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High-school seniors' college enrollment goals: Costs and benefits of ambitious expectations



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ABSTRACT

High school students with high long-term educational expectations attain higher levels of education than those with lower expectations. Less studied is the role of students' short-term college enrollment expectations for the year after high school graduation. The purpose of the current study was to examine the costs and benefits of ambitious short-term expectations and the impact of falling short of these expectations on mental health, motivation, and educational outcomes. Over 1000 youth with expectations to attend college were surveyed during their senior year of high school, one year later, and four years later. Participants who did not achieve their short-term expectations had lower educational attainment four years later but were not less satisfied with their educational progress. The negative consequences of falling short of one's expectations were restricted to individuals with less ambitious short-term expectations. Thus, the benefits of ambitious short-term expectations for youth may outweigh the costs.

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Post-secondary educational attainment is associated with a host of positive adult outcomes including career success and earnings, good physical health, and emotional well-being (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002; Ross & Reskin, 1992). Young adults who earn at least a bachelor's degree (B.A.) can expect greater median earnings and a lower rate of unemployment across the lifespan. For example, in 2012, young adults age 25–34 with a bachelor's degree earned more than twice as much per year as those who did not graduate from high school (\$46,900 vs. \$22,900), 36% more than those who graduated from high school (\$30,000), and 24% more than those who earned an associate's degree (A.A.; \$35,700; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). These differences accumulate over the lifetime, leading individuals with higher educational attainment to have significantly higher lifetime earnings.

As a result of the myriad benefits of post-secondary educational attainment, it is not surprising that most adolescents in high school aspire to earn at least a bachelor's degree (Uno, Mortimer, Kim, & Vuolo, 2010). This collective mentality, coined “college-for-all” by Rosenbaum (2001), is so widespread in the U.S. that even youth with less-than-optimal educational

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performance, resources, and opportunities have high educational expectations. In an analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), Berkner and Chavez (1997) found that 97% of high school seniors expected to obtain some type of post-secondary education “at some point.” For the year immediately following high school graduation, 79% of youth expected to enroll in post-secondary education.

A substantial body of literature has demonstrated the importance of youths' high long-term educational expectations and aspirations for post-secondary enrollment (Eccles, Vida, & Barber, 2004; Hearn, 1991; Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara Barry, & Haskins, 2010; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007; Trusty, 1998) and educational attainment (e.g., Feliciano, 2006; Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Morgan, 2005; Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006). Educational expectations refer to the highest level of education an individual expects to attain (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Kiuru, Aunola, Vuori, & Nurmi, 2007).

While the benefits of high long-term educational expectations for youth are well-established and robust, the benefits of short-term educational expectations are less studied. It is important to note that college enrollment expectations for the year after high school graduation may or may not be as ambitious as long-term expectations. Youth's short-term expectations may be less lofty and more variable because they are anchored in what is realistic in the present and near future. As a result of their time-limitedness, short-term expectations have a higher risk of failure and may lead to undesirable consequences such as negative affect, a loss of self-esteem, or a delay or ending of post-secondary education. Thus, it is unclear if it is as beneficial for youth to have ambitious short-term educational expectations, given a higher risk of failure and possible negative consequences.

Short-term educational expectations may serve as the foundation for long-term expectations. In this case, it might be especially beneficial for youth to have ambitious short-term expectations accompanied by similarly ambitious long-term expectations. It may be detrimental if youths' short-term expectations are not as ambitious as their long-term expectations because short-term expectations may undermine long-term expectations in the long run. Hence, choosing the right level of short-term expectations may present a challenge to youth when attempting to regulate educational goals.

Costs and benefits of ambitious expectations

High educational expectations are an important source of motivation for youth, particularly when obstacles arise or when other factors, such as lack of resources, threaten goal attainment (Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012). High expectations reflect optimism and ambitiousness, two constructs which, in their own right, have been shown to promote perseverance when encountering difficulties. Optimistic biases, in particular, have been linked to higher levels of educational attainment, subjective well-being, and general health (Bandura, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Freund & Baltes, 1998).

However, high educational expectations *per se* are not always beneficial (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). Cultural values (e.g., “The American Dream”) and societal institutions (e.g., a multi-tier school system) influence the impact of ambitiousness on educational outcomes. For example, Heckhausen and Chang (2009) investigated the impact of ambitious long-term expectations among youth in two countries with different educational systems: Germany and the United States. In Germany, youth are channeled into different career trajectories early on through vocational training and apprenticeships, with little opportunity for later switching. In the U.S., even youth who perform poorly in high school have the opportunity to obtain post-secondary education. In the German system, aspirations are most effective when they are calibrated to academic performance and resources (Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002). Heckhausen and Chang (2009) found that in the U.S., ambitious expectations, regardless of performance or resources, are most effective in producing high educational attainment. Thus, the benefits of high expectations depend on cultural value systems and the societally institutionalized opportunities and constraints in the individual's environment.

Educational expectations in youth from diverse backgrounds

Falling short of one's expectations or educational “underachievement,” particularly in the short-term, is a somewhat common occurrence for youth (Uno et al., 2010). In Berkner and Chavez's study (1997), nearly one-fifth (18%) of youth with post-secondary expectations did not achieve them in the year after high school graduation. The long-term consequences of falling short of one's educational expectations, such as discontentment, depressive affect, or lower levels of satisfaction with life, have not been clearly demonstrated by researchers. Certainly, if youth experience repeated failure, prolonged negative feedback, or diminished opportunities to achieve a goal, “holding onto” aspirations can produce negative educational and career outcomes (Uno et al., 2010). The term “educational floundering” is used to describe the phenomenon of prolonged post-secondary education without earning a college degree (Vuolo et al., 2012). In the latter case, the individual would be better off disengaging from the original educational goal and substituting more realistic goals (Heckhausen et al., 2010; Vuolo et al., 2012).

In the U.S., educational expectations, college enrollment, and educational attainment are clearly linked to socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Mello, 2009). A meta-analysis by Sirin (2005) including over 101,000 students from 74 independent samples reported a medium to large positive correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. The relationship between family socioeconomic status and academic achievement is commonly referred to as the *socioeconomic gap* or *socioeconomic gradient* because the gap gradually increases across lower to higher socioeconomic statuses (Willms, 2002, 2003). Moreover, this relationship is stronger among White students than students of other ethnicities (Sirin, 2005).

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