Persistent Inequalities in College Education: Policy Implications

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Income Inequality or Lack of Opportunity?
Columbia University
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Follow the money.
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Intuition supports “follow the money”

Evidence challenges it

Rising tuition — like rising health care premiums — tells us about **how** we pay for professional services

**Not** about **why** the benefits of those services are so unequally distributed

"Good old days" rhetoric pervades discussion of inequality of educational opportunity

“Good old days” weren’t all that good for poor, working class, and lower middle class Americans

>>> **Students from low SES homes had lower college attendance & graduation rates than high-SES Americans as far back as data reach**
Long term trends

1930-1999 (Hout & Janus 2011)

Regressed high school and college graduation on:

- Parents’ education
- Gender
- Race
- Time

Note: No change model fit to all data with dummies for high school graduating class; annual estimates fit to each class separately. Vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals of annual estimates. Source: General Social Surveys, persons 25-64 years old, 1972-2008.
Recent trends

1982, 1992, 2004
(Voss, Hout, & George 2017)

Regressed college graduation

Parents’ education
Parents’ income
Gender
Race
Time

Added
Secondary school experiences
Test scores
College characteristics

Notes: Each panel shows the estimates from a different model. Baseline includes race-ethnicity and gender controls, secondary adds English and math courses to the baseline, test-scores adds verbal and math test scores to the secondary model, and full adds college selectivity and college type (two-year or four-year) to the test-scores model. The vertical gray lines show 95% confidence intervals for each estimate. Scales for estimates made comparable by the Karlson, Holm, and Breen (2012) method.
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Conclusions

“Good old days” — before college was so expensive for middle and upper class students — weren’t all that good for poor, working class, and lower middle class Americans

Inequalities we see today excluded and disadvantaged non-traditional students even then

Their *numbers* increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s — all *numbers* did; *rates* showed persistent disparities

Implication:
Less selection, more opportunity
Conclusions

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Implication: Less selection, more opportunity.