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Changes in Low Income Freshmen Participation in College, 1966 to 1986

by
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and
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This article describes the changes in patterns of freshmen and family incomes in colleges and the nation between 1966 and 1986. It shows that low income students experienced losses in access to college in the early 1980s.

Introduction

The incidence of college-going has become an increasingly important measure of the nation's well-being. The topic is frequently discussed in education publications and at a wide variety of professional meetings. It is often the feature of articles in popular magazines as well as the subject of television programs.

The need for college graduates in virtually every facet of life in a free society has gained broad attention. The topic is routinely considered a vital ingredient in America's ability to compete in world markets against other countries, and is repeatedly linked to national defense requirements for exceptionally well-educated personnel able to understand and operate ever more sophisticated equipment.

The extent of college-going and whether there will be an adequate supply of college graduates to meet our nation's needs is of central concern to educators and public policymakers. That college enrollments have been increasing is a fortunate circumstance. But this trend may soon be reversed, since the number of high school graduates in the nation is expected to decline by ten percent between 1987-88 and the first five years of the 1990s. Given this situation, interest in college-going rates of high school graduates is increasing. Of particular concern are the college-going rates of students from lower-income families, because these students represent a population where potentially the greatest proportionate increases in rates might be achieved and because these students are the prime target population of billions of dollars in state and federal financial aid programs.

Given the interest in and need for increasing college-going rates among all students and especially those among lower-income students, it is appropriate to examine the long-term trends in access to college by students from the lower family income strata. That is the purpose of this paper.

Describing the many interrelationships among student socioeconomic statuses, college costs, financial aid and student matriculation, persistence, and graduation are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper focuses on the long-term trends of family incomes of college freshmen in relation to changes in family incomes to try to assess the extent to which students from the lower-income strata historically have been represented in our college enrollments. There is no intention here to account for why these changes in incomes of college freshmen may have occurred. It is hoped that describing these trends will lead others to focus on the reasons for the significant changes.

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flation in the American economy. Another reason that incomes grew more rapidly in the second decade of analysis is that increasing proportions of families had more than one wage earner.

The data reveal a decline in proportions of All Freshmen with low family incomes, i.e., below \$10,000, from 53.7 percent in 1966 to only 7.6 percent in 1986. This does not, however, indicate that proportionately fewer low-income freshmen enrolled in college or that lower-income students' college participation rates declined. As family incomes in the general population grew, there were proportionately fewer low-income families available to send children to college. Therefore, the proportions of low-income students in the All Freshmen cohorts would necessarily have to shrink, even if college participation rates for students from each family income interval remained unchanged. Consequently unadjusted and direct year-to-year comparisons of the incomes are inappropriate.

It is necessary to consider the year-to-year changes in incomes of the families which send the vast majority of freshmen to college: those families headed by persons between ages 35 to 64. Such data are collected annually by the United States Bureau of the Census. Since the ACE/CIRP survey asks students for their parental income in the year preceding enrollment and because the awarding of most financial aid is based upon the family's income in that same year, the data for All Families incomes for 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, and 1985 were employed in the analysis. These data are displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Incomes of All Families With Heads of Family
Between Ages 35 and 64, 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, and 1985

Income	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985
Under \$ 6,000	33.7%	12.9%	15.9%	6.0%	4.8%
\$ 6,000 to \$ 9,999	34.2	25.9	14.3	6.9	4.9
\$10,000 to \$14,999	21.6	32.2	20.1	10.9	7.4
\$15,000 to \$19,999	4.3	11.8	18.6	12.1	8.1
\$20,000 to \$24,999	4.2	11.7	13.0	13.6	9.2
\$25,000 to \$29,999	2.0*	5.5*	7.6	12.3	9.4
\$30,000 to \$34,999	-	-	10.4**	10.2	9.1
\$35,000 to \$39,999	-	-	-	7.9	8.6
\$40,000 to \$49,999	-	-	-	10.0	13.4
\$50,000 and Above	-	-	-	10.1	25.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Median	\$7,762	\$11,739	\$14,925	\$25,197	\$33,334
Percent Change	-	+ 51.2%	+ 27.1%	+ 68.8%	+ 32.3%

* The interval for this year is "\$25,000 and Above."

** The interval for this year is "\$30,000 and Above."

Sources: See references.

Table 3 compares the median and first quartile incomes of All Freshmen and All Families (from the income distributions in Tables 1 and 2) in each of the five target

below the median for All Families. This indicates that children from families in the bottom half of the All Families income distribution were severely under-represented in the college population that year. Children from the lowest-income (the first quartile) families were even more severely under-represented in the college freshmen cohort. Only 12.4 percent of the 1966 freshmen came from families with annual incomes of \$6,636 or less, when 25 percent of All Families had incomes at or below this amount.

In 1971, the All Families and All Freshmen income distributions were more closely parallel. About 46 percent of the freshmen came from families in the lower half of the All Families income distribution. Even more significant, in terms of enhanced access of lowest-income students, 22.4 percent of the college freshmen had family incomes at or below the first quartile of All Families income. These data indicate that proportionately more lower-income students gained access to college between 1966 and 1971.

During the next five-year period, between 1971 and 1976, there was a slight loss in relative proportions of lower-income, i.e., "below-median," freshmen entering college, from 45.6 percent to 44.5 percent. The loss in relative proportions of lowest-income, i.e., "below-the-first-quartile" freshmen was even greater, from 22.4 percent to 17.2 percent. This indicates that students from lowest-income families were less proportionately represented in college freshmen classes in 1976 than in 1971. However, the lowest-income students' representation in the college freshmen classes was still much higher in 1976 than it was ten years earlier, 17.2 percent versus 12.4 percent.

Between 1976 and 1981, the losses of lower-income and lowest-income freshmen were reversed. By 1981, 49.6 percent of the freshmen came from families with incomes at or below the All Families median and 24.4 percent of the freshmen came from families with incomes at or below the All Families first quartile. This indicates that the All Freshmen and All Families income distributions were in very close correspondence in 1981. In fact, 1981 was the year in which the income distributions most closely corresponded.

By 1986, the proportions of lower-income and lowest-income students represented in the All Freshmen income distributions had fallen significantly. The proportion of lower-income students had dropped to the percentage levels of the first half of the 1970s. The proportion of lowest-income students had returned to the percentage levels of the last half of the 1970s.

Table 4 displays the proportions of freshmen with incomes below the All Families median by institutional types. The proportions generally are highest at two-year colleges, then at public four-year colleges, followed by those at Protestant church-related four-year colleges, Catholic church-related four-year colleges, and independent four-year colleges, with public universities and private universities having the lowest percentages of freshmen with incomes below the All Families medians.

Five of the institutional types increased their proportions of freshmen with incomes below the median in each year between 1966 and 1981. They include the two-year public and private colleges, the two types of church-related colleges, and the public universities. The proportions dipped slightly in 1976 and rose again in 1981 before falling in 1986 at the public and private four-year colleges. At the private universities the proportions fell in 1981 and remained constant in 1986. The year 1981 was the peak year for all but the private universities, whose peak year was 1976.

Table 5 shows how the percentages of lowest-income (first quartile) freshmen changed by institutional types over the twenty-year period. The proportions generally are highest at the two-year colleges, then the public four-year colleges, followed by the protestant church-related four-year colleges. Lower proportions are found

Although there was a fairly steady increase in the proportions of lower-income freshmen enrolled at most institutional types between 1966 and 1981, the proportions of lowest-income freshmen rose and fell during the two decades. For six institutional types (the public universities, public four-year colleges, and public two-year colleges, the independent colleges and both types of church-related four-year colleges) the proportions rose in 1971, fell in 1976, rose again in 1981, and then fell in 1986. At the two-year private colleges, proportions rose steadily until 1981 before returning to their 1970s level in 1986. The proportions at the private universities rose in 1971, remained fairly constant in 1976 and 1981, and then dropped slightly in 1986.

Discussion and Conclusions

The data reveal that the substantial gains in access that lower-income and lowest-income students had experienced by 1981 significantly eroded at all institutional types during the next five years.

Whether this erosion is the consequence of rising college costs, financial aid resources that did not keep pace with rising college costs, reductions in family ability to pay for college, some combination of all three factors, or of other reasons is unknown. The fact remains that less affluent students experienced losses in access to college in the 1980s. If our nation is to continue to prosper in the rest of this century, the reasons for this trend must be discovered, remedied, and reversed.

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