

**Top 10 Percent Report:  
Changes in Newly Enrolled  
Undergraduate Student Populations  
in Texas Public Universities  
Fall 2009-2019**

**January 2021**

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The mission of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) is to provide leadership and coordination for Texas higher education and to promote access, affordability, quality, success, and cost efficiency through *60x30TX*, resulting in a globally competitive workforce that positions Texas as an international leader.

### Agency Vision

The THECB will be recognized as an international leader in developing and implementing innovative higher education policy to accomplish our mission.

### Agency Philosophy

The THECB will promote access to and success in quality higher education across the state with the conviction that access and success without quality is mediocrity and that quality without access and success is unacceptable.

The THECB's core values are:

**Accountability:** We hold ourselves responsible for our actions and welcome every opportunity to educate stakeholders about our policies, decisions, and aspirations.

**Efficiency:** We accomplish our work using resources in the most effective manner.

**Collaboration:** We develop partnerships that result in student success and a highly qualified, globally competent workforce.

**Excellence:** We strive for excellence in all our endeavors.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age or disability in employment or the provision of services.

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## Introduction

The original “Top 10 Percent Law” (also called the “Top 10 Percent Rule”) was passed by the 75<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature in 1997 to address the issue of diversity in Texas public universities. Given the fact that many Texas high schools serve predominantly low-income and minority students, it was hoped that the automatic offer of admission made to the top 10% of students in the spring of their junior year would attract many of those students to Texas public universities, thus increasing the income, ethnic/racial, and geographic diversity of institutions, particularly at the two flagship institutions of The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) and Texas A&M University.

The legislation was a response to the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court Hopwood decision in 1996 that institutions could not use a student’s race as an admissions criterion. The law stated that:

“Each general academic teaching institution shall admit an applicant for admission to the institution as an undergraduate student if the applicant graduated in one of the two school years preceding the academic year for which the applicant is applying for admission from a public or private high school in this state accredited by a generally recognized accrediting organization with a grade point average in the top 10 percent of the student’s high school graduating class.”<sup>1</sup>

A 2009 change allowed UT Austin to set a more stringent standard than top 10% to limit the number of students offered automatic admission under the rule to “75 percent of the university’s enrollment capacity designated for first-time resident undergraduate students in an academic year.”<sup>2</sup> With the 2009 change in the law, the Legislature mandated that THECB produce an annual report on students admitted under the Top 10 Percent Rule and the institutions’ progress in having their student populations better reflect the income and ethnic diversity of the Texas population, with the intent of assessing the impact of the new rule.

In this report, we look at changes in first-time undergraduate student enrollment between 2009 and 2019 at UT Austin, Texas A&M University, and other public Texas universities for students admitted under the Top 10 Percent Rule (Top 10 Percent students) and for Texas resident students not admitted under that rule (Non-Top 10 Percent students). The report examines the extent to which the two flagship universities and the other public universities enroll student populations that reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of the state’s 18- to 22-year-old population.

In addition, the report examines the enrollment of high school graduates in the top 10% who are economically disadvantaged and those coming from small or low-sending high schools. Small high schools are defined as those with fewer than 50 graduates in a given year. Low-sending high schools are defined as those in the bottom 20% based on the percentage of their graduates who enroll in a four-year institution within two years of high school graduation.

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<sup>1</sup> H.B. 588, Sec. 51.803

<sup>2</sup> S.B. 175, Sec. 1 (a-1). Based on this rule, admissions officials at UT Austin initially set the standard at the top 7% and changed it to top 6% for the 2019 entering freshman class. Due to limitations in THECB data collection, all students in the top 10% at UT Austin are included in this analysis; however, students below the UT Austin threshold were not automatically admitted. UT Austin publishes an annual report with additional detail on this issue: <https://provost.utexas.edu/enrollment-management/admissions-research/admission-reports>.

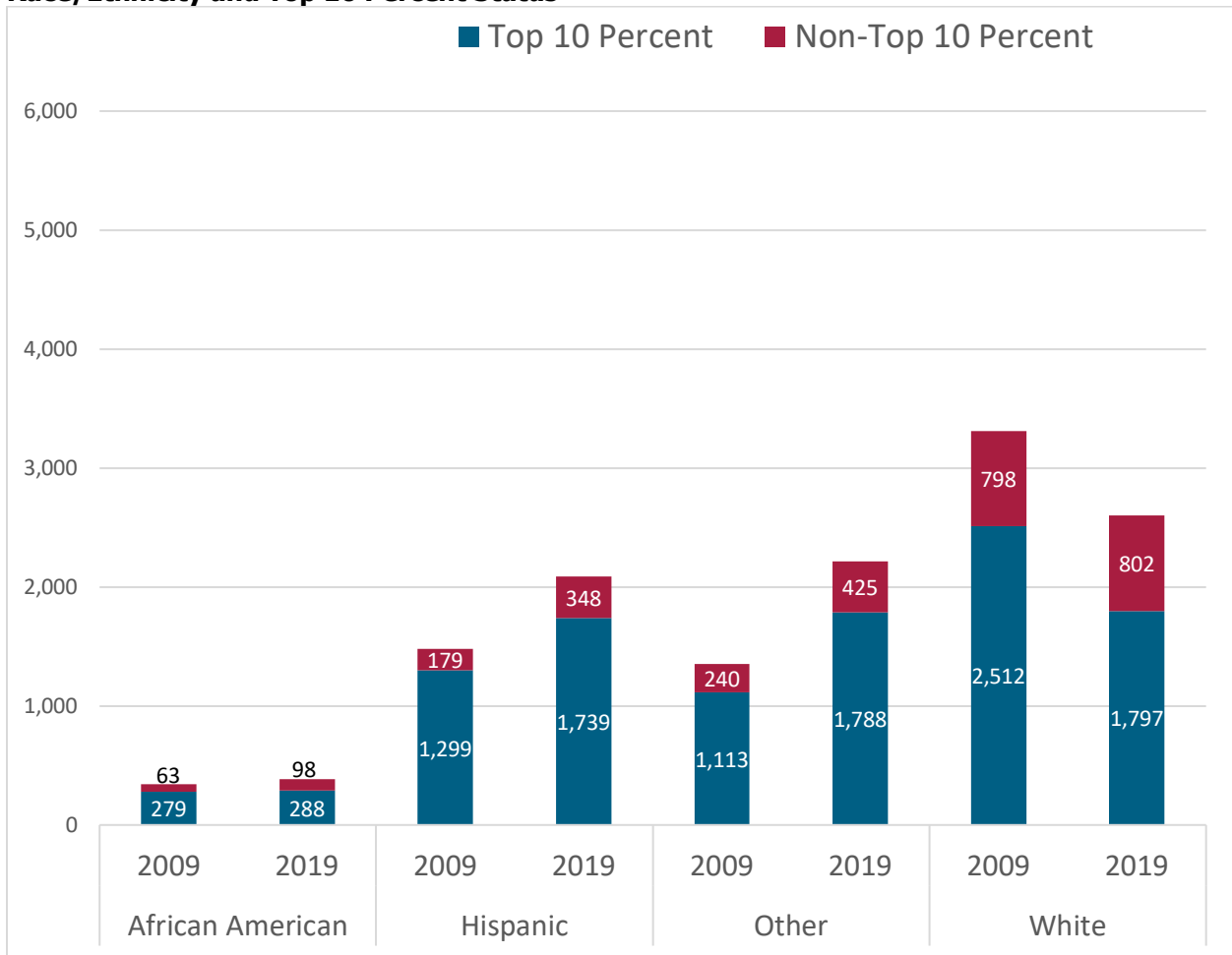
Finally, the report provides a short description of some of the findings of research studies that attempted to estimate the effect of the Top 10 Percent Rule on racial/ethnic diversity in the state's public flagship universities. A [dataset](#) with information for all years from 2009 to 2019 is available on the THECB's Texas Higher Education Data website.

## Trends in Racial/Ethnic Diversity

### The University of Texas at Austin

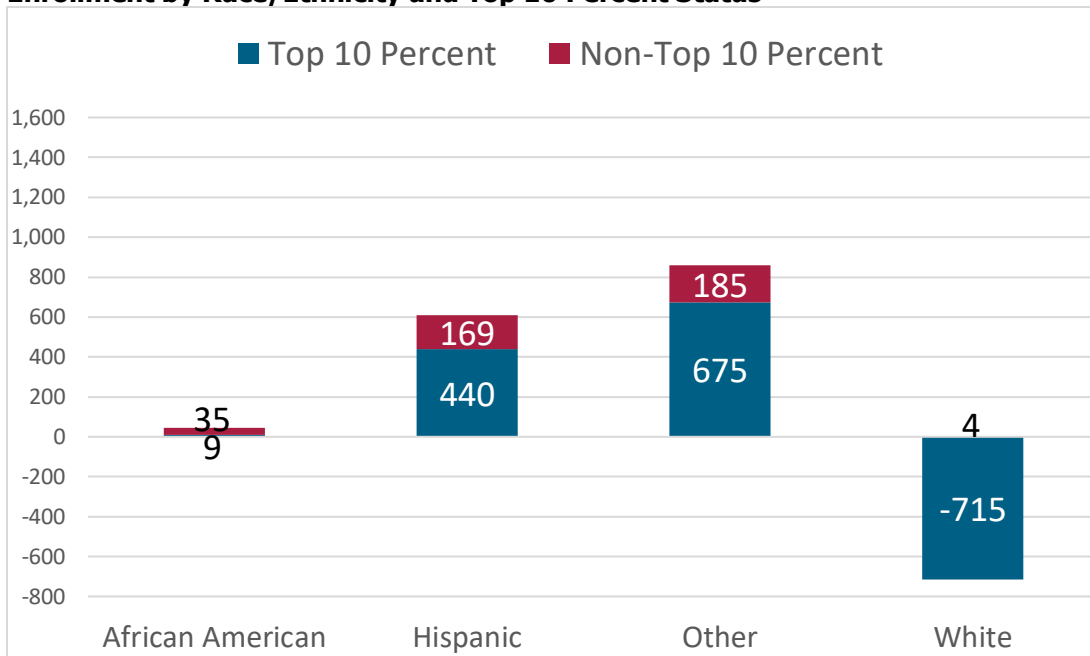
Enrollments by Top 10 Percent and Non-Top 10 Percent students increased for African American, Hispanic, and Other students between 2009 and 2019 at UT Austin (Figure 1). For White students, the enrollment of Non-Top 10 Percent students stayed about the same, while Top 10 Percent enrollments and overall enrollments declined.

**Figure 1. The University of Texas at Austin: First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Top 10 Percent Status**



In absolute terms, most of the 2009-2019 change in the enrollments of Hispanic, Other, and White students at UT Austin was accounted for by the change in Top 10 Percent enrollments (Figure 2). African American student enrollments increased slightly, by 44, most of whom were Non-Top 10 Percent students. Hispanic student enrollments increased by 609 over this period, including 440 Top 10 Percent enrollments. Other students had the largest increase, by 860 enrollments, of which 675 were from the Top 10 Percent. White student enrollments decreased by 711 overall, including 715 fewer enrollments among students graduating in the Top 10 Percent and 4 additional Non-Top 10 Percent enrollments.

**Figure 2. The University of Texas at Austin: 2009-2019 Change in First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Top 10 Percent Status**

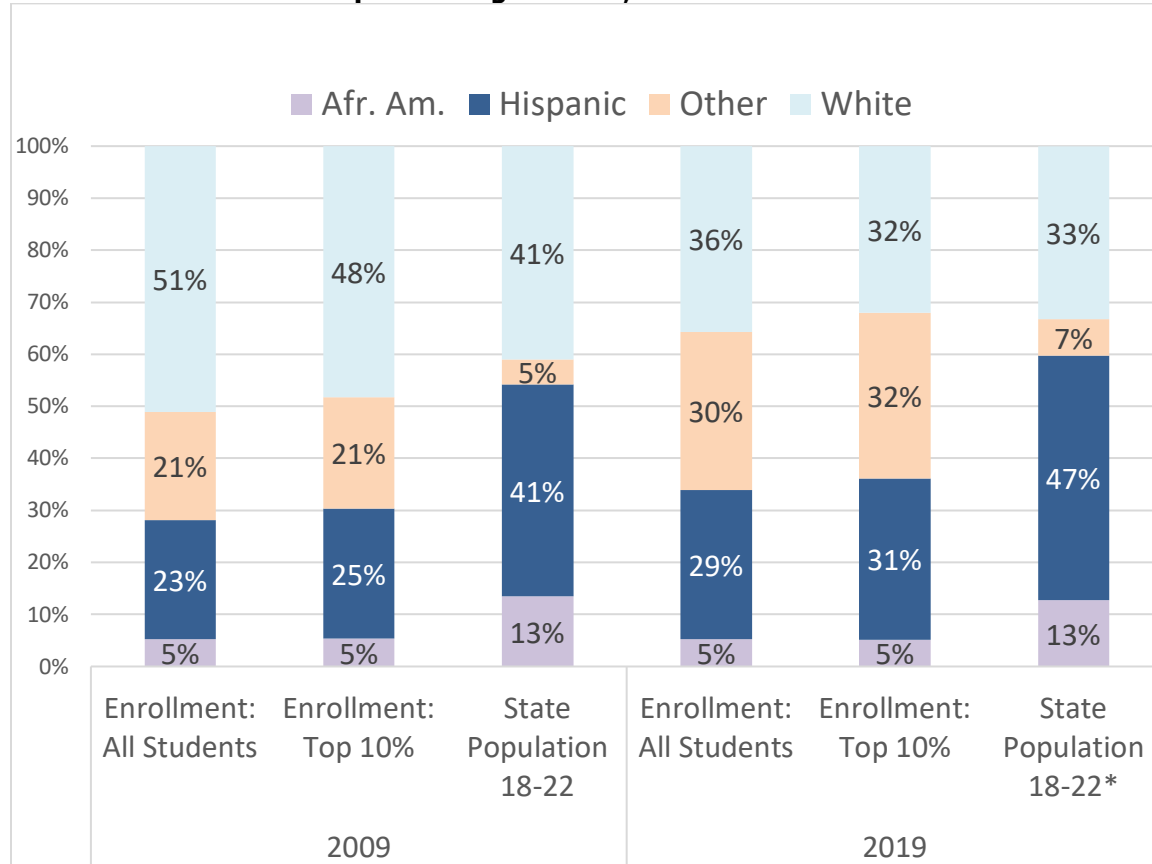


Comparing the university’s racial/ethnic diversity with that of 18- to 22-year-olds in the state (Figure 3), overall and Top 10 Percent enrollment shares of African American and Hispanic students increased between 2009 and 2019 but continued to fall short of the percentages of those two groups in the statewide 18- to 22-year-old population. For example, Hispanic Top 10 Percent enrollments made up 31% of all Top 10 enrollments in 2019, an increase of 6 percentage points since 2009. Yet participation gaps remained roughly the same because the share of Hispanic young adults (18-22 years) increased from 41% to 47% statewide (6 percentage points) during this same period. Meanwhile the “Other” students, many of whom are Asian or multiracial,<sup>3</sup> made up a large and growing share of the university’s enrollment, greatly exceeding that group’s share in the state population.

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, the Census Bureau changed the collection of data on multiple-race populations. THECB data records indicate a large increase in the number of students categorized as multiracial in the 2010-2011 academic year.



**Figure 3. The University of Texas at Austin: Comparison of First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment with Texas Population Ages 18-22, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**

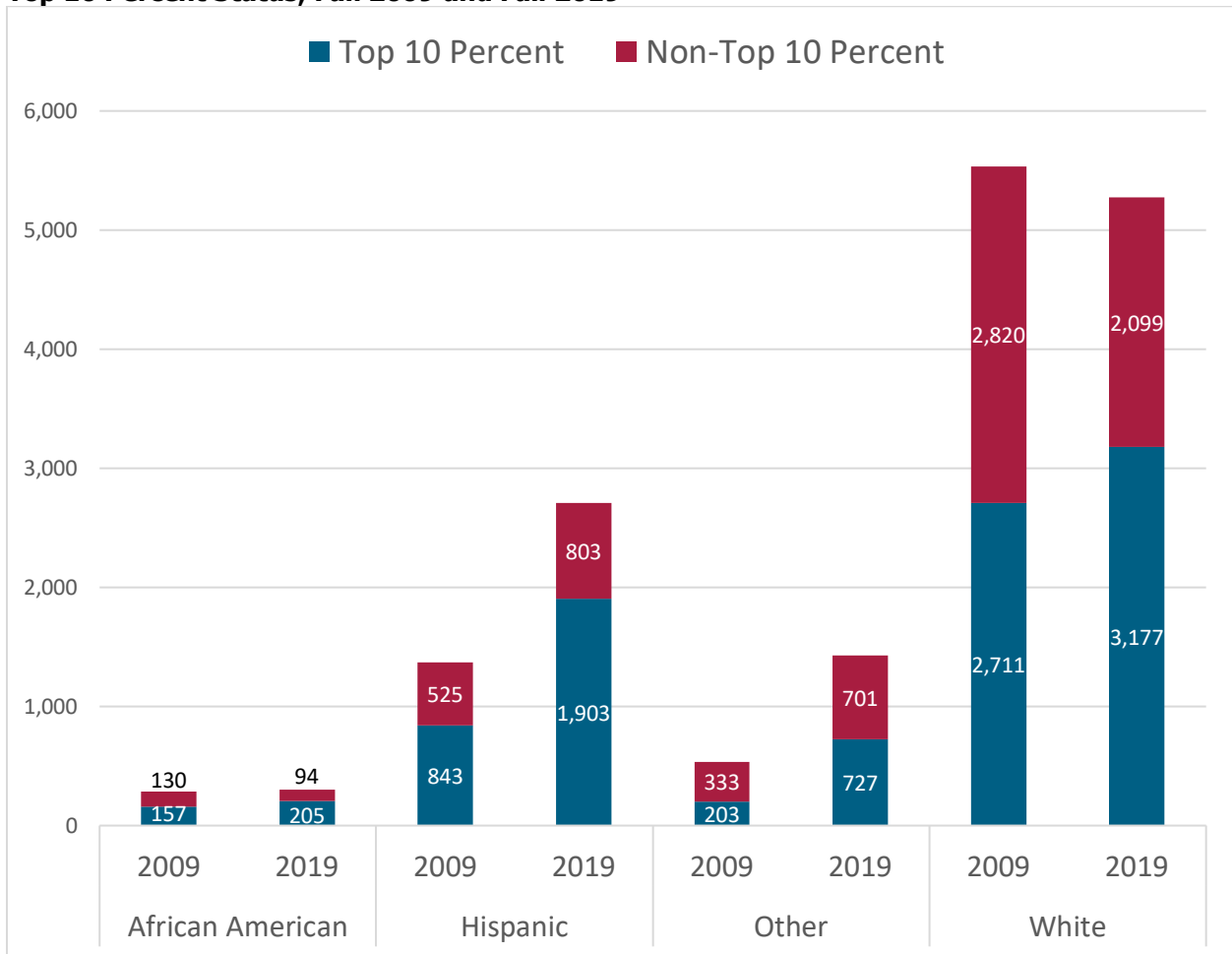


\*2018: latest available from the American Community Survey

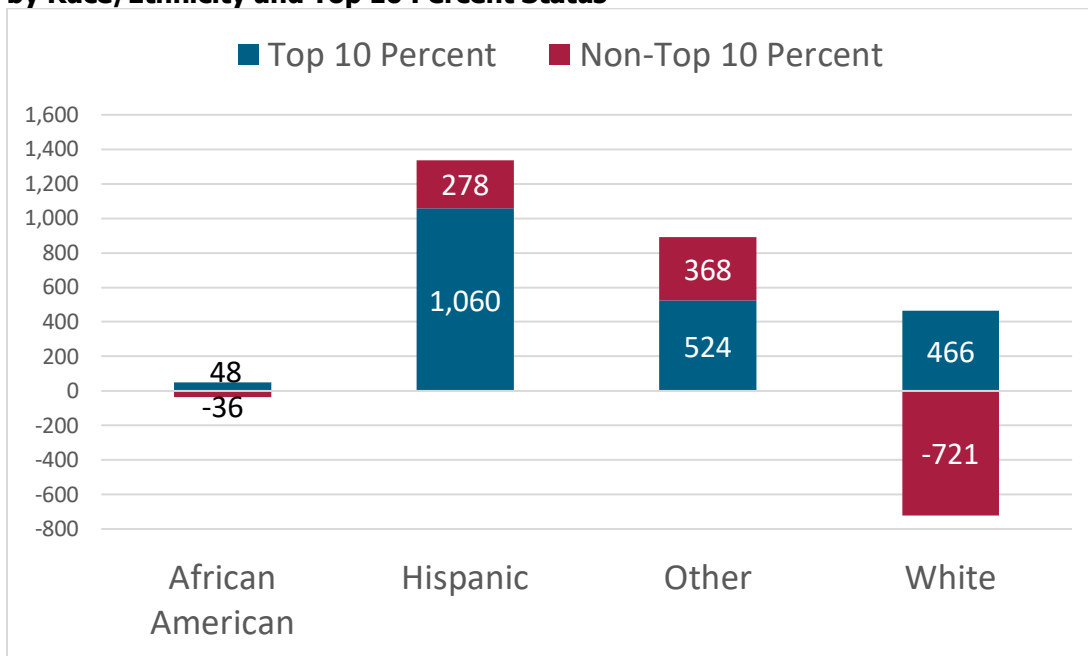
## Texas A&M University

Enrollments by Top 10 Percent students increased for all four race/ethnic categories between 2009 and 2019 at Texas A&M University (Figure 4). Non-Top 10 Percent enrollment increased for Hispanic and Other students and declined for African American and White students. Overall enrollment increased for Hispanic and Other students, increased slightly for African American students (from 287 to 299 students), and declined for White students. Top 10 Percent students accounted for most of the overall enrollment increase for Hispanic and Other students (Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Texas A&M University: First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Top 10 Percent Status, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**



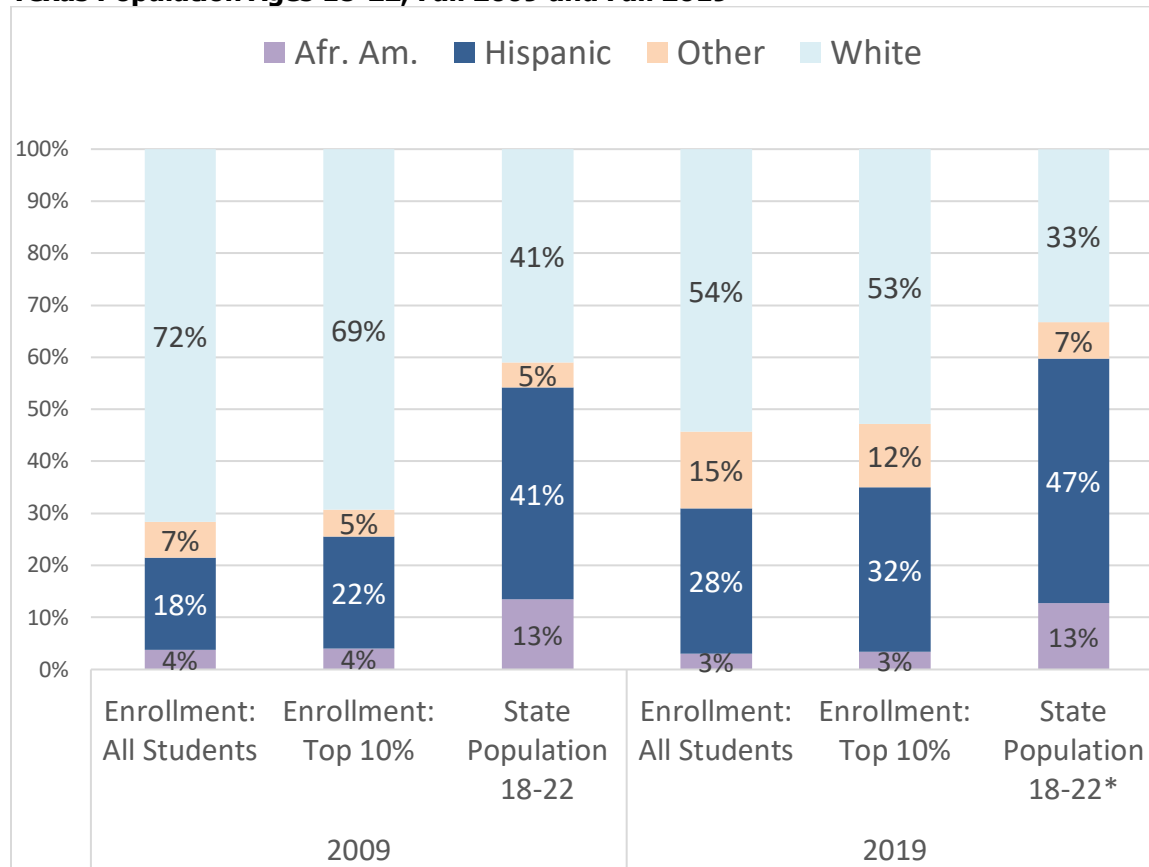
**Figure 5. Texas A&M University: 2009-2019 Change in First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Top 10 Percent Status**



Comparing Texas A&M University's racial/ethnic diversity with that of the population of 18- to 22-year-olds in the state, White students continued to make up the majority of new student enrollments (54%) in 2019, exceeding their share of the Texas young adult population (33%). The share of Hispanic and Other students increased between 2009 and 2019 (Figure 6). In both years, Hispanics were better represented in the Top 10 Percent group than among all new undergraduates—for example, 32% of Top 10 Percent students versus 28% of new undergraduates in 2019.

The percentage of African American and Hispanic student enrollments continued to be well below the share of those two groups in the 18- to 22-year-old population in the state. African American young adults made up 13% of the 18- to 22-year-old population but 3% of all and Top 10 Percent enrollments. Hispanic students were 47% of the young adult population but 32% of Top 10 Percent enrollment and 28% of all enrollment.

**Figure 6. Texas A&M University: Comparison of First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment with Texas Population Ages 18-22, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**

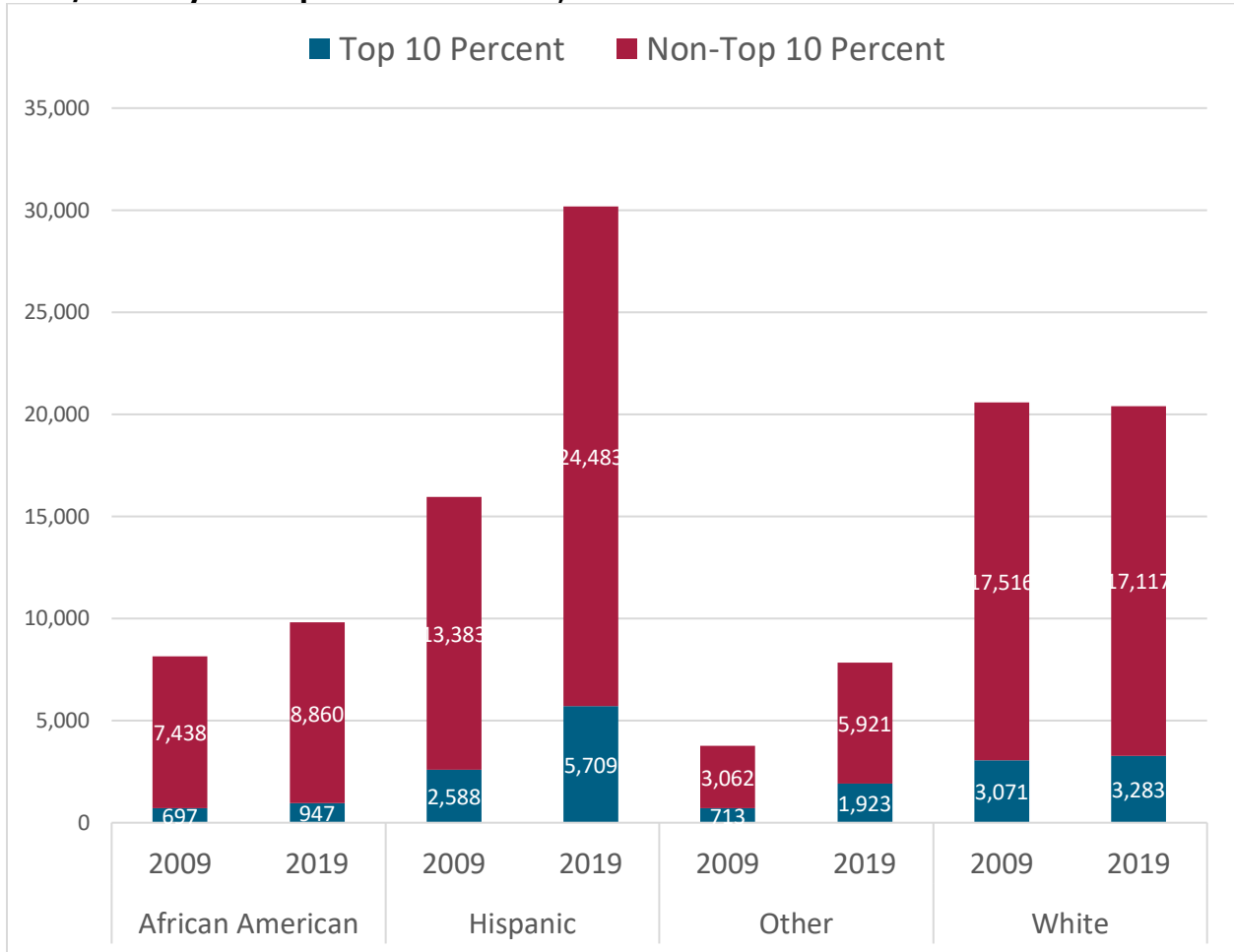


\* 2018: latest available from the American Community Survey

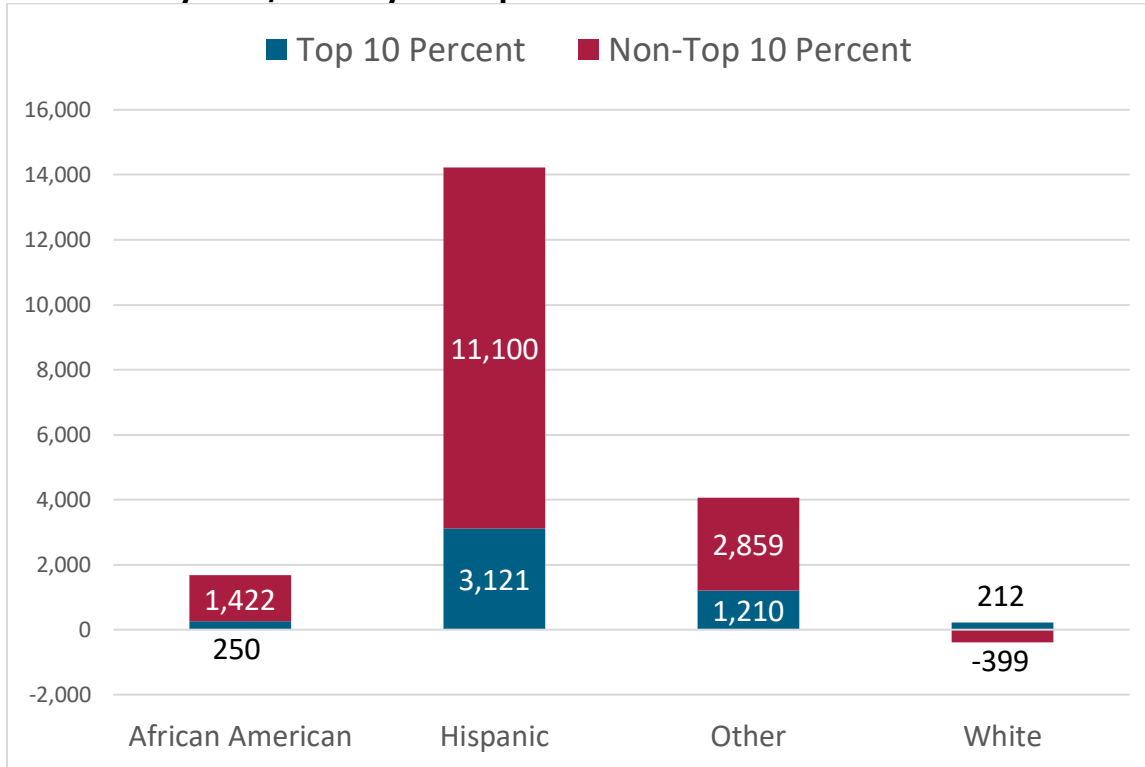
### Other Texas Public Universities

Enrollments by Top 10 Percent and Non-Top 10 Percent students increased for African American, Hispanic, and Other students at the 35 other Texas public universities between 2009 and 2019, while declining slightly for White students (Figures 7 and 8). Hispanic students had by far the largest increase. Most of the entering students at non-flagship institutions in 2009 and 2019 were not from the top 10%. Likewise, most of the increases in enrollment for African American, Hispanic, and Other students (Figure 8) consisted of Non-Top 10 Percent students. This is not surprising given that the Top 10 Percent legislation was mainly aimed at spurring enrollment by underserved groups in the state’s flagship institutions.

**Figure 7. Other Texas Public Universities: First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Top 10 Percent Status, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**

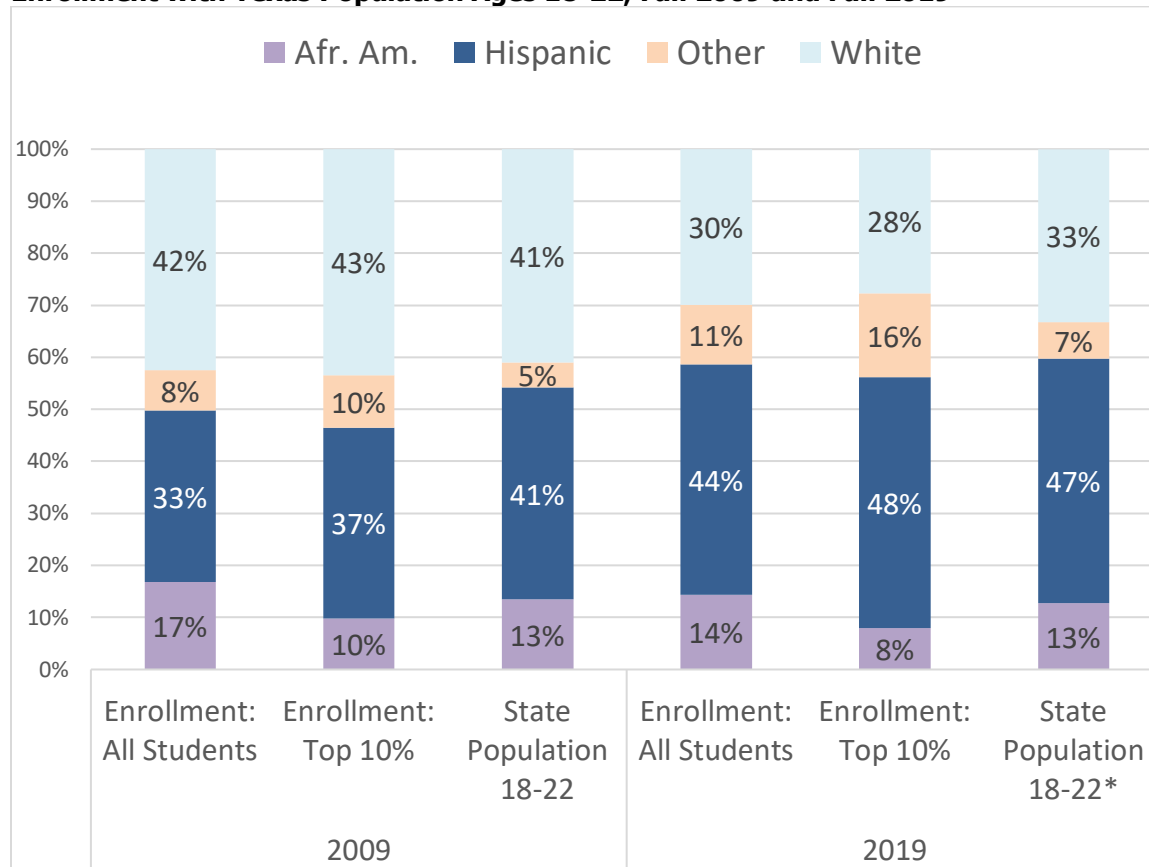


**Figure 8. Other Texas Public Universities: 2009-2019 Change in First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Top 10 Percent Status**



Overall enrollment of racial/ethnic groups in the non-flagship universities in 2019 came quite close to representing the population of 18- to 22-year-olds in the state (Figure 9). For the Top 10 Percent students, the Hispanic and Other shares exceeded the groups' statewide shares, while the African American and White shares were lower than their groups' statewide shares.

**Figure 9. Other Texas Public Universities: Comparison of First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment with Texas Population Ages 18-22, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**



\* 2018: latest available from the American Community Survey

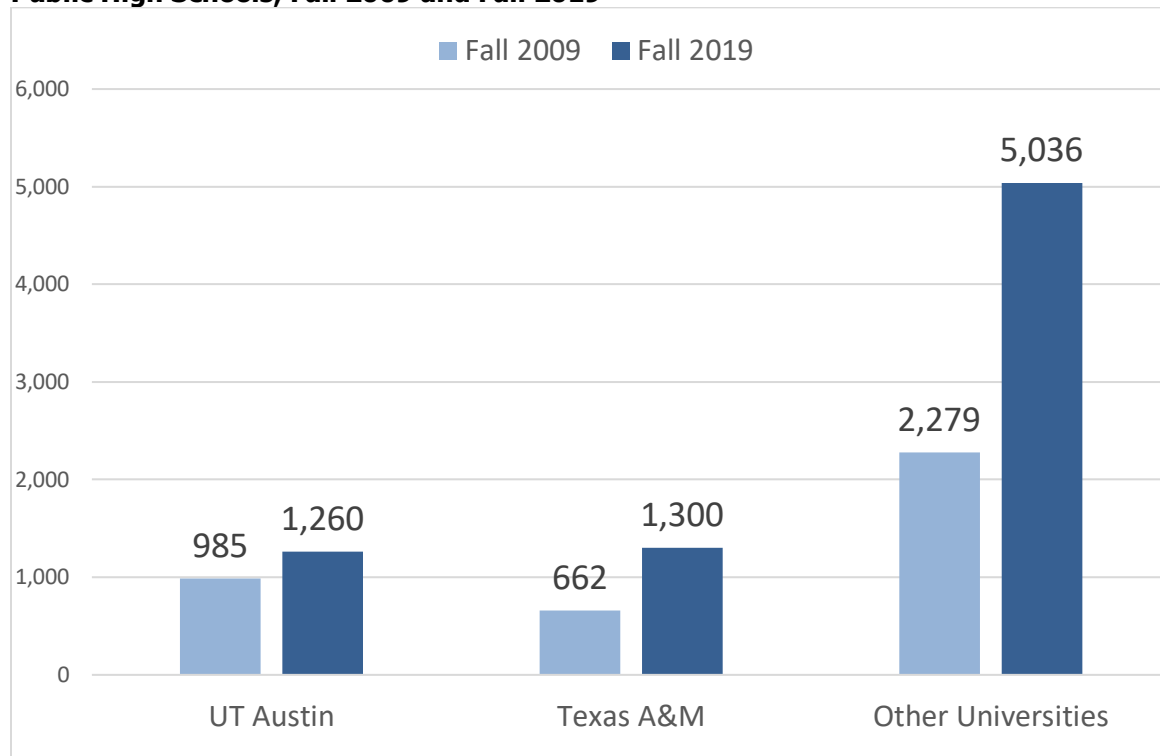
## Trends in Enrollment of Special Populations

Special populations identified in the Top 10 Percent legislation include (1) low-income students—those identified as economically disadvantaged in the Texas Education Agency’s graduation data;<sup>4</sup> (2) students from small high schools with fewer than 50 graduates; and (3) students from low-sending high schools—those in the bottom 20% based on the percentage of their graduates who enrolled in a four-year Texas institution in one of the two academic years following the student’s high school graduation year. The latter two populations are defined as mutually exclusive, with the bottom 20% of low-sending high schools drawn from high schools with 50 graduates or more.

### Economically Disadvantaged Students

The number of economically disadvantaged students who enrolled under the Top 10 Percent criterion increased between 2009 and 2019, most notably for Texas A&M University and the state’s other public universities. The numbers roughly doubled at Texas A&M and more than doubled in the other public universities (Figure 10).

**Figure 10. Top 10 Percent Enrollment of Economically Disadvantaged Students from Texas Public High Schools, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**



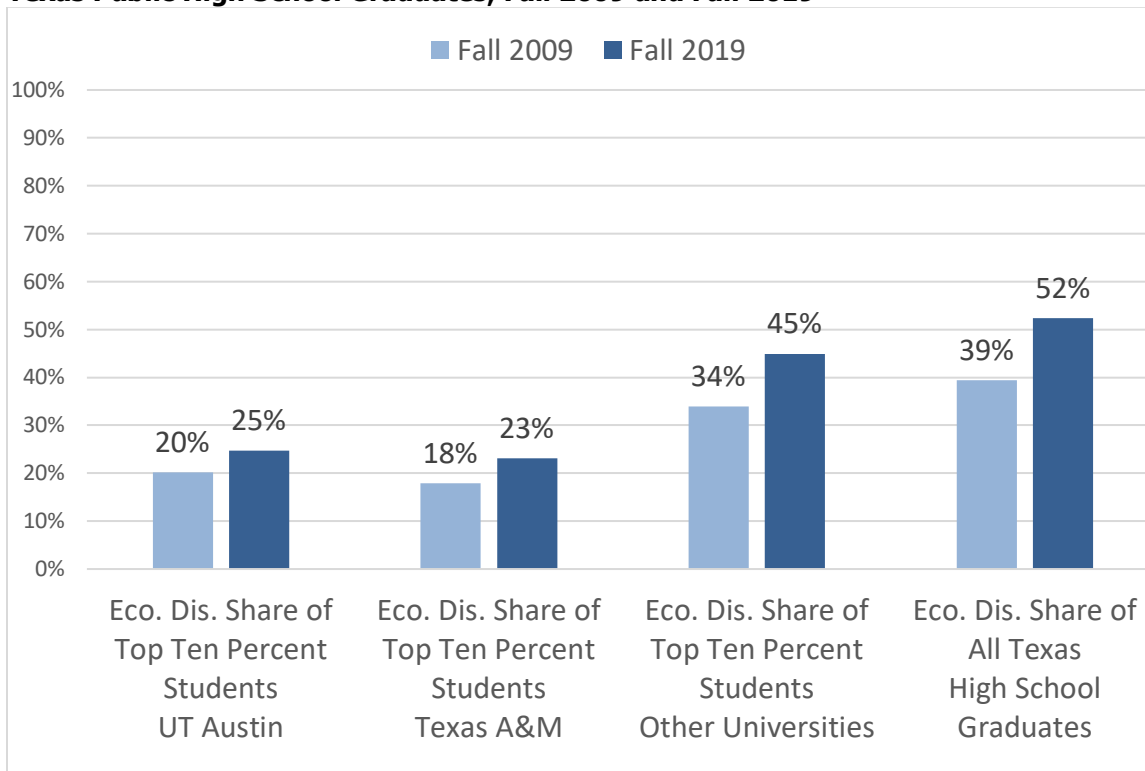
Translating the numbers in Figure 10 into percentages of each institution’s Top 10 Percent enrollees, UT Austin’s and Texas A&M University’s percentages of economically disadvantaged enrollments increased by about 5 percentage points, while the percentages at

<sup>4</sup> In most cases, these were students identified as having been eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Student Lunch program.



other Texas public universities and among all Texas public high school graduates increased by 11 and 13 percentage points, respectively (Figure 11). Comparing institutions' percentages of economically disadvantaged Top 10 Percent students with that of all high school graduates in 2019, these percentages were relatively close for other public universities but not for the flagship campuses.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 11. Economically Disadvantaged Percentages of Top 10 Percent Students and of Texas Public High School Graduates, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**



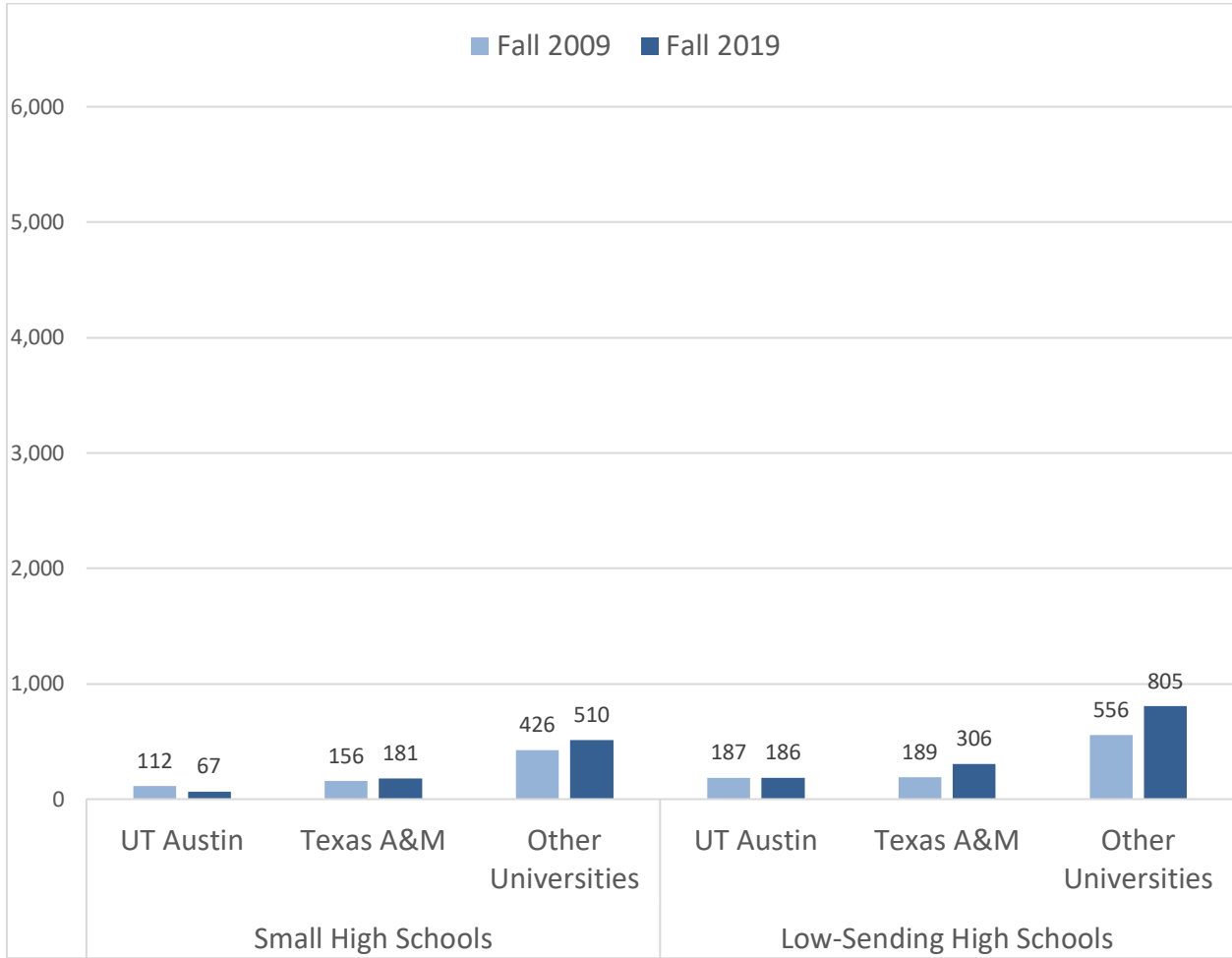
### Students from Small High Schools or Low-Sending High Schools

The number of Top 10 Percent students from small high schools or low-sending high schools was relatively small, as illustrated in Figure 12, where the vertical scale is the same as that in Figure 10.<sup>6</sup> The numbers of those enrollees increased at Texas A&M University and the other public universities, but not at UT Austin. This lack of increase may be an indication that the restriction of top high school graduates to 7% or 6% at UT Austin in recent years may be limiting representation from small and low-sending high schools.

<sup>5</sup> Census American Community Survey data on 18- to 22-year-olds were not used for this comparison because the Census data did not have a comparable measure of economic disadvantage.

<sup>6</sup> Small high schools with fewer than 50 graduates accounted for 4.4% of the 2019 statewide total of 355,615 high school graduates.

**Figure 12. Top 10 Percent Enrollment from Small and Low-Sending High Schools, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**

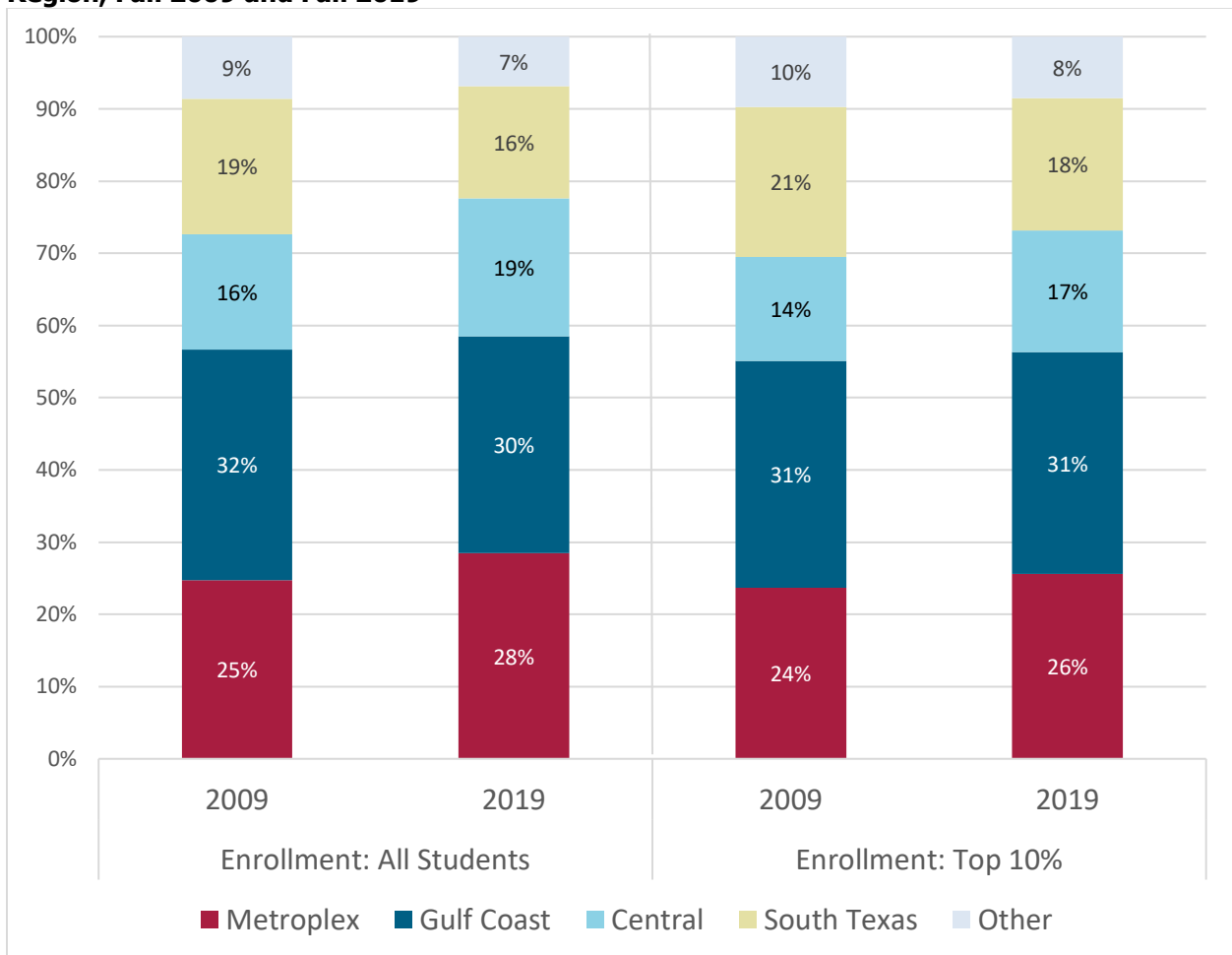


## Regional Enrollment Patterns

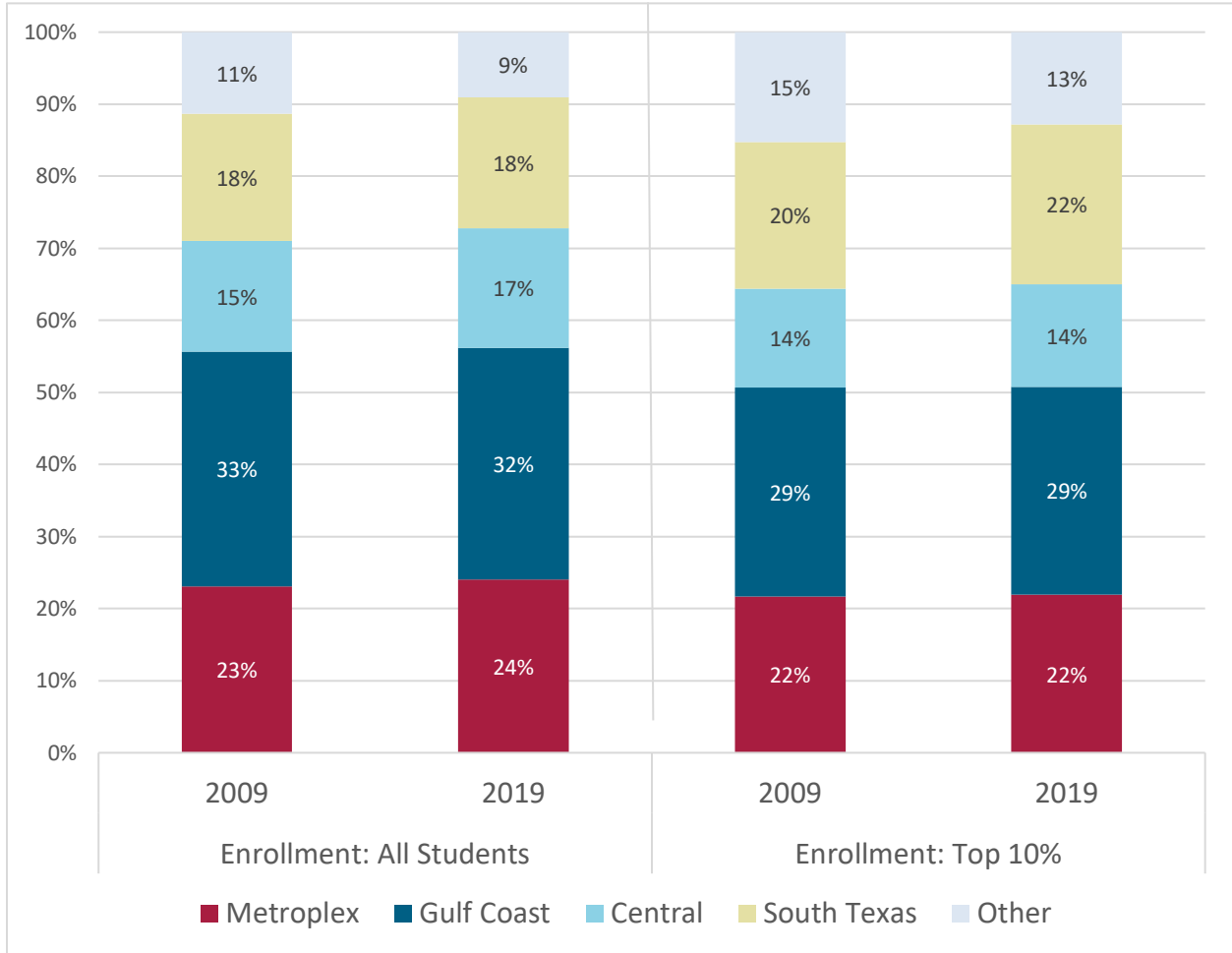
First-time undergraduate student enrollment in the state’s public universities is also tracked by the higher education region where the students originate. (A map of the state’s higher education regions is contained in [Appendix A](#).) Four of these 10 regions contain the bulk of the state’s population: South Texas (containing San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley), Central Texas (containing Austin), Gulf Coast (containing the Houston metropolitan area), and Metroplex (containing the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area).

Looking at the state’s two flagship institutions in 2019, students from South Texas and the six less populated “Other” regions were slightly better represented in the Top 10 Percent group than they were in the overall population of first-time undergraduates at those institutions (Figures 13 and 14).

**Figure 13. The University of Texas at Austin: First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Region, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**



**Figure 14. Texas A&M University: First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment by Region, Fall 2009 and Fall 2019**



## Research on the Top 10 Percent Rule

The Top 10 Percent Rule was intended to increase diversity in enrollment in Texas universities by two basic mechanisms: by increasing the number of high schools in the state that contribute students to those universities and by increasing the flow of minority enrollees from each high school that contributes students.

Descriptive statistics, such as those in this report, do not make it possible to distinguish the effect of the Top 10 Percent Rule from the other policies, initiatives, and trends that have taken place over the last 20 years. Research studies have attempted to quantify the effects of this rule by comparing enrollment by students just above and below the top 10% threshold, who should differ little other than by their eligibility under the rule.<sup>7</sup> These studies have tended to find some improvement in flagship enrollment probabilities for low-income students and Hispanic students, especially those who are well prepared academically.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, a study of enrollment patterns by high school found that the pool of high schools that regularly send students to flagship universities has not expanded much since the rule was put in place.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there is some evidence of benefits to the Top 10 Percent Rule, but these studies suggest benefits would be enhanced if low-income and minority students were better academically prepared and better informed of their options under the program and if stronger outreach efforts were made to students in low-sending high schools.

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<sup>7</sup> These studies are not a complete measure of the effects of the Top 10 Percent Rule compared with the counterfactual of not having the rule, as they cannot measure the enrollment patterns the students just below the eligibility cutpoint would have had in the absence of the rule.

<sup>8</sup> See Sunny Xinchun Niu and Marta Tienda, "The Impact of the Texas Top 10 Percent Law on College Enrollment: A Regression Discontinuity Approach," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 2010, 29:1, pp. 84-110; and Kalena E. Cortes and Jane Arnold Lincove, "Match or Mismatch? Automatic Admissions and College Preferences of Low- and High-Income Students," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2019, 41:1, pp. 98-123.

<sup>9</sup> Kalena E. Cortes and Daniel Klasik, "Uniform Admissions, Unequal Access: Did the Top Ten Percent Plan Increase Access to Selective Flagship Institutions?" Conference paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, May 2019.

## Appendix A: Higher Education Regions





[This report](#) and the [supporting data](#) are available on the [Texas Higher Education Data](#) website.

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