

Those Who Choose and Those Who Don't: Social
Background and College Orientation

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Introduction

How do students choose whether or not to attend college? In this paper we argue that many don't really choose at all; they have always assumed that they will attend college. For such students, the decision is not whether but where to attend. Other students, however, do choose. They are the students who conform to the models of college choice common in the literature: they make their decision of whether or not to attend college based on material resources, personal constraints and academic achievement.

Building on the insights of Pierre Bourdieu and other scholars working in the cultural reproduction framework, we estimate a model of college *habitus* based on whether or not students claim to have made a (self) conscious decision to attend college. We evaluate the role of race/ethnicity, nativity, citizenship and parental education in adjudicating who among those planning to attend college chooses and who does not. We then consider characteristics of secondary schools that may contribute to the adoption of college *habitus* among students who otherwise would be unlikely to have a deeply held orientation to college.

Social origins and higher education

Rates of college attendance among high school graduates in the United States have never been higher. Within two years of their graduation, 72% of students who completed high school in 1992 had attended some sort of college or university, an increase of almost twenty five percentage points over the class of 1972. At the same time, the college completion rate declined from 51% to 45% (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2007). Much of the increase in college attendance over the past few decades has been driven by increases in the rates of attendance

among women (Buchmann), ??? (see Kurlaender and Felts), and students with modest levels of secondary school achievement (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2007).

Changes in college going rates partly reflect increases in the economic returns to higher education (or alternatively declines in the earnings power of high school graduates and dropouts). Whether a cause or consequence of the college-for-all myth, more and more Americans believe that a college education is essential for labor market success (Rosenbaum 2001). The spread of the college for all myth can be traced through changes in the educational expectations of recent cohorts of high school students. Between the 1980 and 2002 the share of high school seniors expecting to attend college rose from 43% to 85%. The increase was twice as great among children of parent who had not completed a bachelor's degree (just over forty percentage points) as among children with a parent who had gone completed at least a bachelor's degree (twenty percentage points) (Goyette 2008) and substantially outpaced the actual growth in college attendance. This and other similar patterns have contributed to an attenuation of the relationship between social origins and educational expectations among high school students (Goyette 2008; Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, and Sischo 2006).

Declines in the stratification of educational expectations and increases in rates of college attendance would seem to undermine claims of reproduction theorists that education in general (and postsecondary education in particular) plays a pivotal role in perpetuating intergenerational social inequalities. We argue, however, that reproduction theory can continue to inform our understanding of the role education plays in perpetuating social advantage and disadvantage. Although college expectations are widely held by high school students, they evolve at different stages in their primary and secondary school careers. Students who have always believed that they will attend college are fundamentally different from those who make a conscious decision at

some point in middle or high school to attend college. Focusing on expectations of students at the end of high school misses this critical distinction, combining early and late adopters of a college orientation into a single group.

We suggest that students with a lifelong expectation of continuing their education past high school hold a different *habitus* than those who make a more proximate conscious decision to go to college. By *habitus* we mean a largely unconscious constellation of preferences, behaviors, and styles of self presentation shaped during childhood. Although enduring, *habitus* is also subject to change over the life course, particularly as people come into contact with environments (or in the language of Bourdieu, fields) inconsistent with their world views. There is a strong class component to *habitus*, but also substantial variation across individual in the same social class. *Habitus* helps bound people's actions by leading them to reject pathways they view as highly unlikely to lead to success.

Schools are one of the principle agents outside of the family in the evolution of *habitués* (Reay 2004). The field of school is heavily classed, with assumptions and styles of conduct and communication driven by the middle class norms of the teachers schools employ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990? Bourdieu 1996? Lareau 1987?; Bernstein 1971?). In addition to being classed, however, schools legitimate social inequality by nurturing what some call the myth of meritocracy: everyone can succeed if they only try (Apple 1983? Bell?). College for all is a softer, more disingenuous version of meritocracy, offering the possibility that even if you haven't tried all that hard you can still go to college if you start working now or perhaps later. The explosion of remedial programs at community and four-year colleges is a testament to the strength of the college-for-all myth and the extent to which American educators and the general

public are willing to postpone uncomfortable assessments of merit to achieve the veneer of universal educational opportunity.

These forces play themselves out in part through the evolution of *habitués* among students. In this paper we suggest that the *habitués* adopted by privileged youth are different from the *habitués* adopted by those less advantaged. Even though almost everyone believes that they will go to college, more advantaged students are more likely to take this belief for granted. In particular, those who are white, native born and from better educated families are more likely to fall into a reproductionist mode of college choice by not really deciding whether or not to go to college. They simply assume from a young age that it will be so. Minority youth and those from less educated families, on the other hand, trace their college expectations back to a more recent time. Such students are more likely to develop their college-going *habitus* as a result of their interactions with others in the field of middle or secondary school. In addition to being more temporally proximate, we argue that the college expectations of these students are more sensitive to school climate, or what some have called a “college going culture” (Oakes 2004) or “organizational *habitus*” of the school (McDonough 1997).

This does not imply that the college attendance behavior of students is irrational in the sense of being inconsistent with some utility maximizing pathway. Privileged students may in fact be more likely to complete college and enjoy the rewards of a bachelor’s degree than otherwise similar disadvantaged students. However, our perspective does suggest that standard models of college choice, based on students and their parents *consciously* evaluating the costs and benefits of college attendance, are partly misguided. Any analysis by privileged students of the costs and benefits of attending college is necessarily *ex ante* if they have really always believed that they will go to college.

Data

We rely on the first and second waves of the sophomore survey collected by the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project (THEOP). In the base year (2002), THEOP drew a stratified, clustered sample of 108 public high schools and sought to collect data from all sophomores and seniors enrolled in each sampled school in March of 2002. After eliminating ineligible schools, THEOP achieved a school participation rate of 93.3%. In-class surveys were the primary means of data collection but students attending schools that did not allow THEOP to conduct in-class surveys and those THEOP was unable to reach during school hours were surveyed by mail. The response rate for sophomores who attended participating schools was 73% (Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project 2003). All student-level measures are based on student reports.

Our measure of *habitus* is based on student responses to the following question: When did you first think about going to college? Students could indicate that they had “always wanted to go to college” or had first thought about going to college during elementary school, middle school, freshman year, sophomore year or never. Students who indicated that they would either like to go no further than high school graduation or that they expected to go no further than high school graduation (about 8% of students responding to one of these questions) were not asked when they first thought about going to college. About half of the responding students said that they had always wanted to go to college.

Measures of social origin include student race/ethnicity, nativity, citizenship, whether the student lives with both parents, parent education, whether or not each parent was employed at any time in the month leading up to the survey and whether the primary language the student speaks to her parents is English. Student race/ethnicity was collected based on a single question

combining race and ethnic origin and recoded into white, African American, Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano, Asian/Pacific Islander and other. Parent education is based on the higher of the levels of the two parents in two parent families and the sole parent/guardian otherwise. I recode parent education to distinguish among those with less than a high school education, a high school diploma, any postsecondary schooling but less than a bachelor's degree, a bachelor's degree or more.¹

To distinguish those with relatively uninformed postsecondary expectation from those engaged in activities to increase their likelihood of successfully completing a postsecondary degree we also adjust for measures of students' postsecondary preparation. These measures include the student's most recent grade in math, English/languages arts, social studies and science; whether or not the student has taken the PSAT or PACT; and whether or not the student has taken or was at the time of the survey enrolled in algebra II. Grades were collected on an ordinal scale and recoded to the approximate grade point value for each level on a four-point scale.²

Finally, we rely on three measures to capture elements of organizational *habitus* related to college attendance. The total dropout rate is the percentage of students estimated to drop out from each high school.³ On the other end of the college going spectrum, we also include estimates of the percentage of students who will attend college and the percentage of students taking AP courses. We expect that student attending school with higher rates of college

¹ Among student participating in the second wave of the survey, 38% reported a different level of parent education in wave two than they did in wave 1. Results using both measures, however, are substantively similar and statistically indistinguishable.

² Analyses using dummy coding for the each grade measure failed to improve model fit over the interval/ratio coding.

³ Need more information on this measure. Percentages are unrealistically low.

attendance and AP course taking will themselves be more likely to believe that they will go on to college net of individual predictors.⁴

Findings: Individual students

We show results from the linear probability model in table 1. The results of comparable logistic regression models are included as Appendix A.⁵ Turning first to Model 1 (labeled ‘SES’), we find that the gender difference in college going *habitus* is quite striking. Girls are about 19 percentage points more likely than boys to have always believed that they would attend college. This difference in the college choice process, with girls much less likely to ‘choose’ to go to college than boys (and more likely to assume that they will do so) may help account for the emerging gender gaps in postsecondary participation and completion.⁶

The probability of having a college going *habitus* is insensitive to the presence of a father or male guardian but is sensitive to patterns of paternal employment; children of father’s who worked in the month before the survey are about seven percentage points more likely to have always believed that they would eventually attend college.

Parental education exerts an enormous influence on the timing of college aspirations. Compared to children of parents who completed high school but never attended college, children of parents with at least a bachelor’s degree are around 20 percentage points more likely to have a college-going *habitus*. Children of parents who failed to complete high school, on the other hand,

⁴ In the near future we will explore the effects of organizational *habitus* on **change** in individual *habitus*, using patterns of discordance between the wave 1 and wave 2 question about when the student first believed she would attend college.

⁵ In results not shown we also produced average marginal effects based on the logit models. These average marginal effects are substantively identical to the estimates based on the linear probability model.

⁶ Of course one would need to control for gender differences across cohorts to build an argument that part of the growing gender gap is attributable to college *habitus*.

are about 8 percentage points less likely than children of high school graduates to hold a lifelong expectation of postsecondary attendance.

Net of parental employment and education we still find modest racial/ethnic difference in the probability of always believing one will attend college. African American students are around five percentage points less likely to hold a deep-seated college *habitus* while Latino students are around seven to eight percentage points less likely to do so. While the native-born are about five percentage points more likely to assume from a young age that they will attend college, citizenship has no effect at all net of nativity. This is potentially problematic since students who are not United States citizens face many additional barriers to college entry and persistence than do citizens. Non-citizens are among the most disadvantaged students in a college-for-all world since even if they adequately prepare themselves for college they have many fewer options for financing their education than do citizens.

Finally, as one would anticipate, children who have always believed that they would attend college also tend to do better in school, take more advanced math classes and are more like to take the precursor to the SAT or ACT (column 3, labeled ‘achievement’). In Morgan’s (2006) terms, these students are transforming the prefigurative commitment they exhibit by their temporally unbound beliefs that they will attend college into preparatory commitment, or action in the service of their educational goals. These actions mediate the association between background characteristics and college *habitus*, but substantial ascriptive differences remain. Even net of preparatory actions, girls are almost 17 percentage points more likely to assume that they will attend college than are boys. Likewise, children of college graduates remain around 14 percentage points more likely to have always assumed that they would attend college than children of high school graduates.

Turning to the role of organizational habitus, preliminary results show little effect of dropout rate, college going rate or percentage of students taking AP courses on the probability that an individual student will claim to have always believed that she would go on to college.

Next steps: looking at the role of habitus in college application. See lpm2 for linear probability model. I will talk a little bit about this at the conference but not too much as I do not anticipate doing much more on this project prior to writing the presentation.

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	SES	ethnicity/ nativity	achievement
female	2.250*** [2.089,2.423]	2.259*** [2.097,2.434]	2.122*** [1.965,2.291]
mother/female guardian present	1.157 [0.991,1.351]	1.157 [0.990,1.352]	1.071 [0.914,1.255]
father/male guardian present	1.048 [0.950,1.155]	1.001 [0.906,1.106]	0.948 [0.856,1.049]
<i>Worked last month</i> mother/female head	1.037 [0.951,1.131]	1.025 [0.938,1.119]	1.035 [0.946,1.133]
father/male head	1.379*** [1.236,1.538]	1.343*** [1.203,1.500]	1.242*** [1.110,1.390]
<i>Parental education</i> <HS	0.698*** [0.613,0.795]	0.737*** [0.642,0.846]	0.767*** [0.666,0.883]
some college/AA	1.387*** [1.244,1.546]	1.369*** [1.227,1.528]	1.266*** [1.132,1.416]
bachelors	2.277*** [2.031,2.552]	2.150*** [1.914,2.415]	1.782*** [1.581,2.008]
graduate/professional	2.657*** [2.365,2.986]	2.477*** [2.198,2.791]	1.963*** [1.735,2.221]
<i>Race/ethnicity</i> African American		0.795*** [0.703,0.899]	0.955 [0.841,1.083]
Mexican/Chicano		0.732*** [0.660,0.813]	0.813*** [0.730,0.905]
Other Laitno		0.703*** [0.583,0.848]	0.778** [0.643,0.941]
Asian/Pacific Islander		1.221 [0.987,1.512]	1.057 [0.849,1.315]
other		0.771** [0.642,0.926]	0.839 [0.696,1.012]
<i>Nativity</i> born in US		1.255* [1.054,1.494]	1.254* [1.050,1.497]

citizen		0.974 [0.792,1.199]	1.046 [0.848,1.291]
Non-English parent		1.184** [1.045,1.341]	1.180* [1.038,1.340]
<i>Most recent grade</i> English/language arts			1.170*** [1.110,1.233]
math			1.142*** [1.091,1.195]
history/soc studies			1.141*** [1.081,1.205]
science			1.087** [1.032,1.145]
took algebra II			1.271*** [1.109,1.455]
taking algebra II			1.406*** [1.281,1.542]
took the PSAT/PACT			1.239*** [1.139,1.348]
constant	0.271*** [0.224,0.329]	0.272*** [0.210,0.353]	0.063*** [0.046,0.088]
N	12522	12522	12522
BIC	-1074	-1074	-1456

	SES	ethnicity/ nativity	achievement
female	0.188*** (0.009)	0.188*** (0.009)	0.167*** (0.009)
mother/female guardian present	0.033 (0.018)	0.033 (0.018)	0.015 (0.018)
father/male guardian present	0.011 (0.011)	0.000 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.011)
<i>Worked last month</i> mother/female head	0.008 (0.010)	0.005 (0.010)	0.008 (0.010)
father/male head	0.073*** (0.013)	0.067*** (0.013)	0.047*** (0.012)
<i>Parental education</i> <HS	-0.079*** (0.015)	-0.066*** (0.016)	-0.056*** (0.015)
some college/AA	0.077*** (0.013)	0.074*** (0.013)	0.054*** (0.013)
bachelors	0.194*** (0.013)	0.180*** (0.014)	0.132*** (0.013)
graduate/professional	0.229*** (0.013)	0.212*** (0.014)	0.152*** (0.014)
<i>Race/ethnicity</i> African American		-0.053*** (0.014)	-0.011 (0.014)
Mexican/Chicano		-0.072*** (0.012)	-0.047*** (0.012)
Other Latino		-0.082*** (0.022)	-0.056** (0.021)
Asian/Pacific Islander		0.043 (0.024)	0.011 (0.024)
other		-0.060** (0.021)	-0.038 (0.021)
<i>Nativity</i> born in US		0.049* (0.020)	0.048* (0.019)

citizen		-0.007 (0.023)	0.009 (0.023)
Non-English parent		0.038** (0.014)	0.036* (0.014)
<i>Most recent grade</i> English/language arts			0.034*** (0.006)
math			0.029*** (0.005)
history/soc studies			0.029*** (0.006)
science			0.019** (0.006)
took algebra II			0.053*** (0.015)
taking algebra II			0.075*** (0.010)
took the PSAT/PACT			0.048*** (0.009)
constant	0.198*** (0.022)	0.204*** (0.029)	-0.109** (0.035)
N	12522	12522	12522
r2	0.09	0.09	0.13

	habitus b/se/stard	SES	ethincity/ nativity	achievement
college habitus	0.167*** (0.021)	0.110*** (0.021)	0.110*** (0.021)	0.059** (0.021)
female		0.038 (0.021)	0.036 (0.021)	0.009 (0.020)
mother/female guardian present		0.113* (0.045)	0.111* (0.045)	0.058 (0.043)
father/male guardian present		0.073** (0.028)	0.077** (0.028)	0.052 (0.027)
<i>mother/female head worked last month</i>		0.032 (0.024)	0.033 (0.024)	0.037 (0.023)
father/male head worked last month		0.019 (0.031)	0.028 (0.031)	-0.011 (0.030)
<HS		-0.037 (0.035)	-0.034 (0.037)	-0.025 (0.035)
some college/AA		0.116*** (0.030)	0.115*** (0.030)	0.077** (0.029)
bachelors		0.204*** (0.032)	0.198*** (0.032)	0.141*** (0.031)
graduate/professional		0.245*** (0.033)	0.238*** (0.033)	0.152*** (0.032)
African American			0.072* (0.034)	0.142*** (0.032)
Mexican/Chicano			0.054 (0.030)	0.098*** (0.028)
Other Latino			0.012 (0.053)	0.027 (0.050)
Asian/Pacific Islander			0.185*** (0.047)	0.123** (0.045)
other			-0.003 (0.051)	0.025 (0.048)
born in US			-0.050	-0.028

			(0.048)	(0.046)
citizen			-0.069 (0.057)	-0.021 (0.054)
English not primary language with parent			-0.055 (0.033)	-0.041 (0.032)
grade in most recent English/language arts				0.052*** (0.014)
grade in most recent math				0.045*** (0.012)
grade in most recent history/soc studies				0.054*** (0.014)
grade in most recent science				0.017 (0.014)
took algebra II				0.159*** (0.034)
taking algebra II				0.134*** (0.024)
took the PSAT/PACT				0.051* (0.022)
_cons	0.549*** (0.015)	0.239*** (0.054)	0.255*** (0.073)	-0.192* (0.084)
N	2038	2038	2038	2038
r2	0.03	0.09	0.10	0.20
bic	2766	2702	2741	2596