

**The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Higher Education:
Sustainable Solutions for Closing the Gap**

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Signature Assignment

Introduction

For many years, higher education was available only to a select few. Originally, postsecondary education began “in 1636 with the founding of Harvard College to educate white men to be religious and civic leaders for the colony” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 88). For about two hundred years afterward, the demographics of those attending higher education did not change much. Students with the financial means and access to information were able to attend while others were left falling short. Recently, however, there has been a significant increase in the number of students attending college, namely ‘non-traditional’ students such as women, African-Americans, and Latinos. While there are more students attending college than ever before, there is still a severe lack of equality in the types of students who are able to afford college. Mainly, students of a higher socioeconomic status (SES) have a higher likelihood of attending college than students of a lower SES. Students coming from a low-income, non-educated, and unemployed household tend to face more difficulty when it comes time to prepare for and make choices about higher education. The problem this paper will address will be the significant disadvantages that lower SES students have regarding access to higher education information and entry, thereby affecting their future choices.

History of Socioeconomic Injustice

“From 1636 until after the American Revolution there was little change in the overall landscape of higher education” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 89). During these times, it was mostly White wealthy or upper-middle-class men who went to college to become future educated civic leaders. Initially, higher education took on a religious tone, and would not change much until the arrival of private liberal arts institutions in the nineteenth century. Throughout the Western exploration years, America saw additions to their colleges and universities as the overall population increased, with some institutions making wider acceptances. Minority, non-traditional

students were beginning to gain access to higher education institutions, albeit in limited numbers as “most were from families of humble means” (p. 90). Even after about two hundred years, socioeconomic status clearly still played a crucial role in the access to college information and entry to these institutions. Over time and into the twentieth century, the American public and federal government eventually took notice of higher education inequality, which helped give way toward “federal and state policies...[that] focused on opening the doors of higher education to the underserved populations of America” (Swail, 2002, p. 15). Finally, after about four centuries, “U.S. higher education now includes 4,400 institutions, educating 20.4 million students in 2009-2010” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 92).

Focusing on the Problem

In today’s society, the expectation remains that students from all backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses should receive access to information about higher education, therefore hopefully increasing their attendance and matriculation rates. However, “large gaps still exist in [terms of] who goes where and who completes degree programs” (Swail, 2002, p. 15). There are numerous reasons behind this issue – namely, information access and attendance patterns.

Early Access to Information

Although there has been “a 32 percent increase in total enrollment over just the last ten years” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 3), students of a lower socioeconomic status are still having trouble accessing information about higher education institutions. Early on in elementary and secondary schools, low SES students are at a significant disadvantage as compared to students of a higher SES. “Seventy-one percent of the lowest-SES students do not obtain the academic qualifications necessary to support college enrollment” (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001, p. 121). Studies have shown that low-SES students would benefit from a more rigorous high school curriculum, particularly in terms of mathematics, which would increase their likelihood of

attending college (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Walpole, 2003). However, low-SES students are inclined to attend schools with under-resourced teachers and classrooms, and as a result, typically leave high school with below-college-ready skills and oftentimes cannot meet basic college acceptance criteria.

Dynamics outside the classroom can also greatly impact students' contact with information about higher education, especially in the case of low-SES students. On average, most parents of low-SES students are not college graduates themselves, and are seldom aware of the application, admissions and financial aid processes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Goldrick-Rab, 2007, Walpole, 2003). Specifically, "most low-income parents expect to finance college education through financial aid" (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p. 8) whereas many parents of high-SES students have substantial savings or other sources of support. Overall, "students whose parents did not attend college are less likely than other classmates to enter the college pipeline" (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000, p. 59). Moreover, low-SES students tend to find information about college from their guidance counselors and college admissions officers (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Goldrick-Rab, 2007; McGlynn, 2014; Renn & Reason, 2013; Walpole, 2003). High-SES students, in comparison, "tend to rely on several sources of information...are more knowledgeable of college costs, are more likely to broaden the search...tend to consider higher-quality institutions, and have parents who planned and saved for college expenses" (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p. 9). Lower socioeconomic students are clearly facing numerous obstacles when it comes to higher education information.

Attendance Patterns of Low-SES Students

Coming from a low socioeconomic background can affect which institutions a student is able to pursue. For instance, low-SES students tend to enroll at two-year institutions primarily

due to cost reasons whereas high-SES students tend to enroll at private, four-year institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2007, Walpole, 2003). Furthermore, “The Century Foundation report found that wealthy students outnumber poor students at the most selective four-year institutions” (McGlynn, 2014, p. 18), promoting the notion that elite schools are still overpopulated with wealthy students (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; McGlynn, 2014; Walpole, 2003). Additionally, “students who begin at a four-year institution and later move to other schools and stop out from school are disproportionately likely to come from low SES backgrounds” (Goldrick-Rab, 2007, p. 2457). Regardless of which type of institution, “those who attend college get access to social networks with useful information about the labor market to which those who hail from poor communities and do not attend college would not have access” (Wickrama, Simons, & Baltimore, 2012, p. 1485). Attending a college or university seems to increase the number of networks, job opportunities, and income levels available to college graduates, most of whom tend to be from higher socioeconomic statuses.

Where Do We Go From Here?

While America has made some impressive strides toward seeking educational equality for all students,

...it remains far from equal with respect to educational opportunity. Access to quality learning opportunities is very unevenly distributed across the country...especially when socioeconomic conditions are taken into consideration...The result is a cohort of students with enormous variance in levels of preparation for the rigors of postsecondary study. (Swail, 2002, p. 19)

In simple terms, “advantage breeds further advantage in today’s world, and higher education is not immune from that reality” (p. 19). Unless serious work is done to mitigate the socioeconomic gap, “it is likely that the new cohort of high school graduates will enter higher education challenged by formidable academic deficiencies” (p. 20). Solutions must be found to

address the challenges that result from having a lower socioeconomic status, with the goal of having a more enriched and diverse student body.

Finding Resolutions

Traditionally, low SES students have received little attention in large part because of “a lack of group identity and political mobilization” (Walpole, 2003, p. 46). In other words, educators and policy makers have not viewed low SES students as a group worthy of significant study and research because of their vast differences in reasons for not attending college and the lack of success rates with attending and graduating from college. As previously stated, low SES students have substantial barriers to overcome regarding access to and attending a higher education institution. Due to lack of information (or lack of consistency of information available), lack of significant parent involvement, and lack of knowledge of career path or aspirations, low SES students face a more difficult entry process into college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Renn & Reason, 2013; Swail, 2002; Walpole, 2003). More initiatives need to be developed to help mitigate the issues faced by low SES students.

Solutions Inside the Classroom

As previously stated, low SES students struggle with college access for many reasons. “The critical importance of being college qualified extends well beyond the application process...the academic resources secured at the elementary and secondary education levels make completion of a college degree a certainty” (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001, p. 142). Low SES students desperately need increased resources within the classroom in order to fully reach their college-seeking potential. Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen (2000) found from their study that “participating in a rigorous mathematics curriculum significantly increases the likelihood of attending college” (p. 56). Students who are more prepared academically were more prepared to

take on the college application process and to eventually attend an institution of higher learning. Furthermore, “taking algebra in eighth grade was strongly associated with taking advanced mathematics in high school, which, in turn, was strongly associated with a higher likelihood of attending college” (p. 56). Therefore, it could be reasoned that students taking advanced critical thinking classes early on in school helps better prepare them for the rigors of college applications. Overall, Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen’s (2000) study about disadvantaged students proved that “the more rigorous the curriculum, the more likely they were to enroll in college” (p. 58).

In addition to academics, test scores are an important component of most college applications. Unfortunately, low SES students do not get much help in terms of preparation for these exams as their family members are largely unfamiliar with the format and study methods. To help combat this, “schools can also help students prepare for the SAT and ACT tests and help them complete their applications for admission and financial aid, focusing on students [such as low SES] who may not get such help from their parents” (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000, p. 62). Guidance counselors and teachers are able to help facilitate a low SES student’s access to information about the SAT and ACT in addition to helping start the conversation about college. This is particularly helpful for those low SES students whose parents did not attend college and therefore may be unfamiliar with the process.

Solutions Outside the Classroom

Equally as important, the environment outside the classroom needs to be addressed in terms of finding solutions to help support low SES students. It has been reported that “low-socioeconomic status (SES) students had fewer information sources than upper-level SES students did... [with] low-SES students relying on high school counselors as the single most likely source of information” (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p. 10). Naturally, access to college

information must increase in order for low SES students to be better represented in college-going statistics. This can be done via a number of different ways such as FAFSA Days at school with parental involvement, admissions contact and brochures provided by local colleges and universities, and partnerships forged between secondary schools and their alumni that attended college after graduation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). In particular, Renn & Reason (2013) point out the value of comprehensive support programs, which “focus on populations of students who might have a more difficult time transitioning to college” (p. 72) and offer support and resources in addition to the Posse Foundation, which “provides scholarships for talented students from urban high schools” (p. 73). These initiatives are examples of how “Higher education’s ability and willingness to reach down and work with [schools] early in the educational pipeline is critical to future success” (Swail, 2002, p. 21). Evidently, high schools and colleges must work together in order to facilitate a more seamless transition for low SES students, given that most are coming from a disadvantageous position in comparison to high SES students.

Information access is especially valuable in regards to financial aid and how families are expected to and can afford to pay for college. For many low SES students and their families, “perceptions of college costs and the actual dollar amount of costs and aid may affect [attendance and] persistence decisions” (Goldrick-Rab, 2007, p. 2466). In fact, many low SES students either skip filling out the FAFSA or often do not understand award letters from institutions, therefore limiting their college-going choices. Parents can certainly benefit from attending financial aid workshops along with their student as “parental involvement [has been] convincingly linked to an increased likelihood of attending college” (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000, p. 60). Low SES parents are seldom aware of the college-going process as many only have a high school diploma (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000), so more financial aid resources and support would prove to be beneficial. Socioeconomic status can also determine the “type, price,

and quality of higher education institutions students deem realistic” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 42). For example, a student that is unaware of the overall mean cost of college may automatically choose the cheapest school, reasoning that it will cost their families the least amount of investment. In this sense, a student could be limiting the potential schools that might be a good academic and financial fit solely based off limited information. Essentially, “finding ways to improve the flow of information, particularly to lower-income students,...would improve the process for students who are making decisions about whether to pursue higher education and which institutions to attend” (p. 42).

Finally, a student’s peers have direct influence on their plans for attending college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Renn & Reason, 2013; Walpole, 2003). Astonishingly, “having friends with college plans was the strongest predictor of college enrollment” (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000, p. 53). Peers are oftentimes the primary source of information and identity formation for students, therefore having a notable effect on their decision making processes, especially when it comes to higher education. These ties can be so strong that “the odds of moderate- to high-risk students enrolling in college were four times higher than if none of their friends planned to go to college” (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000, p. 53). Friends can be a powerful college ally for low SES students, and encouraging higher education discussions among the student body in schools would be an important first step.

Conclusion and Further Recommendations

While it could be argued that higher education in America today has changed much since its introduction centuries ago, the fact remains that many students are still marginalized and deterred from knowing how to pursue and how to complete a college education. Low SES students in particular have run into barriers such as limited information access, slim financial and

parental support, and having other inadequate resources that prevent them from participating in one of the nation's greatest traditions – education. While it is apparent that many studies have been conducted to focus on this topic, additional research must be piloted. Stakeholders need to address the current problems with the underrepresentation of lower SES students in the world of higher education with contemporary and new initiatives. For too long, “higher education scholars [have controlled] for social class differences rather than focusing on how those differences may shape students' experiences and outcomes” (Walpole, 2003, p. 46). It is time to seriously focus on expanding on the projects already available and finding novel ways to actively and successfully promote the college-going process to low SES students and their families in order to create a more diverse and accurate picture of the American college student body.

As the world moves further into the competitive global sphere, higher education will continue to be a powerful and prosperous venture. “The future competitiveness of the United States at the international level lies largely in [its] ability to create and sustain a highly skilled workforce. A society that continues to provide unequal educational opportunity...will be at a distinct disadvantage” (Swail, 2002, p. 23). The success of America depends immensely on the success of its student body, most certainly including those traditionally left out, the low SES students.

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