**Assessing the State Differences in Resident’s Completion of Bachelor’s Degree in 2017**

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**Introduction**

Significant differences exist between states in terms of attainment and completion of a bachelor’s degree in the US. Some states register higher bachelor’s completion rates while many others register a lower completion rate than the country average, which stood at 30.9% as of 2017. This paper shows Statewise distribution completion percentages indicating the five highest and lowest states. It also features a comprehensive analysis of factors that contribute to the existing differences.

**A table showing the highest and lowest percentages of bachelor’s degree completion per state**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| State  | Percentages (%) | Deviation from country’s average (30.9 %) |
| **Highest percentage** |
| Massachusetts  | 42.1 | +11.2 |
| Maryland  | 39 | +8.1 |
| Missouri | 38.1 | +7.2 |
| New Jersey | 38.1 | +7.2 |
| Virginia  | 37.6 | +6.7 |
|  |  |  |
| **Lowest percentages** |
| Nevada  | 23.7 | -7.2 |
| Kentucky  | 23.3 | -7.6 |
| Arkansas | 22 | -8.9 |
| Mississippi  | 21.3 | -9.6 |
| West Virginia  | 19.9 | -11 |
|  |  |  |

*(Data obtained from the United States Census Bureau (2017)*

The table above shows the percentage completion of Bachelor’s degree distributed per state. It shows five states with the highest percentage and the five lowest completion rate. Each percentage rate is compared with the country’s average rate, which stands at 30.9%.

**Comparisons and explanation of differences in completion rates**

As indicated in the table above, there is a notable deviation between degree completion rates between Massachusetts having 42.1% and West Virginia 19.9%. The differences in graduation rates between the highest and lowest stands at 22.2%. Notably, there is a considerable deviation existing between the states that have the lowest completion rate compared with the country’s average. Nevada has a variation of -11%. Interestingly, the states that post the lowest completion rates, which include Mississippi, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Kentucky, come from southern states and most of the states that have high completion rates, including Missouri, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, come from the Northern States. Whereas there are vast differences in completion rates across states, a junk of information is available explaining a myriad of factors that contribute to this inequality. The following paragraphs provide an in-depth analysis of factors that bring these differences which include a combination of socio-economic and political factors

Disparities in socioeconomic attainment exist in the United States, and more so between northern and southern states. Racial factors primarily cause these differences. Inequality is equally noticeable in the education sector. Tate (2017), writing on *Graduation Rates and Race*, explains that degree completion rates differ along the ethnic and racial lines with the white and Asian students having 20% more completion rates than other races. According to the data released by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), the racial differences in completion fluctuate as high as 25%. Their data showed that the Asian and white students graduating from different degree programs stand at 62% and 63.3% respectively while the blacks and the Hispanics graduating from the degree programs stand at 38 percent and 45.6 percent, respectively. Going by NSRC data, racial background determines the achievement of higher education and completion of a Bachelor’s degree. Students coming from black and Hispanic background are less likely to complete their studies in colleges and universities. A similar observation is also notable when you look at High School Dropout Rates available in Child Trends, a government data showing education attainment. This data, like those of college completion rates, show that a high number of Hispanics and blacks drop out of high school, and the majority do not proceed to higher education. Given these data, it is easier to make the supported inference that racial and ethnic backgrounds are a crucial factor shaping degree completion rates in the United States.

Looking at the table above, indicating percentage completion rates per state, there is a notable observation that the Southern States predominantly occupied by blacks and Hispanics record the least rates. Interestingly, states such as Mississippi, West Virginia, and Arkansas, which has the lowest completion, are called black states. Nichol & Schak (2018), in their study *Degree Attainment for Black Adults: National and State Trends* observes that despite the annual increase in number of blacks and Latino attaining higher education from 2000 to 2016; their numbers and completion rates still lower especially in black southern states compared with Northern states predominantly occupied by whites. Their observations concur with details as indicated in the table above, which shows that of five states showing highest degree completion rates in 2017, only Maryland comes from the south, and the other top five states are predominantly white-dominated.

Poverty is another crucial concept that determines degree completion rates in America. Courtney (2017) writing in *Strong Correlation Continues between Poverty, and Graduation Rates* shows the relationship between poverty and graduation rates. Using data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), Courtney indicates that students hailing from lower-income households have a lower rate of college graduation. The research findings show that the economic status and income of households determine education attainment and especially degree completion rates. Poor households do not have enough finances and resources to maintain students in colleges and universities. The economic conditions of households, coupled with the ever-rising cost of attaining higher education, meaning that many households are unable to provide education above high school.

Research by Child Fund (2013) in *The Effects of Poverty on Education in the United States* supports the phenomenon that poverty influences higher educational attainment. Their findings indicate that 1 in every 6 Americans live below the poverty line, while 1 in 5 children live in poverty. More than 30% of children raised in poor households do not finish high schools, while people age 20 years above who do not earn a degree are 7 times more likely to come from poor households. To add salt in an already worse situation, the cost of education in the US continues to increase hence influencing the rate of affordability, especially among low-income families. According to the US. Department of Education (2019) although education remains the leading driver of social and economic mobility in America, the cost of attaining it has entrusted many into poverty since they cannot afford higher education. As argued above, poverty remains a critical element impacting negatively on college graduation in states that register low percentages. States such as West Virginia, Arkansas, Kentucky and Nevada are among the poorest states in the US because their residents have relatively lower household incomes compared to states that have the highest household income, such as California and Massachusetts.

As partial discussed above, the affordability of higher education in the US influences its attainment and is one of the leading causes of a college dropout. Bridgestock (2019) writing on *How Much Does it Cost to Study in the US?* Notes that top tier universities in the US charge $26,290 tuition fee per year and if you add other chargeable fees and the living costs, the average cost of education in the US can hit $60,000 per year. For the private non-profit colleges, the chargeable fees are even higher than public colleges. They charge tuition fees amounting to $35,830 and an accommodation fee of $12,680, totalling to $48 510. Interestingly, government funding available for students to subsidize the fee remains insignificant to many students, given the amount they are required to add on to meet the costs. The ever-rising costs of education higher education have barred many bright students, especially from low-income households. Even those who manage to join through government funding and efforts of relatives may not complete a four-year course making them part of the dropouts. Sustenance brings significant difficulties to poor students because though they can pay tuition fees, they are unable to sustain themselves in colleges. The rising cost of education has continued to affect people in different states, as indicated earlier in the table. Those states registering lower graduation rates means that many families in those states cannot afford to meet the cost of a college education.

**Conclusion**

The table and the analysis above shows the rate of bachelor’s degree completion among different states and intensive analysis of factors that bring these differences. Findings indicate that Massachusetts, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, and Virginia register high completion rates and Nevada, Kentucky, Arkansas, Mississippi, and West Virginia show low completion rates. Massachusetts has the highest completion rate of 42.1%, while West Virginia registered 19.9%. The range between these states stands at 22.2%. A number of factors contribute to this difference. As indicated, racial issues, poverty (economic status of households) and the high cost of university education contribute towards the existing differences. The states having low completion rates come from predominantly black and Hispanic communities and they have low household income hence unable to afford the cost of higher education. The converse of this is applicable in the states that have a higher completion rate.

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