



NEW YORK JOURNAL
STUDENT AFFAIRS {OF}

New York Journal of Student Affairs
Article

Volume 16, Issue 2 (2016)

Toward Equity in Higher Education: Women's Collegiate Decision-Making Processes

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Abstract

This purpose of this study was to better understand women's collegiate decisions (e.g., opting to pursue a college education, the type of school attended, major choice, and ultimate career goals). Comparative qualitative methodology was utilized and the data were interpreted using Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. Participants were women at an urban community college and a rural, public liberal arts college. Findings reveal that, while women's collegiate decision-making processes continue to evolve toward more equitable higher education outcomes, there is still socialized inequity to be addressed. Implications for student affairs practice are discussed.

Keywords: women, college choice, major/career decision-making, urban community college, rural public liberal arts college



Women's participation in U.S. higher education has increased in recent decades (Jacobs, 1996; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010) resulting in women becoming the majority of students in attendance in higher education and women increasing their numbers in the workforce. Despite the progress in women's higher educational outcomes, the U.S. postsecondary sector has not yet demonstrated gender equity in access, experience, or attainment (Fleming, 2000; Klugman, Kolb, & Morton, 2014; Sadker, 2000). It is important to study individual women's higher education decision-making processes in order to reconcile the perplexing trend of improving female aggregate postsecondary enrollments with outcomes that demonstrate continued educational stratification and gender differentiated career and economic outcomes for college graduates. Researchers of higher education stratification have found that women in the U.S. are overrepresented in lower-degree granting institutions (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005), institutions of lesser prestige (Roksa, Grodsky, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007), and in majors that result in diminished economic returns (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Goyette & Mullen, 2006).

Scholars have explored the ways women make meaning, define, and negotiate victory in the "work-family conflict" (Peake & Harris, 2002; Sanders, Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, & Steele-Clapp, 1998). Emerging research suggests that college-educated women have the potential to advance in the labor market while also achieving their goals of marriage and family (Anderson, Binder, & Krause, 2003; Loughran & Zissimopoulos, 2009). This implies that in this triple aspiration future of career/marriage/children some of today's college women are envisioning for themselves appears to be a realistic, albeit conflicted and contested, possibility. While these studies are important contributors to understanding the inequitable outcomes of U.S. higher education, these studies failed to explore how these trends and outcomes occur through gendered collegiate decisions (e.g., opting to pursue a college education, the type of school attended, major choice, and ultimate career goals) that prolong inequality as measured by types of employment and earnings. This study adds to the understanding of women's higher education decision-making by exploring these factors.

Theoretical debates about women's choices related to educational attainment and labor market position are often framed by self-efficacy theory (Choi et al., 2012; Kelly & Hatcher, 2013) and human capital theory (Olson, 2013; Zafar, 2013). Self-efficacy speaks to internal



factors that influence motivations and actions. It has been noted that decision-making can be seriously limited due to self-doubts that impede the execution of a given action (Bandura, 1997), such as women's selection of majors and careers that require math and science competency (Moakler & Kim, 2014). The rational choice model implicit within human capital theory has been used to explain women's choice of majors and careers where their skills will not depreciate during their time out of the labor market for childrearing (Becker, 1986). Both theories are problematic and fail to fully explain women's collegiate decision-making given their lack of consideration of social structures in women's lives. Self-efficacy theory does not account for structures that create the self-limiting inclination of women's decision-making processes, and human capital theory does not question structures that make women's decisions appear to be rational choices instead of irrationally constraining selections. Building upon Giddens' (1984) structuration theory allows for investigation of both the structures that constrain an individual's actions, and when they exist, the acts of agency women demonstrate to transform society through the performance of their daily life activities. This conceptual framework may further understanding of why U.S. women appear to be making choices that maintain educational and social stratification, despite attending U.S. postsecondary institutions in unprecedented numbers.

Method

The research question of this study asked that during a time when women constitute most U.S. higher education students, why do women make collegiate decisions that may reproduce employment and earning inequality? Comparative methodology (Ragin, 1987) was employed "to account for specific historical outcomes or sets of comparable outcomes or processes chosen for study because of their significance for current institutional arrangements or for social life in general" (p. 3).

The study took place at two public institutions of higher education often viewed as emblematic ends of the higher education system: a two-year, open admissions urban community college (Lakeside Community College or LCC) and a four-year highly selective rural liberal arts college (Ohhadaih State College or OSC). Women in their final year of study at both sites were selected to allow students to speak about their collegiate decisions with a unique vantage point of recent memories (the decision to attend college), current experiences (major choice and experiences therein), and envisioned futures (perceived labor market outcomes).



Individual semi-structured open-ended interviews (Blee & Taylor, 2002) were conducted with 27 women total, with 13 from LCC and 14 from OSC, although data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) occurred before interviews were complete. Women from LCC were recruited through a targeted list of students provided by the LCC Institutional Research office to create a purposeful, criterion-based sample (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Of the 416 women students sent e-mails, 13 women were interviewed from LCC for this study. The demographics of the LCC participants were: all identified as coming from lower-middle class families, seven first-generation students; five students under age 25; four self-identified minority students; and five were parents. Women from OSC were recruited via campus postings as approved by OSC's institutional review board. There were 14 women interviewed on campus in a student union conference room for this study. The OSC women included six who identified as coming from upper-middle class and eight from middle class families, no first-generation college students, no students over age 25, five self-identified minority women (three of which were religious minorities), and none of the women were parents.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The data were reviewed for themes by the use of open coding and then re-evaluated with the use of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis revealed the process of meaning-making reflected in the women's choices (Seidman, 2006). The data themes that emerged included: (a) the economic factors of the college decision-making process; (b) factors impacting major and career choice; (c) influential relationships; and (d) progress made and barriers still needing to be overcome. These themes were verified through three additional interviews conducted with LCC women and three with OSC women to allow for member checking of the data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Handwritten field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) of observed gender issues on campus were made during research site visit to provide context for the women's interviews and to triangulate the data, thereby adding validity, integrity, and trustworthiness to the findings of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Findings

The key findings of this study included the calculated risks women took when making their academic plans to create space to achieve both career and family goals, and the role of relationships (past, present, and planned) on collegiate choices. Both findings are explored, and



then implications of these finding for student affairs professionals to help address gender inequity within higher education are discussed.

Calculated Risks: Education, Majors, and Career Decisions

Every woman in this study discussed the interwoven relationship between college attendance and economics. Most of the women at LCC spoke of their choice to attend community college as an economical way to get half of their college work (i.e., their general education requirements) completed. Eight of the 16 LCC women said they did not to want to waste money or time. All women discussed the importance of finding degree programs that were portable and would allow them to relocate for jobs or to advance in their careers. Five of the women discussed their desire to use college as a way to invest in something that could not be taken away from them. The women were very intentional in the decisions they made to maximize their engagement with higher education for the best future economic outcomes for them and their families, given their financial constraints.

The 11 OCC students interviewed were women who could have been accepted at most higher education institutions based on their high school records, standardized test scores, and co-curricular achievements. Most the women discussed their ultimate choice to attend the public institution OSC because of the pressure they received from family to reduce their educational expenditures. Like the LCC students, the OSC women's college choice were clearly economic decisions intended to positively impact their post-collegiate economic outcomes by situating themselves at a high prestige institution while incurring the least possible college debt.

Most women in this study did not speak of career or family separately, but rather of the demands of both and their driving need to be successful in each pursuit. The women from LCC expressed ambitions that drove them away from their working-class backgrounds as first-generation college students with usually traditional (i.e., homemaking) mothers to seek out college enrollment and careers that would afford them the income and flexibility to support a family. The majority of LCC women in this study expressed the need to be successful on three fronts (professional, wife, and mother) based on the societal expectations that are emerging in the United States for women; none of the LCC women expressed a desire to become a full-time homemaker. In fact, only one LCC woman mentioned the stay-at-home path and she did not discuss this choice in a positive way:



My dad has been quite supportive about me going to college. My mom - her thing is trying to find a rich guy to marry. I understand that, but it really infuriates me. She wasn't very supportive. I don't like to just sit back and do nothing all day. And you know I have to have some goals to feel complete or whatnot, and feel successful. I need to do something. I want to be busy and self-reliant. (Lauren)

The lack of interest as a primary life goal that was expressed by the LCC women in marriage and none of the women identified becoming stay-at-home mothers as their career choice was an important finding of this study because it contradicts portions of Holland and Eisenhart's (1990) findings of women lowering their academic aspirations in the interest of their romantic relationships. These collegiate and career aspirations certainly exemplify the LCC women's desires to move beyond routinized moments of daily life and gender-constrained life expectations.

The women in this study had experiences that allowed them to envision a broad career path, but believed certain options were closed to them because they were women. LCC's Lauren noted in addition to her mother's view that the purpose of college for Lauren was to find a rich husband, in high school she felt that "guys are still encouraged more with technology classes, like auto tech and woodshop. I mean even though girls do take it, there are a lot less and it's mainly just guys in those classes." Mary, another LCC student who held a part-time job at an electronics store, recounted interactions with customers who refuse to believe she was the technology expert at her store, even though she stated "I'm the trainer and know everything. All my co-workers comes to me for any questions." The participants repeatedly reported ways in which they had improved opportunities when compared to their mothers and grandmothers, yet they also offered examples of continued gender inequality they experienced, such as Lindsay from LCC who said:

My friend, she's going to college and she was pregnant and she had kind of a hard time with one teacher that said, 'Well, it's your fault. You got knocked up. You're not married and you're a school mom and . . .' I felt they're a little bit biased. They also told her, 'Well, you can't drop the school work. You know that's your fault, right?' She's in school still and she's keeping up. I mean, it's really harsh, maybe it was at the time, but she's capable from that.



OSC's Janet provided an example of concerns about sex discrimination related in her future work life:

My whole family thing and their business thing . . . my dad and grandfather . . . they were gearing me toward the business world. They were always holding back a little bit, like my father with the computer stuff because of the fact that I was a girl. They knew that there would be barriers for me in the business world and they made it pretty known to me. They were trying to warn me and that held me up a bit, because I felt that once I was in business I was gonna have to play it so much harder than the guy sitting next to me.

Noting women's progress and the continuing equality gaps is important in understanding female experiences in higher education and society, to remember that women simultaneously have more options than ever before, but they also still encounter oppression as they navigate their lives.

Relationships Past, Present, and Planned

Women at both institutions discussed the importance of relationships in their college decision-making process. They reflected on how past relationships (e.g., family and teachers) had influenced their college aspirations, how current relationships (e.g., friends, peers from extra-curricular groups, and romantic partners) impacted academic pursuits, and how desired future relationships (e.g., spouses and children) shaped major and career decisions. While both sets of participants noted the importance of all three phases of relationships in their college decision-making processes, how those relationships impacted their choices differed at the institutions.

LCC's Lauren provided an example of the influence that past family practices play in college attendance. She noted that her father had been extremely supportive of her collegiate studies while her mother had been less supportive. Lauren's narrative revealed tension when she compared her life to her brother and the seemingly natural choices dictated by gendered social structures (for her brother to enter the Army to pay his debts and for her to find a husband to take care of her). When asked how her older brother made the decision to attend technical school and she went to college, Lauren replied:

He's just always liked cars, I guess, I don't know. We always hung out with each other and had the same friends. He has had problems with school. I've always outshone him in class. I don't know how that was for him. He's smart, but I don't think my parents



commend that in him, but I don't know. I don't know why he didn't go on to college. He gets lazy. He's in the Army right now to pay off his loans. I think the fact that he didn't go to school influenced my parents' interest in me going to school. Even though my mom said, "Marry someone," she still wants me to go to school and, I guess, be focused, so . . . I need a back-up in case the marriage thing doesn't come through.

Perhaps it was these incongruities of a her family's beliefs that a man should earn a living and a woman should earn a husband that led Lauren to alter her major and career choice from dietician, which she viewed as a helping job that really "just means making menus for people for the next 40 years," to brain researcher where she could "have some goals to feel complete and feel successful, and not to rely on somebody else," thereby potentially altering the rules of her family's ascribed gender roles. Familial relationships and social constructs about womanhood also shaped the educational choices and career paths of the OSC women. All of the women interviewed from OSC noted that college was a family expectation for them rather than a personal choice described by some of the LCC women.

Current relationships with family, significant others, and social networks were also noted as important influences on college persistence and choice of major for the OSC women. Many of the OCC women noted the importance of the relationships and support networks formed through extra-curricular organizations, such as sororities and academic clubs. Melissa explained why she believed her extra-curricular organization to be a positive part of her higher education experience:

I think sorority has been one of the most important parts of my college experience. It was very nice to be in an organization where you're not competing with men. . . . It was nice to be in a caring environment, to be able to step up and become a leader among other women, and then transfer that over into another thing that you wanted to do.

The OSC women's connections to these extra-curricular organizations allowed them to broaden their collegiate experiences and inspired increased self-confidence, thereby pushing back against the gender inequities that persist in higher education's social structures.

Five of the LCC women interviewed had children and most of the others planned to have children while also having careers. Of the 11 OSC women interviewed, only Dorothy, who was



trying to force herself into a teaching career despite her love of history, and Linda, a theater major who wanted to own a performance company, talked about the primacy of their goal to be a mother over their career aspirations. Even these women planned for children and a career rather than dropping out of the workforce once they became mothers. The rest of the OSC women were notably silent or ambivalent about marital and childrearing plans. Contrary to research about earlier generations of college women on the impact of marriage and family plans on their career decision-making (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Moen, 2003), these women were clear about prioritizing themselves and their careers as their primary foci instead of subverting these ideals for spouses and children. This apparent shift in changing structural (e.g., familial and institutional) expectations may be liberating women to demonstrate greater agency and be more satisfied in their higher education choices, as has been recently suggested (Wilson, Vilardo, Fellingner, & Dillenbeck, 2014).

Discussion and Implications for Student Affairs Practice

As revealed by the Lakeside Community College and Ohhadaih State College women interviewed, women's college decision-making is a complex and dynamic process. Women from LCC were often caught between the explicit expectations and implicit rules within society as they considered college attendance, major choice, and career outcomes. The women of OSC have capitalized on their families' expectations of their postsecondary attendance to create new opportunities for themselves in their future careers and relationships.

While the OSC women may have seemed better positioned at their selective public liberal arts college than the LCC women at their open-admissions community college and although both groups of women began the higher education at different starting places, both groups were constrained in their higher education choices due to finances. The comparative part of this study illuminated the fact that women's stratified enrollment was a product of pre-collegiate socioeconomic status, the cost savings of an institutional type, and perceived return on the investment in a degree from an institution. These findings support the conclusions of other researchers who have explored aspects of returns on the investment of college attendance (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Understanding how women make meaning of and give consideration to past, present, and future economic issues as they plan for higher education may help clarify why women choose particular institutional types. This understanding may help



inform interventions during the college selection process which could help resolve gender inequities in college enrollments.:

The findings of this study also revealed the need to educate women about career realities from all fields and strategies people may employ to achieve work/life balance across disciplines in an effort to close gender gaps in majors and careers. As articulated by the LCC and OSC students, women are motivated to complete their education and do the work necessary to improve their socioeconomic status, and they might be willing to explore non-traditional options if only they were aware of the potential for career success. Thus, institutions of higher education need to guard against complacency in gender equity efforts based on the aggregate enrollment numbers and continue to advance gender equity initiatives on campus.

The relationships students have with higher education faculty and staff are significant in creating engagement and inspiring academic attainment (Astin, 1993; MacCallum, 2015). Practitioners who understand the interconnection of economic and relational factors of women's educational choices possess key information to help improve the decisions women make about their higher education aspirations, careers, and self-positioning within the social structures of their lives. Student Affairs professionals and Academic Affairs staff who mentor to students, such as residential life staff and academic advisers, can use their student relationships to challenge gendered major and career assumptions. Those who plan programs, such as career center staff or club advisers, can create events that highlight new possibilities for students and provide accurate information about wages and work/life balance offered in particular fields. Further, student affairs graduate preparation degree programs can use these findings for points of discussion in their counseling or social foundation courses to deepen awareness of these issues in the upcoming generations of student affairs practitioners.



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