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AUTHOR Holmstrom, Engin Inel
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ABSTRACT

In a short period since 1968, higher education institutions have provided the means of upward social mobility to over 250,000 students, many of whom were, at the time of college entry, disadvantaged in status. In the four college years, these students improved their status and their prospects; in spite of a crowded college labor market, they enhanced their competitive position for a better job and stable income. The author suggests that only by understanding more fully the impact of different types of institutions and programs on different types of students and by considering the issue of the match between types of students and types of institutions can we uncover new and promising college effects. (Author/LBH)

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: A PROMISE STILL KEPT

BY

ENGIN INEL HOLMSTROM

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Higher education today is in the throes of three major crises, each of which threatens to enlarge the already dangerous breach between the public and the private sector. Most conspicuous is the financial crisis. By this time, the refrain is familiar: The expansionist era has ended; hard times are upon us. As enrollments level off, as federal support dwindles, as private and foundation sources dry up, and as inflation eats away at institutional dollars, many colleges and universities find their very existence endangered (Bowen and Minter, 1975; Lanier and Andersen, 1975). Although the states have tried to compensate for the decline in federal funds, it is unlikely that, as enrollment growth slows down, they can continue to provide increasing support to the public sector and, at the same time, come to the aid of private postsecondary education. Thus, the competition between the two sectors--for students and for federal and state monies--will probably intensify, to the detriment of both sectors.

The second crisis besetting higher education today is a crisis of confidence: the public's confidence in the value of a college education. Throughout its history, this nation has had faith in education as the key to the improvement of society and the betterment of the individual. But now, disheartened by the apparent insolubility of such pervasive problems as unemployment, crime, and urban blight and burdened by inflation, high costs of living, and taxes, the public seems to have lost some of that faith.

Unfavorable articles and books directed at the mass

audience--arguing that the soaring costs of a college education and the declining market value of a college degree make it pointless for most young people to invest either the time or the money in an education beyond high school--have struck a responsive chord in a public that, for too long, has been "sold" higher education solely on the grounds that it brings increased returns on the job market. But this skepticism is by no means shared by many young people, particularly noncollege youth who perceive that without the benefits of a college education, their chances of finding work that is both financially and psychologically rewarding are not very great (Yankelovich, 1974, p. 28). Nor is this perception inaccurate. The most recent figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics clearly show that, even in a recession, a college education still pays off in lower unemployment and better jobs: In March 1975, of the 16- to 24-year age group, 6.4 percent of the college graduates were jobless compared with 16.1 of the high school graduates and 24.6 percent of the high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976).

Nonetheless, higher education has fallen in priority among national goals, as reflected in public appropriations, and some of this drop is undoubtedly related to growing public doubt about the importance of supporting higher education (Henry, 1975, p. 137). Greater public understanding is needed, yet developing a consensus about the role and value of higher education has become increasingly more difficult, which brings us to the third and related crisis: a crisis of purpose.

Higher education in America today has become a highly

complex, multipurpose enterprise, serving an increasingly heterogeneous population who come to it for a variety of reasons. The complexity of the system, the diversity among institutions, and the public-private polarization impede effective consensus building. In the words of one scholar, we need

> *to find common ground among the institutions of higher education as the basis for public interpretation of purpose, achievement, and potential* (Henry, 1975, p. 155).

I suggest that this common ground is the students.

A necessary first step toward resolving this crisis of purpose is to shift our focus of attention to students and to the interaction between students and institutions. A second step is to abandon our simplistic view of the distinction between the public and private sectors--which is primarily a political, not a functional distinction--in favor of a more realistic concept of the nature of institutional diversity. Third, we have to concentrate on how institutional diversity relates to and affects students. Finally, we have to stop talking about students in the aggregate.

In recent years, the student population has changed markedly. As greater numbers of minority-group members, older people, the financially and academically disadvantaged, women, and part-time students enter higher education, it becomes meaningless to talk of the total group of undergraduates without examining the pertinent differences among them. For example,

our acquiescence to the notion that the college degree has lost its value reveals a singular myopia, a tendency to look at the economically privileged young person to whom a college education (and subsequently, an assured high-status job) is a forgone conclusion anyway.

The recent surge of applications to elite institutions suggest that a great effort is being made to increase the economic distance between an "ordinary" college degree and a degree from a more prestigious institution. Nonetheless, a college degree from even a "proletarian" school may still make a vast difference to the labor market entry-level of many lower-class and minority students.

Granted that the economic value of a college degree waxes and wanes with prevailing labor market conditions; a more stable benefit is that of social status. Increasingly, educational level is a key determinant of social status, nullifying or greatly reducing the handicaps that may be connected with sex, race, and age, as these have traditionally determined status (Coleman, 1968; Duncan, 1969; Sewell, 1971). Moreover, higher education has increasingly assumed a credentialling function not only for the higher professions which in the past required postsecondary education but also for many subprofessional and even technical occupations, the training for which used to be acquired on the job through apprenticeships or in vocational programs in high school (Sewell, 1971). Postsecondary education, as the enlarged scope of the term suggests, may be the only societal force that lends itself to policy manipulations

to improve the life chances of citizens.

My purpose in the remainder of this paper is twofold: first, to demonstrate the extent to which higher education still promotes the upward mobility of a large number of students, permitting them to improve their social and occupational status; second, to illustrate the diversity of higher education by examining differences in outcomes for different types of students attending different types of institutions.

Procedure

The data for this study were taken from ACE's most recent undergraduate longitudinal files, consisting of subjects surveyed first at the time of their college entry as first-time, full-time freshmen in 1968, and followed up four years later in the fall of 1972. These students entered a representative national sample of 358 two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Their responses were weighted to represent the total population of about 1.3 million first-time, full-time freshman enrollments in 1968.[1/]

First-generation college students are defined as those students whose fathers had never entered a college or university. Second-generation college students are defined as those whose fathers had at least some college education. Upward social mobility is defined as the attainment of the baccalaureate by a first-generation college student. The analyses controlled for

[1]See Astin (1975) for a detailed description of the sampling and weighting procedures.

sex, race, ability, and income, all of which are related to degree attainment.

Ability is measured by high school grade averages: higher-ability students are those with averages of B+ or better; lower-ability students are those with B or lower averages. Higher-income students are those reporting parental incomes of $10,000 and above for 1967; lower-income students are those with parental incomes less than $10,000. Median splits were used for both the ability and income measures.

Two categories were used to define race: blacks and non-blacks, the latter including not only whites but other nonblack minorities such as Spanish-speaking Americans and Orientals. Analyses were run for each of these four major variables, yielding eight analytic groups.

Institutional Categories

To evaluate fully the impact of institutional diversity on student performance, we used the Carnegie rather than the USOE classification of postsecondary institutions, because it allows for greater differentiation among types of institutions (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973).

The emphasis of the study was on baccalaureate completion within four years after college entry; this criterion necessarily excludes those institutions and programs that do not conveniently fit into this pattern: e.g., two-year colleges, schools of engineering and technology. Thus, the study is based on students entering only the following Carnegie-typed institutions: Doctoral-granting Universities (including Research

Universities I and II), Comprehensive Universities and Colleges I and II, and Liberal Arts Colleges I and II. Figure I presents profiles of institutions and their students. These institutions constitute about half the population of higher educational institutions and serve over two-thirds of the student population (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973, pp. 6-7).

Findings

Although the public sector served larger absolute numbers (three out of five first-time, full-time freshmen in 1968 enrolled in public four-year colleges and universities), the distribution of the students within each sector was strikingly similar: About 47 percent were women, 8 percent black, and 39 percent lower-ability. The major differences occurred with respect to parents' income and father's education: 46 percent of the students in the public sector as compared with 35 percent in the private sector were lower-income students. Similarly, 57 percent of the students in the public sector as compared with 43 percent in the private sector were first-generation students.

First-generation students constituted just over half (52 percent) of the entering freshman class in 1968. Fully 70 percent of first-generation students as compared with only 57 percent of second-generation students attended public colleges.

Income and race were strongly related to generational status in that three out of four lower-income students and nearly four out of five blacks were first-generation students in

contrast to about one-third of the higher-income and one-half of the nonblack students (Table 1). Sex and ability, on the other hand, bore little relation to generational status.

The distribution of first-generation students among institutions of higher education was not random but followed a similar pattern in both the public and private sectors. That is, selective liberal arts colleges (Liberal Arts Colleges I category) followed by doctoral-granting universities, were least likely to enroll first-generation students. The highest concentration of first-generation students occurred in the Comprehensive Universities and Colleges II category in the public sector and in the Liberal Arts Colleges II category in the private sector.

Looking at the social mobility of first-generation students, we find that students in the private sector were more likely to receive the degree within four years after college entry than were students in the public sector: In fact, a greater proportion of both first- and second-generation students in private institutions than in public institutions received the baccalaureate: 62 percent of first-generation students in the private sector versus 54 percent of those in the public sector, and 68 percent of second-generation students in the private sector versus 59 percent in the public sector. Thus, the findings here echo a familiar point in the debate between the public and private sectors: Typically, the public sector claims that it provides access to larger numbers of students whereas the private sector claims that, though its clientele is smaller, it

provides a more personal, individual educational service with the result that a larger proportion of its students persist in college.

Although students in the private sector outperform their counterparts in the public sector, the pattern of degree completion rates within each sector was strikingly similar: The B.A. performance of students improved as one moved from doctoral-granting universities to comprehensive universities and colleges, reached a peak in selective liberal arts colleges, then dropped in the category of other liberal arts colleges (Figure 2).

Generally, second-generation students were slightly more likely to receive the degree than were first-generation students (63 percent versus 56 percent), but the generational difference in degree performance varied somewhat by sex, race, income, and ability of the student and by the type of institution (Table 2). Some institutions seemed to cater to second-generation students. On the other hand, some institutions seemed to minimize the effects of academic, financial, and generational differences among their students. For instance, first-generation students in selective private liberal arts colleges (i.e., Liberal Arts Colleges I) were just as likely as second-generation students to receive the degree in four years; moreover, their B.A. completion rates were higher than those of students attending other types of institutions--a difference which persisted across ability, income, sex, and race categories.

Conclusion

To summarize: Just over half the students entering the nation's four-year colleges and universities in 1968 were first-generation college students. Four years later, these first-generation students received nearly half the baccalaureates awarded to their class. Thus, in a short period, higher education institutions provided the means of upward social mobility to over a quarter-million students--many of whom were, at the time of college entry, "disadvantaged" in status. In the four college years, these students improved their status and their prospects; in spite of a crowded college labor market, they nonetheless had enhanced their competitive position for a better job and stable income.

In conclusion, it seems to me in talking about the role and value of higher education, we have to constantly ask the questions "for whom?" and "from what type of institution?" Only by such questions can we rationally acclaim the pluralism of the educational system and its students. By seeking to understand more fully the impact of different types of institutions and programs on different types of students and by addressing ourselves more directly to the issue of the match between types of students and types of institutions, we may uncover new and promising college effects. The discovery of heretofore unrecognized values and outcomes will give renewed strength of purpose to higher education institutions and increase the clarity of public understanding of these purposes.

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FIGURE I

COLLAPSED CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION OF FOUR-YEAR POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS AND 1968 FRESHMAN PROFILES

DOCTORAL-GRANTING UNIVERSITIES

Private

65 Institutions-33 in sample: e.g., Princeton U., Stanford U., Brandeis U., Dartmouth College, Adelphi U.

Freshman Enrollment: 72,163 (21.9%)*

Freshman Composition: 33.0% Women
2.6% Black
25.0% Lo-ability
26.3% Lo-income
35.1% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 64.9%
First Generation: 60.0%
Second Generation: 70.5%

Public

108 Institutions-52 in sample: e.g., UCLA, UNC-Chapel Hill, SUNY-Stony Brook, Purdue Univ., University of Akron

Freshman Enrollment: 290,038 (50.4%)

Freshman Composition: 41.1% Women
2.7% Black
32.2% Lo-ability
36.6% Lo-income
46.4% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 55.9%
First Generation: 52.4%
Second Generation: 59.0%

COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES I

Private

98 Institutions-19 in sample: e.g., U. Hartford, Loyola U.-L.A., Pratt Institute

Freshman Enrollment: 46,797 (14.2%)

Freshman Composition: 35.6% Women
2.1% Black
48.2% Lo-ability
32.2% Lo-income
46.5% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 66.8%
First Generation : 64.4%
Second Generation: 68.8%

Public

223 Institutions -30 in sample: e.g., Va. State Coll., Clarion State College, Alabama A & M College

Freshman Enrollment: 234,423 (40.7%)

Freshman Composition: 52.0% Women
11.5% Black
42.8% Lo-ability
53.7% Lo-income
66.3% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 55.4%
First Generation : 53.9%
Second Generation: 58.3%

COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES II

Private

47 Institutions-9 in sample: e.g., Springfield Coll., George Peabody Coll. for Tea., St. Norbert Coll.

Freshman Enrollment: 12,194 (3.7%)

Freshman Composition: 44.8% Women
2.4% Black
36.4% Lo-ability
36.5% Lo-Income
44.7% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 71.8%
First Generation : 67.1%
Second Generation: 75.6%

Publi

85 Institutions-10 in sample: e.g., Winston-Salem State U., Longwood College, Californis State College

Freshman Enrollment: 41,880 (7.3%)

Freshman Composition: 53.7% Women
19.8% Black
55.1% Lo-ability
67.7% Lo-income
76.7% 1st gen.

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 63.3%
First Generation: 61.4%
Second Generation: 69.6%

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES I

144 Institutions-64 in sample: e.g., Wesleyan U., Franklin & Marshall Coll., Amherst College

Freshman Enrollment: 58,776 (17.8%)

Freshman Composition: 59.0% Women
3.1% Black
21.0% Lo-ability
25.4% Lo-income
28.2% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 75.9%
First Generation: 74.9%
Second Generation: 76.1%

2 Institutions-1 in sample: e.g., Univ. of California-Santa Cruz

Freshman Enrollment: 1,472 (.3%)

Freshman Composition: 53.4% Women
3.4% Black
2.2% Lo-ability
17.2% Lo-income
18.7% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 60.2%
First Generation: 65.9%
Second Generation: 58.8%

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES II

547 Institutions-97 in sample: e.g., Athens Coll., Wofford College, Trinity College-Illinois

Freshman Enrollment: 139,751 (42.4%)

Freshman Composition: 54.0% Women
17.6% Black
53.7% Lo-ability
43.3% Lo-income
51.9% 1st generation

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 60.4%
First Generation : 59.7%
Second Generation: 61.2%

26 Institutions-4 in sample: e.g., St. Mary's Coll. of Md., U.Michigan-Dearborn, LSU-Shreveport

Freshman Enrollment: 8,034 (1.4%)

Freshman Composition: 40.9% Women
6.8% Black
75.6% Lo-ability
56.5% Lo-income
66.2% 1st gen.

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rate: 32.1%
First Generation : 28.2%
Second Generation: 39.8%

* 21.9 percent of all 1968 freshmen enrolled in private four-year colleges and universities were in Doctoral-Granting Universities.

Figure 2

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rates of First-Generation Students in Public and Private Four-Year Colleges and Universities by Carnegie Classifications

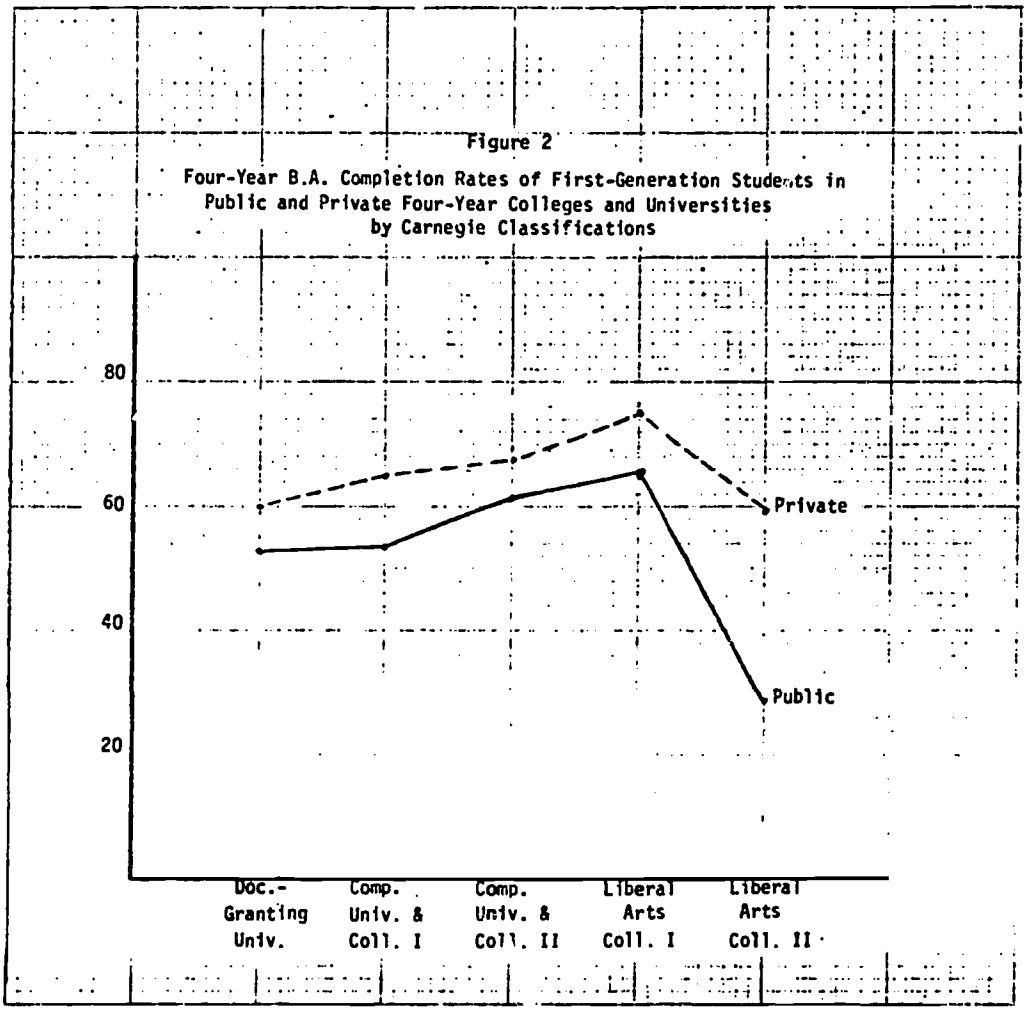

Table 1

Proportion of First-Generation College Freshmen by Sex, Race, Ability, and Income in Public and Private Four-Year Colleges and Universities

	Private	Public	Total
TOTAL:	43.0	56.9	51.8
SEX:			
Men	46.4	57.6[a]	53.6
Women	39.1	56.1	49.9
RACE:			
Nonblacks	40.1	55.0	49.6
Blacks	71.8	80.8	77.1
ABILITY:			
Lower-ability	46.4	60.7	55.4
Higher-ability	40.7	54.5	49.5
INCOME:			
Lower-income	70.8	76.4	74.7
Higher-Income	28.3	40.3	35.4
(N)	(329,719)	(575,813)	(905,532)

[a]To read: 57.6 percent of all men in public institutions were first-generation students.

Table 2

Four-Year B.A. Completion Rates of First- and Second-Generation Students by Sex, Race, Ability, and Income in Private and Public Institutions by Collapsed Carnegie Classifications

	Doctoral-Granting Universities		Comprehensive Univ. and Colleges I		Comprehensive Univ. and Colleges II		Liberal Arts Colleges I		Liberal Arts Colleges II	
	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public
MEN:										
First-generation	61.2	50.1	61.0.	46.4	65.1	49.3	74.7	60.8	57.4	23.1
Second-generation	69.9	53.2	66.0	49.7	77.7	63.6	75.8	57.7	56.8	36.6
WOMEN:										
First-generation	57.0	56.1	72.4	61.4	69.8	71.4	75.1	72.5	62,0	35.3
Second-generation	71.6	66.6	72.9	65.2	73.1	75.5	76.3	59.9	64.4	45.4
NONBLACKS:										
First-generation	60.0	52.9	65.1	55.3	67.3	63.2	74.7	67.9	61.0	31.4
Second-generation	70.8	59.2	69.1	59.0	75.4	71.8	76.4	58.9	61.7	39.8
BLACKS:										
First-generation	60.7	42.2	42.0	45.4	62.5	54.7	78.0	33.4	55.9	0.0
Second-generation	58.1	45.2	47.3	47.9	86.5	55.9	59.8	57.0	56.1	---
LOWER ABILITY:										
First-generation	37.4	37.5	62.5	40.4	48.6	47.5	63.6	0.0	52.6	25.8
Second-generation	53.5	42.1	63.2	45.1	64.7	61.2	63.3	---	52.3	31.5
HIGHER ABILITY:										
First-generation	67.6	59.8	66.3	64.8	78.1	77.7	78.1	66.1	67.7	35.1
Second-generation	76.2	66.8	73.8	66.6	81.6	81.1	79.4	60.5	71.7	71.4
LOWER-INCOME:										
First-generation	55.6	52.5	59.0	54.2	66.5	60.0	73.0	66.0	59.5	33.2
Second-generation	62.7	56.0	58.9	55.6	68.5	73.0	70.2	78.3	62.6	45.2
HIGHER-INCOME:										
First-generation	64.5	52.3	69.8	53.4	67.8	65.7	77.4	66.3	60.0	18.3
Second-generation	71.7	59.7	70.8	59.6	77.8	67.2	77.0	57.0	60.7	36.6