



# Unequal returns to academic credentials as a hidden dimension of race and class inequality in American college enrollments



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## ABSTRACT

This study asks whether growing access to academic credentials for students from disadvantaged groups will lead to a decrease in the value of those credentials for these groups in college enrollments. Drawing on credentialing theory and the concept of adaptive social closure, I argue that as certain academic credentials become democratized (i.e., more accessible to disadvantaged students), their value decreases for students from disadvantaged race and class groups at the same time as it increases for students from privileged race and class groups. To test this idea, I use data from two cohorts of American high school graduates to estimate changes in the educational payoff of participation in the Advanced Placement (AP) program for students across racial and social class groups. The results show that at the same time as students from disadvantaged groups gained wider access to the AP program, its effect on their rates of college enrollment declined. During the same time period, the AP effect on the rates of college enrollment for students from privileged groups increased. I conclude that unequal *returns* to academic credentials for privileged and disadvantaged students represent a hidden dimension of race and class inequality in American college enrollments. Moreover, the results demonstrate the possibility that as access to an academic credential democratizes, as is the case with the AP program, privileged groups are better able to insulate themselves from the negative effects of credential inflation.

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## 1. Introduction

The contemporary college admissions regime in the U.S. values applicants who can demonstrate achievement in multiple dimensions, including academics, extracurricular activities, and community service. This focus on the “whole student” is seen widely as a democratizing force in higher education because it decreases the emphasis on standardized tests, which have been criticized roundly

for their racial and class biases. Though standardized test scores still loom large in admissions decisions (Alon, 2009; Alon & Tienda, 2007), a number of colleges and universities have moved to deemphasize their importance, with some schools even opting to make the submission of test scores voluntary (NCFOT, 2012). Students who traditionally perform worse on standardized tests (i.e., those from race and class groups that have been historically marginalized in the education system) are thought to benefit from the current admissions regime because they have opportunities to demonstrate academic promise outside of standardized test scores.

Whereas standardized test scores tend to affect postsecondary school attendance similarly for all students (Alon,

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2009; Alon & Tienda, 2007), many of the indicators of academic promise that are becoming increasingly important in the admissions process are *non-standardized* credentials (NACAC, 2009), which means that they do not necessarily carry the same value in the admissions process (or, therefore, yield the same returns) for applicants across status groups. I develop the argument that democratization of non-standardized academic credentials can lead to an increase in the value of those credentials in college admissions for students from privileged groups because privileged groups are able to employ adaptive social closure techniques surrounding those non-standardized credentials. If non-standardized admissions credentials can yield higher educational returns for students from privileged groups than for those from disadvantaged groups, this would suggest that the current admissions regime in higher education, with its use of a variety of indicators of academic achievement, may not be as beneficial to students from disadvantaged groups as is widely thought. Differential educational returns to non-standardized credentials, then, may represent an invisible dimension of inequality in higher education, compared with the more visible problem of unequal access to academic credentials across groups.

This study examines whether one prominent non-standardized credential—participation in the Advanced Placement (AP) program—yields differential educational returns across racial and social class groups. I focus on AP coursework because it is a non-standardized credential that has become increasingly accessible to high school students from disadvantaged groups over the last few decades. The analyses examine whether the effects of AP coursework on college enrollment changed between 1992 and 2004—years of huge growth for the AP program—for students from privileged and disadvantaged race and class groups. The main question addressed by this study is: When access to a non-standardized admissions credential, such as the AP program, is democratized, does the value of the credential decline for disadvantaged students at the same time as it increases for their privileged peers?

This is an important question because if privileged groups are able to preserve the educational advantages that accrue to them from a given academic credential (e.g., AP courses) even when their monopolization of the credential itself has declined, then growing access to these credentials for disadvantaged groups would lack the power to reduce inequality in higher education enrollment. With non-standardized admissions credentials likely to become increasingly important in university admissions as selective schools continue to deemphasize the importance of standardized test scores, working toward equality in higher education enrollment depends on developing an awareness of how these non-standardized indicators pay off for students from privileged and disadvantaged groups.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Academic credentials

Credentials, such as academic degrees and certifications, purportedly convey standardized information about the skills and competencies of their bearers to third parties.

Beginning with Weber (1916/1951) and further developed by Collins (1979), sociologists have developed a credentialing theory that conceives of credentialing systems as formalized ways of maintaining inequality between status groups by regulating access to resources and opportunities. A key tenet of credentialing theory is that ‘the content and occupational significance of credentials are more cultural and exclusionary than technical and efficacious’ (Brown, 2001, p. 20). Thus, the credential bearer need not actually possess the set of skills and dispositions that the credential supposedly indicates in order to benefit from that credential. However, by moving away from regulating access to resources primarily on the basis of ascriptive characteristics, credentialing systems are seen as legitimate and meritocratic arbiters of opportunity. Thus, credentialing systems serve to legitimate inequalities between status groups by formalizing and justifying these inequalities as the result of perceived meritocratic differences between status groups.

While credentials typically refer to one’s qualifications in the job market, this study examines qualifications for admission to colleges and universities. This study contributes to the sociological literature on credentialism by distinguishing between standardized and non-standardized credentials, where the standardized/non-standardized distinction refers to whether the social value of the credential is equal across its bearers. If credentials serve as cultural markers more than indicators of actual competencies, as credentialing theory holds, then this allows room for the social meaning of a credential to be manipulated such that the credential becomes more valuable for some groups than others. In this view, credentials have the potential to perpetuate inequality not only because members of privileged groups are more likely to possess them, but also because credentials may be perceived as more valuable when they are possessed by members of privileged groups.

In her audit study of the effects of the “negative” credential of a criminal record, Pager (2007) demonstrates that not only are African American men more likely to hold the credential of a criminal record than white men, but also that this credential is more damaging to African American men than to white men in the unskilled labor market. Mass incarceration, then, perpetuates racial inequality not only because more African American men than white men are “marked” as criminals, but also because African American men are disproportionately damaged by holding the criminal credential. Applying this logic to the institution of education, I argue that the education system perpetuates inequality between groups not only because privileged groups have greater access to academic credentials that are valued in the college admissions process, but also because some of these credentials carry greater value for members of privileged groups than disadvantaged groups. The latter inequality is an important topic of study because it is less visible, and therefore more insidious, than the more visible inequality in access to credentials. In the current study, I concentrate on the non-standardized credential of AP coursework, which has become increasingly accessible to students from disadvantaged groups over the last few decades.

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