



## **College Choice in Context: Toward a K-16 Education Policy Approach to College for All**

*Paul E. Pitre*  
*Auburn University*

### *Abstract*

*The changing demographic and economic structures in the United States dictate that policy makers at the federal, state, and organizational levels of education pay closer attention to college recruitment and enrollment trends. These trends point to the need for an aggressive approach to moving the educational system into the 21st century by building stronger connections between K-12 systems and colleges. The college choice literature provides a means for gaining a better understanding of how students experience the transition from high school to college. The purpose of this paper is to show that research on college choice can be leveraged to develop a concentrated focus on P-16 education policy which brings schools and colleges in closer alliance with the primary focus of creating future benefits for students. By adopting a college for all policy approach, schools and colleges can begin to work together to meet the college access needs of all students while preparing these students to meet the demands of and be successful in the 21st century economy.*

Education has played an important role in the history, politics, and economics of American society. Over time, the college degree has developed into a type of currency and has become a key to individual economic prosperity. According to Judy and D'Amico (1997) in the late 1980's and throughout the 1990's, the college degree served as "the ticket to the middle class" (p. 137). In contemporary times, education has been directly linked to personal income earning power of Americans (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). Though a college degree does not guarantee its recipients a secure income once they enter the workforce, high school graduates who choose to go on to college and complete the bachelor's degree

are more likely to earn a higher salary than their peers who only complete the high school diploma.

As the modern day workforce preparation equivalent of the high school diploma of the 1950s and 1960s, the bachelor's degree provides individuals a greater opportunity to compete in the labor market. An example of the economic advantage that comes with the completion of the bachelor's degree is illustrated by Henschel, Kirshstein, O'Malley, and Rhodes (2000). They report that in 1998 individuals who held a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$43,782 yearly, while their peers with only a high school diploma earned approximately \$23,594. In this example, the average salary of the college graduate is close to double the salary of the high school graduate.

While the role a college education plays in personal economics is well known, the issues surrounding the role of a college education as it relates to the future of the national economy has not been fully realized. The Supreme Court's 2003 ruling that affirmative action in college admissions is of compelling national interest speaks to the importance of broadened college access (Gratz, et al v. Bollenger, et al., 2003). Further, the ruling demonstrates that the issues surrounding access to college are still a major concern in the 21st century.

The nuances of college access are much easier to understand and interpret in the year 2005 because of the research that has been done in the area of college choice. Studies related to college choice provide background information on how students decide whether or not to go to college, what type of college would best suit them, and what college they will actually attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983). The knowledge gained through analysis of high school students' decision making behaviors can be successfully leveraged to help broaden the spectrum of students that are prepared for college attendance.

Through new and innovative policy focused on college preparation and recruitment of students from ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, expanded access can be achieved. The first step in expanded access is insuring student preparation for success in college. The focus on college preparation is not meant to diminish the role that a positive college experience plays in preparing students to command a larger role in the national economy, but to enhance it . This paper argues that through the knowledge gained from the current body of research on college choice there can be value added by starting with a focus on the input -- a well prepared student

transitioning through the K-12 system and into college -- which will likely have a positive effect on the output: the college educated wage earner. Gaining a better understanding of the college choice behaviors of students and utilizing newly acquired knowledge to implement policy that will be effective in broadening the spectrum of students who are prepared for college is important to the success of K-12 and college level administrators and teachers, policymakers, students and families, and the American public as a whole.

The findings of college choice related studies provide the groundwork for programmatic approaches to helping students navigate the K-12 system and make a smooth transition to college. Additionally, college choice research can lead to new and innovative policy regarding school/college partnerships - P-16 education-and the development of new college choice theory related to how ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students experience the transition from high school to college.

Starting with a national focus, this paper discusses economic and demographic trends that speak to the need for an aggressive approach to moving the educational system into the 21st century by building stronger connections between K-12 systems and colleges. Then, key aspects of the college choice process are described. Finally, this paper concludes by providing policy recommendations for consideration. The recommendations center on implementing P-16 education policy that focuses on a college for all approach for preparing K-12 students in the 21st century. The college for all policy focus includes tightening existing structures and relationships that exist between K-12 systems and colleges in order to facilitate more effective college preparation, smoother college transitions, and a general improvement in access to college for all students.

### **Considerations of National Significance**

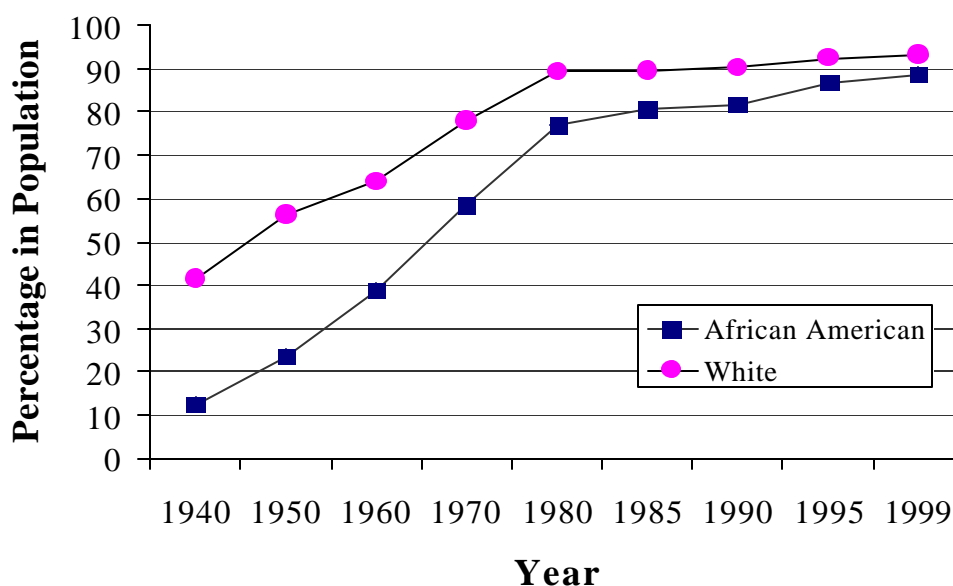
The issues related to gaining access to college are of great significance to policy makers, educators, the business community, and the broader community for two primary reasons. First, both the workforce and the economy in the United States are in transition. Workers in the new economy need more education and training than ever before due to growth in the skilled labor market (Judy & D'Amico, 1997). While blue collar and low-skilled employment will still command a share of the labor force in the next decade, there will be an expansion in the availability of employment in the skilled labor market (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001).

This expansion has already begun and a shortage of skilled labor exists (Judy & D'Amico, 1997; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). According to the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001), an even greater shortage in skilled labor is projected. The commission states: "One report from the Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research projected that 385,000 jobs demanding high levels of skill would be created by 2010 and that the existing workforce probably could not do them" (p. 5).

The findings of this report demonstrate that the future growth in jobs will require employees to have training beyond the high school level of education to compete in the new economy.

In order for students to prepare for the current challenges presented by the new information-based global economy and the requirements of a high-skilled labor market, education beyond the high school diploma is almost mandatory. The low-skill/high-wage labor jobs that were once a staple in the United States labor market are not only decreasing in availability, these jobs now require workers to have the same high school curricular background as those students who intend to go on to college (Orfield & Paul, 1994).

A second issue related to changes in the economy and the new requirements for the entry-level job market is the increase in African American student high school graduation rates that are now similar to those of Caucasian students (see Figure 1). With African American high school graduation rates increasing-



*Figure 1.* Percentage of African American and Caucasian completing high school education or higher 1940-1999 Data source from the U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2000.

seemingly creating larger pools of college recruits, it would seem logical that African American college enrollments would increase at a similar rate. However, this is not the case. While college enrollment figures for African Americans as well as Hispanics, and Native Americans have increased overall since the 1960s, the rates of African American students attending college still trail those of Caucasian and Asian students. Heller (1999) reports that in 1996, the proportion of the African American college age population who actually attended college lagged behind the proportion of the White college age population, who actually attended college, at a rate of 12%. The difference in the college attendance rate between African American and Caucasian students in 1996 was similar to the 1967 rate of attendance. In 1967, the proportion of the African American college age population, who actually attended college, lagged behind the Caucasian college age population, who actually attended college, by 14% (Heller, 1999). The new figures suggest that after more than 30 years there has only been about a 2% change in African American student college-going rates when compared to Caucasian students.

The population of students most likely to attend college seems to be students of Asian descent. In a more recent report, Akerhielm, Berger, Hooke, and Wise (1998) state, "While 79 percent of Asians attend [postsecondary education], 66 percent of Whites, 53 percent of Hispanics, 52 percent of [African American], and 38 percent of Native Americans attend [postsecondary education]" (p. ES-2). The gap between African Americans and Caucasians in college age student enrollments in this instance is 14%, again providing evidence that African American college age students have not significantly increased their college enrollment rate in proportion to their caucasian counterparts since 1967. It has been noted that the substantial gains in African American and Hispanic college age student college enrollments made in the 1960s and 1970s declined in the 1980s and 1990s (Heller, 1999).

Due to the aforementioned changes in the demographic and economic picture in the United States, policy makers at the federal, state, and organizational levels of education must pay closer attention to college recruitment and enrollment. On June 23, 2003, the United States Supreme Court ruled that it is in the best interest of the country to continue to move forward with affirmative action policies and to provide the additional types of assistance necessary to help racial and ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students make their way to college (Gratz et al. v. Bollenger et al., 2003).

The response to this call seems to be slow. The changes in demographics and economics speak volumes about the challenges that lie ahead of the United States as a country. It is up to the leaders in the educational policy arena to move these important issues to the forefront of the national educational policy agenda. In doing so, the players in the policy process must consider two important college access related trends-enrollment management and college choice. This paper is concerned with the latter, college choice, and its' potential to inform policy related to college access and the P-16 education policy approach.

### **Understanding College Choice: A Key to Broadening Access**

College choice has been defined as the process a student experiences as she or he makes the transition from high school to college (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). Theory related to the college choice process provides a means for understanding how students experience the transition from high school to college. Given the demographic changes taking place in the college age student population, student college decision making processes are fast becoming an important policy concern.

Three theoretical approaches to college choice have been widely used: econometric, sociological and combined. Econometric models explain the college choice process in monetary terms, as rates of return on educational investment (Hossler et al., 1989; Manski & Wise, 1983; McDonough, 1997). Sociological models of college choice focus on the influence of schools, parents, peers, and teachers (McDonough, 1997). In a combined approach, researchers utilize the most viable variables in the two approaches to facilitate more accurate predictions (Hossler et al., 1989).

Hossler et al. (1989) conducted a comprehensive analysis of college choice models utilizing the Hossler and Gallagher combined model of college choice as a framework for organizing their discussion. The three stages of the model are predisposition, search, and choice. Hossler and colleagues (1989) showed that the Hossler and Gallagher model was effective at encompassing a great deal of the research on issues related to college choice.

Organized into stages of college preparation processes, models of college choice provide a conceptual map for tracing how students navigate the process of transitioning from high school to college. Models of college choice also provide researchers a framework for examining the processes by which

students make decisions concerning college attendance (Bateman, 1990; Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983). These models facilitate identification of specific variables that may have an impact on a student's decision-making processes. Research suggests that students navigating the college choice process are in need of different types of information, assistance, and support at each stage.

### **Moving Toward a P-16 College for All Policy**

Given the changes taking place in the economy, the demographics of the national population, and the growing significance of college related education and training, there is a need for an increased focus on providing the opportunity for college education to a broader spectrum of the population. Some might refer to this focus as a P-16 college for all education policy.

Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, and Morrell (2002) suggest that such a policy might be difficult to implement because the social and political climate surrounding access to college has been dominated by those individuals and families considered advantaged socially and economically. The authors further contend that these families will always seek to update and differentiate their students, educationally, in order to maintain an advantage over those students and families that have fewer resources. This type of approach to college access could pose a problem in the short run because those individuals in possession of social and economic advantage will leverage that advantage to gain access to higher education. However, the aim of the P-16 education college for all policy focus will standardize college access and move the entire educational system toward equalization of opportunities for all students. Implementation of the P-16 college for all education policy must be embraced at the state-level and implemented at the school system level.

In order to implement a college for all policy, curriculum mechanisms must be examined and aligned in order to integrate college choice information in a standardized fashion. The school curriculum can be a valuable tool for providing students much needed information on college choice. According to Mintrop, Machellan, and Pitre (2001) students sought out teachers first when they were interested in getting information related to college choice. These teachers often lacked current knowledge of information related to college attendance (Mintrop et al., 2001) which could be detrimental to those students who are in need of assistance in navigating the college choice process. Correspondingly, research has shown that counselors are overburdened with

excessive student counseling loads (McDonough, 1997; Mintrop et al.). This is a problem for ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students who may not be familiar with timing and other key college choice related activities. The current K-12 college preparation system is structured so that the counselor is responsible for knowing each student in their particular caseload and meeting each one of those students' post high school needs. Given the large caseloads that these counselors maintain, this may be a difficult task. In the long run, some students may not get the help they need to fulfill their college aspirations.

The P-16 education approach to developing college for all policy proposes that instead of relying on overloaded counselors, the school classroom can be leveraged to provide an opportunity to integrate the high school curriculum with information on the college choice process. Schools would then be able to call upon colleges to help develop course materials that will assist students in making the connection between the courses they are studying and college. In keeping with the education reform efforts of the 1990s which asked the question "What should a high school graduate look like?" the P-16 education college for all policy approach answers that question: "A high school graduate should look like a college student." Such a policy can only be effective if schools are open to new and innovative ideas and approaches.

To effectively provide all students the opportunity to make clear choices regarding their educational futures, it may be necessary for schools to revise current curriculum practices. Schools and colleges must work together to assist students by providing them with the resources to successfully move through the college choice process. Arming students with information on what college is, how much it costs, the requirements for attending, the benefits of attending, and what college is like is an important strategy in increasing the college choices of African American students, other racial and ethnic minority students, and students in the general population. By utilizing the research on college choice, leveraging the resources of college admissions offices, and bringing those resources together in the school context, the P-16 education approach to a college for all policy can prosper and foster aspirations for college and future prosperity in all students.

## **Conclusion**

Broadened access to college continues to be an issue of national importance. Much of the debate surrounding affirmative action and its role in access to higher education may stem, in part, from the notion that a college degree can



positively influence personal economics. However, there are broader sweeping issues related to college access. Changes taking place in the economy and workforce, coupled with the changing demographics in the United States calls for a rethinking of our national priorities. There is an increasing need for a clearer focus on how to further our efforts in developing an educated citizenry. In order to gain that focus we must first realize that the bachelor's degree of today is equivalent to the high school diploma of the past. Without postsecondary education or training the high school graduate of 2005 and beyond will meet with struggles in our current workforce and economy.

To gain a better understanding of students and how they make decisions with regards to their lives beyond high school, the college choice literature must be considered. The college choice literature must also be expanded to provide information that is more relevant to racial and ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged student populations, as these populations begin to command a larger share of the of college-going student pool.

The existing college choice literature points to the need for a more concentrated focus on P-16 policy which brings schools and colleges in closer alliance with the primary focus of creating future benefits for students. By adopting a college for all policy approach, schools and colleges can begin to work together to meet the college access needs of all students. Colleges can assist school districts in leveraging the classroom as a resource for integrating the high school curriculum with information on the college choice process. Enhancing P-16 education relationships through partnerships that focus on improving college choice processes can be of mutual benefit to students, schools, colleges, and subsequently, the broader community and the national economy.

## References

- Akerhielm, K., Berger, J., Hooke, M., & Wise, D. (1998). *Factors related to college enrollment: Final report*. (Mathematica Publication No. 3360-028) Washington, DC: Department of Education.
- Alexander, K., & Cook, M. (1979). The motivational relevance of educational plans: Questioning the conventional wisdom. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 43, 202-213.
- Bateman, M. (1990). *Correlates of black and white student predisposition to pursue postsecondary education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

- Bateman, M., & Hossler, D. (1996). Exploring the development of postsecondary education plans among African American and white students. *College and University*, 72(1) 2-9.
- Campbell, R. T. (1983). Status attainment research: End of the beginning or beginning of the end? *Sociology of Education*, 56, 47-62.
- Carter, D. F. (2001, April). *The aspirations achievement paradox: A partial explanation*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- Chapman, D. W. (1981). A model of student college choice process. *Journal of Higher Education*, 10(5), 490-505.
- Freeman, K. (1997). Increasing African American participation in higher education: African American students' high school perspectives. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(5) 523-550.
- Gratz et al. v. Bollinger et al. 539 U.S. 244 (2003) LEXIS 4801
- Henschel, G., Kirshstein, R., O'Malley, A., & Rhodes, D. (2000) *Managing the cost of college: A handbook for students and families*. Retrieved August 22, 2004, from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences Website: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/collegecosts/index.html>
- Heller, D. (1999, Fall). Racial equity in college participation: African American students in the United States. *Review of African American Education*, 1(1) 5-29.
- Hossler, D., Braxton, J., & Coopersmith, G. (1989). Understanding student college choice. In J. Smart (Ed.) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. New York: Agathon.
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. (1987). Studying college choice: A three phase model and the implication for policy makers. *College and University*, 2, 207-221.
- Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N. (1999). *How social, economic, and educational factors influence the decisions students make*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Judy, R. W., & D'Amico, C. (1997). *Workforce 2020: Work and workers in the 21st Century*. Indianapolis: Hudson Institute.
- Kao, G., & Tienda, M. (1998). Educational aspirations of minority youth. *American Journal of Education*, 106(3), 349-386.

- Kerchoff, A., & Cambell, R. (1977). Race and status differences in the explanation of educational ambition. *Social Forces*, 55, 701-714
- Litten, L. (1982). Different strokes in the applicant pool: Some refinements in a model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 53, 383-402.
- Manski, C. F., & Wise, D.A. (1983). *College choice in America*. Cambridge: Harvard Press.
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mintrop, H., MacLellan, A., & Pitre, P. E. (2001). *The Bridge Project: Strengthening K-16 transition policies: Student, parent and school responses*. College Park: University of Maryland Center for Education Policy and Leadership.
- National Commission on the High School Senior Year. (2001). *The lost opportunity of senior year: Finding a better way*. Preliminary Report. Department of Education.
- Orfield, G., & Paul, F. (1994). *High hopes, long odds: A major report on Hoosier teens and the American Dream*. Indiana: Lilly Foundation. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED378463).
- Paulsen, M. (1990). *College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education and George Washington University.
- Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 117-141.
- Sewell, W. (1971). Inequality of opportunity for higher education. *American Sociological Review*, 36, 793-809.
- Smith-Maddox, R. (1999). The social networks and resources of African American eighth graders: Evidence from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. *Adolescence*, 34(133), 169-184.
- Terenzini, P. T., Cabrera, A. F., & Bernal, E. M. (2001). *Swimming against the tide: The poor in American higher education*. New York: The College Board, Research Report No. 2001-1.
- Tuttle, R. (1981). *A path analytical model of the college-going decision*. Boone, N.C: Appalachian State University.