

## Reducing Inequality in an Age of Student Mobility

### Challenges Facing American Higher Education

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#### INTRODUCTION

The massive expansion of American postsecondary education was among the most successful public policy achievements of the twentieth century. As the proportion of students finishing high school grew, rates of college-going rose as well. On average, the per cent of students enrolling in college during the fall immediately following high school graduation increased from 49 per cent in 1972 to 67 per cent in 2004. Thus, the transition from high school to college is now a normative one for the majority of students who complete their secondary education. However, the postsecondary transition rate is substantially lower for students from the bottom 20 per cent of family incomes (50 per cent), and for African-American and Hispanic students (63 per cent and 62 per cent respectively). Those same students are also less likely to complete high school and in the U.S. it is very uncommon for non-graduates to go to on to college (U.S. Department of Education 2006: Table 29).

The economic return on the bachelor's degree (B.A.) continues to grow, rendering it a nearly essential requirement for adults wishing to join or remain part of the middle class. Men with a college degree earn nearly 50 per cent more than men with only a high school diploma, while college-educated women earn nearly 60 per cent more than their less-educated counterparts (Ellwood and Kane 2000). The average annual family income for families headed by an adult with a bachelor's degree has increased 17 per cent since 1973, and now hovers around \$100,000 (Mortenson 2006). Further, a student's probability of attending a four-year college is much greater if at least one of her parents completed four years of college. Eighty-six per cent of high school graduates with a parent who finished a bachelor's degree go on to attend college, compared to 67 per cent of those whose parent started but did not finish a college degree, and 55 per cent of those whose parent is a high school graduate (Ellwood and Kane 2000: U.S. Department of Education 2006: Table 29). Clearly, the benefits of earning the highest undergraduate credential offered in the American system are transmitted to the children of graduates only if one completes a degree.

But the United States has been far less successful in promoting degree completion among students who enrol at its colleges and universities than it has been at promoting access. Only 34 per cent of students who start college at a four-year institution complete a bachelor's degree within four years, 64 per cent finish within six years, and 69 per cent complete within 8.5 years (Adelman 2006).

Strikingly, since 1945 as the proportion of adults in each subsequent age cohort enrolling in college has increased, bachelor's degree completion rates have decreased (Turner 2004).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, going to college does not equate with finishing college in America.

Moreover, there is a persistent socioeconomic gap in college completion. As a result of three points of inequity in American education – high school graduation, college participation, and college completion – students from the highest socioeconomic status quartile are nearly nine times more likely to graduate from college than those in the bottom quartile (National Center for Education Statistics 2005).<sup>2</sup> While on average 23.8 per cent of the U.S. population aged 15 and older has a bachelor's degree, that degree is held by only 14.4 per cent of African-Americans and 9.6 per cent of Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). The implications of this disparity are deeply troubling, for as economist Sarah E. Turner notes, "It is these differences in attainment, not in enrolment, that ultimately affect the distribution of earnings" (2004: 15).

One understudied but important facet of the American higher education system contributing to these stratified outcomes is the level of institutional mobility among its students. Over the period during which student mobility has been tracked, the number of schools attended by college students has slowly but steadily increased. In 1972, 47.5 per cent of college students attended more than one college, by 1982 it was 51.3 percent, and in 1992 it was 56.5 percent. In fact, nearly one-fifth (18.9 per cent) of 1992 high school seniors went on to attend more than two colleges (Adelman 2003; Adelman 2004a).<sup>3</sup>

But the current policies and practices of U.S. higher education do not facilitate the equitable flow of all students among all schools. Some students who change schools lose a portion of the credits they earned the last institution they attended, fail to piece together a coherent curriculum of courses, and struggle to find the means with which to pay for college and travel to school (Bailey 2003; McCormick 2003; Prager 2001). Moreover, studies of student mobility in elementary and secondary education in the U.S. indicate that mobile students have difficulty coping with moves to new schools, often suffering psychologically, socially and academically (Rumberger 2003). For all of these reasons, then, we can expect increases in student mobility in higher education to contribute to the declines in overall completion rates. Furthermore, given that the problems caused by mobility are probably more common among students with less access to the information required to effectively navigate institutional structures (e.g. low-income or first-generation students), we can also expect that student mobility will contribute to the socioeconomic gap in college completion.

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<sup>1</sup> College enrolment here includes enrolment at any type of college, not limited to four-year colleges and universities (Turner 2004).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper a student's socioeconomic status refers to a composite measure based on parental education, income and occupation; the measure was developed by the National Center for Education Statistics and is widely used in its reporting. Other measures of social class background are also used in analyses referenced, including a measure of parental occupation (see footnote 8) and parental education.

<sup>3</sup> Here, attendance includes enrolment at all types of colleges.

Students move among colleges in a tremendously varied fashion. Multi-institutional attendance can take many forms beyond what is most commonly known as transfer, including what some observers term “swirling”, a pattern of movement back and forth between two- and four-year institutions, “excursion” to temporary institutions, and “serial transfer” or “migration” from one institution to another in sequence (Adelman 2004b; Borden 2004; de los Santos and Wright 1990; McCormick 2003). In this chapter I discuss how student mobility, in all of its forms, shapes inequality in American higher education. In particular, I summarise findings from my research which document the stratification of student mobility using national longitudinal transcript data. Based on the findings from those analyses, I contend that contemporary approaches to closing gaps in college completion are flawed to the extent that they do not recognise student mobility and attempt to improve its outcomes. Instead, I offer some proposed approaches to improving completion rates which are more responsive to the inequalities inherent in student mobility.

#### INCREASING THE STOCK OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED LABOUR

While higher education researchers and practitioners have long been concerned with the relatively low completion rates produced by the majority of American colleges and universities, and the socioeconomic gaps in those rates, they have only recently been termed a public concern by state and federal policymakers. Motivated by fiscal constraints, the globalisation of the economy, and an intense accountability environment, a movement is underway to increase the ‘success rates’ in higher education.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, this attention was magnified by the creation of a new federal commission on higher education, which has taken colleges and universities to task for their low completion rates and (to some degree) inequities in those rates (Field 2005). Among the most prominent voices in that debate are those who believe that these inequities are caused or exacerbated by institutions, and therefore institutions need to stop ‘shying away’ from being held accountable for making changes (Haycock 2004). For example, The Education Trust, a prominent Washington D.C. based educational policy organisation, has created a website highlighting the differences in graduation rates between schools with “similar” groups of students, enabling consumers of higher education to compare institutional graduation rates.<sup>5</sup> Using “College Results Online” ([www.collegeresults.org](http://www.collegeresults.org)), one will find that “a typical analysis comparing one university to the 25 most similar institutions produces a range (Carey 2004: 3) between the highest and lowest graduation rates of

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<sup>4</sup> “Success” is most often defined in terms of graduation rates. Institutional six year graduation rates in the U.S. range from less than 10 per cent to nearly 100 per cent, with an average of 53 per cent (Carey 2004)

<sup>5</sup> “Similar” colleges are determined based solely on 11 factors, including racial composition, percent of students receiving Pell grants, and median SAT scores. The Trust acknowledges that institutions’ “outbound transfer rates” are not included due to a lack of data, and thus institutions who lose or facilitate the movement of students away from their campus are penalised with lower graduation rates (see “About the Data” at the College Results Online website).

30 percentage points or more”.<sup>6</sup> According to The Education Trust, since there is evidence that some institutions are doing a better job than others in serving similar groups of students, the solution to inequitable graduation rates is hold schools accountable for achieving equitable outcomes, so that they will embrace the possibility of improving (Carey 2004a). The theory goes that market forces, via accountability, will in turn act to shame institutions into action.

But this focus on improving institutional graduation rates has an adverse side effect to the extent that it serves to reinforce the sense among colleges and universities that students ‘belong’ to them and are best kept within their schools until completion. By promoting a culture of ‘responsibility,’ this approach encourages institutions to focus more on their own ‘successes’ than those of their students. Furthermore, institutional comparisons and studies of ‘best practices’ push the policy agenda towards tinkering with ‘institutional effects’ in the hopes of changing student outcomes. A veritable cottage industry of higher education researchers has struggled mightily to identify such institutional effects, but thus far they have met with relatively little success (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). This is in many ways unsurprising. Several decades of K-12 research since the Coleman Report have failed to yield compelling evidence that the measurable dimensions of institutional quality (such as school or classroom size, and teacher quality) have effects on student outcomes substantial enough to increase or decrease educational attainment or to close gaps in attainment (Hanushek 2003). Moreover, there is an inherent difficulty in isolating the effects of individual institutions when students are moving among schools. As Clifford Adelman notes, even using a weighted scheme (such as that employed by Titus (2004)) “for a student who earned 26 credits at a community college, 30 credits at a four-year baccalaureate residential college, and 75 credits at an urban university would dilute the very meaning, let alone effect of any single institutional characteristic” (2006: 82). While new empirical methods, such as cross-classified multi-level modelling,<sup>7</sup> might be used to improve the estimates of institutional effects, such methods usually fail to account for the unequal routes students take in college.

As the options for how students can pursue higher education in America increase, students respond by participating in the tertiary sector in myriad and complicated ways. And yet, just like the gaps in completion rates, student mobility is still treated “as if it (were) late-breaking news” (Borden 2004: 13). Institutions themselves encourage student mobility by making it easier to enrol whenever and wherever a student chooses; for example, witness the growth of mid-semester enrolment, distance learning and evening classes. Indeed, some schools, particularly those in metropolitan areas, actively seek out students who might be willing to transfer to their institutions, often resuming college after a break. For example, the

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<sup>6</sup> The tool created by The Education Trust is flawed beyond the definition of ‘similarity’ between student bodies. The data used to examine gaps in completion rates come from only two cohorts of students (who entered college in Fall 1996 and Fall 1997), and therefore the results are probably sensitive to unobserved fluctuations.

<sup>7</sup> A tool suggested by Paul Umbach, drawing on the work on Steven Raudenbush and Anthony Bryk (2002), when speaking at the 2006 meetings of the Association for Institutional Research.

progressive New School University placed an ad in the New York Times which read: “Start. Stop. Start. Stop. Start. Finish Your BA at the New School.” At the same time, students are acting under increasingly severe fiscal constraints, as tuition and the cost of room and board at even the least expensive institutions has skyrocketed (Heller 2002). Thus, while it is true that the majority of today’s bachelor’s degrees recipients earn their degree from the first institution they attend (Adelman 2004a), we can expect to continue to see more students, especially those who do not earn degrees, attending multiple schools.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the gaps in completion rates are likely to grow, with more socioeconomically advantaged students remaining at the first school they attend, and the more disadvantaged students travelling other paths among institutions, losing course credits along the way. Since student mobility may also compromise curricular coherence, the result of these changes may be even more severe, as the very learning gains said to take place in college may themselves be differentiated by not only social class lines, but also by mobility lines (Prager 2001).

#### EMPIRICAL ANALYSES OF STRATIFICATION IN STUDENT MOBILITY

What most policymakers and practitioners in higher education fail to recognise is that student mobility in American higher education is an unequal process with unequal outcomes. I have investigated this form of stratification in several studies, including ‘Following Their Every Move’ (Goldrick-Rab 2006a), ‘Pushed into Jumping’ (Goldrick-Rab 2006b), ‘Does How You Go Matter?’ (Goldrick-Rab 2006c), and ‘Getting Off Track’ (Goldrick-Rab 2006d). In this work I compare the various types of student mobility patterns we observe in American higher education to the socioeconomic backgrounds of students engaged in those patterns. My findings are essentially threefold. First, there is significant social class variation in student mobility. Second, the type of mobility in which the poorest students engage is associated with a strong negative penalty for bachelor’s degree completion. And third, both ascriptive and achieved student characteristics contribute to stratified mobility patterns, thus we might say that student mobility is a process resulting from being pushed into jumping into advantageous and disadvantageous routes through college. Next, I discuss each of those findings in more detail.

In all of these analyses I draw on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), an American survey that sampled 25,000 8th graders in schools across the country in 1988, and tracked them until they were 26 or 27 years old in the year 2000. The NELS is a rich dataset containing both students’ high school and college transcripts, which provide a detailed account of the places and times where students went to school, even if they went to multiple institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> Clifford Adelman finds that among mobile students who earned bachelor’s degrees, the per cent earning that degree from the first institution they attend varies by the type of attendance pattern they follow. For example, while 58 per cent of students who engaged in lateral transfer among four-year schools got their degree from their first school, only 30.3 per cent of student engaged in movement alternating between two and four-year schools did so (2006: 64). Note that this statistic does not tell us whether movement resulted in a return to the first institution a student attended.

Because the NELS follows students across schools, it differs from institutional datasets, which often lose track of a student when she or he leaves their school. Further, the wealth of information on NELS students prior to college entry allows the researcher to distinguish between the independent influences of family background, high school achievement and college attendance patterns on chances for degree completion.

### *Unequal Opportunities for Student Mobility*

Overall, there is a substantial amount of mobility among the college students in the NELS dataset. As noted earlier, more than half (56.5 per cent) of the students in the full sample attended more than one college. That statistic is the one most often referenced in describing student mobility in higher education. But that number conceals several important sources of variation in the way in which students move across schools. First, there is variation in the meaning of mobility by institutional type: the importance of student mobility is different for students who start at a four-year institution, as compared to students who begin at two-year institutions. Two-year institutions in the United States are intended to provide a ‘transfer function’, a route to a bachelor’s degree that begins at a two-year school and ends at a four-year one (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994). Thus, mobility is expected behaviour among two-year students; moving to a four-year institution is a positive and therefore promoted outcome. However, it is not a normative move; indeed, only 29 per cent of beginning college students who start at a two-year institution transfer to a four-year school within six years (Hoachlander, Sikora & Horn 2003). This relatively low percentage is due to many factors, including the lower levels of academic preparation among the student body, the difficulties in navigating the transfer process, and importantly, the fact that not all students at two-year institutions aspire to transfer (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994). Therefore it is important to look at mobility *within* these subpopulations of students, defined by the type of institution they first attend. My research thus far has examined mobility among four-year students; 46 per cent of NELS students beginning at four-year institutions attended more than one school (Goldrick-Rab 2006a).

A second source of variation in student mobility lies in the nature of the mobility patterns: quite often institutional change is not the only ‘non-traditional’ behaviour students engage in. Changing colleges is a process that sometimes involves a physical move to a new location, a change in financial aid status, and/or a transfer of credits.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is a process that may also involve an interruption in enrolment. I tested this hypothesis by testing whether multi-institutional attendance intersects with discontinuities in enrolment (so-called “stopouts”) in significant ways. Of the 2,135 NELS students who started their postsecondary education at a four-year institution and went on to attend at least one other college, 20 per cent also experienced an interruption in their enrolment. I term this pattern “interrupted

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<sup>9</sup> Of the 1992 high school seniors who attended more than one college before the year 2000, 35.7 per cent attend college in more than one state (Adelman 2006).

movement,” and compare it to “fluid movement” across schools (Goldrick-Rab 2006a).

The students who engaged in ‘interrupted movement’ across schools are significantly different from those engaged in ‘fluid movement.’ They are more often male, non-white, and from the bottom 20 per cent of the socioeconomic distribution, and they have lower high school test scores, lower high school grade point averages, and engaged in less rigorous high school curricula. The results of a multivariate model, controlling for the effects of these other characteristics, reveal that the relationship between a student’s family socioeconomic status and their propensity for ‘interrupted movement’ is significant, such that students from the bottom 20 per cent of the socioeconomic distribution are more than three times more likely to engage in that pattern, compared to students in the top 20 per cent (see Figure 7.1 and Goldrick-Rab 2006a).

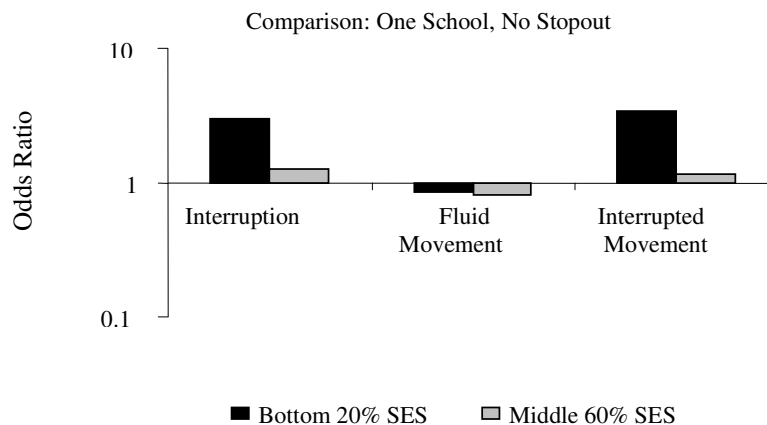


Figure 7.1: Effects of Socioeconomic Background on Log Odds of Student Mobility

Notes: Odds are from a multinomial logistic regression and are net of gender, race, high school achievement (test scores, GPA, curriculum), and degree expectations. Sample includes students beginning at four-year institutions only. The top 20 per cent of the SES distribution is the comparison group. For more details, including full regressions, see Goldrick-Rab 2006a.

In other words, a student’s ability to change institutions without having to take time off appears to be predicated, in part, on coming from a more advantaged family background. This may be due to the increasing reliance of many students on

financial aid, which is administered indirectly via institutions (Heller 2002). When a student changes schools it often takes time to fill out the necessary paperwork required to resume aid receipt at the new school.<sup>10</sup>

The third source of variation in student mobility is based on the destinations students reach after changing schools. In his careful examination of the postsecondary transcripts of 1992 high school seniors who went to college, U.S. Department of Education analyst Clifford Adelman identified ten different combinations of origins and destinations among students who changed colleges (2006). The most common form of mobility is lateral movement among four-year institutions only (38 per cent of all college-goers engage in this type of movement), followed by: lateral movement among two-year institutions only (27 per cent); the classic two-year to four-year transfer (11 per cent); and alternating movement among two- and four-year institutions (7 per cent). Other patterns include 'incidental' attendance (often during the summer), and enrolment at trade schools.

In my own examination of NELS students who began at a four-year institution, 64 per cent of those students who changed schools moved laterally, from one four-year school to another; the other 36 per cent did a 'reverse transfer' to a two-year institution. I found that these two forms of movement are differentiated by a student's socioeconomic background, such that working-class students are overrepresented among those who engage in reverse transfer.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, net of other ascriptive characteristics and high school background, the odds of reverse transfer are 35 per cent higher for first-generation students compared to students with college-educated parents (Goldrick-Rab 2006b). Put another way, even among the relatively elite group of students who begin their tertiary education at a four-year institution, students whose parents did not attend college are disproportionately likely to leave that institution for a two-year school. As I discuss in the next section, this contributes to the lower levels of bachelor's degree completion among first-generation students.

#### *The Stratified Outcomes of Student Mobility*

As Figure 7.2 illustrates, differences in the destinations of mobile students are not benign; instead they result in highly disparate outcomes in terms of degree completion. Students who move to a two-year institution greatly reduce their chances for completing a bachelor's degree, largely because most two-year institutions do not grant four-year degrees. As a result, the odds of completing a BA are reduced by 88 per cent if a student does a reverse transfer, net of other determinants of completion including: demographic characteristics, high school

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<sup>10</sup> I am currently investigating the hypothesis that financial aid receipt or loss is associated with discontinuities in enrolment among mobile students.

<sup>11</sup> Class status was based on the parental occupation of the father, in the base year of the survey, when the student was in 8th grade. The professional class includes professionals, managers, and self-employed workers; the working class includes skilled workers, clerical and sales workers, and unskilled workers and farmers. This classification takes into consideration the standard international classification known as the Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero occupational class categories (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992).



achievement, degree expectations, selectivity and control of the initial institution attended, timing of college entry, enrolment intensity, and college GPA (Goldrick-Rab 2006b).

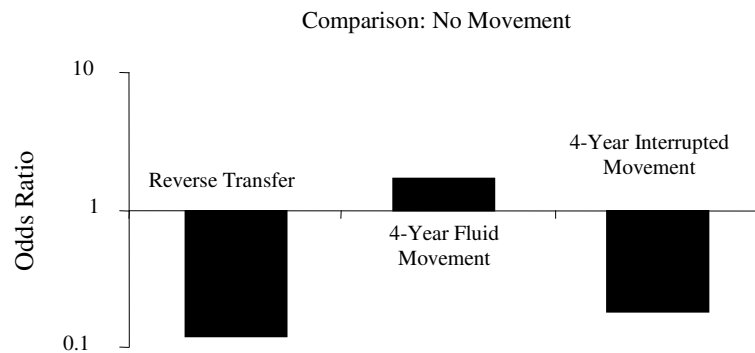


Figure 7.2: Effects of Student Mobility Patterns on Log Odds of Bachelor's Degree Completion

Notes: Odds are from a logistic regression and are net of gender, race, high school achievement (test scores, GPA, curriculum), degree expectations, selectivity and control of 1st institution attended, timing of college entry, enrolment intensity, and college GPA. Sample includes students beginning at four-year institutions only. Dependent variable is completion of a BA by age 26/27. For more details, including full regressions, see Goldrick-Rab 2006b.

Furthermore, each institutional change a student makes during college exerts a statistically significant negative impact on his or her chances for bachelor's degree completion. Changing institutions between the first and second years of college enrolment reduces the odds of completing a degree by 49 percent; a change between years two and three reduces completion by 73 percent, and a change between years three and four reduces the odds of completion by 60 per cent (Goldrick-Rab 2006c). These effects are above and beyond the negative impact of taking time off between any of those years of enrolment, and are also net of a student's college grade point average. Moreover, there is a significant interaction effect between parental education and institutional change, such that first-generation students incur a greater penalty for their mobility. As Figures 7.3 and 7.4 illustrate, this effect holds for students at both the bottom and top of the distributions of high school achievement.

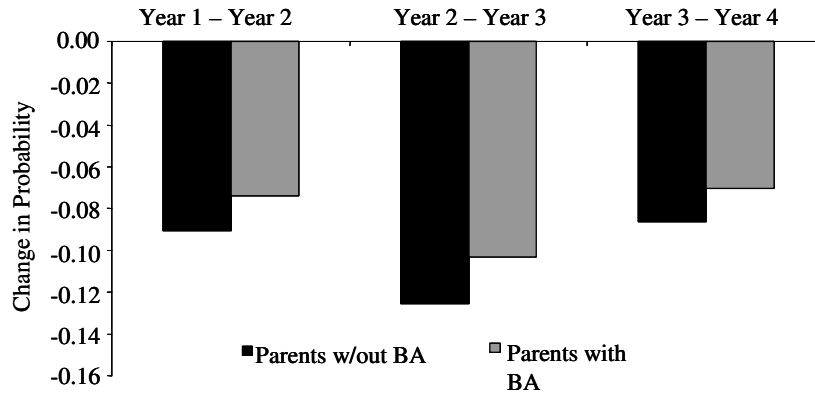


Figure 7.3: Effect of College change on the Predicted Probability of bachelor's Degree Completion (Highest HS GPA Quintile, all Other Variables at Their Mean)

Notes: Predicted probabilities generated from a logistic regression and are net of gender, race, high school achievement (test scores, GPA, curriculum), timing of college entry, periods of stopout during college, and college GPA. Sample includes students beginning at four-year institutions only. Dependent variable is completion of a BA by age 26/27. For more details, including full regressions, see Goldrick-Rab 2006c.

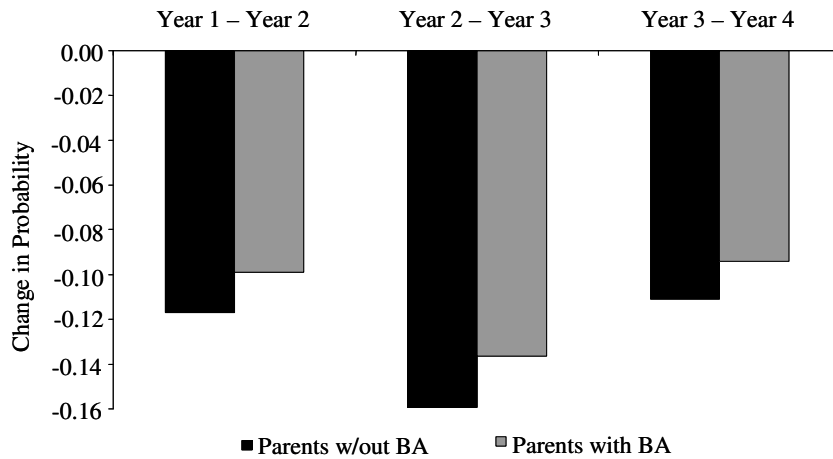


Figure 7.4: Effect of College Change on the Predicted Probability of Bachelor's Degree Completion (Lowest HS GPA quintile, all other variables at their mean)

Notes: Predicted probabilities generated from a logistic regression and are net of gender, race, high school achievement (test scores, GPA, curriculum), timing of college entry, periods of stopout during college, and college GPA. Sample includes students beginning at four-year institutions only. Dependent variable is completion of a BA by age 26/27. For more details, including full regressions, see Goldrick-Rab 2006c.

*Being Pushed Into Moving?*

If changing schools appears to reduce a student's chances for earning a degree, why do they do it? Does the decision appear to be a 'choice' based on an assessment of past and present academic performance, or is it the result of economic and social constraints? In order to examine the importance of these structural 'pushes' I compared the role of student's ascriptive and achieved characteristics in predicting student mobility. My analysis revealed that while family background is a significant predictor of a student's attendance pattern, high school achievement is of greater importance. The standardised effect sizes for various measures of high school achievement range from 0.96 to 1.22, while the effects of parental education, occupation and income range from 0.75 to 1.13. Thus it appears that student mobility is a structured process, but one that also varies based on how students respond to their academic abilities. Poor students may be more likely to follow disadvantageous pathways, then, partly because they have less money and less information, but also because they had lower grades in both high school and college (Goldrick-Rab 2006b).<sup>12</sup>

American postsecondary education also appears to disadvantage poor students because it is seemingly by its very nature, a path-dependent process. As Figure 7.5 illustrates, students who successfully complete their first year of enrolment are more likely than those who do not to go on to a second successful year. In other words, when we define completion at the end of an academic year as still being enrolled and having completed 30 credits (thus making progress towards a bachelor's degree), and persistence as still being enrolled but not achieving that credit threshold, it becomes clear that success begets success (witness the large amount of movement among the horizontal axes in the figure). Poor students are less likely to experience success in college early on. As a result, they quickly end up off-track, changing schools or taking time off, and in the end have lower completion rates (Goldrick-Rab 2006d).

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12 The lower grades earned by poor students in both high school and college should not be entirely attributed to the individual, as the circumstances under which learning occurs have an impact on the grades students achieve.

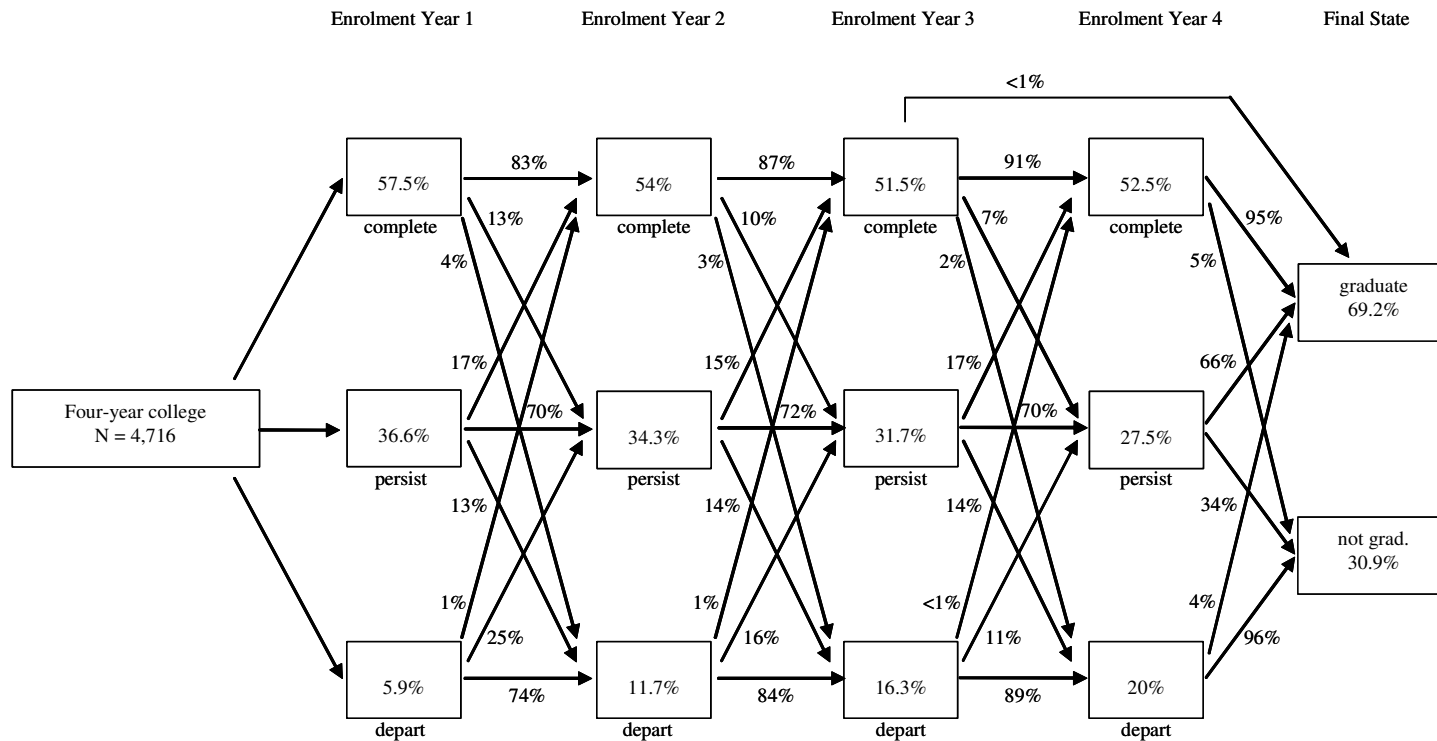


Figure 7.5: Flowchart of Path-dependence in Postsecondary Enrolment

Note: "Complete" indicates that the student is still enrolled and has achieved a credit threshold (30, 60, 90, 120) for a given year of enrolment. "Persist" indicates that a student is still enrolled but did not achieve a credit threshold. "Depart" indicates a student is no longer enrolled. See Goldrick-Rab 2006d for details.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The results of my research on student mobility strongly indicate that students are interacting with numerous institutions during their process of postsecondary education in inequitable ways. In one sense, it is not surprising that student mobility differentiates educational outcomes in American higher education. As Yossi Shavit, Richard Arum and Adam Gamoran's (forthcoming) cross-national examination of higher education in 15 countries reveals, the expansion of educational opportunity has nearly always been accompanied by increased differentiation within the higher education system.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, what Arum and his colleagues mean by the term differentiation is in fact institutional differentiation, or the diversification of the system into varied types of colleges and universities, whereas I am referring to increased differentiation in how students move through the system. But both meanings are consistent with the theory of Maximally Maintained Inequality (Raftery and Hout 1993), which holds that advantaged groups will take (better) advantage of any new opportunities created under conditions of expansion, and thus ensure the persistence or growth of class inequality. Thus, we might expect that the creation of additional options for student enrolment would result in more disadvantaged students following less advantageous pathways. On the other hand, it could also be true that student mobility represents an improved option for disadvantaged students; after all, it is plausibly a by-product of the movement of diverse students into higher education. If the opportunity for mobility helps to increase the overall amount of college poor students experience, even if it lowers their chances for degree completion, the net effect may well be positive.<sup>14</sup>

Is increasing opportunities for student mobility an effort to divert certain groups of students from increasing their educational attainment (a corollary of the hypothesis put forth by Brint and Karabel (1989) with regard to the creation of community colleges)? It would be premature to make such a claim without deeper knowledge about the sources of student mobility and the institutional and other factors which may serve to enhance it. How do low-income and first-generation students think about the choices they face when choosing how to enrol in college? How do they view their options when things fail to work out at the first school they attend? Do they accurately assess the potential risks of changing institutions? These questions are left for future research.

Even without knowing all the sources of student mobility, what is clear is that the inequitable ways in which students move among schools challenge our efforts to improve national graduation rates via a focus on individual institutions and their practices. Indeed, such a focus seems to reinforce the no-longer normative sense that students are best 'kept' in one school, their movement prevented. Instead, as Borden (2004) suggests, we should consider ways to facilitate productive mobility, altering the conditions under which students are changing schools. As an alternative to

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<sup>13</sup> Although Shavit and his colleagues do surprise us with the finding that increased institutional differentiation does not always translate into increased inequality.

<sup>14</sup> This is consistent with Shavit's (forthcoming) argument that institutional differentiation on the whole has increased opportunities and resulted in further democratisation of higher education, rather than diversion.

focusing on institutional graduation rates as the primary measure of success, we should be concerned with whether students complete college anywhere in the system, and whether they gain a coherent and deep postsecondary education. Yes, institutions should be held accountable for the education they provide our students, but their approach to achieving that goal need not be narrow or institutionally focused. We might consider redefining student success in terms of learning outcomes or competencies, and award schools partial credit for contributing to the outcomes of mobile students. This notion is not so radical indeed, it is an idea that has been broached by Charles Miller and others on the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Field 2006). But achieving this goal is far more difficult than embarrassing individual institutions into changing their policies and practices. It requires tackling one of the biggest barriers to successful student mobility: the lack of transparency throughout American higher education. Most U.S. institutions currently function primarily to serve and preserve themselves, struggling to keep students enrolled and paying tuition at their school, and as a result they do not always have a student's best interests in mind. There is often little positive action to encourage and facilitate student mobility for students enrolled at four-year institutions; instead the actions taken are largely negative, discouraging students from moving. Thus an overhaul of this system would require systematic and coherent efforts to create common learning goals and teaching practices, install effective transfer and articulation agreements, change the process of administering financial aid so that the money follows the students, and enhance advising efforts to provide more and better information to all students.

Shifting our goals would also require focusing on the strengths of the "system" of American higher education, rather than emphasizing the strengths of individual institutions. But there is a powerful political argument being advanced by those who want to focus on holding schools themselves independently accountable for institutional change. In 'One Step from the Finish Line: Higher College Graduation Rates are Within our Reach', The Education Trust argues that not doing so "implicitly excuses whatever graduation-rate outcomes occur at the higher-poverty or less selective institutions" (Carey 2004b: 3). This clever argument thus frames the issue as either/or; either you are for focusing in changing institutional practices, or you are against achieving equitable outcomes. Consideration of alternative approaches is therefore limited, in the name of political correctness.

Student mobility also challenges us to think beyond typical educational policies, to the power of broader social policies. The meaning of student characteristics, and the meaning of student mobility in higher education, may be found in the highly conditional and selective nature of the postsecondary transition process in America. That wealthy students are more likely to finish college, no matter where they attend, tells us that at each and every stage of the game, poor students are relatively disadvantaged. Changing the practices of schools will not sufficiently change the factor that most disadvantages these students: the experience of living in poverty, at the bottom of the heap in a country where wealth is increasingly concentrated at the top. In order to change educational outcomes in a system where students are increasingly unattached to specific institutions, we must use both educational and

social policy levers, viewing the two as part and parcel of an effort focused on the same goal.

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