

# Working Papers

## Academic Capabilities and Disadvantaged Students: The Role of Institutions

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George Warren Brown School of Social Work

# **Academic Capabilities and Disadvantaged Students: The Role of Institutions**

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Abstract

**Academic Capabilities and Disadvantaged Students:  
The Role of Institutions**

Notwithstanding the far reaching intellectual and practical contributions of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, researchers have suggested that it may not adequately address the role of institutions. This paper suggests that traditional measures of self-efficacy underemphasize institutional factors. This may have important implications, especially for considering the circumstances of disadvantaged groups. It may be productive to think of self-efficacy as a multidimensional construct that includes personal and institutional dimensions. Using an interdisciplinary approach, we examine how self-efficacy theory can be expanded to account for the social and economic realities of disadvantaged groups and lead to empirical work that can inform policy and programs.

## Academic Capabilities and Disadvantaged Students: The Role of Institutions

One of the most serious social issues in the United States today is the widening gap between rich and poor. Although education is a promising solution, data on differences in educational attainment between children of the rich and poor suggest we that have a long way to go. In 2001, approximately 11 percent of low-income students dropped out of high school compared to 5 percent of middle income students, and 2 percent of high income students (Wirt *et al.*, 2004). High school graduates who are low income (below \$25,000 per year) enroll in a four-year college at half the rate of comparably qualified high-income (above \$75,000 per year) high school graduates (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). Furthermore, low-income students are far less likely to complete college. Only 6 percent of the poorest youth earn a bachelor's degree, compared to 40 percent of high income students (King & Bannon, 2002).

By race, only 28 percent of college qualified African American high school graduates enroll in a four-year college compared to 61 percent of college qualified White Americans and 44 percent of Hispanics (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). Moreover, 34 percent of White young adults between the ages of 25 and 29 completed college, compared to 18 percent of Blacks and 10 percent of Hispanics in 2003 (NCES, 2005). These patterns translate into future economic disadvantage (Wilson, 1987), including lower income and earnings (Murphy & Welch, 1989), less

stable employment (Topel, 1993) and lower wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004).

Social scientists suggest that self-efficacy is a critical factor in academic engagement and success (Bandura, 1997; Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Jonson-Reid *et al.*, 2005; Schunk, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995). Further, self-efficacy is believed to indicate how hard a child will work in school and whether the child will persist when faced with difficult school related activities (Frank Pajares, 2002). However, as Jonson-Reid and colleagues (2005) point out, little is known about when children begin to disengage from academics and what contributes to building children's self-efficacy in academic pursuits.

Bandura introduced the concept of self efficacy in 1977 in a seminal article, *Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavior Change*. More recently, he has defined self efficacy as, "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (1994, p. 71). Originally, self-efficacy theory aimed to predict success or failure of individual counseling with clients who exhibited fearful and avoidant behavior (Bandura, 1977). It was not until the 1980's that social scientists began to use the concept to examine academic behaviors. It is now used to explain people's behavior in a number of academic domains including: mathematics, reading, writing, choice of academic majors, and teaching (Bandura, 1997).

Some researchers suggest that attention to institutional factors has been inadequately addressed in self-efficacy theory (Alkire, 2005; Eastman & Marzillier, 1984; Franzblau & Moore, 2001; Kirsch, 1985; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2002; Scheier & Carver, 1987). While Bandura often writes about institutions, his emphasis remains on

the individual, rather than specifying institutional factors that may contribute to academic disengagement.

For example, Alkire (2005) suggests that self-efficacy scales do not capture the influence of institutions – or as she refers to them, external barriers – on school performance: “While the scales might potentially track important attitudinal shifts, they would not provide information on external barriers to empowerment – and these are the main barriers which are of interest to other disciplines” (p. 241). Franzblau and Moore (2001) suggest that the focus of self-efficacy theory tends to blame the victim rather than institutional barriers or “the ideological, institutional, and social resources that provide the foundation for taking certain actions” (p. 83). Similarly, Rosenbaum, Reynolds, and Deluca (2002) claim that self-efficacy underemphasizes institutional factors that shape individual behavior. They find that people “learn whether they have efficacy by whether environments reward or punish their actions” (Rosenbaum et al., 2002, p. 81).

This paper examines the role of institutions in self-efficacy theory. In other words, instead of, “... venturing into other disciplinary gardens to collect glittering measurement objects with but passing regard for their setting and significance...” as Alkire (2005, p. 245) warns, we focus on the role of institutions in Bandura’s writing. We explore whether academic self-efficacy is a valid way to measure disadvantaged student’s capabilities in performing academic activities. To prevent misinterpretation, Bandura’s writing is quoted freely throughout the paper. In addition, the focus is on African American students because they comprise 38 percent of minority students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education, 2006) and have a legacy of suffering from unequal treatment within United States schools (Orfield, 2004).

First, we discuss how Bandura addresses institutions in self-efficacy theory, and its ability to shed light on academic outcomes among disadvantaged youth. We explore how some other social scientists have approached self-efficacy, and make a case for greater attention to institutional factors in studying student's perceptions about their academic performance. Following this, we discuss the conceptualization and measurement of self-efficacy, noting that academic self-efficacy scales do not directly measure institutional factors, producing results that may fail to account for academic disengagement among disadvantaged youth. In the next section we introduce the idea of perceived institutional capabilities, and illustrate with sample questions and approaches to measurement. The paper concludes with a discussion of research and policy implications.

### Bandura on Institutions

An institution is the formal and informal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure relationships among individuals in various interactions between the polity, economy, and society (Hall, 1986). This view of institutions is not only concerned with "rules and regulations" but with organizational qualities of institutions.

Bandura (1997) distinguishes between two things that might influence a person's behavior in a given situation. One is their judgment about whether they are capable of performing an given act, which Bandura calls a self-efficacy judgment (1986, 1997). The other is their judgment about the connection between actions and outcomes, which Bandura calls an outcome expectation. According to the latter, people take into consideration institutional factors when they make decisions about whether a particular



behavior will lead to a desired outcome. Gurin and Brim (1984) suggest, “The environment is critical in one – the outcome expectancy.... The self is critical in the other – the efficacy expectation...” (p. 286). Further, they state that although “Actual behavior theoretically depends on both expectancies...Bandura’s work primarily has dealt with the efficacy expectation” (p. 286). In sum, Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy takes into account the self and the environment although he emphasizes efficacy expectations. These are important points to keep in mind as we discuss Bandura’s writings on institutions.

#### *Self-Efficacy Theory and Institutions*

Bandura (1997) discusses the influence of inequitable institutional structures in people’s perceptions about their capabilities. According to Bandura (1984), when people make a self-efficacy judgment, they not only judge their personal capability to perform a task, they also judge the role that institutions play in their performance:

Self-appraisal of efficacy is, therefore, a judgmental process in which the relative contribution of ability and nonability factors to performance success and failure must be weighed. The extent that people will alter their self-percepts of efficacy from performance experiences will depend upon such factors as the difficulty of the task, the amount of effort they had to expend, ... *the amount of external aid they receive, the situational circumstance under which they perform, the quality of the apparatus...* (emphasis added, p. 243)

He uses the following example to distinguish between the two types of control, “Piece-rate workers may control their incomes by how hard they work but exercise no control over the unit pay rate the system sets” (Bandura, 1997, p. 21). In this example,

institutions could augment the ability of the piece-rate worker to pay her way through college, for example, by setting attainable milestones for receiving pay raises that are distributed equally for all groups.

Bandura further distinguishes between the role of personal and institutional factors in the following passage:

There are two aspects to exercise of control. The first concerns the level and strength of personal efficacy to produce changes by perseverant effort and creative use of capabilities and resources. The second aspect concerns the modifiability of the environment. This facet represents the constraints and opportunities provided by the environment to exercise personal efficacy.

(Bandura, 1993, p. 125)

Despite recognition of the role of institutions the application of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy tends to focus on the role of the former (role of the individual) more than on the latter (role of institutions).

#### Implications of Bandura's Theory of Institutions for Disadvantaged Students

From Bandura's institutional theory, two criteria should be met for self-efficacy to be an accurate predictor of choice of behavior: (1) individuals must have access to sufficient levels of resources, and (2) the resources must have utility for influencing events that matter to the person. When a person's efforts and ability have little impact on outcomes, self-efficacy has little explanatory power: "Efficacy beliefs account for only part of the variation in expected outcomes when outcomes are not completely controlled by quality of performance" (Bandura, 1997, p. 24).

#### *Criteria One: Academic Resources*

There is strong reason to believe that many disadvantaged students lack access to sufficient levels of academic resources. In a study that attempted to locate the high schools in America who produce the highest number of dropouts per year, Balfanz and Legters (2004) find that high schools where more than half of the students are minorities are five times less likely to promote freshmen to senior status. They estimate that 46 percent of African American students and 39 percent of Latino students attend high schools where graduation is not the norm. In contrast, 11 percent of white students attend high schools where graduation is not the norm. Further, Blacks and Hispanics are far more likely to attend high poverty schools (Wirt *et al.*, 2004). Using 4<sup>th</sup> grade students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs as a proxy for low income family status, Wirt, et al. (2004) report 47 percent of African American and 51 percent of Hispanic students attend the highest-poverty schools (those with more than 75 percent of students eligible) compared to 5 percent of their white counterparts. They also found that 70 percent of African American 4<sup>th</sup> grade students and 71 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> grade Hispanic students (71 percent) were in low-income families compared to 23 percent of white 4<sup>th</sup> grade students (Wirt et al., 2004).

Given this, it can be presumed that minority students are far more likely to come from poor families. It is commonly held that students from poor families are at a disadvantage in school compared to their counterparts (see for e.g., Duncan *et al.*, 1998). Further, African American students are more likely to attend the poorest schools with the weakest promotion power from freshmen to senior status. In addition, these schools are often staffed by less qualified teachers, inadequate resources, and are plagued by high turnover among administrators (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Low quality schools are

believed to have adverse effects on academic performance (see for e.g., Rumberger, 2004).

*Criteria Two: Utility of Schools*

In addition to lacking access to the resources needed for outcomes to be completely controlled by academic performance, schools and other institutions such as the labor market fail to provide many minority students with the proper return from investing effort and ability into school activities. In 2003 on average whites with a four year college degree earned six percent more than African Americans with a four year college degree and 15 percent more than Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). In addition to making less money upon graduation, students who come from low-income families face increasing amounts of debt upon graduation. The amount of debt students from low-income families face upon completing a bachelor's degree at either a public or private college increased 50 percent from 1992 to 1999 (approximately \$10,000 to \$15,000) (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). As a result, while college still pays off, the utility of school for some disadvantage students is far less than other advantaged students.

Evidence suggests that some disadvantaged students lack access to quality schools and that school might have less utility (there might be less incentives) for them to engage in school activities than there is for others. From this, we can conclude, with a reasonable amount of certainty, that some disadvantaged students come to doubt the level of access they possess to quality schools and the utility of school for reaching desired outcomes. In these cases, self-efficacy might not be an adequate measure of student

perceptions of their academic capability. Given this, alternative explanations might be needed.

In the following section we explore some alternative conceptualizations of self-efficacy before addressing measurement. The alternative conceptualizations will serve as a backdrop for making a case for greater attention to institutional factors in studying student's academic capabilities.

### Self-Efficacy in the Social Sciences

Institutional factors related to self-efficacy have been approached in several ways. Self evaluation theory (Della Fave, 1986), for example, provides a perspective of individual behavior in which institutions play a more central role than they do in self-efficacy theory. According to Della Fave (1986), disadvantaged individuals legitimate social structures despite unequal rewards. Similar to self-efficacy theory (Gecas, 1989), self evaluation theory focuses on people's ability to control their social environments through unevenly distributed wealth and power (Della Fave, 1986). People develop favorable or unfavorable self-evaluations based on their level of control over exchanges in the social environment. Della Fave (1986) postulates that people with less positional power defend – or legitimate -- the social structure because they believe that they are rewarded fairly for their contributions.

When tested, however, this legitimation process has been largely unsuccessful (Gecas, 1989; Shepelak, 1987; Stotle, 1983). Stotle (1983) reformulated self-evaluation theory to include self-efficacy, noting that self-evaluation theory explains too little about the role of cognition in social exchange. He finds that positional power has a significant effect on self-efficacy, but his findings do not support the prediction that disadvantaged

people think that the system is legitimate (or fair). Shepelak (1987) suggests that self-evaluation theory assumes that people who are disadvantaged automatically internalize feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness. Instead, his findings suggest that disadvantaged individuals do not automatically internalize feelings of hopelessness; they maintain a belief in their own ability to create change (Shepelak, 1987). In other words, while doubting the “system”, a disadvantaged person retains a normal sense of self-efficacy. As a result, disadvantaged individuals who believe in their own effort and ability continue to challenge the legitimacy of unequal opportunity (Shepelak, 1987).

Gurin and colleagues (1978) make a similar argument using the concept of locus of control (Rotter, 1966). They contend that locus of control theory merges an individual’s belief in her capacity to control the events in her life (personal causation) with her belief in how institutions will respond (social causation). People who view personal and social causation as one are more likely to be institutionally advantaged (Duncan & Morgan, 1981; Patricia Gurin et al., 1978). Consequently, locus of control theory favors people who find that their effort and ability are rewarded by institutions (Patricia Gurin et al., 1978). In contrast, locus of control theory disfavors people who view personal and social causation as unrelated because their personal experiences with unresponsive institutions lead them to believe that personal and social behavior are not related. Disadvantaged people who maintain belief in their personal effort and ability are more likely to emphasize social causation more than personal causation to explain their failures. Gurin, et al. (1978), suggest that a multidimensional approach that accounts for institutional factors, as well as personal competence, may be a more productive idea.

Another relevant line of inquiry concerns the relationship between access to resources and self-efficacy. Duncan and Liker (1983) find that as earnings increase, self-efficacy also increases, suggesting that people with access to resources are more likely to display higher levels of self-efficacy. They find that higher earnings contribute to self-efficacy, but that self-efficacy is less likely to contribute to higher earnings. Duncan and Liker (1983) conclude: “Hence, disadvantaged groups with fewer opportunities for advancement or persons otherwise constrained by their jobs or the labor market in which they work are less likely than the advantaged or unconstrained to find outlets for translating feelings of efficacy into higher earnings” (p. 220). In explaining why self-efficacy does not appear to influence earnings, Duncan and Morgan (1981) suggest that self-efficacy, as currently used, applies best to privileged groups:

A possible reason for weak attitudinal effects is that we are taking a theory that applies to a small group of people at the margin with real choices and opportunities and testing it on a whole group, many of whom may be totally constrained by environment and circumstances (p. 655).

In sum, these studies point to both the role of the individual and the role of institutions in explaining attitudes and behaviors among disadvantaged populations.

### Measuring Academic Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy is typically assessed by asking students to rank their confidence in executing specific tasks. They make no claim of the generalizability of self-efficacy beliefs beyond the task. In addition, Bandura (1997) suggests that in order to accurately predict academic outcomes, “[self-efficacy] beliefs should be measured in terms of particularized judgments of capability that may vary across realms of activity,

under different levels of task demands within a given activity domain, and under different situational circumstances” (p. 42).

Therefore, according to Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs can be measured by level of difficulty, strength, and level of generality (1997). Level of difficulty assesses, for example, confidence related to low-level math problems versus higher level math problems. Strength assesses how confident a person is that they can perform a task successfully. Level of generality assesses a person’s capability to perform a global task (e.g., “I can make things happen”), a domain specific task (e.g., “I can make things happen in school”), a more specific task (e.g., “I can make things happen in reading class”), or a particular task (e.g., “I can read a philosophical treatise successfully”). The greater the level of specificity of self-efficacy beliefs, the more predictive of behaviors (Bandura, 1997). In this paper we will pay special attention to two levels of generality: task-specific and domain-specific. Task-specific self-efficacy is the most important.

According to Bandura (1997):

Efficacy beliefs should be measured in terms of particularized judgments of capability that may vary across realms of activity, under different levels of task demands within a given activity domain, and under different situational circumstances. (p. 42)

Domain-specific self-efficacy is a more general self-efficacy belief and may explain why some institutionally disadvantaged students maintain a high sense of domain specific



self-efficacy (Graham, 1994) at the same time that they have low task-specific self-efficacy.<sup>1</sup> We will return to these later.

Bandura's (1993) Reading Self-Efficacy scale provides a helpful way to illustrate level of difficulty, strength, and level of generality (see Table 1). First, the task subscale of Bandura's (1993) Reading Self-Efficacy gauges the *level of difficulty* of various tasks. Beginning with a student's confidence in reading "a letter from a friend or family member", the questions become increasingly difficult until the last question, which asks the level of confidence reading "a philosophical treatise". Second, *strength* is captured by asking the student to indicate her level of confidence using a scale of zero to ten, with zero representing the absence of confidence and ten representing complete confidence. The actual measure of strength of self-efficacy is obtained by dividing the summed magnitude scores by the total number of problems (Bandura, 1993). Third, the *level of generality* is best illustrated by looking at the nature of the questions in the subscale in Table 1. The questions represent knowledge of what it takes to succeed in reading (Bandura, 1997). A person reading these questions would, most likely, be able to quickly recognize that are related to reading.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

#### Absence of Institutional Factors

The Reading Self-Efficacy instrument in Table 1 also illustrates the exaggerated attention to personal causation in self-efficacy measures. The role of institutions in self-perceptions of capabilities is not measured. In essence, this scale, like other academic self-efficacy scales, merges institutional factors into the individual's belief about their

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<sup>1</sup> The other two levels ("global-task" and "more specific task") are not addressed here because domain-

personal capabilities. It assumes that the student attributes her lack of confidence in reading “a philosophical treatise”, for example, to a lack of confidence in her personal capabilities. It assumes that people view personal and institutional causes as one (or at the very least that personal causes are the only relevant causes in academic performance).

*Why Institutions Might be Discussed but Not Measured in Self-Efficacy Research*

Bandura (1997) states that institutions take on three different forms: imposed, selected, and created. The imposed institutional environment is that part of the environment that impinges on people over which they have very little control. The selected environment is the potential environment, not what exists but what can be used with the proper use of effort and ability. The created environment is the changes that occur in the imposed environment as a result of the use of effort and ability.

Even though Bandura (1997) acknowledges the role of the institutional environment, he attributes the greatest weight to the selected environment, what people can accomplish through the proper use of effort and ability,

For the most part, the environment is only a potentiality with different rewarding and punishing aspects. The environment does not come into being until it is selected and activated by appropriate action. Which part of the potential environment that is experienced thus depends on how people behave. (p. 163)

The implication is that students are primarily responsible for the outcomes they achieve in school. If the concern is only with the part of the environment people can influence, it is not necessary to consider institutional factors when measuring student’s

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specific looks the most promising for understanding the self-efficacy beliefs of disadvantaged students.

self-efficacy. Institutions can be viewed as simply responding to people according to how they behave.

This interpretation is further supported in Bandura's writing. As discussed earlier, although Bandura (1986, 1997) says that outcome expectations account for institutional factors, they are not given a position of importance. According to Bandura, outcome expectations are, "... a redundant predictor". This suggests there is little reason to measure them in cases where effort and ability are the deciding factors in outcomes (Bandura, 1997, p. 24). Even though Bandura does not directly address the case when effort and ability are not the deciding factors, it can be inferred, when effort and ability are not the deciding factors, an alternative explanation might be needed. As Pintrich and Schunk (1996) point out, "Although Bandura proposes both of these motivational constructs, the theory and subsequent research focus on the role of self-efficacy beliefs" (p. 90).<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis on personal factors over institutional factors in Bandura's work has guided the study of self-efficacy. While effective for individual counseling, there is evidence that it may be less effective in understanding how disadvantaged students engage in school, and to inform policy and educational planning for these students.

### *Confounded Results*

Lack of attention to direct measures of institutional factors in academic self-efficacy scales may be one reason why research on disadvantaged groups sometimes produces perplexing results. Graham (1994) finds that after controlling for socioeconomic status, African American students' academic self-efficacy scores

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<sup>2</sup> Also see, (P. Gurin & Brim, 1984)

(domain-level) are equal to or higher than their counterparts (e.g., “I can make things happen in school”). At the task-specific level, however, Pajares and Kransler (1995) find that African American students score lower than their counterparts. Thus, while some African American students may be confident about their ability to perform well in school, they may not perform the specific tasks necessary to develop skills needed for long-term success in school.

What might explain this disconnect? The reasons for this may be more complex than lack of confidence in their personal capabilities. According to Schunk and Pajares (2002), African American students have sometimes been misunderstood as having low self-efficacy because researchers confound ethnicity with socioeconomic status. To better understand this disconnect researchers must pay closer attention to when the student’s level of self-efficacy was assessed and whether they maintain a high level of domain-specific self-efficacy despite low task-specific self-efficacy.

*Time and Low Task Specific Self-Efficacy Beliefs*

Academic self-efficacy research shows that students with high self-efficacy respond to minor challenges in the classroom with increased effort and ability (Bandura, 1997). Further, students with high academic self-efficacy confronted with inequitable institutional structures attempt to alter those structures. As Bandura writes: “Conditions combining high personal efficacy and environmental unresponsiveness generate resentment, protest, and collective efforts to change existing institutional practices” (Bandura, 1997, p.21). If they fail, these students remain confident in their abilities and seek alternative avenues to obtain what they want. This suggests that in some cases students confronted by low quality teaching and schools may be making a rational

decision to disengage from academic pursuits in favor of other alternatives.

Unfortunately, over time, this disengagement from academic pursuits is likely to lead to poor performance in school.

Early in their academic careers these same students may have had high levels of task-specific self-efficacy in performing math problems (young children typically overestimate what they “can do” early on in life) (for e.g., Harter, 1996; Midgely *et al.*, 1989; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Schunk, 1995; Wigfield *et al.*, 1997). In fact, little difference is detected in academic self-efficacy beliefs prior to middle school (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). In lower grades students rarely doubt their ability to acquire basic skills (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Given this, it seems reasonable to conclude that many institutionally-disadvantaged students, (like other psychologically normal students), have high task-specific self-efficacy early in their academic careers.

When low self confidence is the result of institutional factors, it is still an accurate assessment of capability for performing task (e.g., math problems). In other words, low efficacy can be the result of lack of effort and ability or institutional impediments; however, in one case the reason is an inaccurate assessment of the role that effort and ability play in achieving outcomes:

Low effort and ability → Low math skills → Low confidence

In the other case, however, the reason is bad schools:

Bad schools → Poor math skills → Low confidence

When the underlying cause of task-specific self-efficacy beliefs is bad schools, the student may not have a reason to doubt her personal self-efficacy and she, therefore, maintains a high sense of domain-specific self-efficacy. The student lacks confidence in

the ability of the school to help her learn. In this case, the focus of reform should be on institutional change. At the same time, these students lack the necessary skills to do well in school and will also benefit from academic assistance.

### Perceived Institutional Capabilities

We define institutional capability as a person's perception that a given institution brings an aspect of the environment under her control (Anthony Giddens, 1984a), augmenting her capability to achieve desired outcomes. Institutional capabilities are internalized responses that reflect a pattern of interactions between the individual and social institutions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review all constructs that are related to institutional capability, Table two distinguishes between institutional capability and some of the most closely related constructs.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Building on previous research, an institutional capability perspective proposes that a person's perception of their academic capability consists of perceptions about personal capabilities, as well as perceptions about institutional capabilities (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The non-shaded area reflects personal capabilities associated with individual effort and ability (P. Gurin & Brim, 1984; Patricia Gurin et al., 1978). The shaded side reflects the role of institutional capabilities and institutional responsiveness. When people have confidence in their personal capabilities (effort and ability) and when institutions are responsive to their effort and ability, the individual is unlikely to even notice the role that institutions are playing. When institutional arrangements properly function, they can be taken for granted. The individual is able to focus energy on performing tasks. To

illustrate, institutions are like breathing – they are taken for granted. However, if breathing stops, or is interrupted, the individual is forced to think about the essential nature of oxygen to survival. Similarly, the facilitating role of institutions may not be noticed unless it is interrupted or is no longer present.

On the institutional side, in order for an institution to be considered accessible, it must also be effective.<sup>3</sup> As Giddens (1984b) suggests, institutions that are effective bring parts of the social world under the individual's control by augmenting effort and ability. Does the individual consider the institution as augmenting her ability to achieve desired outcomes by bringing the social environment under the control of her individual resources (effort and ability)? In addition to access, schools must have utility. Utility refers to the incentive structure schools – and later the labor market-- promise students. It might be that at least in part, students engage more fully in school activities because they perceive benefits in doing so. Without incentives, participation in school may become less attractive, students may invest fewer personal resources, and they may turn to alternative institutions.

An example of how institutional capabilities might function is found in the Gautreaux study by Rosenbaum and colleagues (2002). . In this study, low-income families were randomly assigned to live in low-poverty or high poverty areas. Ms S, who was assigned to a high-poverty area, said that her son wanted to attend school to study computer technology. But because of what might be called his institutional capability, he did not know how to go about applying for college. Research suggests this is common among disadvantaged individuals who lack information about how to access institutions

such as college. As Perna (2000) points out: "... compared with their White and Hispanic counterparts with the same educational expectations, African Americans have less access to the information and knowledge about how to actually acquire a college education and achieve their educational goals" (2000, p. 136). Lack of access to college in this case, could lead low perceived institutional capability (at least in this domain).

In contrast, Ms. A and her son, also part of the Gautreaux study, were assigned to a low-poverty suburban area (Rosenbaum et al., 2002). Ms. A's son was given the opportunity to take a class at a local college during his junior year of high school and subsequently obtained a bachelor's degree in computers and business. As a result of access to college, we suggest that his level of perceived institutional capability in relation to school was increased, permitting him to achieve his desired goals.

#### *Creating an Institutional Capability Scale*

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an actual scale for measuring a student's perception of institutional capabilities, below are examples of questions that might be asked. Similar to self-efficacy questions (Bandura, 2006), institutional capability questions should be phrased in terms of what the person "can do" in contrast to what the person intends to do or hopes to do. For example, the first question in table 3, "When I have a question in class, I can go to my teacher for help" is phrased in terms of "can do". It attempts to capture the student's perceived access to the teacher. Further, the questions are written at the domain level. Each item rates on a 0 to 100 scale from "no confidence at all" to "highly confident":

[Insert Table 3 here]

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<sup>3</sup> What constitutes an effective institution is beyond the scope of this paper, however, Sherraden and



The objective here is not to provide a scale for measuring perceived academic institutional capability, but to illustrate how institutional capabilities might be measured.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Measures of self-efficacy are widely used to predict student academic engagement and outcomes in school. However, this paper suggests that these measures may be used inappropriately with student populations they are not designed for. Even though self-efficacy theory acknowledges the influence of institutional factors, the way it is specified and measured it focuses almost exclusively on personal capabilities without illuminating the direct role of institutions. We suggest that this is due, at least in part, to its clinical origins.

In clinical work, the psychologist asks how a person contributes to her own motivation to act. While this is an important question, other questions might shine as much light on the topic of academic disengagement by disadvantage youth. For example, Bandura (1997) says that some people interact with institutions with efficacy and some do not:

Within the rule structures, there is a lot of personal variation in their interpretation, enforcement, adoption, circumvention, or active opposition... Efficacious people are quick to take advantage of opportunity structures and figure out a way to circumvent institutional constraints or change them by collective action. Conversely, inefficacious people are less apt to exploit the enabling opportunities provided by the social system and are easily discouraged by institutional impediments. (p. 6)

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colleagues (2003) provide some insight into the dimensions that make institutions effective.

In contrast, Lareau, a sociologist who conducted an ethnographic study of middle-class, working-class, and poor African American and White families (2003), emphasizes the institutional aspects associated with developing what might be thought of as “perceived institutional capabilities”.

Thus while Bandura, a social psychologist, emphasizes the role of personal capabilities, and what he calls self-efficacy, Lareau asks how institutional barriers contribute to a person’s motivation to act. Lareau (2003) finds that middle-class children, regardless of race, develop what she calls a “sense of entitlement”. These children and their parents gain institutional advantage because they are trained in the “rules of the game,” permitting them to interact and engage with teachers and administration with confidence (Lareau, 2003). In contrast, working-class and poor children and their parents develop a “... sense of constraint in their interactions in institutional settings and, as a result, are unable to make the rules work in their favor” (Lareau, 2003, p. 6).

While self-efficacy theory alludes to institutions, they remain in the shadow. The tension in the writing on self-efficacy is between the recognition that institutions matter and an underlying assumption that individuals determine outcomes. While it might be argued that institutional capabilities are tied up in individual behavior, in the social sciences we should aim to specify what explains the individual’s behavior.

When the concept of self-efficacy was originally introduced, the tension was not as strong because self-efficacy was designed to understand the success or failure of individual counseling with clients who exhibited fearful and avoidant behavior (Bandura, 1977). In the interim, however, self-efficacy has been extended beyond its original purpose. In the case of people who have phobias (Bandura, 1977, 1986), it makes sense

for a clinician to assume that the world is just and that fearful and avoidant behavior is within the client's power to control. In other words, it is probably fair to say that snakes will bite one person's hand just as quickly as they will bite another person's hand.

Therefore, it might make sense to assume that the playing field is level (snakes treat everyone the same). However, this is not necessarily the case when applied to students who are institutionally disadvantaged. As described earlier, institutions do not always treat students equally.

As Shapiro (2004) observes, "the genius of the American Dream is the promise that those who work equally hard will reap roughly equal rewards" (p. 87). For many Americans schools are considered the main vehicle for carrying out their aspirations for achieving the American Dream. Academic self-efficacy is built on this assumption. However, when resources are lacking and the utility of school is low, as is the case for many minority students, schools fail to ensure a meritocracy based on individual ability and effort. In such cases, outcomes will not be completely controlled by academic performance and self-efficacy might be an inadequate measure of why disadvantaged students disengage from school.

Self-efficacy theory has proven to be a productive theoretical construct in the social sciences. However, perceived institutional capability might help researchers understand more fully the causes of academic disengagement by disadvantaged youth. While this idea appears to be promising, further conceptual specification and empirical research is necessary.

**Table 1:** Bandura’s Reading Efficacy Scale

Source	Type of Scale	Sample questions	Answer Options
(Bandura, 1993)	Reading Efficacy	(1) Task Subscale a. A letter from a friend or family member b. An employment application c. A philosophical treatise  (2) Component Skill Subscale a. Recognize letters b. Use previous knowledge to help understand new material	Participants were asked to indicate their confidence that they could successfully perform different tasks and their confidence on eighteen different reading skills.  From no confidence at all (0) to certain I can do (10).  Intervals of one.

**Table 2:** Related Constructs to Institutional Capability

Construct	Seminal writer(s)/field of study	Originally created to explain	Originally targeted at	Definition	Operationalize	Level of generality	Psychological functioning
Self-Efficacy	Bandura, 1977  Psychology	Designed to understand the success or failure of individual counseling with clients who exhibit fearful and avoidant behavior.	Individuals for whom effort and ability are the deciding factor in achieving desired outcomes.	“[P]eople’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p. 71).	- Effort - Ability	Task specific	High self-efficacy -Normal  Low self-efficacy - Dysfunctional
Locus of control	Rotter, 1966  Psychology	Developed from observations of people in therapy.	Clients in therapeutic sessions	People with an internal locus of control believe that their own actions determine the rewards that they obtain.  People with an external locus of control believe that their own behavior does not matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control.	Internal - behaviors  External - Luck - Chance - Fate	Global	Internal locus of control - Normal  External locus of control - Dysfunctional
Learned helplessness	Seligman, 1975  Psychology	Originally used to explain clinical depression.	Clients suffering from depression.	Motivational, cognitive, and emotional deficits due to prolonged exposure to noncontingent events.	Chronic exposure to incontingencies results in helplessness. Tested in laboratory experiments.	Global	Optimism - Normal  Learned helplessness - Dysfunctional
Reformation of Learned helplessness	Abramson, et al., 1978  Psychology	Used to help explain depression.	Clients suffering from depression.	“[C]ases in which an individual lacks requisite controlling responses that are available to other people” (p. 51).	Three types of explanatory styles: - Personal: Perceive self as	Global	Optimism -Normal  Learned Helplessness

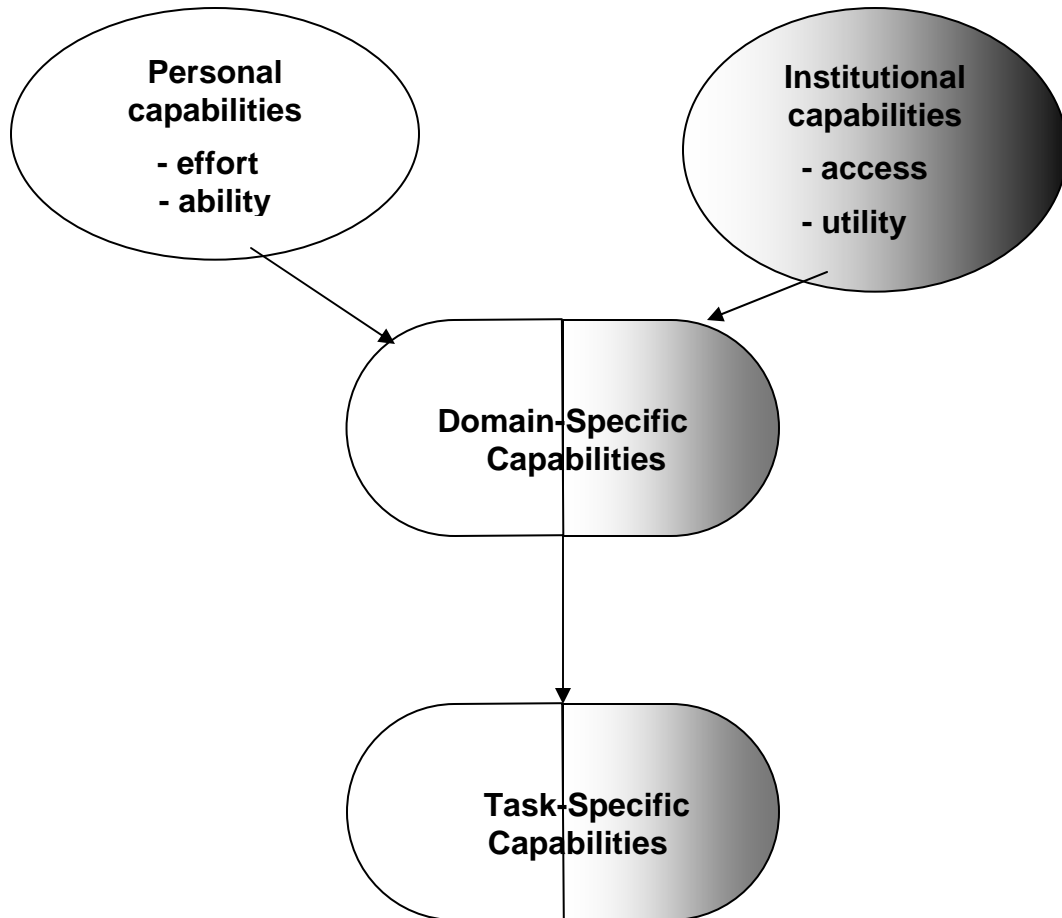
## Academic Capabilities and Disadvantaged Students

				Focuses on behavior and reinforcements	problem (similar to low self-efficacy) - Pervasive: Perceive problem affecting all areas of life. - Permanent: Perceive the problem as unchangeable.		-Dysfunctional
Systems responsiveness	Gurin and Brim, 1984  Political science	Help explain “ease and difficulty of adult change in beliefs about the self and environment” (p. 283).	Adults	“[J]udgment of the environment’s likely response to individual action” (p. 282).  “... this means a view of the environment’s general responsiveness to individual action rather than response to a particular actor’s specific act” (p. 286).	Political efficacy  Political systems responsiveness	Global	Low personal efficacy and high outcome expectations (institutions responsible for outcomes) -Dysfunctional
Institutional capabilities	****	Help explain persistent disadvantage; provide a way to potentially measure perceived capabilities for institutionally disadvantaged individuals.	Institutionally disadvantaged	- A person’s perception that a given institution brings some aspect of the environment under one’s control (Giddens, 19984), augmenting individual’s capability to achieve desired outcomes. - Concerned with a particular actor’s perception of how institutions will respond to use of effort and ability.	- Access - Utility	Domain	High institutional capability -Normal  Low institutional capability - Normal

**Table 3:** Sample Questions for Measuring Institutional Access and Utility

	Sample Questions	Confidence (0-100)
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When I have a question in class, I can go to my teacher for help.</li> <li>- Somehow, I can get enough money to attend college.</li> <li>- My school can give me access to the same kinds of school resources (for example; computers, books, and college prep courses) that students at neighboring schools have access to.</li> <li>- If I get in trouble in school, I can speak to the principle and he/she will listen to what I have to say with an open mind.</li> <li>- Students at my school can go to college if they want.</li> </ul>	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
Utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I can get a better job by graduating from school.</li> <li>- My school can prepare me to go to college.</li> <li>- I can increase my knowledge by attending school.</li> <li>- By going to class, I can learn valuable skills that will help me get a good paying job.</li> <li>- Students who get good grades at my school can attend the college of their choice.</li> </ul>	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

**Diagram 1:** Bifurcated Model of Perceived Capabilities





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