

National and State Perspectives on Educational Attainment

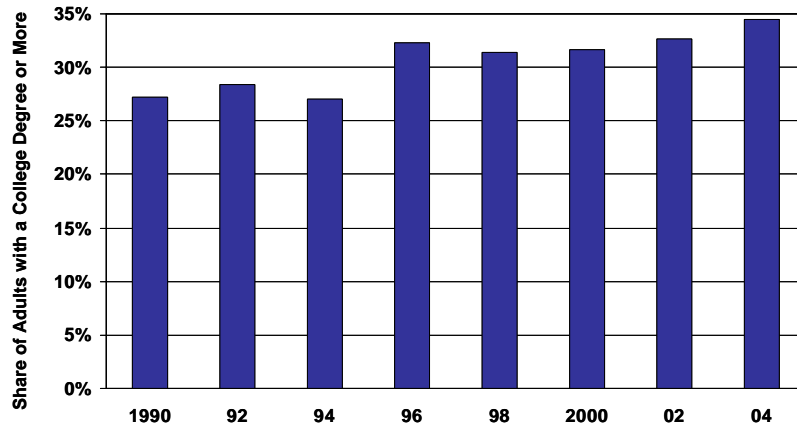
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Connecticut has always been home to an educated and skilled work force. An educated work force is productive and innovative, key features of furthering economic growth.

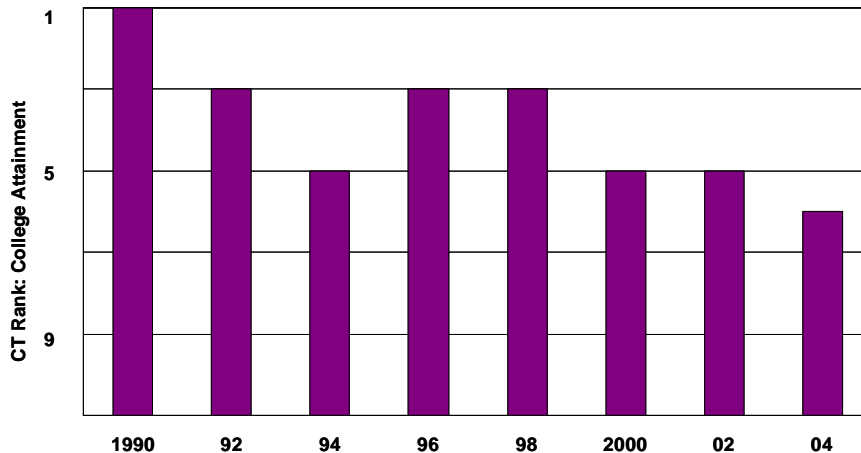
As noted in *Benchmarking Connecticut's Economy: A Comparative Analysis of Innovation and Technology* (www.cerc.com/benchmarks), Connecticut's college attainment rate of 34.5 percent was almost seven percentage points higher than the national average of 27.7 percent.

And Connecticut has made some impressive strides in recent years. In 1990, Connecticut's college attainment was 27.2 percent. Fourteen years later, the state improved more than seven percentage points. The state's positive trend through the 1990s can be seen in the figure to the right.



Source: U.S. Census

However, when we look at Connecticut's performance relative to other states, the story reveals more. In 1990, Connecticut was tied with Massachusetts for the highest college attainment in the country. Since then, Connecticut's rank has declined, and in 2004 the state was 6th in college attainment, as seen in the figure at the left. (If the District of Columbia is also included, then Connecticut ranks 7th.) Even though Connecticut has been improving in this metric in percentage terms, other states have caught up to and surpassed the state.



Source: U.S. Census

Which states had higher college attainment rates than 6th-ranked Connecticut? In 2004, the top states included: 1) Massachusetts, 2) Colorado, 3) New Hampshire, 4) Maryland

and 5) New Jersey. And Vermont, coming in 7th, has been closing the gap during recent years and may even surpass this state soon. This trend is one that the “Land of Steady Habits” should want to change.

A Global View

Even though Connecticut’s national prominence has dipped somewhat since 1990, the state still has one of the highest college attainment rates in the country. And the U.S., according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),¹ takes the top place regarding the percentage of 25-to-64 year-olds who had a college degree in 2002. The data showing the results of all of the OECD countries is displayed in the chart on the right. The U.S. is the world leader in college attainment.

However, the nation and the state must not remain complacent. This is because the nation’s test scores, when compared with other OECD countries, are mediocre at best. Every three years, OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys are conducted, which assesses how well 15-year-old students are prepared in various disciplines. The value of the PISA surveys is that the information can be compared across countries.

Based on mean scores of all students from 41 countries in 2003, the U.S. ranked:

- 19th in reading;
- tied for 23rd in science; and
- 30th in problem solving².

(For a visual representation of this survey data, visit CERC’s Map of Month for February.)

The results of these test scores indicate that the U.S. may not keep its innovative edge in the future because students in a number of other countries have better scientific and critical thinking skills.

OECD Country	Share of 25-to-64 yr-olds, Completed at Least College
United States	29.0%
Norway	28.4%
Netherlands	21.9%
Canada	21.0%
Japan	20.1%
Australia	20.0%
Iceland	19.9%
Denmark	19.8%
United Kingdom	18.6%
Korea	18.5%
Sweden	17.7%
Spain	17.3%
Switzerland	16.2%
Ireland	15.9%
Finland	15.6%
New Zealand	14.8%
Hungary	14.2%
Germany	13.4%
Belgium	12.8%
Greece	12.7%
France	12.4%
Poland	12.1%
Czech Republic	11.9%
Luxembourg	11.6%
Italy	10.4%
Slovak Republic	10.4%
Turkey	9.3%
Portugal	7.1%
Austria	7.0%
Mexico	2.5%

This achievement gap among nations is already being noted. A report by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) in November 2002 pointed out that a “child at school in Finland, Canada or Korea has a higher chance of being educated to a reasonable standard, and a lower chance of falling a long way behind the average, than a child born

¹ OECD, *Education at a Glance 2004*, http://www.oecd.org/document/11/0,2340,en_2825_495609_33712011_1_1_1_1,00.html

² OECD, *PISA 2003 Technical Report*, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/49/60/35188570.pdf>, 2005, Pages 208-210.

in Hungary, Denmark, Greece, the United States or Germany.”³ The U.S. should not want to be left behind in an achievement gap with other countries. Our nation should strive for its students to be the best they can be.

Educational Achievement Gap within Connecticut

There is also an achievement gap here in the state in terms of Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) scores. The CMTs are administered every year to students in grades 4, 6 and 8 to gauge performance in math, reading and writing. The table on the left shows the school districts at the top and bottom of the range in terms of the percentage of students

District Name	% Goal
Westport	92.6
Simsbury	87.6
Avon	87.1
Ridgefield	86.8
Darien	86.6
State	55.7
Hartford	19.9
New Britain	19.6
Bridgeport	18.0
New London	14.8
Bloomfield	11.9

who achieved the goal in math in 2004. The districts at the bottom of the pack are the urban areas. The table on the right shows the school districts at the top and bottom of the range in terms of achieving the goal in reading. Again, the districts at the bottom of the pack are the urban areas.⁴

District Name	% Goal
Westport	93.6
Simsbury	93.0
Avon	91.2
Wilton	89.4
Weston	88.9
State	64.9
New Haven	32.8
Bridgeport	31.5
Hartford	30.8
New London	30.6
New Britain	30.5

Other test scores also show the achievement gap among the municipalities. The first column in the chart below shows the shares of students who passed all four tests (math, science, reading and writing) of the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). The majority of students in the most affluent towns met all four goals while slim percentages passed the tests in the urban areas. Results from the SAT tests reveal

Town	CAPT % Meeting Goal Grade 10 All 4 Tests, 2002	SAT Combined; average 1996-2002
New Canaan	56%	1,160
Darien	61%	1,162
Weston	70%	1,170
Wilton	62%	1,176
Westport	57%	1,139
Average Most Affluent	60%	1,161
Bridgeport	4%	773
Hartford	2%	759
New Britain	13%	929
New Haven	7%	804
Waterbury	7%	864
Average Least Affluent	6%	816

similar results—the affluent towns perform well relative to the urban areas⁵.

Conclusion

So far, it has been discussed that the state performs well in terms of overall college attainment, but is losing its competitive edge as other states improve faster. The U.S. also fares well in terms of college attainment. However, the U.S. is not a leader in test scores among other countries. And just as there is an achievement gap among the countries, there are disparities in the state as well. The country and state should continue to develop strategies that enhance our education status and address the disparity issues.

³ UNICEF, *A League Table of Educational Disadvantage in Rich Nations*, November 2002, <http://www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/repcard4e.pdf>, page 2.

⁴ <http://www.cmtreports.com/index.html>

⁵ Connecticut Department of Education