



SOCIAL MOBILITY ELEVATORS

An Analysis of Low-Income Student Enrollment and Outcomes at Four-Year Colleges and Universities

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KEY FINDINGS

- Out of the approximately 1,900 four-year colleges and universities in the United States, Education Reform Now identified only 614 where students with Pell Grants are more likely to graduate than drop out and where federal loan repayment and default rates are better than the average for four-year institutions.
- Education Reform Now ranked the overall impact of each of these 614 “social mobility elevators” based on their share of Pell Grant students enrolled, Pell Grant student graduation rates, and most significantly, the number of Pell Grant students served. Public universities occupy 90 of the top 100 spots because they tend to enroll large numbers of students and a large share of them receive Pell Grants.
- The majority of highly selective colleges and universities—defined as those that accept less than 25% of applicants—fell into the bottom half of our social mobility *impact* ranking due both to small class sizes and subpar rates of enrollment of students with Pell Grants.
- Just three for-profit colleges had outcomes strong enough to be included in our ranking.

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Higher education remains an important driver of social mobility in America. Everyone benefits when low-income and working-class students enroll in and complete postsecondary training. Those with postsecondary degrees earn more, are more likely to be employed, and pay more in taxes.¹ Racial inequities in employment and income increasingly even out where there are higher levels of education attainment.² Too often, however, the students who stand to benefit the most from a college degree are shut out of many of our most prestigious universities and end up at institutions where a majority of students never graduate. Worse, they are saddled with debt they cannot afford to repay.

While it is important to challenge both the wealthy colleges that are not doing enough to enroll low-income students, especially relative to their size, and the colleges that are not doing enough to help low-income students graduate and succeed, it is also important to identify colleges and universities that are providing both access and successful outcomes to large numbers of students, transforming not just their lives but their communities and the nation as well.

Education Reform Now, a non-profit advocacy organization, created our “social mobility impact ranking” to hold up the colleges and universities that change the most lives, but doing so also revealed hundreds of colleges, many of them very wealthy, that could do more to lift up low-income students. A social mobility elevator, after all, only helps people who get in it.

SOCIAL MOBILITY ELEVATORS DELIVER ACCESS AND COMPLETION

In 2018-19, almost 7 million college students received Pell Grants, which typically go to individuals from households earning less than \$65,000 per year.³ That’s almost half the households in America, so it’s no surprise that about 31% of all postsecondary students currently receive this federal assistance.⁴ At almost 200 colleges in our ranking, however, not even 20% of undergraduates are Pell Grant recipients. That’s significant given that ACT and College Board data reveal that tens of thousands of students who score in the 90th percentile and above on admissions exams come from Pell Grant eligible families.⁵

Hundreds of colleges do enroll large shares of students with Pell Grants, and the vast majority of four-year colleges admit many more applicants than they reject. Enrollment alone, however, does little to increase social mobility. Students need

¹ Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Meredith Welch, *Education Pays 2019: The Benefits Of Higher Education For Individuals And Society*, College Board (2019).

² Rory O’Sullivan et al., *Closing the Race Gap: Alleviating Young African American Unemployment Through Education*, Young Invincibles (2014)

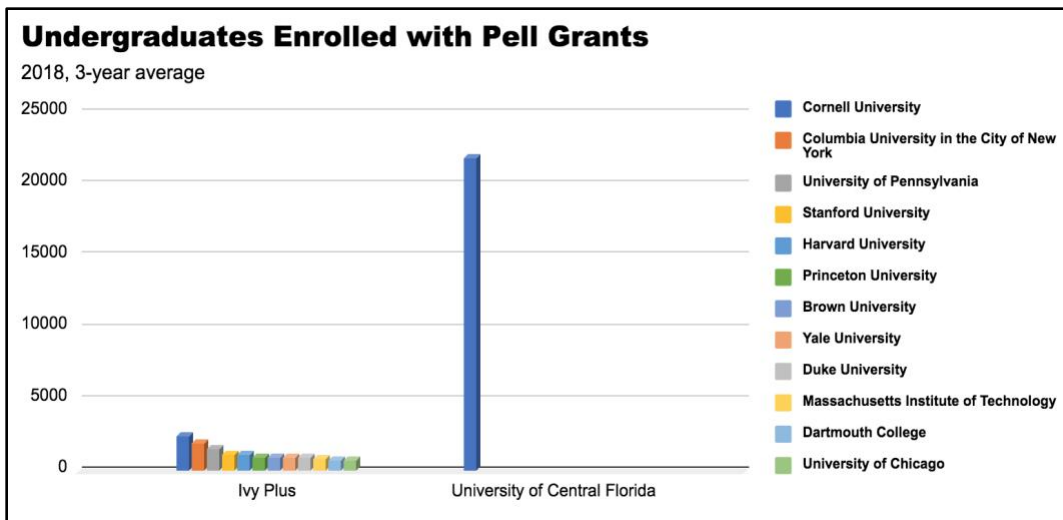
³ College Board, [Trends in Student Aid 2019](#).

⁴ Household income percentiles are from DQYDJ, “[Household Income Percentile Calculator for the United States in 2020](#).” Pell data are from College Board, [Trends in Student Aid 2019](#).

⁵ Michael Dannenberg & Mary Nguyen Barry, *Tough Love: Bottom-Line Quality Standards for Colleges*, Education Trust (2014) available at: https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ToughLove_0.pdf

degrees. Liberty University, for instance, enrolls around 20,000 undergraduates who receive a Pell Grant, but only 37% of them go on to earn a degree.

In contrast, the University of Central Florida (#2 in our social mobility impact ranking) enrolls close to 22,000 Pell Grant students a year and 69% of them graduate. UCF’s graduation rate is lower than many of the most selective private and public universities, but it has a larger impact than, say, the University of Virginia (#156) where students with Pell Grants have a 92% graduation rate but only make up 13% of undergraduates, and a much larger impact than our nation’s most elite universities. **UCF enrolls 55% more Pell Grant students by itself than the twelve Ivy Plus universities combined.**



To be social mobility elevators, universities and colleges need to provide access to low-income students and deliver the academic and student services that drive higher graduation rates and lead to good jobs after college. Pell Grant student shares as a percentage of overall enrollment in and of itself is an important accountability measure in higher education, because representation matters on campus and socioeconomic diversity benefits students enrolled at individual institutions, but our ranking goes beyond representation to highlight the impact on social mobility of colleges enrolling and graduating low-income students.

In order to gauge both the extent to which a college has made [a meaningful commitment](#) to social mobility *and* the impact of that commitment, Education Reform Now created a straightforward formula accounting for access, completion, and outcomes. The result is our social mobility impact index, which ranks public, private, and for-profit institutions that predominantly grant bachelor’s degrees.

We started with over 1,900 institutions listed by the US Department of Education as four-year schools that receive federal financial aid dollars. Our first and perhaps most alarming finding was that **only 614 colleges and universities met our thresholds for graduation and loan repayment rates.** To some degree, all of the institutions that made the cut qualify as social mobility elevators, since they all

deliver largely positive outcomes for the low-income students they enroll. At too many colleges and universities, particularly the wealthy ones that have the best outcomes, their social mobility impact is limited because they enroll too few of the students who would in fact benefit the most by attending them. There are, however, institutions, like UCLA (#13) and USC (#74), that prove a university can be highly selective and propel large numbers of low-income students into the middle class.

HOW WE CALCULATED THE SOCIAL MOBILITY IMPACT RANKING

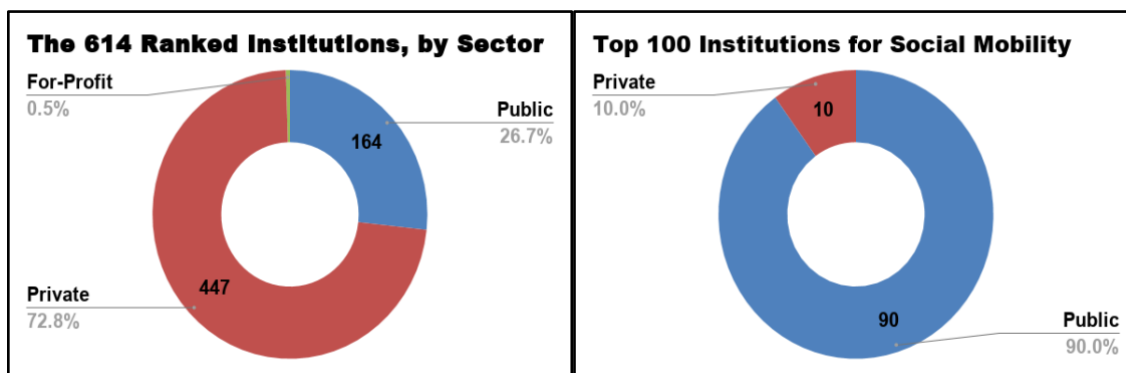
To be included in the social mobility impact ranking, a four-year college had to meet the following criteria:

- more than 50% of students with Pell Grants graduate within six years
- fewer than 6.9% of students default on their student loans within 3 years of entering repayment
- at least 75% of students have started paying down their federal loans within five years of entering repayment.

Institutions that made the cut were ranked using the following formula:

$$(2018 \text{ Pell Share}) \times (2018 \text{ Pell Grad Rate}) \times (2018 \text{ Pell Enrollment}) = \text{Social Mobility Impact Score}$$

Of the 614 four-year colleges that met our criteria for access, completion, and outcomes, the majority were non-profit private institutions. **Only three for-profit colleges had a Pell graduation rate over 50%, a cohort default rate below 6.9%, and a 5-year repayment rate of 75% or greater.** If we look at the top 100 schools in our social mobility impact ranking, however, the list is dominated by public colleges and universities.



Nine of the top ten and 90 of the top 100 institutions in our social mobility impact ranking are public universities.

Top 10 Universities for Social Mobility Impact

	2018 Pell Share 3 yr avg (%)	2018 Pell Grad Rate 3 yr avg (%)	2018 Pell Headcount 3 yr avg
California State University-Long Beach	51.71	68	16,478
University of Central Florida	38.24	69	21,849
California State University-Fullerton	48.42	65	16,883
University of California-Riverside	54.15	74.67	10,910
University of California-Irvine	41.46	82.33	11,936
California State University-Fresno	58.81	51.33	12,922
California State Polytechnic University-Pomona	47.88	66.33	11,648
University of California-Davis	37.78	83	11,344
University of Houston	39.27	56	14,602
Brigham Young University-Provo	36.8	75	11,489

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Georgetown and Notre Dame might be the most prestigious Catholic universities in the country, but their social mobility impact numbers fall far behind hundreds of secular colleges that do not share the Church’s mission to serve the poor.

Top 10 Private Universities for Social Mobility Impact

Overall ranking in parentheses

	2018 Pell Share 3 yr avg (%)	2018 Pell Grad Rate 3 yr avg (%)	2018 Pell Headcount 3 yr avg
Brigham Young University-Provo (10)	36.8	75	11,489
Brigham Young University-Idaho (26)	27.38	53.67	12,688
DePaul University (52)	32.22	67	4,804
New York University (67)	19.71	81.33	5,209
California Baptist University (72)	45.4	50.33	3,361
University of Southern California (73)	20.91	90.33	4,018
Rochester Institute of Technology (77)	29.06	62.33	3,914
St John's University-New York (79)	27.48	56	4,586
Mount Saint Mary's University (95)	58.25	65.67	1,512

Created with Datawrapper

Some private universities do have a large impact on social mobility. **A majority of these highly ranked private institutions have a religious mission.** DePaul University (#52) is the top-rated Catholic university in our ranking. Georgetown University (#283) and the University of Notre Dame (#355) might be the most prestigious Catholic universities in the country, but their social mobility impact numbers fall behind hundreds of secular colleges that do not share the Church's mission to serve the poor.

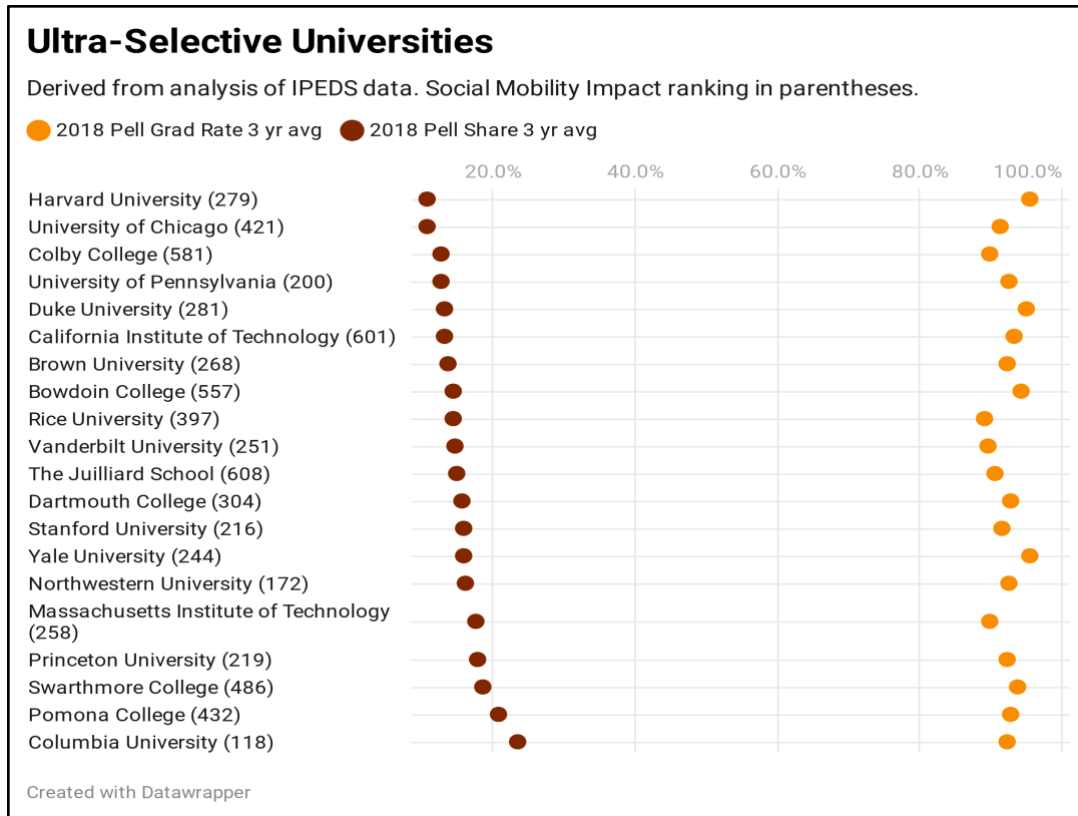
WHY PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITIES HAVE LESS IMPACT

The top of our ranking is dominated by large public institutions. The top ten universities enroll, on average, 14,006 students with Pell Grants. One of the big problems with most highly selective schools, which do provide significant benefits for the working class and low-income students they enroll, is that they admit relatively low shares of Pell-eligible students to typically small freshmen classes.⁶ **33 of the 59 colleges in our ranking with acceptance rates below 25% fell into the bottom half of the list.**

Highly selective colleges also tend to enroll very few students through transfer, which is an important pathway to four-year colleges for low-income students. **Ivy League universities averaged just 188 transfer enrollments per year between 2016 and 2018.** If we take Columbia and Cornell out of that count, the remaining 6 institutions averaged only 43 transfer enrollments per year. The University of Central Florida, in contrast, averaged 7,880 transfers per year. USC is a highly selective private institution, but it averaged 1,402 transfers per year during this period, almost as many as the entire Ivy League.

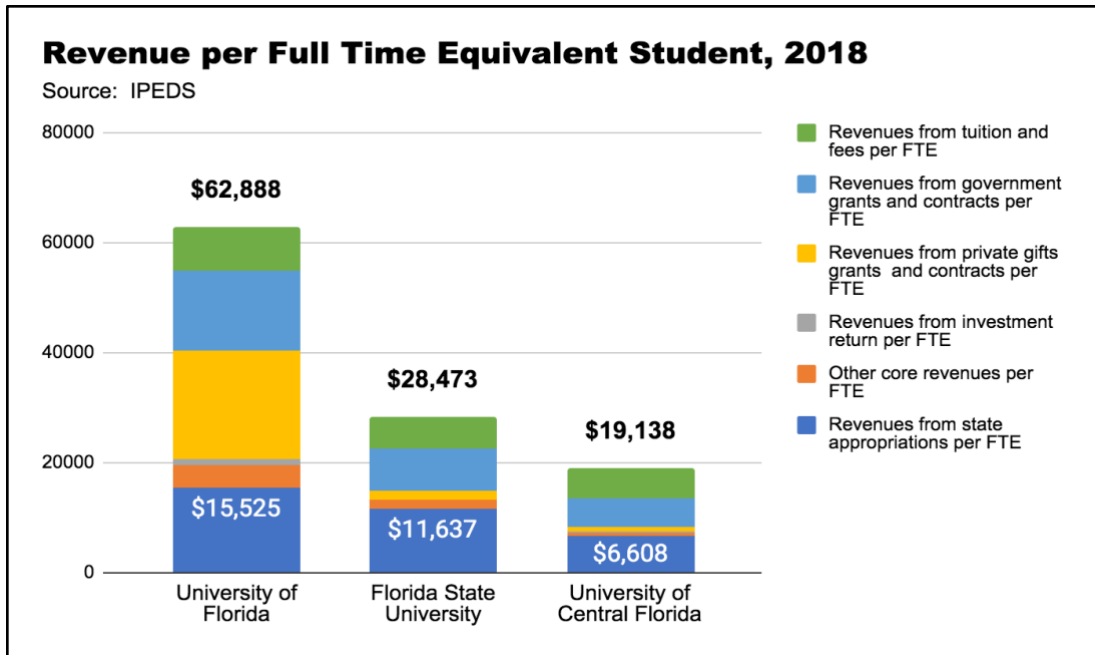
Low Pell Grant student shares and small overall enrollments combine to blunt the impact most highly selective universities have on social mobility. Too many highly selective institutions that have very high graduation rates and billion dollar plus endowments, like Tufts University (#401) and Washington and Lee University (#602), effectively hoard opportunity. For the select few low-income and even middle-income students who get into these prestigious institutions, the payoff can be very large indeed. The problem is too few are admitted and enrolled. These highly selective universities play an outsized role in politics, finance, science and medicine, so it is essential that they increase socioeconomic and racial diversity. They should expand access by not only increasing their Pell shares but also by increasing their class sizes so more students can reap the benefits of attending a school like the University of Chicago (#421), Colgate University (#550) or CalTech (#601).

⁶ Stacy Dale & Alan B. Krueger, "Estimating the Return to College Selectivity over the Career Using Administrative Earnings Data," *Journal of Human Resources* (Spring 2014).



High prestige schools, like the ultra-selective schools with acceptance rates in the single digits, receive a disproportionate amount of media attention and dominate conversations about higher education, while the biggest social mobility elevators want for attention and, too often, funding.

In some states, the most selective public institutions receive a disproportionately large percentage of the state funding even though less prestigious peers are doing a better job of promoting socioeconomic mobility. Consider Florida. While the University of Florida (#21) and Florida State University (#16) both do well in our ranking, they do not do as well as UCF (#3). And yet, the State of Florida sends much more revenue to the University of Florida and Florida State in state appropriations. The University of Florida gets more than twice as much from the state per full-time equivalent student than the University of Central Florida does, despite the flagship also receiving more than three times as much total revenue per full-time equivalent student.



Given the financial challenges facing states and higher education in the coming years, social mobility elevators that successfully serve the most students with the fewest resources deserve priority in any state funding formula relative to other four-year colleges. The time has come to lift up the institutions that do more to lift up students.

TOP 50 COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY IMPACT

The complete social mobility impact ranking is available [here](#).

Rank ▲	Institution	Rank	Institution
1	California State University-Long Beach	26	Brigham Young University-Idaho
2	University of Central Florida	27	University of North Carolina at Charlotte
3	California State University-Fullerton	28	Texas A & M University-College Station
4	University of California-Riverside	29	University of California-Santa Cruz
5	University of California-Irvine	30	Rutgers University-Newark
6	California State University-Fresno	31	California State University-San Marcos
7	California State Polytechnic University-Pomona	32	University of Arizona
8	University of California-Davis	33	The University of Texas at Austin
9	University of Houston	34	East Carolina University
10	Brigham Young University-Provo	35	University at Buffalo
11	University of California-San Diego	36	Stony Brook University
12	University of California-Los Angeles	37	Utah State University
13	University of Illinois at Chicago	38	SUNY at Albany
14	San Jose State University	39	George Mason University
15	Rutgers University-New Brunswick	40	Ohio State University-Main Campus
16	Florida State University	41	The University of Texas at Dallas
17	San Diego State University	42	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
18	CUNY Bernard M Baruch College	43	Michigan State University
19	University of California-Santa Barbara	44	Washington State University
20	Montclair State University	45	Pennsylvania State University-Main Campus
21	University of Florida	46	Texas Tech University
22	California State University-Chico	47	Grand Valley State University
23	University of California-Berkeley	48	Towson University
24	University of California-Merced	49	University of Washington-Seattle Campus
25	Temple University	50	University of Georgia

Methodology

Using the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), we retrieved a list of more than 1,900 four-year institutions that receive federal Title IV funds. Although Pell Grants are not perfect indicators of income-status, they provide the best data available on enrollment of low-income students.⁷ We used the Pell Grant student share of all undergraduates, rather than first-time, full-time students, because transfer is an important pathway to a bachelor's degree for many working-class students. In order to capture how successful low-income students are at an institution, we looked at the graduation rate for students who received Pell Grants and set a minimum completion rate within six years over 50% in order to recognize only those institutions where students with Pell Grants are more likely to graduate than not.

There are no readily available post-bachelor earnings data that isolate students with Pell Grants, so we relied on the cohort default rate (CDR) and the 5 year student loan repayment rate to identify institutions where students are much less likely to be crippled by student loan debt. CDR measures the share of students at an institution who have made no payments on their federal loans for at least 270 days during the three-years after entering repayment. Repayment rates, taken from the most recent College Scorecard data, indicate the percentage of students who have paid off at least \$1 of their original loans five years after entering repayment.⁸ Cohort default rates are imperfect outcome measures, which is why we paired them with repayment rates.⁹ The most recent national cohort default rate is 9.7%, but for four-year public and private institutions that rate is 6.9%, which is why we set that as a threshold for our ranking.¹⁰ According to research, 78% of bachelor degree holders have repaid some of their principal 5 years after entering repayment.¹¹ We set a cut-off at 75% repayment rate. At 38 institutions, the 5-year rate was suppressed, so we used their 7-year rate.

Because we wanted to measure not just the equity of institutions' policies but also the impact of their practices when it comes to access and completion, we multiplied the average headcount of students with Pell grants by the average Pell Grant student share and average Pell Grant graduation rate. Pell Grant student enrollment and graduation figures were determined using weighted averages of academic years 2016/17, 2017/18, and 2018/19. We also used a three-year weighted average for cohort default rates, using the three most recent years available, which are 2015-2017. Institutions missing enrollment, graduation, or default-rate data were removed from the ranking.

⁷ Kelly Ochs Rosinger and Karly S. Ford, "Pell Grant Versus Income Data in Postsecondary Research," *Educational Researcher* (May 2019); Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner, "The Right Way to Capture College 'Opportunity,'" *Education Next* 19.2 (January 2019).

⁸ US Department of Education, [College Scorecard Data](#).

⁹ Michael Itzkowitz, "[Why Repayment Rates Should Supplement, Not Supplant, Cohort Default Rate Guardrails](#)," Third Way (July 2019).

¹⁰ Analysis of US Department of Education data from "[Official Cohort Default Rates for Schools FY2017](#)" (September 2020).

¹¹ Michael Itzkowitz, "Want More Students To Pay Down Their Loans? Help Them Graduate," Third Way (August 2018).