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Keynote

Understanding the Part into and through College: Old Problems and New Questions

It is well-established that college completion is associated with a range of lifetime benefits for individuals and society ranging from higher earnings to better health practices to high rates of civic participation. However, this simple refrain obscures enormous complexity on the path towards realizing these returns, as well as the fact that the returns do not accrue equally to all college graduates. Understanding both the nature and source of this variation is one of the primary goals of scholars of the life course through college. In this talk I will highlight some of the research that has expanded our understanding of how students make choices about whether and where to enroll in college, and how those decisions, and later experiences, shape their later life outcomes, as well as new questions that we do not yet have answers to.

On its face, the path into and through college appears quite simple. At the most basic level, scholars in this area are primarily concerned with three main phases in a student's life—the student's schooling and experiences prior to college, the college education itself, and the movement into the labor force after college. In the U.S., our understanding of how students move from high school to college has developed significantly in recent years. We used to understand college choice as a three-phase process in which students initially develop aspirations to attend college, then search for information about college options, and then enroll in one of the colleges to which they have applied and been accepted (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). We now understand that this process involves many more steps, and likely does not proceed as linearly as originally suggested (e.g. Klasik, 2012). These steps include developing the appropriate academic qualifications for college, taking college entrance exams, and successfully submitting college applications. This expanded view of the college choice process has suggested new places for policy to intervene to help students make their college choices, such as requiring that all students take a college entrance exam (Hurwitz et al. 2014; Hyman 2017; Klasik 2013).

We are also developing an expanded understanding of the importance of where a student goes to college for a student's success and later life outcomes. Students who attend more selective colleges—particularly in the top tier—see higher returns to their degree than students of similar academic ability who attend less selective colleges (Black & Smith, 2004; Hoekstra, 2009; Long, 2008). These heterogeneous returns could have equity-enhancing benefits because they accrue disproportionately both to traditionally under-represented racial and ethnic minority (black and Hispanic) students and students who have less-educated parents (Dale & Krueger, 2011). Attendance at more selective colleges is also associated with larger tuition subsidies, and greater attention from

faculty (Hoxby, 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Further, it is not just among the top tier of colleges where there are benefits to students to enroll in more selective colleges. Specifically, the likelihood that students graduate appears positively related with college quality at many points in the selectivity spectrum (Cohodes & Goodman, 2014; Goodman, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2017).

Given these findings, it appears straightforward to recommend that students attend the most selective college they can gain admission to, but here again, recent research has revealed new obstacles for students. We have long known that students prefer to attend college close to home (Long 2004; Niu and Tienda 2007; Rouse 1995; Turley 2009, Skinner 2018). However, recent documentation of disparities in where colleges are located around the U.S. has highlighted the potential consequences of these preferences. Indeed, as many as 12 percent of all students who apply to college in the U.S. do not live within a reasonable driving distance of an affordable, broad-access college (Klasik, Blagg, & Pekor, 2018), and these students tend to come from areas with lower education attainment levels and higher Hispanic populations (Hillman, 2016). Additionally, over 7 percent do not live near a college that is appropriately matched to their academic credentials (Klasik et al., 2018). This means that work to encourage students to enroll at the best college they can must also reckon with the various costs students face as they move away from home. These matters of geography and mobility persist as student after students graduate as where a student lives is and related to whether he or she can pay back their student loans (Klasik, 2016), and his or her later earnings (Klasik, 2017).

Thus, this basic process of transitioning from high school to college and from college to the workforce presents many paths for students to follow, and the path a student takes is shaped both by well known factors such as family background and academic preparation, but also by factors we are still learning about such as where students live.

Even as we are coming to appreciate the complexity of student movement into and through college, there are many important, open questions about what happens when students do not progress through these stages in a continuous or linear way. What are the consequences, for example, of whether students delay their college entry? Or return to college for new credentials after spending time in the labor market? We know very little about the students who follow these non-traditional paths, even though it appears the non-traditional student population may, in fact, be the norm (Chen, 2017). These paths raise new questions about old findings—if students delay their college entry after high school, does high school performance continue to be predictive of college success? Are the returns to a college degree the same for traditional and non-traditional students? These are just some of the new questions that need answering as we work toward a better understanding of student paths into and through higher education.

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