



Educational expectation trajectories and attainment in the transition to adulthood

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ABSTRACT

How consequential is family socioeconomic status for maintaining plans to get a bachelor's degree during the transition to adulthood? This article examines persistence and change in educational expectations, focusing on the extent to which family socioeconomic status shapes overtime trajectories of bachelor's degree expectations, how the influence involves the timing of family formation and full-time work vs. college attendance, and how persistence in expectations is consequential for getting a 4-year degree. The findings, based on the high school senior classes of 1987–1990, demonstrate that adolescents from higher socioeconomic status families are much more likely to hold onto their expectations to earn 4-year degrees, both in the early years after high school and, for those who do not earn degrees within that period, on through their 20s. These more persistent expectations in young adulthood, more so than adolescent expectations, help explain the greater success of young people from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds in earning a 4-year degree. Persistence of expectations to earn a bachelor's degree in the years after high school is shaped by stratified pathways of school, work, and family roles in the transition to adulthood.

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1. Introduction

Sociologists have focused much attention on adolescents' ambitions, both as important correlates of educational and occupational attainment, but also because they provide an important window through which to see how adolescents view their opportunities and themselves. Expectations are often measured by adolescents' reports of how far they really think they will go in school, and recent estimates from the Educational Longitudinal Study indicate that 75% of 12th graders in 2004 expected to earn a bachelor's degree or more (Ingels and Dalton, 2008). In what became known as the "Wisconsin model" of status attainment, adolescents' expectations about their future educational attainment and occupational destinations were thought to be a key link between parental socioeconomic status (SES) and offspring's attainment (e.g., Haller and Portes, 1973). Recent refinements to the theory emphasize that children from higher SES families are more able to maintain high educational expectations from elementary school through high school, and that stable high expectations are better predictors of educational attainment than are expectations measured toward the end of high school (Bozick et al., 2010). We know much less about how processes linking socioeconomic background and expectations play out in the years beyond high school, and their ultimate implications for attainment (Morgan, 2004).

What happens to educational ambitions as adolescents from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds leave high school and embark on futures that may or may not be what they expected? Despite growing attention to rising expectations across

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cohorts of *adolescents* (Goyette, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2006; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999) and what that has meant for educational attainment (Reynolds and Johnson, 2011), we have only scattered evidence of whether these expectations persist or change as young people move through their 20s, when ambitions often go unfulfilled and other life events like parenthood or full-time employment may encourage goal revision or postponement. Further, an ongoing debate is whether increasingly widespread ambitions to obtain a 4-year college degree or more are on balance beneficial or harmful to youth, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Domina et al., 2011a,b; Rosenbaum, 2011). Though hard to interpret as all positive or negative, a reality is that poorly prepared and/or economically disadvantaged adolescents face losing odds to realize their expectations to get a bachelor's degree (Alexander et al., 2008). Many questions in this area remain unanswered. Are young people who expect to earn bachelor's degrees able to hold on to these expectations in the years after high school, particularly those from lower SES backgrounds? Do SES-related differences in the persistence of bachelor's degree expectations help explain stratification in attainment? Finally, what role do competing commitments that arise in adulthood play in SES-related patterns of persistence and change in expectations?

In this study, we draw on panel data from a national sample of high school seniors from the Monitoring the Future Study (the 1987–1990 senior year cohorts) to examine patterns of persistence and change in expectations to earn a 4-year degree in the early and later part of the decade following high school. Our first objective is to examine how SES is related to the way bachelor's degree expectations come and go during the transition to adulthood. Our second objective is to examine the impact of these expectation trajectories on educational attainment and evaluate the extent to which they explain the higher attainments of higher SES youth. Our third objective is to examine the ongoing life events that shape expectations as young people make the transition to adulthood for their part in SES-differentiated expectations and attainments.

Our focus with respect to educational expectations is on young people's subjective probabilities of obtaining a bachelor's degree. That is, we seek to better understand the way educational advantage is passed on through the tendency for young adults to perceive with greater certainty and constancy they will get a 4-year degree. Our focus on the bachelor's degree is grounded in the growing prominence of such plans among adolescents, who are often encouraged to pursue such plans based on average and projected payoffs to higher education, despite rapidly rising tuition and fees at 4-year institutions (e.g., Baum et al., 2010). Focusing on expectations to obtain a bachelor's degree also is consistent with the small but growing literature on what happens to educational expectations beyond adolescence (Alexander et al., 2008; Hanson, 1994; Trusty, 2001; Trusty and Harris, 1999; Uno et al., 2010). It should be noted however that this differs from others who examine educational expectations in terms of how far adolescents and young adults think they'll ultimately go in school (e.g., Andrew and Hauser, 2011; Morgan, 2004).

Building on recent work by Bozick et al. (2010) and Alexander et al. (2008) and drawing on the life course perspective, we argue that higher SES enables the maintenance of expectations to earn a BA in the years after high school. Stable high expectations facilitate investments in higher education, resulting in higher educational attainment. That is, part of the reason youth from higher SES families are more successful and expedient at completing bachelor's degrees is due to their more steadfast plans to do so. We also argue that the lower or more unstable bachelor's degree expectations of lower socioeconomic youth result in part from different life course trajectories of work, schooling, and family formation during the transition to adulthood. We examine these dynamics in two phases of young adulthood: the first 5–6 years after high school and then another 5–6 years beyond that. This enables us to assess whether the benefits of stable high bachelor's degree expectations or the links between SES and persistence extend beyond the normative period of college-going. The percent of high school graduates in the 2010 Census who were enrolled in school dropped steeply between 18 and 25, after which enrollment declines taper only slightly with advancing age through age 30 (Ruggles et al., 2010). We label these two phases the “early phase” and “late phase” of young adulthood, but also use the “early twenties” and “late twenties” for ease of expression.

1.1. Socioeconomic status and persistence vs. change in educational expectations

Adolescent educational ambition is widespread in the US. Turner (1960) long ago characterized US educational ideology as one that emphasizes an open-ended competition, encouraging widespread high expectations into late stages of schooling. In the aggregate, we know young adults lower their educational ambitions in the years after high school (Jacob and Linkow, 2011). Underneath this aggregate downgrading of ambitions, however, lies a variety of trajectories. Young adults may persist in their expectations, give them up for more modest achievements, or aim even higher than before—trajectories both influenced by socioeconomic origins and potentially consequential for subsequent attainments. A possible educational advantage of youth from higher SES families is that they are more likely to maintain expectations for a bachelor's degree and less likely to let go of those plans than lower SES youth (Alexander et al., 2008; Hanson, 1994; Trusty, 2000; Trusty and Harris, 1999; Uno et al., 2010).

Bozick et al.'s (2010) recent work provides a possible explanation for why young people from higher status backgrounds may sustain their expectations over time, and suggests that the persistence of high expectations plays a large role in the link between socioeconomic origins and post-secondary educational attainment. Bozick and colleagues demonstrate that expectations to attend college fluctuate from the elementary school years through the high school years and the resulting trajectories of expectations are more strongly related to later college enrollment than expectations measured once in 11th grade. Those with stable high expectations were much more likely to attend college than others who also expected to attend college as juniors in high school but had not held consistent expectations. In other words, later formed expectations, even those at a

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