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This fact sheet focuses on differential rates of college completion by socioeconomic status, the factors researchers think are behind them, and key aspects of promising efforts to help level the playing field and increase college completion among disadvantaged students.

College Completion Differs by Socioeconomic Status

College completion is one of the surest pathways out of poverty, but not everyone that sets foot on campus graduates. Since 1980, gaps in rates of college entry, persistence, and completion between children from low- and high-income families have widened, although women are outpacing men in college attainment in every demographic group. At UW–Madison, 70% of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students (those who experienced poverty in high school and whose parents did not attend college) graduate within 6 years, compared to 83% of high-SES students (those whose families were in the top 25% of income and had at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree). The strong connection between SES and college completion remains even after adjusting for other student characteristics like pre-college test scores.

For example, at large state universities, 69% of students whose parents had no college education—often referred to as “first-generation students”—graduate within 6 years, compared to 79% of students with at least one parent with a college degree (Figure 1). More than one-half of this 10 percentage point difference remains after taking into account parental income, SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA, state residency, race, ethnicity, gender, and university attended.

Further, when considering income, there is a 13 percentage point difference in completion between students from the bottom income and top income quartiles (Figure 1). Of this difference, 6 percentage points remain after accounting for differences in parental education, SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA, state residency, race, ethnicity, gender, and university attended.

Why Do Parental Education and Income Make a Difference?

First-generation students are at greater risk of delaying college entry, experiencing culture shock upon entering college, taking remedial coursework, and dropping out of college than their peers with college-educated parents.

Parental income affects the resources available to students, including access to quality K-12 education, adequate food and

shelter, and extracurricular experiences that can boost a student’s readiness for college and their ability to succeed in school.

What Are Other Related Factors?

Several other factors that are associated with growing up in a low-SES family may partially explain differences in college completion, including:

- differential access to and enrollment in advanced and rigorous pre-college coursework;
- status as a nontraditional student, including those who delay their start, enroll part time, experience gaps in enrollment, and have children of their own;
- undermatching, whereby high-achieving low-SES students attend colleges where the average GPAs and test scores of enrolled students are lower than their own;
- a lack of a sense of belonging; and
- being a student of color attending a predominantly white institution.

Key Terms

Socioeconomic Status (SES): A measure combining an individual’s or family’s income, education, and occupation.

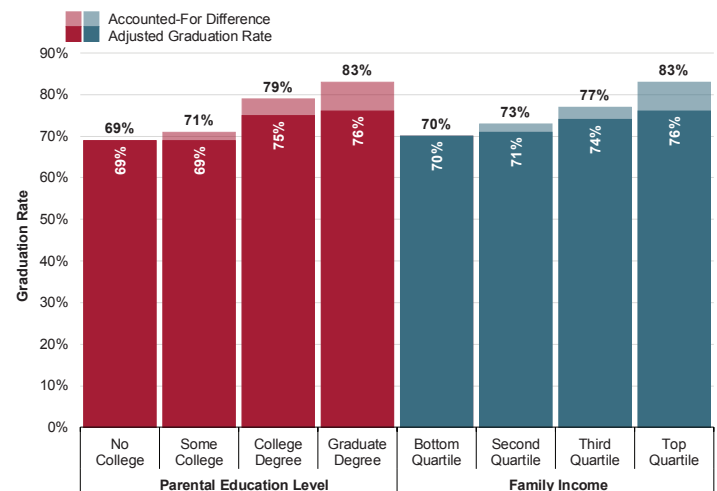
College Entry Rate: The proportion of individuals born in a given year that have enrolled in college by age 19.

College Persistence Rate: The proportion of students who, once enrolled in college, continue on to the next semester.

College Completion Rate: The proportion of college students that graduate within 6 years of enrollment.

College Attainment Rate: The proportion of all individuals born in a given year that possess a bachelor’s degree by age 25.

Figure 1: Variation in graduation rates between high- and low- SES students after controlling for student characteristics.



Source: The College Board.

Promising Programs and Policies to Increase College Completion among Low-SES Students

The following efforts have shown evidence of boosting disadvantaged students' academic success:

Providing Wrap-Around Support

The City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associates Program (ASAP), founded in 2007, aims to increase graduation rates at nine CUNY community colleges across New York City through full-time enrollment, financial support, tutoring, career services, and intensive mentoring. Prospective students must be a state resident, file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), have a GPA of at least 2.0, and enroll in a full-time course load to participate in the program. A randomized-control trial found that graduation rates among ASAP students are more than double those of non-ASAP students (40% vs. 22%). The program is currently being replicated at Westchester Community College in Valhalla, New York, and Skyline College in San Bruno, California.

Matching Students with the Right College

The Expanding College Opportunities Project provides low-SES students informational packets about the college application process, application fee waivers, and net college costs. Program participants enrolled in colleges that were 19% more likely to be a good match and experienced graduation rates that were 6% higher than those of a control group.

Increasing Students' Sense of Belonging

A recent experiment administered a 30-minute online module designed to improve students' sense of belonging to incoming students across three institutions in the summer before beginning college. The module provided information indicating that academic and social struggles were commonplace, non-reflective of potential for belonging, and eventually self-resolve. Among disadvantaged students, the intervention increased first year full-time enrollment from 32% to 41% and cumulative GPA from 3.33 to 3.42, and reduced the proportion of disadvantaged students in the bottom 20% of their class from 46% to 29%. Additionally, it increased social and academic integration across multiple metrics, and reduced the raw institutional achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students by 40%. The University of Texas at Austin has created an online "U.T. Mindset" orientation based on the results from this research that is given to all first-year incoming students.

Addressing Lack of Academic Preparation with Co-Requisite Remediation

A recent study at three CUNY community colleges enrolled remedial students in a college-level statistics course alongside weekly workshops for additional academic support instead of remedial algebra. Participating students had a 16% higher pass rate than did students taking remedial algebra (the control group) and also earned more college credits in the next year.

Decreasing Continuous Enrollment Gaps at Community Colleges

Text message reminders to complete paperwork appear to be a promising strategy for encouraging continuous enrollment in community college. In a recent field experiment, researchers sent

12 personalized text messages to freshman enrolled in two-year community colleges encouraging them to refile their FAFSA in order to maintain their financial aid for the following year. Rates of persistence into the fall sophomore year increased from 64% to 76%. Persistence into the spring sophomore semester, after the intervention had ended, increased from 66% to 80%, suggesting an ongoing effect. At the same time, however, no gains from the intervention were seen among freshman at four year colleges.

Providing Personal Coaching

InsideTrack is a private company contracted by 15 colleges across the country to provide coaching services to students with the aim of improving retention and graduation. Coaches help students navigate class registration, childcare, and other obstacles that might impede completion. Coaches focus on areas such as health, academics, time management, finances, and persistence. An evaluation found the program increased persistence to the next semester by 9% (from 58% to 63%). Two years after receiving coaching, students were 14% more likely to stay in school and 4 years after the intervention the average graduation rate among coached students was 35% compared to 31% for the control group.

Societal Benefits to Increased College Completion

Beyond the benefits of college completion that are accrued by students and their families, there are also societal benefits to higher college completion rates, such that identifying and implementing promising practices and policies designed to increase college completion for low-SES students may benefit society as a whole. These societal benefits include:

Increased Health and Decreased Health Expenditures

Evidence suggests that college graduates smoke less, exercise more, and have lower rates of obesity compared to individuals without a college degree. These factors are associated with better health for individuals and decreased health care costs for society.

Increased Income and Tax Revenue

College graduates pay, on average, \$6,900 more in income taxes and earn \$17,700 more in after-tax income per year than high school graduates. Moreover, college graduates earn, on average, \$800,000 more than high school graduates by retirement.

Increased Civic Engagement

More highly educated individuals tend to have higher rates of civic engagement. In 2015, 16% of adults age 25 and older with a high school diploma volunteered compared to 39% of adults with at least a bachelor's degree.

Decreased Public Benefit Participation

In 2014, 29% of individuals age 25 and older who had a high school diploma participated in Medicaid compared to 12% of those with at least a bachelor's degree. Similarly, 13% of individuals with a high school diploma received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food assistance compared to 3% of college graduates.

Decreased Student Loan Default Rates

Default rates on student loans are higher among students who drop out of college compared to those who attain a degree, despite that those who drop out have lower levels of average debt.

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