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## Extracurricular associations and college enrollment

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## ABSTRACT

There is consistent evidence that student involvement in extracurricular activities (EAs) is associated with numerous academic benefits, yet understanding how peer associations within EAs might influence this link is not well understood. Using Add Health's comprehensive data on EA participation across 80 schools in the United States, we develop a novel measure of peer associations within EA activities. We find that EA participation with high achieving peers has a nontrivial link to college enrollment, even after considering individual, peer, and school-level factors. This suggests that school policies aimed at encouraging student exposure to high achieving peers in EAs could have an important impact on a student's later educational outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

A college education is critical for socioeconomic mobility and other important life outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Hout, 2012; Arum and Roksa, 2011), but the transition from high school to college is fraught with important decision-making and overall uncertainty (Niu and Tienda, 2008; Grodsky and Jones, 2007). Although family resources and other related factors are important determinants of a student's likelihood of college enrollment (e.g. Sandefur et al., 2006), growing evidence has also been able to document the association between college attendance and a student's peer networks (Fletcher and Tienda, 2009; Flether, 2012; DiMaggio and Garip, 2012). We add to this research by examining the extent to which involvement with high achieving peers in extracurricular activities (EAs) associates with a student's likelihood for attending college.

Extracurricular activities are an embedded feature of an U.S. education; more than three-fourths of students participate in some kind of extracurricular activity (Feldman and Matjasko, 2007; Mahoney et al., 2005). The impact of EAs on academic outcomes has been debated for decades (see Coleman, 1961; Spady, 1970), but recent work has documented a consistently positive relationship between participation in EAs and educational outcomes (Eccles et al., 2003; Covay and Carbonaro, 2010; Kaufman and Gabler, 2004; McNeal, 1995). Yet, despite the ubiquity of EA participation and its potentially positive effects, *how* participation in EAs is beneficial is still uncertain (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005; Broh, 2002).

Research suggests that EAs are social contexts that can foster positive peer associations (Moody, 2001; McNeal, 1998)—students interact with each other in ways that can mutually influence their educational experiences. For example, peers can encourage effective study practices and high educational expectations, as well as an overall positive orientation toward school (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Riegle-Crumb and Callahan, 2009; Merolla et al., 2012). Because peers in EAs typically have disproportionately higher GPAs, come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and are less delinquent (Feldman

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and Matjasko, 2007; Coleman, 1961; Covay and Carbonaro, 2010), it is reasonable to think that EAs can influence these outcomes, in part, due to positive peer influences within activities. Yet, to date, there simply has not been sufficient data to explore this explanation empirically. We examine the relationship between the characteristics of peers participating in EAs and college enrollment using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health contains EA information from all students across the 80 sampled schools in the data. This allows us to know the average GPA of all students in each EA in each school.

This approach adds to an important task of social scientists, to reveal the myriad ways students are influenced in their transition to college. Surprisingly, despite acknowledgements that peers play a likely role in why EAs matter (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Fredricks and Eccles, 2006; Feldman and Matjasko, 2005), we have yet to find any formal assessments of how the composition of advantaged peers in EAs might influence a student's educational futures. Because it is difficult to demonstrate causality, our first step then is to document whether any link is evident, and then to consider whether the size of the association warrants increased attention among scholars and practitioners of education.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Extracurricular activities

In *The Adolescent Society* (1961), Coleman argued that EAs undermined educational outcomes by involving students in activities that competed with academic goals.<sup>1</sup> But a lot has changed since—decades of research on EAs have demonstrated a net benefit to schooling. A student's participation in EAs has been linked to self-confidence (Mahoney et al., 2003; Gore et al., 2001), commitment to school values (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004; Marsh and Kleitman, 2002), educational expectations (Troutman and Dufur, 2007), improved grades (Marsh, 1992; Feijin, 1994; Eccles et al., 2003), higher standardized test scores (Landers and Landers, 1978; Broh, 2002), better cognitive and noncognitive skills (Covay and Carbonaro, 2010), retention (McNeal, 1995), and long-term outcomes such as college enrollment (Eccles et al., 2003; Kaufman and Gabler, 2004) and college completion (Eccles et al., 2003; Marsh, 1992; Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). Participation in extracurricular activities has also been linked to lower levels of antisocial behavior (Gilman et al., 2004) and, for some students, less involvement in other risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol consumption (Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks and Eccles, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Generally, EA participation has a positive association across a number of outcomes regardless of activity type (e.g. sports, performing arts, school involvement, or academic clubs) (Eccles et al., 2003; Barber et al., 2001).

To date, it is unclear exactly how participation in EAs may influence these positive outcomes. There is some indirect evidence that participation promotes work ethic (Broh, 2002), structures idle time (Mahoney and Stattin, 2000; Gilman et al., 2004), and develops a positive self-identity (Broh, 2002; Eccles and Barber, 1999; see Fredricks and Eccles, 2006). We argue that another potential pathway is through peer associations fostered in EAs.

It is well known that peer networks in adolescence, ranging from romantic partnerships to delinquent peer groups, can have a powerful influence on student outcomes (Giordano, 2003; Haynie and Wayne Osgood, 2005). In criminological research, peers strongly affect an adolescent's illicit substance use (Andrews et al., 2002) as well as the probability of committing violent crime (Zimmerman and Messner, 2011). Peer associations via friendship networks and school course work can also be positive, with evidence that peer associations in school are linked to higher academic achievement (Choi et al., 2008; Crosnoe et al., 2003, 2008). Thus, one possibility is that EAs foster the kinds of peer associations that creates an environment conducive to positive academic outcomes (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Fredricks and Eccles, 2006; Feldman and Matjasko, 2005).

To detail this possibility theoretically, we organize the following perspectives from broad to specific—beginning with how the composition of peers in a given context can influence an individual student, then how this process can work specifically in EAs, and finally how peer associations in EAs might influence a participant's chances for college enrollment.

### 2.2. Extracurricular associations: a compositional approach

To understand how associations with peers in EAs might influence participants, we begin with a compositional framework. Generally “composition” in the education literature refers to the demographic profile of students within a given context (e.g. socioeconomic status, race, gender), often within schools (see Crosnoe, 2009). The study of peer composition and its link to academic outcomes is largely due to the legacy of James Coleman. With particular attention to racial composition, the *Coleman Report* concluded that “the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's own social background, than is any school factor” (Coleman et al., 1966:325). Coleman's compositional interpretation of schooling reframed the education debate (Jencks, 1972) and became an important catalyst for racial desegregation policies in schools (e.g., busing) (Mickelson, 2010). More recently there has been a turn in composition studies to

<sup>1</sup> Coleman, however, focused most of his analysis on popularity and school context rather than educational outcomes. Within his analysis, the “Leading Crowd” were the most likely students to have college expectations. He also argued that some activities (i.e. sports), if representing the most popular students in school, would have a positive relationship with educational outcomes because it would effectively increase one's commitment to school.

<sup>2</sup> But not all studies of EAs uncover “positive” effects. EAs have also been linked to more alcohol use and increased sexual activity, especially among boys in high school sports (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005).

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