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Minority Access to Higher Education and its Social Outcomes

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Abstract

The social disadvantage of minority groups has been attributed to their inability to compete in the labor market due to lower rates of obtaining higher credentials, compared with middle-class Whites. During the 70's and the 80's, several large-scale policies attempted to promote minority access to higher education. This paper reviews two of these policies – the CUNY open admissions and the expansion of community colleges – and suggests that even though minority access to higher education has increased, this increase was counterbalanced by a rise in internal stratification within higher education. As a result, increased access did not generate equality of opportunity.

Introduction

During the 1990's, our economy experienced a major redirection, turning into the “Information Economy” or the “Office Economy” - a new paradigm for commercial activity that demanded a new skill set from its workers.

Since the late 1970's, technological advances were replacing many of the elements of production, and the labor market at the beginning of the 80's was shifting its job offerings from traditional manufacturing to the service sector. This development has allowed millions of workers to transfer to the service sector; while the new technological economy does demand some workers with specialized high-tech skills, most of the job growth over the last twenty years has been fueled by the need for non-technical workers who need only utilize technological applications.

The new services-focused office setting requires skills that are quite different from those needed in the past. Today, employers look for general cognitive skills such as verbal and mathematical reasoning and for personality traits that allow one to navigate the intricacies of a service industry. Services need to be customized, differentiated, transferred with quality, and always focus on the customer; workers need to handle a wide variety of requests and problems that are particular to this operational paradigm. They need to be able to think critically so that important decisions can be made at any level within the organization in order to meet strict quality standards, and they need to be able to understand and communicate with individuals who do not share their cultural background. The teachings within the factory model of K-12 education do not convey these skills, and the task is usually left to the college or university, as the new jobs of the office economy are almost entirely filled with degree holders. With 30% of the population today holding a Bachelor's degree, individuals need at least a Bachelor's degree in order to be able to compete successfully in the labor market. Consequentially, the social disadvantage of minority groups has been attributed to their inability to

compete in the labor market due to lower rates of obtaining higher credentials, compared to Whites. Minorities are significantly underrepresented in the managerial and professional occupations compared to Whites, and are over-represented in the blue-collar occupations (Llagas and Snyder, 2003).

The gap in college participation between Whites and minorities was 13% in the 60's, narrowed in the 70's and widened again in the 80's, until in the mid-80's the gap set on 18% (Baker and Velez, 1996). These changes were mainly due to increased segregation in K-12 education, rising tuition, inadequate assistance to less prepared students, and mostly – the decrease in financial aid.

Minority students experience a greater need for financial assistance in order to attend college: In 1999, 21.7% of Hispanics and 22.7% of Blacks, but only 8.1% of Whites were living below poverty level (NCES Digest of Educational Statistics 2001, Table 21). In 1981, federal tax revenues were cut drastically, and minority students faced a rising tuition and shrinking Pell grants. Average aid for public colleges fell 15% short of the actual expenses, and for private colleges fell 30% short (Orfield, 1992). Policy makers were unwilling to increase financial aid to minority and low-income students on the expense of middle-class aid; they assumed that loan programs and institutional aid could replace federal grants successfully, and by 1988 loan programs grew almost tenfold, while grant aid shrunk dramatically. Their assumption, however, was proven wrong - the more loans replaced grants, the less low-income students took advantage of them. While middle- and upper-class families are familiar with long-term loans as investments, and are confident about their payback capacity, low-income and minority families are reluctant to take loans, since they are less likely to think they can pay it back. Minority families often have no financial reserves, and they have had bad experiences with debts previously in their lives. Minorities who graduate from college will earn less than Whites, and will face on average a higher debt. Minority students often don't know about aid options at all, may have difficulty with the forms (especially in non-English-speaking homes), or hold misperceptions about aid availability and qualification requirements.

During the 70's and the 80's, several large-scale policies attempted to encourage minority access to higher education. One of these policies was open admissions – in New York City, the City University of New York guaranteed open admissions to one of its colleges to any high school graduate. Another such policy was the creation and expansion of community colleges – through cheap, local and nonselective 2-year schools, minority students can transfer to 4-year colleges and complete their degree.

The open admissions decision and the expansion of community colleges were both intended to create a new entry-point into higher education, through easy access to community colleges. These two go hand-in-hand, as the expansion of community colleges is a continuation of CUNY's open admissions; the vast availability of community colleges guarantees that every student who is interested in higher education

will find a way in, even without a high school diploma (as many community colleges have academic programs that include the completion of a GED on-the-way).

How effective was this new entry-point in bringing minority students into the universities and improving their job prospects? Are minorities better off today in the labor market after enjoying more access to higher education during the 90's?

Open Admissions

The increased demand for higher education after World War II resulted in a rising threshold for admission into CUNY schools (the third largest university in the United States). Getting into CUNY's City College had become quite difficult, and in spite of the city's changing demographics, City College students remained mostly White.

The civil rights gains of the 1960's drove minorities to become more vocal in their demands for social equality, and in the Spring of 1969, minority students at City College led a major strike, demanding that the ethnic composition of City College reflect the ethnic composition of New York City's high schools. As a direct result of the strike and of the major public support it received, the Board of Higher Education announced an immediate implementation of an open admissions policy, guaranteeing all graduates of New York City high schools a place in one of the CUNY colleges. Under the new open admissions policy, students who graduated from high school with at least an 80 average in academic courses or ranked within the top 50% of their class could enroll in one of the senior colleges; and high school graduates who did not meet these conditions were guaranteed a place in a community college. Consequentially, in the Fall of 1970, the proportion of minority students in the entering class nearly tripled, and the number of freshmen grew from 20,000 in 1969 to 35,000 In 1970 (Fullinwider, 1999).

A side-effect of the CUNY open admissions policy, though, was the transformation of the labor market - from a hungry market into a market saturated with too many college graduates. Since this initiative was not met by an expansion of the labor market, employers could upgrade educational requirements for positions, without adjusting salaries accordingly; upgrading educational requirements is a tactic groups use to raise an occupation's prestige and autonomy, as a part of the struggle for social goods. Consequentially, the value of the degree dropped as more graduates were produced by the CUNY system. As Collins (1979) describes it - a social group was successful in pressuring the system for more education, and as a result the American society was turning into a "credential society" - a society in which the importance of education in people's lives rises and the demand for credentials increases, but without a corresponding increase in the returns for these credentials. Minorities who hoped to secure a better future for themselves through this newly obtained access to higher education, found themselves at a labor market where they indeed possessed a degree, but that degree was worth less than it did before the open admissions revolution.

Since the gap between White high school graduates and minority high school graduates in occupational status and earnings is larger than between White and minority

college graduates, credentials for minorities narrow ethnic inequalities (Lavin and Hyllegard, 1996). Occupational inequalities remain, though, even for Whites and minorities with the exact same education. The explanation lies in the labor market itself: minorities are disproportionately found in the public sector, where prestige and earnings are lower. The CUNY degrees minorities have obtained were less prestigious in the labor market, and public employers were more likely to compromise for a CUNY degree, while the private sector became more selective, as a consequence of the credential inflation. Internal stratification within higher education was heightened by the open admissions policy, since now the CUNY system's degrees bifurcated to top (CUNY selective colleges) and bottom (non-selective colleges).

The open admissions policy narrowed inequality in the distribution of ethnic groups in higher education; nonetheless, the policy created an increase in minority representation at community colleges, while more Whites attended 4-year schools (Lavin and Hyllegard, 1996). Within community colleges, minorities were more likely to attend the vocational programs, and transfer rates dropped for all groups. It looks like the major beneficiaries of the new policy were White students, while many minorities found themselves locked at the dead-end programs of the community college.

Most strikingly, an Associate degree did not provide an earning advantage over those who completed at least one 4-year college semester, but who did not complete the Baccalaureate program (Lavin and Hyllegard, 1996). This finding suggests a weak relationship between practical skills and earnings; if the labor market in fact rewarded education because of acquired skills, we would have expected holders of Associate degrees to earn more than college dropouts. The adverse relationship may imply to cultural reasoning behind employer's decision-making – a 4-year college dropout is probably closer to the dominant culture than a community college successful graduate. From this socio-cultural point of view, the goal of education is status group membership, and not the acquisition of practical skills (Collins, 1979); hence, as the internal stratification of the system increases, the role of higher education as a cultural currency intensifies. The CUNY open admissions policy helped minority students obtain degrees, yet at the same time generated a chain-reaction that resulted in these degrees losing worth by the time of graduation.

The open admissions policy set in motion a process that was already ongoing in the United States, and maybe brought it to an extreme. In the absence of admissions requirements, some of the value we assign to the college degree is lost. It becomes something that supposedly “anyone can do”, and is treated this way in the labor market. At the same time, while degrees from prestigious universities could have maintained their value, they did not, since the entire market moved to require more advanced degrees - the Baccalaureate was no longer a sufficient distinction for status purposes, now that minorities and working-class Whites obtained access.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are torn between the public demand for more opportunities and the social and economic need for limiting opportunities. Community colleges went in the 70's through the same process that high schools did in the middle of the century – once high school education became common, high schools formed vocational tracks; and as community colleges became common, they started offering more and more vocational tracks, rechanneling students in order to meet the economic division of labor. During the 70's and the 80's, community colleges expanded their vocational programs on the expense of their transfer programs, and as a result, the percent of transfers declined from the 70's to the 80's (Dougherty, 1994; Cohen and Brawer, 1989).

Educational expectations of minority students are at par with those of Whites - 62.3% of 1990 Hispanic high school sophomores and 69.9% of Black high school sophomores expected to finish a 4-year college, compared to 68.9% of Whites (Nettles and Perna, 1997, Table 4, data from NELS 1988 8th graders, first follow-up). While up to 70% of community college entrants say their educational goal is BA completion (Kane and Rouse, 1999), only 39% of them end up transferring. Transfer students experience an additional hurdle at the 4-year college – only 36% of transfer students are successful in completing their degree within 5 years of beginning their studies at the community college (compared to 63% of 4-year college natives; Choy, 2002). In many cases, and especially in places where there are no articulation agreements¹, students are unsuccessful in their transfer attempts since their academic records do not meet the 4-year college admissions criteria. In addition, community college faculty and students do not always know which classes are transferable, and as a result students do not take transferable classes. This directly affects their chances of completing a Bachelor's degree, since once transferred, they may have to make up a lot of credits at the 4-year college, which reduces their likelihood of graduation (McDonough, 1997; Dougherty, 1994). Transfer students are also more likely to drop out during their 3rd year in college than 4-year natives, since they are less prepared for upper division academic work (Dougherty, 1994; Alba and Lavin, 1981). Moreover, since community college instructors serve transfer, vocational and recreational students, they lower their standards to increase interest among vocational and recreational students and to reduce dropout. By doing so, they fail to provide university-level instruction for prospective transfer students, who end up dropping out shortly after transferring (Brint, 2002).

Community college transfer students are more likely to drop out than 4-year native students not only due to poor academic preparation, but also due to lack of social integration, as 4-year colleges do not have extensive social support systems for transfer students as they do for freshmen. Transfer students also face financial difficulties as they experience a sharp rise in tuition and a drop in the amounts of financial aid they can obtain (since universities assist more freshmen than transfer students), which forces more of them to work full-time and delays their academic progress (Dougherty, 1994). While community college literature focuses largely on the community college impact on obtaining a Bachelor's degree after transferring, the 4-year college seems to serve as an effective barrier for transfer students' success as well. In addition to the data on students

¹ Articulation agreements are agreements between local 2- and 4-year colleges that formalize a smooth admissions process and a liberal transfer credits policy for transfer students from certain 2-year institutions.

aspiring to a Bachelor's degree, students with uncertain aspirations were also more likely to obtain a Bachelor's degree by attending a 4-year institution versus a community college (Crook and Lavin, 1989).

Nevertheless, the approach of researchers toward community colleges varies, depending on where the researcher is located regarding the contention surrounding "substitution effect". The term "substitution effect" refers to the concept by which community college students would have entered 4-year schools if community colleges were not available, hence the low transfer rate is seen as a major problem. Some researchers have shown that students from comparable backgrounds are 11-19% more likely to obtain a Bachelor's degree attending a 4-year college than attending a community college, thus the availability of the community college reduces their chances of obtaining a Bachelor's degree. Accordingly, states with more community colleges have lower Bachelor's degree completion rates than states with fewer community colleges (Dougherty, 1994; Brint, 2002). The expansion of community colleges seems to have increased minority access to higher education, but we'll never know whether in the absence of these colleges, the system would have had to allow more minority access to its senior schools. Community colleges have diverted minority students from the 4-year school and have allowed senior schools to remain selective and White.

On the other hand, Rouse (1998) found only weak evidence for substitution effect, and stronger evidence to support a "democratization effect" of community colleges: community colleges serve society in opening up higher education to students who would not have attended college otherwise, hence even low transfer rates are better than the alternative, which is no postsecondary education at all. (Rouse's findings apply only to Whites though, while for Black students community colleges seem to hinder educational attainment and Hispanics were not discussed at all in her study.) As Cohen and Brawer (1989) put it, "for most students in 2-year institutions, the choice is not between the community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the community college and nothing" (p. 48). Minority students tend to delay entry to college and tend to be part-time, and community colleges are designed to serve older, part-time students better than 4-year schools. Therefore, Community colleges should not be held responsible for low transfer rates, since they do not serve a comparable population to that of 4-year schools. Older, part-time and minority students are less likely to graduate regardless of which kind of institution they attend, and community colleges are always there for non-traditional students, while 4-year schools are not (Cohen and Brawer, 1989; Dougherty, 1991). Furthermore, the Associate degree offers better prospects in the labor market than a high school diploma, just like a high school diploma offers better prospects than no credentials: each year of community college attendance adds between 5-10% to future income compared to high school graduates (Dougherty, 2002).

There is a smokescreen hiding this dual system of higher education: what looks to the public like a step toward equal opportunity is actually "participation for all" and not "equal opportunity". The opportunity to participate is not synonymous with equality of social opportunity, since increases in participation are being offset by increases in

internal stratification within the world of higher education. Thus, community colleges are legitimizing social inequality through dissemination of meritocratic ideas, extreme openness, and seemingly multiple opportunities for success (Clark, 1960; Lavin, Alba and Silberstein, 1981). As long as White students remain one step ahead of minorities in higher education, the educational and social gaps between minorities and Whites remains, in spite of increased minority access to higher education. Minorities with post-secondary credentials are not gaining socially in narrowing the gap, even though these credentials are valuable human capital, since the labor market has downgraded these credentials. As the market moves on, minorities find that the returns to their credentials have diminished.

The role of community colleges shifted from preparing students to transfer to the 4-year college to vocational training, relieving colleges from increasing pressures for more access. This arrangement is very convenient for society – it maintains social stratification in an age of demands for more access, operates as a sorting mechanism while diverting the masses of working-class and minority students away from 4-year institutions, maintains hierarchy in higher education, and prevents overproduction of college graduates that the economy cannot absorb (Brint and Karabel, 1989). Minority students are not always aware of the significance and extent of internal stratification within higher education and of its labor market implications, and are not aware of the hurdles in their way when attempting to transfer from a community college into a senior school.

Conclusions

“The mobilization of demands by minority groups for mobility opportunities through schooling can only contribute an extension of the prevailing pattern.” (Collins, 1971 p. 1016).

Interestingly, internal stratification within the system casts doubts on the successes of community colleges and open admissions in narrowing social gaps. Neither was able to offer minorities with real equal opportunity in higher education, without explicitly or implicitly diverting them to lower-prestige, lower-strata credentials.

Today, high schools promise open access to college and generate high student aspirations regardless of academic performance, and as a result students do not see the relevance of high school performance to future success (since in a seemingly open-admissions system they see little reward for high school success and little penalty for lack of high school success; Rosenbaum, 1998). They do not realize that in reality, high school grades hold the strongest effect on college success (Lavin and Hyllegard, 1996; Adelman, 1999) and that open admissions exist almost exclusively in community colleges and not in 4-year schools. Minority students, who perform less well than Whites in high school (Digest of Educational Statistics 2001, table 139), are being fed false hopes, and end up at a disadvantage as they graduate and suddenly realize that their high school records are not sufficient for the kind of higher education they had hoped for. In addition, inadequate student-to-counselor ratio, which can be seen in many inner-city schools, leaves many students with deficient information. First-generation college-goers

in particular lack information about college, and are especially affected by high school counseling; ironically, an inadequate student-to-counselor ratio is more common in schools serving first-generation college-going students (McDonough, 1997). This affects minorities in particular, as they have large rates of potential first-generation college-goers.

During the 20th Century, as minority groups gained access to different levels of education, the value of these levels has decreased. As education expands among lower-status groups, it also expands among high-status groups, and so the gap remains.

As a result, the returns for higher education were depressed. Higher education cost was increasing as a response to the increased demand, but salaries stood still, especially for those college graduates who were filling out previous “high school” jobs (20% of degree holders in 1990 were either unemployed or employed in “high school” jobs), and the rapid technological changes of our era make it also difficult for older graduates to find jobs (Tyler, Murnane and Levy, 1995).

Professions who let minorities in are still afraid they will suffer a prestige loss, similar to the one experienced by professions as they went through the process of feminization during the last century. We should stop looking at higher degrees as the simple solution to social inequality, since their success in reducing social gaps is contingent upon the market’s recognition of these degrees as valuable market currencies. Pushing the entire system upwards is not synonymous with reducing the social gaps between Whites and minorities. We should not be content with minority access to community colleges. Our goal should be equal opportunity, not equal participation.

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