



Inequality in skill development on college campuses



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ABSTRACT

While patterns of inequality in access and attainment in higher education are well documented, sociologists have left largely unexplored the question of disparities in skill development during college. Following a cohort of students across 23 four-year U.S. institutions from entry into college through their senior year, we examine inequalities in development of general collegiate skills. Findings indicate that despite unequal starting points, students from less educated families gain skills at the same rate as those from more educated families. African-American students, in contrast, enter college with lower levels of general collegiate skills than their white peers and gain less over time. A substantial portion, but not all, of the African-American/white gap in general collegiate skills is explained by academic preparation and selectivity of the institutions attended. Notably, African-American and white students experience similar benefits from being academically prepared and attending more selective institutions. These findings provide valuable insights for research and policy concerned with inequality in higher education.

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In the current era of “college for all” policies, the majority of high school graduates in the U.S. enter higher education. Although widespread, access to higher education remains stratified, as does the likelihood of degree completion. Students from disadvantaged family backgrounds and racial/ethnic minority groups are less likely to enter or complete college (e.g., [Adelman, 2006](#); [Baker & Velez, 1996](#); [Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009](#); [Deil-Amen & Lopez-Turley, 2007](#)). While ample research examines inequalities in access and degree completion, inequality in skill development during college has received limited attention.¹ This stands in stark contrast to the K-12

literature, which has produced an extensive body of knowledge regarding the gaps in academic skills (typically math and reading) across different sociodemographic groups.

Do U.S. students from different family backgrounds and racial/ethnic groups experience similar gains in general collegiate skills during their time in higher education? On the one hand, it may be expected that the patterns of inequality in academic achievement in higher education simply replicate the patterns from K-12. However, it is also possible that higher education yields significantly different patterns of results given the level of sorting and selection that occurs at the point of institutional entry. By the time students enter higher education, and

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¹ For a review of the higher education literature on this topic, see [Pascarella and Terenzini \(2005\)](#). Previous studies of general collegiate

skills (such as critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing) rarely focus on understanding sociodemographic inequalities. In addition, very few studies use objective measures and follow the same group of students over time. Instead, they tend to rely on students' self-reports, focus on a small number of institutions, or use cross-sectional designs.

particularly four-year institutions, which are the focus of this study, they represent a highly selected group – many students from less advantaged family backgrounds and racial/ethnic minority groups either do not enter higher education or enroll in two-year institutions. Moreover, the majority of traditional-age students in four-year institutions are not living with family members but with other students on or close to campus, which could potentially weaken the effects of social background. The importance of institutional as opposed to family contexts may thus be heightened in higher education.

To offer insights regarding this dimension of inequality in higher education, we examine racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in the development of general collegiate skills during college. While those skills are not the only relevant outcomes of higher education, they have been broadly endorsed by higher education institutions (Bok, 2006) and employers (AAC&U, 2008; NRC, 2012), and recent research indicates that they are related to post-college labor market outcomes (Arum & Roksa, 2014). We follow a recent cohort of college students from entry into college to the end of their senior year, and describe the gaps in general collegiate skills between students from different family backgrounds and racial/ethnic groups. Subsequently, we explore whether and how academic preparation and institutional selectivity contribute to the observed disparities. Presented results provide valuable insights for research and policy concerned with inequality in higher education.

1. Literature review

1.1. Socioeconomic inequality

Despite the massive expansion of higher education, students from less advantaged family backgrounds continue to lag behind their more advantaged peers in access and attainment in higher education (Roksa, Grodsky, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007).² For example, while 87 percent of the 2002 high school sophomores whose parents had graduate/professional degrees entered college by 2006, only 53 percent of their peers whose parents had a high school education or less did so. The gaps are even more pronounced when considering access to specific types of institutions, such as four-year or selective colleges and universities. Similar patterns are observed for family income, where students in the top income category are substantially more likely to enter higher education, as well as enter four-year institutions, than their less financially advantaged counterparts (Bozick & Lauff, 2007). These patterns continue through graduation, where researchers have observed a 40 percentage point gap in bachelor's degree completion between students from the bottom and top income quartiles (Haveman & Wilson, 2007).

These gaps in access and attainment by family background are attenuated, but not fully explained, by academic preparation. Students from less advantaged family

backgrounds fare worse on a range of academic preparation measures, such as performance on standardized tests, enrollment in different high school tracks, or enrollment in specific classes (e.g., Adelman, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008; Kelly, 2007; Lucas, 1999). After researchers adjust for these differences, the gaps in college entry (Roksa et al., 2007; Karen, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2004) and bachelor's degree completion (Adelman, 2006; Camburn, 1990) decrease. However, even after those, and other, controls, students from less advantaged backgrounds continue to lag behind.

With respect to gaps in academic achievement, K-12 research has demonstrated that students from less advantaged family backgrounds enter schooling with lower test scores, and these gaps grow over time. This increase in gaps over time, however, emerges primarily from students' family contexts, not schooling. When in school, students from different family backgrounds learn at approximately similar rates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Condrón, 2009; Downey, von-Hippel, & Broh, 2004). This finding has important implications for considering possible patterns of skill development in higher education. Traditional-age students in four-year institutions rarely live at home. In our sample, only 12 percent of students in the second year of college and only 8 percent in their senior year lived with family. Moreover, parents have much less control over structuring students' time in higher education, where students' lives tend to center around participation in the collegiate culture (Grigsby, 2009; Nathan, 2006). Given lower influence of parents over students' lives in higher education, we may not observe an increasing gap in skill development, as is the case for academic achievement in K-12. Instead, the sociodemographic gaps in performance may stay the same or decrease as students progress through college. At least one study, which focused on the first two years of college, reported that gaps in critical thinking between students from different family backgrounds persisted over this time period (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

1.2. Racial/ethnic inequality

Patterns of racial/ethnic inequality are slightly more complicated and vary across outcomes examined. Descriptive statistics reveal that African-American and Hispanic students are less likely to enter higher education or complete educational credentials than white students (e.g., see Baker & Velez, 1996; Kao & Thompson, 2003). For example, while 70 percent of white high school completers in 2007 entered higher education within 12 months of high school graduation, only 56 percent of African-American and 64 percent of Hispanic students did so. The gaps are much more pronounced with respect to degree completion: among the 1990 high school sophomores, 33 percent of white students completed a bachelor's degree or higher by 2000. In contrast, only 16 percent of African-American and 12 percent of Hispanic students attained the same level of education (NCES, 2012).

These large racial/ethnic gaps in access and completion in higher education are strongly associated with family background and academic preparation. In a review of the literature, Gamoran (2001) concluded that: "the

² This pattern of persisting socioeconomic inequality in higher education is not unique to the U.S. See Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran (2007) for cross-national comparisons.

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