcomes of our students play a central role in the economic and social development of the state, many have sought to understand the evidence for why Arizona is underperforming in this regard. Some have viewed the changing demographic characteristics in Arizona as a factor in the state’s low graduation rate.

The population in Arizona has seen some dramatic changes in recent years. Figure 1 demonstrates that not only has the overall population of AZ increased, but the state has also become much more ethnically diverse in the last ten years.

**Figure 1: 1990 Arizona Population Breakdown by Race and Ethnicity
(Total 3,665,228)**



**2000 Arizona Population Breakdown by Race and Ethnicity
(Total 5,130,632)**



The growing number of Hispanic residents in the state is particularly prominent. Immigration and natural increase have added 600,000 Hispanics to Arizona’s population in the last ten years, and Hispanics now represent 25 percent of all Arizonans and 36 percent of those under 18 years of age (US Census Bureau, 2000). The increasing ethnic diversity within Arizona schools mirrors this larger population shift, with 45% of students in the Arizona cohort class of 2004 belonging to an ethnic minority group. Latinos comprise a growing population of Arizona’s urban schools. For example, Latino students now account for half the K-12 population in Phoenix and Tucson schools (US Census Bureau, PL 94-171, 2000; Waits, et al., 2001).

When addressing school achievement in light of these demographic changes, some might argue that Arizona has a lower than average graduation rate because Arizona has a larger proportion of ethnic minority students than other states. The fact that, on average, ethnic minority students perform less well than White, non-Hispanic students might lead some to believe that the proportion of ethnic minority students within the state brings down the overall state graduation rate.

A superficial glance at state rankings of graduation rates might support this argument. For example, in a study from the Education Commission of the States (Rupert, 2003), the states with the highest graduation rates tend to have a lower proportion of ethnic minority students, whereas the ten states with the lowest graduation rates tend to have a higher proportion of ethnic minority students (see Table 2).

Table 2: Education Commission of the States – Class of 2000 State Rankings by Graduation Rates			
Top Twelve States (tie for 10th)	Graduation Rate	Bottom Ten States	Graduation Rate
New Jersey	86	Alabama	59
Minnesota	84	Arizona	59
Nebraska	84	New York	59
North Dakota	84	North Carolina	59
Utah	84	Louisiana	56
Iowa	83	Mississippi	56
Vermont	79	Florida	55
Montana	78	Tennessee	55
Wisconsin	78	Georgia	52
Connecticut	77	South Carolina	51
Idaho	77		
Maine	77		

As demonstrated in reports from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE, 2005), Arizona’s ethnic minority students demonstrate lower scores on achievement tests and lower graduation rates than their White, non-Hispanic peers, and these achievement outcomes should remain a major concern (see Table 3). However, the proportion of ethnic minority students in Arizona is not the only contributing factor to the state’s low graduation rate. When examining states such as Arizona, one finds that lower graduation rates are present across all racial/ethnic groups, including White, non-Hispanic students.

Table 3: Arizona Department of Education Graduation Rate for Class of 2004 by Race/Ethnicity	
Total	76.8%
Hispanic	66.6%
African American	72.9%
Native American	63.2%
Asian	87.1%
White	84.3%

Arizona's ongoing population growth will continue to impact the demographics of the state, which will in turn influence enrollment patterns of children in schools. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand how different majority and minority populations are performing within the state and work to impact positive academic success for all of our students.

The central purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that low graduation rates in Arizona can not be attributed solely to a particular ethnic group or groups, but rather results from the cumulative effect of low graduation rates among all ethnic groups, including the White student population. Stated in another way, the high proportion of Hispanic students does not fully explain Arizona's low graduation rates despite the large number of such students and their relatively low average graduation rates. To conduct this analysis, the present study will compare the graduation rates of Arizona and two high performing, or benchmark, states (Iowa and Wisconsin). Also, the present study will compare the graduation rates for all ethnic groups in Arizona with the graduation rates of one state that is demographically similar (Texas). With these comparisons, the study contributes to public policy research by summarizing how Arizona compares to other states in terms of graduation rates and underscores the need to focus on the systemic issues impacting Arizona's educational system as well as on the performance of individual ethnic groups.

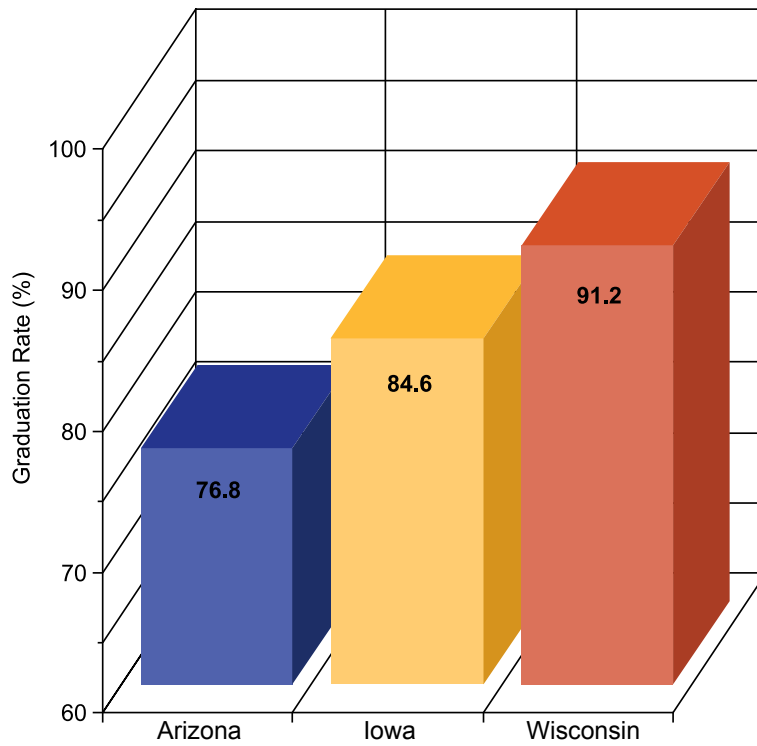
Strategy for Comparing Graduation Rates across Different States

Graduation rates have been a prominent part of public policy discussions about educational attainment and achievement. However, until recently, using graduation data to make cross-state comparisons remained a difficult and tenuous endeavor. Many states did not collect graduation data, and of those states that did, many often used disparate formulas for calculating graduation rates. In response to this issue, the National Governors' Association (NGA) recommended that all states adopt and begin taking steps to implement a standard four-year, adjusted cohort graduation rate (NGA, 2005). The present study has identified three states (Iowa, Wisconsin, and Texas) which have adopted the NGA's formula for calculating graduation rates which can serve as useful comparison states for Arizona.

Comparing Graduation Rates of Iowa, Wisconsin and Arizona

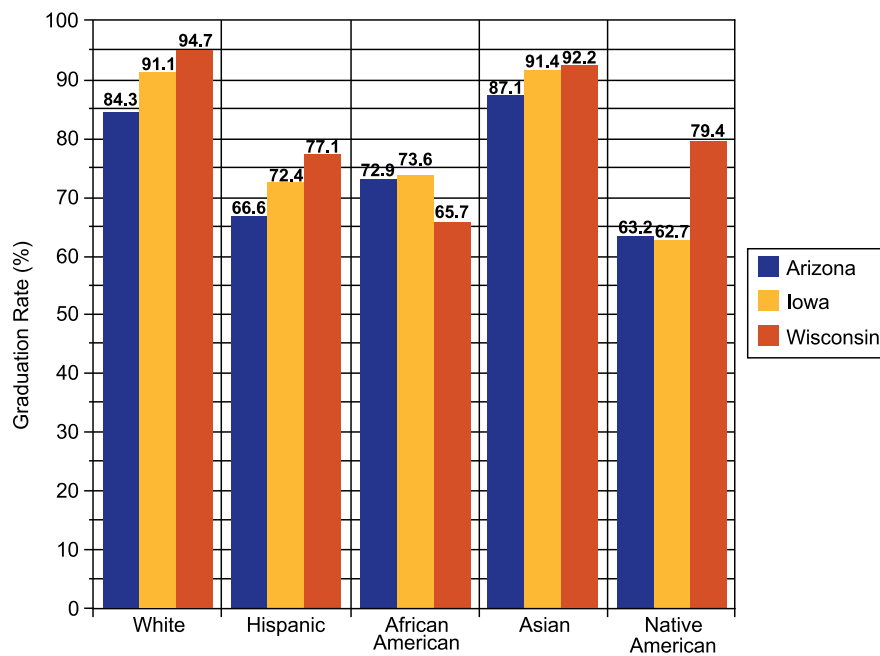
The states of Iowa and Wisconsin have been identified in several research studies as "high performing" states in that they both evidence high rankings on several academic indicators, including state graduation rates. When compared to Arizona, Iowa and Wisconsin show higher graduation rates overall (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Arizona, Iowa and Wisconsin Graduation Rates for the Class of 2004



Likewise, Arizona has lower graduation rates across almost all ethnic subgroups, including White, non-Hispanic students as compared with Iowa and Wisconsin (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: 2003-04 Graduation Rates for Arizona, Iowa and Wisconsin by Ethnic Group



Comparing Arizona's graduation rates with those of Iowa and Wisconsin provides a benchmark in performance that Arizona can strive to meet. However, it is the case that Iowa and Wisconsin are demographically and geographically dissimilar from Arizona. For example, only 7% of the population in Iowa and 12% of the population in Wisconsin belong to an ethnic minority group, compared to 35% in Arizona. Iowa and Wisconsin also have fewer ethnic minority students enrolled in public schools than does Arizona, which may have an effect on their overall graduation rates. Additionally, Arizona has a unique position as a border state with Mexico, which brings about distinctive challenges unshared by non-border states, such as a higher proportion of highly mobile students. Therefore, in an effort to compare graduation rates with a state more demographically similar, the following section will compare the graduation rates of Arizona with those of Texas.

Comparing Graduation Rates of Texas and Arizona

Texas and Arizona have demographic similarities in the socioeconomic status of their population and in the ethnic composition of their schools. In Texas, the 2004 cohort enrollment percentage of ethnic minority students was in fact even higher, at 58%, compared to Arizona's 45%. In addition, both states share a border with Mexico, which means that schools in these states face the distinctive challenges that arise from having a mobile population of immigrant students and families. Such challenges may come about because both states have a high proportion of students who are economically disadvantaged and have limited English language proficiency.

Even with these demographic similarities, Texas has a substantially higher graduation rate (84.6%) than Arizona (76.8%) for the class of 2004 (see Figure 4). Also, when comparing graduation rates across ethnic groups, Arizona evidences lower graduation rates in all ethnic group categories (see Figure 5). Therefore, it does not appear from these comparisons that the percentage of ethnic minority students in the state of Arizona is the major or only determining factor in the state's lower than average graduation rate. In fact, these comparisons show that all racial/ethnic groups in Arizona are performing less well than their counterparts in Texas based on their graduation rates.

Figure 4: Arizona and Texas Graduation Rates for the Class of 2004

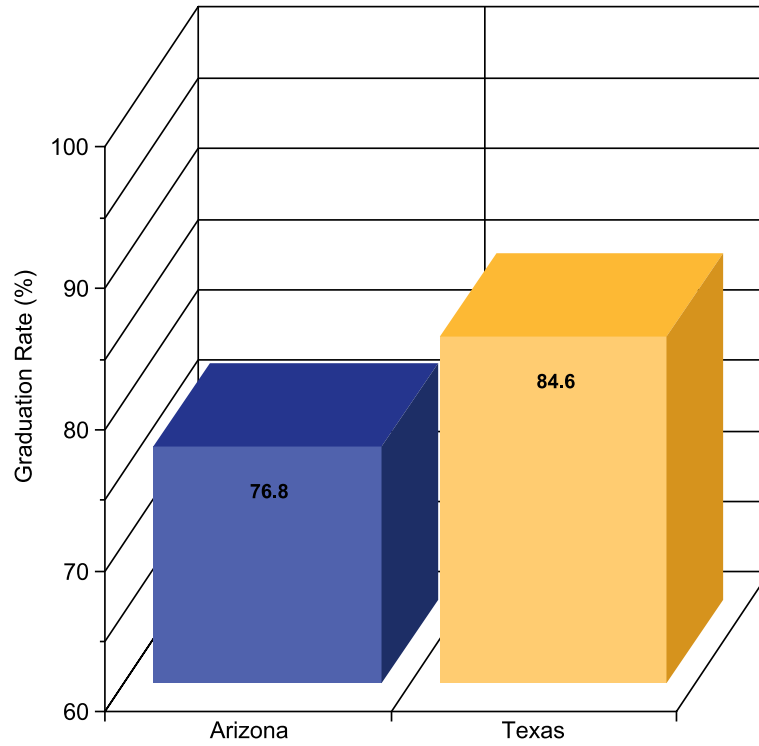
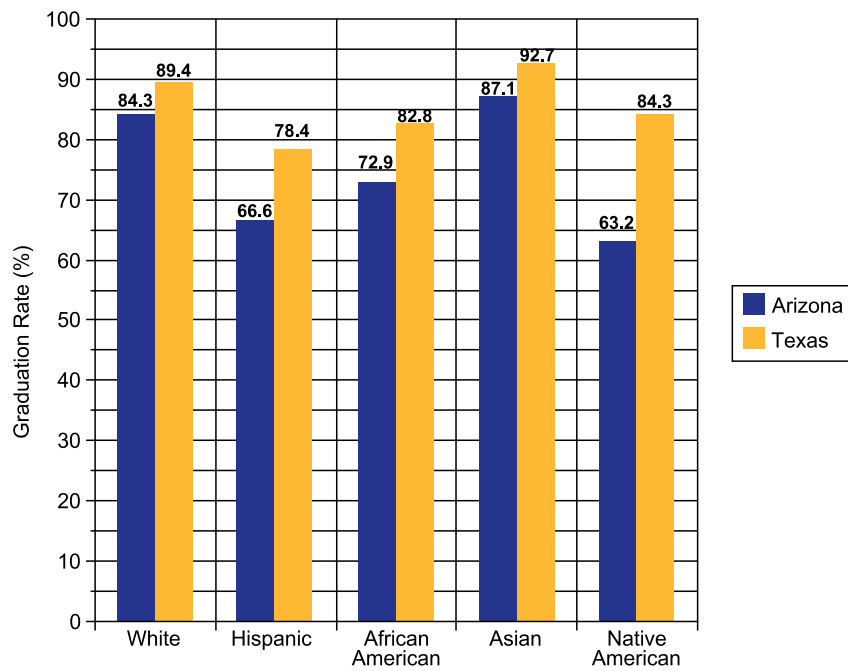


Figure 5: 2003-04 Graduation Rate for Texas and Arizona by Ethnic Group



Conclusion

From these observations we conclude that multiple strategies will be required in order to improve the educational performance of students in the state of Arizona and to raise graduation rates overall. Certainly, we must address the unique challenges facing Arizona's multiple ethnic groups. At the same time, we cannot use our high ethnic minority population as an "excuse" in explaining low graduation rates. As demonstrated in this study, Texas, a state with similar demographics to Arizona's, is outperforming Arizona in graduation rates. To make a real difference in graduation rates in Arizona we will need to raise graduation rates across the board and stop thinking that our challenges lie mostly in our high ethnic minority population. Low graduation rates are "everybody's problem" and we need to adjust our thinking and craft strategies accordingly.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Lattie Coor, Dr. Sybil Francis, and the staff at the Center for the Future of Arizona for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. We would also like to thank Cristina Fernandez for her efforts in gathering the data used in this study, and Dr. Gregory Hickman for his help in the initial conceptualization of the paper.

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The Center for the Future of Arizona

The Center is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization funded through the donations of philanthropic individuals and organizations dedicated to Arizona's future well-being. Dr. Sybil Francis serves as the organization's executive director, and Dr. Lattie Coor serves as chairman and CEO. In addition, the Center is governed by a board of directors comprised of distinguished community leaders committed to improving the lives of Arizonans. For more information, visit the Center's Web site at www.ArizonaFuture.org or call (602) 496-1360.