

Old School, New School, No School: Changing Paths into, through, and out of College

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Introduction

College looms large in the American imagination and pop culture. Characters on the popular TV show *Gossip Girl* began the shift from high school to college in the second season, dealing with the drama of the college admission process and all of the accompanying questions: *Will I get into Yale? Will I fit in at Brown? How am I going to pay for college without a scholarship?* While these teens represent a popular image of college students—young, cosmopolitan, white, and upper-middle class—the world they’re moving into would probably look unfamiliar to those who graduated a generation or so ago. Internships, extracurriculars, and longer hours at jobs are now typical of college life. Actually, although the characters on *Gossip Girl* represent typical college students of the 1960s or 1970s, they are now in the minority nationally.

Below, I delve into several of the ways college life has changed in the last 40 years, from the admissions process and who goes to college, to what happens after graduation and for young adults who do not go to college. There are three particular points that I hope will be takeaways for readers: (a) although more Americans enroll in college now than ever before, there are still big discrepancies across racial, ethnic, and income groups; (b) the day-to-day experience of college has become more varied and includes more paid work and extracurricular activities; and (c) despite high costs in both money and time, college degrees still lead to major financial benefits. To illustrate these points, I’ll talk about some of the undergraduates I’ve met through my own research on

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college life (of course, names and key details have been changed to protect confidentiality). But first, let me provide a little historical background for my discussion.

A Bird's-Eye View of College Changes

The American college campus took a turn in the turbulent and iconic era of the 1960s and 1970s. Attendance rose, and students became more diverse. At the same time, college opportunities expanded. A lot of these shifts were supported by the Higher Education Act and its subsequent amendments, which provided new kinds of financial support to low-income students and then broadened to include middle-income students.¹ These programs shifted financial support from parents toward federal student aid and student employment, so that teens whose parents could not afford tuition could enroll, and made it easier for adults to attend college.

Many more women, African American, and Hispanic students went to college during these years, building on hard-won gains of the civil rights movement. Women made especially strong advances, moving from a minority of students to equal numbers as men by 1980 (and even earlier in two-year programs). There were also growing numbers of older and part-time students, either returning to college or beginning for the first time. The creation of community colleges made room for a lot of these new students, and the percentage of students enrolled in community colleges as a share of the total also increased by a large margin.

In the 1980s, some of these gains were either slowed or reversed. The Reagan administration chose not to increase government funding of financial aid to keep pace with rising education costs and inflation; students were forced to take increasingly large loans to cover gaps. College enrollment and graduation rates among Hispanics and African Americans slowed. Women, however, have kept up their rates of enrollment, though they are still less likely to graduate from the most highly selective colleges and to major in certain fields that are linked to highly paid career fields such as math and engineering—I'll talk more about this later.

While some of these losses have again been reversed with new policy efforts from the 1990s and beyond, the pace at which enrollment has risen among black and Hispanic students is still lower now than during the 1970s. Federal and state financial

aid policies continue to support many students, but loans now outweigh grant assistance. Financial aid policies have also shifted somewhat toward middle-income students through the offer of merit-based rather than need-based grants. For example, Georgia's HOPE Scholarship is based on grades rather than financial need.

These shifts form the backdrop for college today. I've divided the next section into three stages: getting in, being there, and graduating. Toward the end, I'll make some comparisons with emerging adults who don't go to college.

The Envelope, Please!

Each spring, high school students anxiously await the arrival of a thick envelope containing an offer of admission to the school of their choice. There's a long process leading up to this moment, however, and the complications involved in applying to college and financial aid are early stumbling blocks for many would-be collegians.

While most American high school students intend to go to college, low-income, first-generation, African American, and Hispanic students are much less likely to attend college, particularly BA programs. Imagine the college application process as a mountain to be scaled. For some, this is a light hike, made with all the latest high-tech equipment and a good map. Others have a steeper path, with less gear and no map. The first, most basic step begins with prospective enrollees and their families gathering information about the various sorts of undergraduate programs available, the admissions process, and how to afford it. Many high-schoolers who hope to go to college are not well-informed about how to make it a reality, with misconceptions about even the most basic academic requirements; this is also the case for their parents. Most families don't start saving for college until their children reach high school, if at all. Low-income teens—especially those whose parents didn't go to college—often rely on overworked guidance counselors to help them prepare, or go through the process alone, while higher-income students rely on a number of sources, including family, friends, college guidebooks, SAT-prep courses, and school or private counselors. Compare the experiences of Genesis, the only one of her graduating class to leave the state for college, who did her search without much advice and entirely online from her high school library, with Sabrina, who attended college fairs at her high school, visited a number of

campuses with her parents (who had themselves graduated from similar schools), and traded impressions with friends also looking for the right college fit.

While we often think of college students enrolling right out of high school, many young adults begin college after working for a number of years; these days, almost half of the undergraduates in the United States are over 21. This change probably comes both from new complications (for example, it is too expensive to go to college without holding down a job) and from more opportunities, such as colleges offering part-time enrollment. Adult students are more likely to be low and middle income than upper income, and black and Hispanic students are more likely than white students to enroll later into their adult years (i.e., not immediately after high school)—I'll come back to this issue below.

One hotly debated aspect of higher education admissions is affirmative action. Does affirmative action help or hurt minority students and is it unfair to others? Few schools have ever had affirmative action policies, because schools admitting all or almost all applicants do not need to give admissions preferences to any particular group. At schools that do use affirmative action policies, who benefits? Not surprisingly, black and Hispanic students receive some preference—by one calculation the equivalent of up to 230 SAT points, while Asian applicants lose the equivalent of 50 SAT points. I think it's important to point out that athletes and students whose parent(s) attended the college to which they are applying also get benefits in the admissions process, the equivalent of 200 and 160 SAT points respectively.² These admissions policies are used more often, but stir up much less controversy—why? And it's also important to mention that, despite concerns that affirmative action allows admission to unqualified applicants, students from disadvantaged backgrounds generally perform as well academically as their more-advantaged peers who scored similarly on the SATs. Moreover, there are many more low-income, black, and Hispanic students who are able to complete high-level college work (according to their SAT scores) who either don't get in or don't apply. In other words, despite affirmative action, some groups remain underrepresented at elite colleges, low-income students especially.

Keeping All the Balls in the Air

Admission to college is, of course, only the first step; new challenges take shape once students arrive on campus. Making college work today is a juggling act, with students struggling to balance a range of responsibilities and opportunities. College life has become more hectic. Students commonly spend many hours at paid jobs while taking a full load of classes. Students also participate in unpaid internships and leadership roles in order to compete for jobs after graduating. For example, Steven is the president of the Black Students Alliance, organizing peers to respond to social justice issues in the city where he attends college, in addition to serving in the student government. Emily serves as a campus tour guide and is the treasurer for her campus's College Republicans chapter, as well as working as an intern for the alumnae association of her college. Both of them hope that these positions demonstrate leadership ability and other skills to potential employers. In addition to all of this, undergrads try to keep up a social life, dancing the night away at quad parties or seeing the newest *Twilight* or *Harry Potter* movie with friends. Students who work to pay for tuition or support a family often don't have time for these extracurricular activities, which may put them at a disadvantage for later jobs or simply prevent them from spending time with friends.

For those students returning to college, or beginning college, later into their adult years, making a switch back into education can be really tough—especially if there are children or other family members to support. For example, Monica, a young mom, shared with me how difficult it is to balance completing her own schoolwork, helping her son do his homework and get to soccer practice, and doing the usual home-life things like getting dinner on the table and packing a lunch every morning. Offices that provide assistance to students like her, such as academic advising or information about social services benefits, are often only open during the day, when Monica puts in hours at her job and goes to classes. Paying for tuition and living expenses is a big challenge, because financial aid programs rarely make up for loss of income or provide support for a family. Unfortunately, these kinds of difficulties prevent many adults who might like to become students from returning to school.

Sometimes the juggling act is too difficult to maintain. Today's students are increasingly likely to take time away from college or switch schools. This slows the whole

process, and students who begin this pattern are less likely to graduate at all—especially low-income students, who often need to take time away to earn money. Researchers who study higher education believe that students who develop personal connections to campus, those who put down roots, are more likely to stay enrolled. For example, Maya explained to me how she developed a feeling of belonging on campus through her intramural sports team, close connections to faculty in the Portuguese department, and especially her role as social chair of her dorm, which helped her meet students further along in their studies who provided advice and support. This process differs, of course, between types of colleges. For example, at commuter campuses, students often have fewer chances to engage with each other, participate in extracurricular activities, or even meet with their faculty members, because they leave after class to go back to lives off campus.

The average number of years students take to graduate from bachelor of arts or science programs has also lengthened to greater than the traditional four years of enrollment (though not at the most highly selective schools). There is some disagreement about the causes of this shift. Some believe that students have too little financial support and therefore have to work more and take fewer courses. Others argue that students are now more likely to voluntarily take time off to get valuable internship experience, backpack across Central America, or take advantage of other opportunities. However, it seems likely that while both causes may play a role, they differ by student background. Students with less family income are more likely to take time off to work for pay, while students with more family income are more likely to switch schools without taking time off or to be able to take advantage of internships or other nonacademic opportunities. In addition, the greater number of older students, who are more likely to take classes on a part-time basis, also lengthens the overall average.

Even though there are more students in college now than ever before, there are still large gaps in college completion rates between those who are white, middle or upper-middle class, and the children of college graduates, and those who are low income, black or Hispanic, or whose parents did not go to college—as in past generations. However, women are an exception here. Across age, race, and ethnic groups, they are more likely to complete college than men. Women's high rates of

college attendance and graduation are something of a puzzle. There are probably many explanations. For example, legal changes achieved during the civil rights era, increased availability of birth control, and delayed marriage all play a role in making college a better possibility for women. While these changes have also influenced men's college enrollment, there are also factors that are specific to women. First, some scholars argue that the financial benefits of college have grown faster for women than for men since the 1960s, making college a more tempting post-high school option for them. Second, there have been cultural shifts that may have an impact here. For example, families' investments in education may be more evenly distributed now between male and female children. Third, women's college successes probably build on earlier school advances: girls tend to receive higher grades and test scores than boys, have fewer disciplinary problems, and take more advanced classes like honors or Advanced Placement. Fourth, women are less likely than men to drop out of high school and college, helping their comparative graduation rates. Finally, women are more likely to attend college directly after high school, which is associated with higher graduation rates.

Onward and Upward, or Shackled by Debt?

The high cost of college tuition has been in the media a lot in the past couple of years. Is college becoming too expensive? Is it worth the high cost if students have to take out large loans? Public opinion and academic research agree that a college degree leads to higher earnings and greater job opportunities. College is like a ticket to these and other future possibilities—a house, a car, yearly summer vacations, college tuition for your own future children. The links between future income and a college degree can be seen in statistical data. By one recent calculation, college graduates earn around \$25,000 more per year than adults with only a high school diploma, and those with graduate education earn even higher incomes on average. Two-year degrees also bring economic advantages, though much less.

But what is the cost of this ticket? Will having student loans keep young adults from being able to accomplish other goals, like owning a home? Are graduates overwhelmed by loans or credit card balances? The answer is unclear. At least one study found that although today's young adults ages 25–34 do have debts, the majority of that debt is in mortgages, as in past generations. This study also found that credit card debt

among young adults is relatively low and that the debt levels carried by today's young adults do not seem out of proportion with previous generations. In other words, college students are not overstretching themselves financially. There are some differences among them, however. Whites have both higher debts and higher debt-to-income ratios than other groups, and those who earn more overall have higher debts but are also more able to repay them.

While school loans do not seem to lead to financial problems in life after college, another study reported that graduates who received financial aid but did not accrue loan debt—students whose colleges offered financial aid in the form of grant and work study only—were more likely to go into low-paid work, generally for nonprofit organizations. For example, grads might be more likely to take jobs working for a microlending organization in Malawi rather than taking a position in investment banking at Goldman Sachs. This suggests that although education debt in the aggregate doesn't seem to be problematic, the prospect of accumulating debt for education may be changing prospective students' college choices or shifting enrolled students' plans of what to study and career choices.

No College; What Next?

What does young adulthood look like for those who don't attend college? Young adults who don't go to college make the transition to full adulthood earlier. They begin families and, of course, employment at earlier ages, but their long-term prospects for supporting a family and maintaining a living wage are not as strong as in past generations. Earnings differences between graduates and nongraduates have increased over the past decades. While the real wages of college graduates have held steady (and the earnings for those with at least some graduate work have increased), income levels for those with only a high school diploma have fallen. Where past generations found a variety of possibilities for those without a degree, from manufacturing to office work to highly skilled labor, today's young adults are frequently limited to service work that is ill paid, short term, and provides low or no benefits. Scholars disagree about why a college degree has become more important. While some argue that higher education means a gain in knowledge or skills, others believe that real training takes place on the job and college degrees are just symbolic credentials. Regardless, discrepancies between adult life

possibilities are only growing between haves and have-nots of higher education.

Final Thoughts

For some students, graduation from college is the moment of transition from teenager to adult. For others, the college process can be a long-term project that lasts through the emerging adulthood years and is balanced alongside other adult responsibilities. The “typical” college student has changed over the last 40 years. She is now more likely to be like Monica, a 34-year-old mom doing part-time coursework, than the traditional collegiate image of a young man in pressed khakis. Students today attend college in different ways, from part-time certificate programs to full-time, four-year (or more) enrollment. And for many, the pace of campus life has increased and includes more nonacademic activities. What has changed less is the large discrepancy in college attendance and graduation between different groups of Americans. Because of this, some scholars argue that education is becoming more divided. Although we now have greater enrollment, many Americans still don’t have access to college or are limited to community colleges that don’t provide the same financial benefits after graduation. For those who don’t complete college, wages have fallen over time. These kinds of gaps need our national attention in the years to come.

Notes

¹ For an in-depth discussion of different kinds of federal financial aid now available to students and parents or guardians, as well as the application process, see www.finaid.org.

² Thomas Espenshade and Chang Y. Chung (2005), The opportunity cost of admissions preferences at elite universities, *Social Science Quarterly*, 86 (2): 293–306.

Annotated Bibliography

Historical and Other Overviews

Baker, Therese L., and William Velez. (1996). Access to and opportunity in

postsecondary education in the United States: A review. *Sociology of Education*, 69, 82–101.

The authors provide an overview of the shifts in higher education from the late 1960s through the early 1990s. Although their review does not stretch into the current decade, they give an excellent walk-through of the national, macrolevel policy and demographic shifts that brought America's higher education system to its current workings.

Roksa, Josipa, Eric Grodsky, Richard Arum, and Adam Gamoran. (2007). United States: Changes in Higher Education and Social Stratification. Chapter 7 in Shavit and Tsai (Eds.), *Stratification in higher education: A comparative study*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

This chapter discusses policy changes in American higher education over the last 40 years. The authors argue that higher education has become more stratified, even as it has become more diverse and available to more Americans than in the past.

Admissions and Access

Stevens, Mitchell. (2007). *Creating a class: College admissions and the education of elites*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stevens worked for a year in the admissions office of a selective liberal arts college, with the goal of learning how a class is “created” through the admissions process. In particular, he hoped to learn how it is that the students who are unable to access such an institution come to be excluded—despite the egalitarian efforts of admissions offices. Stevens details the ways that organizational processes and relationships between organizations reduce the chances of admitting students with low socioeconomic status.

Perna, Laura W. (2006). Understanding the relationship between information about college prices and financial aid and students' college-related behaviors. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49 (12): 1620–1635.

Perna lays out a multilevel system for interpreting differences in students' and families' understanding of financial aid and admissions. She summarizes the areas where advantage or disadvantage may be found within each level of her analysis. She begins with the national and state policy context, moves on to the role of institutions of higher education, then to more local contexts such as school, neighborhood, and family, and finally discusses the role of the individual student's own *habitus*. (*Habitus* is a term used by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to refer to the ingrained, often imperceptible, behaviors and habits gained throughout one's upbringing, particularly from one's family.)

During College

Nathan, Rebekah. (2005). *My freshman year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Nathan, a college professor, spent a year living in a freshman dorm as a new student. She focuses especially on the fast pace of life at the large state school where she conducted her study, examining how students balance their many commitments and what the frenetic pace means for students' academic and social lives.

For a related examination, see Michael Moffat's *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (Rutgers University Press, 1989). Moffat spent time in a dormitory at Rutgers University and discusses student relationships across a number of venues, from the casual "friendly" exchanges between dorm-mates, to racial tensions around culture, to students' perceptions of their own sex lives. Although the research was conducted in the 1980s, the primacy of peer relationships and their complicated existence in dorm life is still highly relevant.

Massey, Douglas S., Camille Z. Charles, Garvey F. Lundy, and Mary J. Fischer. (2003). *The source of the river: The social origins of freshmen at America's selective colleges and universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Massey and his colleagues use both survey data and in-depth interviews to learn about students enrolled at 28 of the nation's top colleges and universities. This

volume details differences in their backgrounds, considering first the types of neighborhoods, families, and high schools these students came from—what social and academic experiences have brought them into their freshman years. The authors then connect these background characteristics to the freshman year, considering how students adjust to college life.

Rosenbaum, James E, Ann E. Person, and Regina Deil-Amen. (2006). *After admission: From college access to college success*. New York: Russell Sage.

Building on earlier work, Rosenbaum and colleagues examine the successes and failures of the contemporary community college system, comparing outcomes of students at these schools to those in private two-year occupational programs. They pay particular attention to the role of community colleges in moving students into four-year baccalaureate programs and the transition into employment.

Bowen, William G., Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The authors take the premise that simply enrolling in college is not sufficient. Rather, we must be concerned with seeing students through to graduation. Several overviews are provided, both historical and contemporary, the latter laying out differences between populations of college students. The authors then delve into a number of factors that might lead to success for college students—particularly for low-income and nonwhite students—including the predictive role of standardized tests, financial aid, family background, and differences in majors and college pathways. The authors also offer suggestions for how to improve college students' experiences.

Graduation and after College

Rothstein, Jessica, and Cecilia Rouse. (2007). *Constrained after college: Student loans and early career occupational choices*. MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood Working Paper. National Bureau of Economic Research.

This working paper summarizes the authors' findings on the effects of loans on young adults' employment choices in the years following college graduation. This is an important area to consider, because although students may not be dissuaded from college degrees by fear of high levels of loan debt, or unduly burdened by repayments after college (and there is mixed data about each of these), this should not imply that loans have no impact upon adult outcomes.

Goodwin, Latty Lee. (2006). *Graduating class: Disadvantaged students crossing the bridge of higher education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Goodwin returns to a group of lower-income nonwhite students she first interviewed four years earlier to discuss their college experiences and their thoughts on graduating. She focuses on students' own perceptions of many of the questions raised in this essay: Was college "worth it"? What are the costs and benefits of attendance? What will happen as they transition to the "real world"? She combines their answers with illustrative recollections from the course of their college careers.

Not Attending College

Given that the majority of Americans do not complete college, it is difficult to characterize the experiences of those without college degrees. The article and books listed below speak to just a few of these possible configurations but should not be taken as representative.

Blustein, David L., Susan D. Phillips, Kevin Jobin-Davis, Sarah L. Finkelberg, and Amy E. Roarke. (1997). A theory-building investigation of the school-to-work transition. *Counseling Psychologist*, 25 (3): 364–402.

The authors interviewed 45 young adults in various fields, both satisfied and dissatisfied in their work lives. The authors speak to a number of topics, including what roles work plays in respondents' lives, the transition from school to work, and how respondents first came to be in their current fields.

Newman, Katherine. (1999). *No shame in my game: The working poor in the inner*

city. New York: Russell Sage.

Newman and her graduate students spent a year with teens and young adults from a low-income New York neighborhood, examining the roles of school and work in their lives. One particular focus is the difficulty of obtaining employment and balancing other responsibilities. The book provides an excellent, insightful examination into the work lives of urban young adults who have not obtained—and who may not be able to obtain—college degrees.

Egan, Timothy. (2005). No college degree, and no way back to the middle. In Bill Keller (Ed.), *Class matters*. New York: New York Times Books.

Using interviews with men nearing retirement age who had been laid off from factory jobs, Egan discusses changes in the value of high school and college degrees on the blue-collar job market over the last generation.

Data Sources and Centers of Study

The following centers produce ongoing work on college students and college life, ranging from basic statistics to in-depth analyses. These sources will be helpful for anyone interested in learning more or keeping up to date with new scholarship on college students and outcomes.

Network on Transitions to Adulthood: www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/.

MDRC: www.mdrc.org/area_index_5.html.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): www.nces.ed.gov/.

The College Board: professionals.collegeboard.com/policy-advocacy.