

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

CONNECTION, THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION, is published five times a year by the New England Board of Higher Education, 45 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111-1325
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Vol. XVII, No. 2 Fall 2002
ISSN 0895-6405
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Publisher: Robert A. Weygand
Executive Editor: John O. Harney
Senior Director of Communications:
Charlotte Stratton
Design and Production:
The Publication Group

**Director of Advertising Sales
and Marketing:** Myha Nguyen

Back Issues: Regular issues \$3.95 each; annual directory issue \$14.95.

Advertising rates are available upon request.

CONNECTION is printed in New England.

CONNECTION is indexed and abstracted in EBSCOhost's Academic Search Elite, Academic Search Premier and Professional Development Collection, and indexed in PAIS International and ERIC's Current Index to Journals in Education. A cumulative index of CONNECTION articles and abstracts of recent articles are also accessible on the World Wide Web at www.nebhe.org.

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There are two Big Stories in New England Demography. One is that the six-state region is the slowest-growing in America, thanks to an aging white population and, in spots, the out-migration of educated young people—the so-called “brain drain.” This poses obvious dangers for the regional labor force, which grew hardly at all in the last decade, and for the region’s political clout, which has been waning for several decades.

In fact, with all the hand-wringing about the people New England is losing, it’s easy to overlook Big Demography Story Number Two: the people New England is gaining. These are the Somali refugees flocking to Lewiston, Maine; the Laotians of tiny Newmarket, N.H.; the Tibetans and Bosnians of Burlington, Vt.; the Dominicans, Haitians and Russians enlivening communities from Lynn, Mass., to Stamford, Conn.

True, Boston is America’s third whitest metro area, behind only Pittsburgh and Minneapolis, and the Hub and its suburbs are disturbingly segregated, according to research by the Harvard Civil Rights Project. Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, meanwhile, are among just a dozen states nationally where 85 percent or more of school students are white.

Yet, this is not *su padre’s* New England. Dim sum is served in far-flung suburbs—and there’s a wait. Mosques and Buddhist temples dot the countryside. The region’s demography is changing profoundly. The *new* New Englanders have arrived.

Where they go from here will depend in large part on the region’s colleges and universities, many of which are just now adjusting to the *old* new demography—the phenomenon of “nontraditional” working adults, women, single parents, flooding campuses with demands for evening classes, larger parking lots and weekend services.

Now, New England’s fate is riding on the educational attainment of new populations with far more complex challenges. Will they graduate from high school, pursue higher education and contribute to the skilled workforce as an earlier generation of new populations did? Or will they be left behind—mass casualties of what Harvard Professor Gary Orfield characterizes as “a destructive set of federal, state, and local changes in higher education policy that limit the ability of minority and low-income families to go to college, damage their future and the future of their communities, and sacrifice too much of the human potential of a society where soon half of all school-age children will be non-white.”

These changes include wholesome-sounding inventions like high-stakes testing (on which students of color underperform), merit aid programs (versus aid based on financial need) and honors colleges (which shift public higher education resources away from the “regular” state higher education programs that have offered the traditional entryway for so many nontraditional students).

The good news is that with the white population shrinking, college officials have a powerful incentive to reach out to the *new* New Englanders—to revamp and recharge the mostly white admissions committees that have tended to admit students in their own image and to invest in imaginative ways to diversify the professoriate, which is now about 90 percent white.

They should make these urgent priorities. There’s no time—and no *new* New Englanders—to waste.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.