FLORIDA
COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK

# Florida aims to boost the number of Pell students attending our state universities.

## *What can be done to achieve this goal?*

Florida's higher education leaders are committed to serving more lower-income students. The state is already renowned as a national model of excellence for student success, as well as for providing a high-quality education that is both affordable and accessible. Now, Florida's state university system is aiming even higher to improve college access for lower-income students. Recently, the State University System (SUS) of Florida Board of Governors (BOG) adopted its ambitious new SUS-30 Strategic Plan that includes goals to significantly increase the proportion of Pell students (those who qualify for federal need-based financial aid) who enroll in and graduate from the state's 12 public universities.

At FCAN, we applaud the BOG's new goals. Now the question becomes how to achieve it. What changes in policy and practice can help make this happen? Would increasing universities' capacity to enroll greater numbers of students also increase Pell student enrollment? What other changes at the institutional level would enable universities to increase their proportion of Pell students?

The answer is likely much more involved than what we can discuss in one article. So to begin an inquiry into these questions, we took a look at some of the available data to see what we might learn.

## WHAT PROPORTION OF PELL STUDENTS DO FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITIES CURRENTLY ENROLL?

First, we looked at the enrollment trends of Pell students at SUS institutions over a ten-year period. As Florida's universities have risen in stature on the national scale while keeping tuition rates modest, they have also grown much more popular—and competitive. While this is a strong indicator of a healthy higher education ecosystem, it can also result in bigger barriers to access for lower-income students.

***On average, the universities' percentage of Pell students fell from 36% in 2014 to 28% in 2023.***

For example, as Table 1 shows, the number of applications that Florida's public universities attracted over the ten admissions cycles through 2023 has grown significantly for 11 out of the 12 institutions—and by over 100% for five of them, including the three most competitive schools: University of Florida (128%), Florida State University

**Table 1: Applicants by SUS Institution, 2014-2023**

| School | 2014 | 2023 | Count Change | % Growth 2014-2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| UCF | 33,226 | 60,627 | 27,401 | 82% |
| FAMU | 5,017 | 22,713 | 17,696 | 353% |
| FAU | 14,944 | 27,612 | 12,668 | 85% |
| FIU | 20,175 | 25,034 | 4,859 | 24% |
| FSU | 30,266 | 74,038 | 43,772 | 145% |
| UF | 28,662 | 65,375 | 36,713 | 128% |
| UNF | 11,154 | 21,568 | 10,414 | 93% |
| USF | 24,988 | 65,187 | 40,199 | 161% |
| UWF | 10,039 | 9,831 | -208 | -2% |
| NCF | 1,570 | 2,119 | 549 | 35% |
| FGCU | 13,773 | 16,050 | 2,277 | 17% |
| FPU | 1,217 | 2,600 | 1,383 | 114% |
| **SUS** | **195,031** | **392,754** | **197,723** | **101%** |

(145%), and the University of South Florida (161%). Combined, Florida public universities saw applications increase by 101%, which translates to almost 200,000 more applicants over the period.

## HOW HAS THE INCREASE IN APPLICATIONS IMPACTED THE ADMISSIONS RATE OF PELL STUDENTS?

As would be expected by such a steep increase in applications, the percentage of applicants admitted to most of Florida's large universities decreased over the same time frame, although most of Florida's smaller universities experienced an increase. By student count across all SUS institutions, this accounted for a decrease from a 53.0% admissions rate in 2014 to a 40.6% admissions rate in 2023.

**Table 2: Admission Rate by SUS Institution, 2014-2023**

| School | 2014 | 2023 | Percentage Point Difference 2014-2023 |
|---|---|---|---|
| UCF | 49.6% | 39.5% | -10.1% |
| FSU | 55.4% | 25.4% | -30.0% |
| UF | 45.6% | 24.0% | -21.6% |
| USF | 53.2% | 41.0% | -12.2% |
| FIU | 52.8% | 58.8% | 6.0% |
| FAU | 66.0% | 73.4% | 7.4% |
| FGCU | 58.9% | 76.7% | 17.8% |
| UNF | 60.6% | 62.3% | 1.7% |
| UWF | 41.7% | 56.9% | 15.2% |
| FAMU | 49.0% | 21.1% | -27.9% |
| NCF | 59.9% | 74.0% | 14.1% |
| FPU | 55.7% | 68.5% | 12.8% |
| **SUS** | **53.0%** | **40.6%** | **-12.4%** |

As universities' applicant pool increased over the past decade, the proportion of enrolled students who qualify for a Pell grant dropped at all but three of the 12 universities. On average, the universities' percentage of Pell students fell from 36% in 2014 to 28% in 2023.

***...the data suggests that Florida universities' popularity makes it harder for lower and moderate-income students to compete.***

**Table 3: Share of Pell Awardees per Fall FTIC class by SUS Institution, 2014 – 2023**

| School | % FTIC Awarded Pell Grants 2014 | % FTIC Awarded Pell Grants 2023 | Percentage Point Difference 2014-2023 |
|---|---|---|---|
| UCF | 32.0% | 25.0% | -7.0% |
| FSU | 27.0% | 21.0% | -6.0% |
| UF | 28.0% | 23.0% | -5.0% |
| USF | 40.0% | 25.0% | -15.0% |
| FIU | 51.0% | 48.0% | -3.0% |
| FAU | 41.0% | 33.0% | -8.0% |
| FGCU | 34.0% | 26.0% | -8.0% |
| UNF | 29.0% | 36.0% | 7.0% |
| UWF | 41.0% | 33.0% | -8.0% |
| FAMU | 68.0% | 56.0% | -12.0% |
| NCF | 26.0% | 30.0% | 4.0% |
| FPU* | - | 32.0% | Not Applicable |
| **SUS** | **36.0%** | **28.0%** | **-8.0%** |

**As Florida Polytechnic (FPU) is a relatively new institution that achieved accreditation within the past ten years, it did not yet qualify for federal aid, including Pell grants, in 2014.*

Of course, correlation is not causation, and there are likely other factors contributing to this overall drop in Pell admissions. Still, the data suggests that Florida universities' popularity makes it harder for lower and moderate-income students to compete.

## WHAT OTHER FACTORS HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE DECREASE IN PELL ADMISSIONS?

### Enrollment trends and regional population growth

We next considered whether enrollment at Florida universities—especially large institutions serving major metropolitan regions—is keeping pace with population growth, as lower-income students are more likely to choose colleges close to home compared to their non-low-income peers.

A promising trend is that the State University System as a whole currently projects growth in student enrollments of 5% through 2029, approximately 14,000 more students over the next four years. However, not all of Florida's metropolitan-area universities project increases that keep pace with regional population growth. For example, the University of Central Florida, based in Orlando and the state's largest university by enrollment, anticipates only modest growth of 1% by 2029, compared to a projected 4.5% increase in the Orlando metropolitan region's 18 – 24-year-olds. The University of South Florida, which is based in Tampa Bay and is the state's fourth largest university, anticipates a growth of 2.7% compared to an estimated 3.9% increase of college-aged residents in the region.

Although schools like UCF and USF are major research institutions that attract students from all over the country and internationally, they are still important institutions of opportunity for local Pell-eligible students. Tracking university enrollment growth trends over time compared to regional population growth and Pell student admissions can provide us with some insight into whether "increasing the seats" at such institutions correlates to more access for lower-income students.

We do note that some Florida metropolitan universities are projecting enrollment growth greater than their anticipated regional population growth. For example, the University of North Florida is projecting an ambitious 33.8% increase in enrollments compared to a projected 5% increase in college-aged youth in the surrounding Jacksonville metropolitan area. In South Florida, Florida International University (based in Miami) and Florida Atlantic University (based in Palm Beach County) forecast a combined growth of student enrollments of 6.4%, compared to a 1.9% increase in 18 – 24-year-olds in the three-county Miami metropolitan region.

We also note that although some of Florida's smaller public universities project significant enrollment increases, the actual number of additional students they anticipate serving is relatively small. Exceptions are the University of North Florida (based in Jacksonville), with a projected increase of 48% to 19,770 students, and Florida Atlantic University (based in Boca Raton, Palm Beach County) with a projected increase of 17%, to 27,685 students.

**Table 4: Projected Fall Headcount Enrollment by SUS Institution, 2024-2029:**

| School | 2025 | 2026 | 2027 | 2028 | 2029 | Projected % Growth 2025-2029 | Projected # Growth 2025-2029 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UCF | 58,900 | 58,900 | 59,000 | 59,400 | 59,500 | 1.0% | 600 |
| FSU | 41,765 | 41,503 | 41,388 | 42,091 | 42,839 | 2.6% | 1,074 |
| UF | 40,435 | 40,714 | 41,178 | 41,425 | 41,508 | 2.7% | 1,073 |
| USF | 37,510 | 37,938 | 38,252 | 38,456 | 38,456 | 2.5% | 946 |
| FIU | 31,040 | 31,000 | 31,110 | 31,230 | 31,050 | 0.0% | 10 |
| FAU | 24,624 | 25,512 | 26,287 | 27,004 | 27,685 | 12.4% | 3,061 |
| FGCU | 14,780 | 16,030 | 17,730 | 19,770 | 19,770 | 33.8% | 4,990 |
| UNF | 13,827 | 13,781 | 13,843 | 13,918 | 13,983 | 1.1% | 156 |
| UWF | 9,527 | 9,806 | 9,946 | 10,057 | 10,143 | 6.5% | 616 |
| FAMU | 7,972 | 8,110 | 8,250 | 8,440 | 8,630 | 8.3% | 658 |
| NCF | 1,826 | 1,975 | 2,135 | 2,309 | 2,497 | 36.7% | 671 |
| FPU | 862 | 978 | 1,098 | 1,210 | 1,300 | 50.8% | 438 |
| **SUS** | **283,070** | **286,250** | **290,220** | **295,310** | **297,360** | **5.0%** | **14,290** |

Some may question whether increasing enrollment is prudent, given the fact that many universities around the country anticipate an enrollment "cliff" due to a drop in the youth population. Yet in contrast to much of the country, Florida's youth population is anticipated to grow in the coming years.

While 40 U.S. states experienced a population decline of children under the age of 18 between 2020 and 2022, Florida's under-18 population increased. Indeed, 62% of the nation's under-18 population gains during those years were in Texas and Florida, largely due to in-migration from other states and countries. This growth trend is expected to continue, although it might be tempered by international migration trends. Between 2025 and 2037, for example, Florida's state university system projects that Florida will increase its number of new high school graduates by 6%, compared to a 10% decline nationwide.

Like the rest of the country, university enrollment in Florida did decline in the post-pandemic years. However, a closer analysis reveals that this was mostly due to a drop in transfer student enrollments. For example, Florida's State University System data show that from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022, Florida universities' undergraduate enrollment declined by 1.5 percentage points, whereas universities nationwide saw a 1.1 percentage point decline. Yet first time in college and returning students actually increased by 1 percentage point each. In contrast, the number of students

transferring from Florida's state colleges with an associate's degree dropped 7 percentage points during this time frame.

Further inquiry is warranted into whether enrollment capacity compared to regional population change impacts Pell student access. Although not a "silver bullet" solution, increasing the seats available at our public universities—especially in major metropolitan regions—is likely an important factor to achieving the BOG's Pell student enrollment goals.

### Admissions criteria

Another factor that warrants more inquiry is schools' admissions criteria. Student SAT and ACT test scores have long been commonly used in acceptance decisions. As institutions become more competitive, the average SAT/ACT score of admitted students tends to rise. Yet lower income students face a disadvantage if their families lack the resources to invest in test preparation courses, tutoring, or the cost of taking multiple tests. Another factor may be that even high-achieving students whose parents did not attend college often navigate the college application process without adequate guidance from a knowledgeable adult, which can decrease their odds of acceptance to a competitive school. Such disadvantages can contribute to a limited pool of "highly qualified" Pell students under many schools' admissions criteria. It is also one reason (in addition to cost savings) why many high-achieving, lower-income students first attend their local state college to earn an associate's degree before transferring to a state university.

## INCREASED OPPORTUNITY FOR PELL STUDENTS WILL HELP FUEL FLORIDA'S ECONOMIC FUTURE

Most indicators point to a bright economic future for Florida. The nation's third-largest state, Florida has the fourth-largest economy in the country and the third-fastest growth rate. The Florida Council of 100 reports that among the nation's top 10 most populous states, Florida ranks #1 in GDP growth and #2 in year-over-year job increases. In 2022- 2023, Florida was home to four of the ten U.S. metropolitan areas with the highest growth in gross domestic product (GDP): Orlando, Tampa Bay, Jacksonville, and South Florida.

***And although the state's economic future generally looks bright, Florida is facing headwinds in one vital area: talent.***

To sustain this growth, Florida needs a more highly educated workforce. Currently, about 55% of Florida's working-age population holds a postsecondary degree or credential. Although this rate has grown steadily over the years, Florida needs to accelerate it to meet future workforce needs. Indeed, by some estimates, more than 64% of Florida jobs will require some form of education beyond high school by 2031.

This is because Florida's economy is changing fast. The Florida Council of 100 reports that the state's diversifying economy is moving away from low-wage sectors toward relatively high-wage

ones. The Florida Chamber of Commerce's Top 30 High Demand Careers all require postsecondary credentials, 43% of them a bachelor's degree.

And although the state's economic future generally looks bright, Florida is facing headwinds in one vital area: talent. According to the Florida Chamber of Commerce, 86.9% of employers surveyed last year reported that they struggled to recruit qualified workers for open positions. Some of Florida's most in-demand and high-wage fields, including healthcare, IT/math, business and finance, and architecture and engineering, have the largest talent shortages in the state. These are all fields that commonly require college degrees.

Expanding access for Pell students to Florida's public universities can help bridge the talent gap and stands to reap massive economic gains for Florida. Helios Education Foundation recently reported that increasing Florida's postsecondary enrollment rate by just 10 percent would generate annual gains of $8.38 billion. A 20 percent increase in degree completion would generate annual gains of $7.59 billion. By comparison, the annual operating budget for Florida's public university system is approximately $8.5 billion. The return on investment is clear: More university access for Pell students benefits not only students, but also employers, the economy, and our state as a whole.

## About Florida College Access Network

Florida College Access Network (FCAN) is Florida's collaborative network committed to ensuring all Floridians have the opportunity to achieve an education beyond high school and a rewarding career. We envision a Florida working together where education is the pathway to economic mobility for all.

FCAN strives to expand knowledge of research, data, policies, and practices that impact postsecondary access and attainment in Florida. For more information, visit **www.floridacollegeaccess.org**.

### *Online version of this report includes hyperlinked resources.*

*FCAN is a statewide independent organization hosted by the University of South Florida (USF). The statements and positions presented are those of FCAN and are not made on behalf of the USF Board of Trustees or intended in any way to be representative of USF.*

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