Macrothink Institute™

International Journal of Education
ISSN 1948-5476
2022, Vol. 14, No. 2

Equal Opportunity to Selective Colleges: Assessments Through the Admissions Process

Brian P. An[1,*]

[1]Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, University of Iowa, United States

[*]Corresponding author: Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, University of Iowa, E-mail: brian-an@uiowa.edu

Received: March 2, 2022 Accepted: March 23, 2022 Published: April 28, 2022

doi:10.5296/ije.v14i2.19614 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v14i2.19614

Abstract

Studies in educational stratification that focus on the transition from high school to college generally examine the relation between social origins and college destinations or consider how the admissions process influences college access. These two strands, however, have been primarily studied in parallel. By examining trends in college destinations separately from the impact of the admissions process on college access, stratification researchers may misattribute the allocation process of students to colleges. Instead, I integrate these two research agendas and use a multiplicative process to identify potential inequalities in college access and better understand how aggregate differences in college destinations occur.

Keywords: college application, selective colleges, equal opportunity, college destinations

1. Introduction

A critical inquiry in social stratification research is the extent to which the transition from high school to college is based on ascriptive (e.g., social origins) or achievement (e.g., meritocratic) considerations. Stratification researchers generally follow two paths when studying this transition. The first path is to examine the relation between social origins and college destinations (e.g., enrollment to two-year colleges, four-year colleges, and selective colleges). The second path is to consider how the admissions process (e.g., application, acceptance or rejection, and enrollment) influences college access. Although these two streams of research provide insights into our understanding of the transition from high school to college, stratification researchers have mainly studied these streams in parallel, rarely intersecting each other (but see Brown & Hirschman, 2006; Roderick et al., 2011). By examining trends in college destinations separately from the impact of the admissions process on college access, stratification researchers may misattribute the allocation process of students to colleges. In this paper, I integrate these two research agendas and propose a multiplicative process to identify potential inequalities in college access. This approach allows researchers to understand better how aggregate differences in college destinations occur.

Studies that concentrate on college destinations have documented disparities in socioeconomic status (SES) where students from low-SES families are more likely to enroll in two-year institutions while those from high-SES backgrounds tend to reside in four-year institutions (Duta, An, & Iannelli, 2018; Klugman, 2012; Roksa et al., 2007). Social scientists further observe that those from the bottom of the SES distribution are less likely to attend selective institutions than those from the top (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Duta, An, & Iannelli, 2018; Roksa et al., 2007).

There is reason to suspect a growing disparity in attendance at selective institutions from different SES backgrounds. Alon (2009) finds that the SES gap to selective institutions has widened between 1982 and 1992. Moreover, the SES gap in college attendance has widened more at selective institutions than at other types, such as two-year colleges. Astin and Oseguera (2004) further show that the probability of first-year students with highly educated parents who attended elite institutions remained relatively unchanged between 1971 and 2000. By contrast, the probabilities of first-generation students and students with middle-level educated parents who attended elite institutions had declined over time, where first-generation college students witnessed the sharpest decline. The increasing SES gaps in attendance at selective colleges have led some scholars to conclude that access to selective institutions has become less equitable than in the past.

Prior studies in stratification research that examine the relation between social origins and college destinations often neglect the transition process, thereby confounding allocation in at least two locations: the allocation process of strong academic candidates to attend selective colleges and the allocation process of admissions. Unlike two-year colleges, participation at four-year colleges generally requires admissions. Therefore, whether individuals attend a particular postsecondary institution hinges on their admissions experience.

However, most four-year institutions are non-selective or marginally selective, where admissions committees admit a large proportion of applicants. In 2017, less than 20% of four-year institutions accepted fewer than half of their applicants (Clinedinst, 2019). By contrast, the competition at selective institutions is high, with applications far exceeding vacancies (Alon, 2009). Clinedinst (2019) reports that the average number of applications that accept less than half of applicants is twice the number of applications submitted to institutions that accept 50% to 70% of applicants. As a result, the concentration of academically talented students is becoming more exclusive to selective colleges and universities (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). In 1979, 32% of students who scored over 700 on their SAT-verbal attended the "most competitive" colleges, according to Barron's Selector. Ten years later, the percentage of these high achieving students who attended the most competitive colleges increased to 43% (Cook & Frank, 1993).

In 2017, the average number of applications assigned to an admission officer was 335 at institutions that accepted more than 85% of their applicants. This number was more than triple (1,026) for admission offers at institutions that accepted fewer than half of their applicants (Clinedinst, 2019). Factors that help sort through applicants, therefore, are at a premium. Academic indicators serve as a "cutoff" where an admissions committee is unlikely to admit individuals who fall below this cutoff. The percentage of institutions that consider the strength of curriculum and grades in college preparatory courses as considerably important in their admissions decision is 62% and 73%, respectively (Clinedinst, 2019). Others, however, recognize that access to highly selective institutions is not purely based on merit or academic ability. Underrepresented minorities, legacies, and athletes may receive an admissions advantage relative to other similarly qualified candidates (Bowen et al., 2005; Espenshade et al., 2004; Hurwitz, 2011). Therefore, examining the admissions process is critical in understanding where inequalities may occur.

However, previous research that concentrates on disparities in the admissions process generally focuses on a single stage—such as the role of the admissions committee on college access—thereby making it difficult to estimate the relative influence that different stages of the process have on the destination to selective colleges. Moreover, previous studies of college admissions are generally silent in explaining how SES-based differentiation in college destinations may have increased or narrowed over time.

The purpose of this paper is to integrate these streams of research into a common framework. I consider SES-based changes in the allocation patterns to selective institutions by paying attention to the admissions process as a critical element in the transition to college and consider how changes at different stages of this process may affect educational opportunity. Instead of simply examining the likelihood of high school graduates enrolling at selective institutions, I advocate that the transition to college is a multiplicative process where the probability of entering selective institutions occurs at several stages. When thought of this way, stratification researchers can identify potential inequalities in college access, and they also have a better understanding of how aggregate differences in college destinations occur.

I begin with the premise that SES increasingly differentiates enrollment to selective

institutions, a finding that previous empirical research has substantiated (Alon, 2009; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Karen, 2002; Turley et al., 2007). Through conceptual scenarios, I show how observed differences in college enrollment are potentially derived from different stages of the admissions process. Examining SES disparities in the admissions process is not new (e.g., Espenshade et al., 2004; Karen, 1991), but previous studies generally focus on a single aspect of the admissions process. Instead, the multiplicative approach argues for a simultaneous examination of the entire admissions process.

By taking advantage of a multiplicative approach, social analysts can pursue research questions unavailable when considering overall enrollment trends or a single aspect of the admissions process. For example, are students from affluent backgrounds cumulatively advantaged across the entire admissions process? Do low-SES students receive an advantage at one stage of the admissions process, but this advantage is offset by an even larger disadvantage at another stage? Does a single stage of the admissions process account entirely for the overall levels in enrollment? In the following sections, I accomplish two tasks. First, I define the term equal opportunity. Second, after defining equal opportunity, I use the admissions process to illustrate a framework that identifies potential areas for inequities in the allocation process.

2. Defining Equal Opportunity

Blossfeld and Shavit (1993, p. 22) define educational opportunity as "the chance to attain a specific educational level, rather than its actual attainment." Though appealing, this concept of educational opportunity is challenging to implement and empirically test because it is unclear the conditions upon which equal opportunity is based. What social factors and at which point of an individual's life cycle qualify as conditions toward equalizing educational opportunity?

This unrestricted concept of equal opportunity is appropriate for acknowledging the level of commitment needed to obtain equal conditions throughout an individual's life course. This concept is less suitable for equalizing immediate opportunities, such as secondary school students considering attending college. To evaluate these immediate opportunities, I require a conditional conception of equal opportunity. While some argue that an unrestricted concept truly reflects equal opportunity, a conditional conception of equal opportunity remains important and necessary because individuals do experience social mobility despite their social position and opportunities experienced earlier in their life.

Generally, social scientists use academic accomplishments as the allocation mechanism to evaluate equality of educational opportunity (Hoffer, 2002; Kingston, 2006). Therefore, the main question becomes whether students are admitted into selective institutions based on equitable (i.e., meritocratic) considerations rather than non-equitable considerations (e.g., social origins). Guiton and Oakes (1995) distinguish between three alternative conceptions of equality. The libertarian conception of equality argues that inequalities are permissible as long as the differences in the distribution of goods proceed in a fair process—in terms of

meritocratic characteristics of the recipients. Moreover, this perspective argues for little involvement of the state in the distributional process. Similar to the libertarian conception of equality, the liberal perspective favors a merit-based allocation process and recognizes an uneven distribution of resources and opportunities based on merit. Unlike the libertarian position, the liberal approach takes a more direct stance of removing non-meritocratic (e.g., race, social class, and gender) considerations from the distributional process of goods and opportunities. For example, this approach favors state interventions, such as compensating for disadvantages, to ensure a fair and even playing field. Finally, the democratic liberal position takes an egalitarian approach arguing that merely compensating for past inequalities is inadequate and advocates the redistribution of goods and opportunities. Moreover, this approach argues that a threshold level of benefits applies to all students and places the states responsible for assuring that all students attain this minimal level.

For this paper, I adopt the liberal approach and define equal opportunity as a merit-based allocation process where factors, such as social origins, should not influence the distributional process of goods and opportunities. Moreover, state and government interventions are needed to remove these non-meritocratic characteristics in the allocation process. Furthermore, I restrict opportunity in terms of its access, which includes both conditions of access (i.e., external factors that set the circumstances for access) and criteria of access (i.e., traits and factors needed by individuals for access) (Burbules et al., 1982).

While limited in discussions of unrestricted equal opportunity, as a democratic liberal approach advocates, a liberal concept of equal opportunity does provide several benefits. First, this approach bridges the gap between high school completion and college enrollment, recognizing that access to college takes place in the admissions process. Second, social analysts can observe steps in the admissions process, and they can empirically examine the likelihood of completing each step. Unlike simply examining the proportion of high school graduates enrolling at selective institutions—the general practice of previous studies that examine a student's college destination after high school—I argue that the probability of entering selective institutions is multiplicative, taking place at several stages. When thought of this way, some aspects of the admissions process may be more equal and may offset some of the overall disparities across social groups.

3. Hypothetical Examples of Changing Enrollment Patterns in College Access

Previous studies that overlook the transition process from high school to college may lead to erroneous conclusions of educational opportunity. To understand this, Table 1 provides a hypothetical distribution of enrollment to selective institutions among students from Groups A and B over two time periods. To simplify our discussion, the number of high school graduates remains consistent across these periods.

Table 1. Hypothetical Enrollment Patterns to Selective Colleges by Group Membership

	Group A		Group B	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Number of high school graduates	20,000	20,000	20,000	20,000
Number of students enrolled in a selective college	2,492	3,644	5,043	8,031

In Year 1, 2,492 or 12.5% of Group A students enrolled in selective institutions. During this period, 5,043 or 25.2% of Group B students enrolled in these institutions. In other words, the odds of Group B students enrolling in selective institutions are twice as great as the odds of Group A students.

By Year 2, Group A students increased their representation at selective institutions by 46%, from 2,492 students (12.5%) in Year 1 to 3,644 students (18.2%) in Year 2. Despite this increase for Group A students, the representation of Group B students at selective institutions increased at an even greater rate. Between Years 1 and 2, Group B students increased their enrollment at selective institutions by 59%, from 5,043 students (25.2%) in Year 1 to 8,031 students (40.2%) in Year 2. These findings show that the enrollment gap between Group A and Group B students increased across time. In Year 1, the odds of Group B students enrolling at selective institutions were two times the odds of Group A students enrolling at selective institutions. By Year 2, the odds of Group B students were 2.2 times that of Group A students, resulting in a 9% increase in the enrollment gap. Social analysts may conclude that participation in selective institutions has become less equitable over time from these results.

Table 1, however, does not take into account the multiplicative process in the transition from high school to college. Table 2 shows the same hypothetical enrollment patterns in Table 1 but incorporates the admissions process into three basic stages: the application stage, the acceptance/rejection stage, and the enrollment stage. Table 2 further separates Group A and Group B students by their academic qualifications. In this example, the increase in representation of Group A students at selective institutions between Years 1 and 2 is entirely due to the increased probabilities at each stage of the admissions process and not due to changes in the characteristics of the applicant pool (based on academic achievement). By contrast, the increase in representation of Group B students at selective institutions during this time is wholly attributed to changes in the characteristics of the applicant pool and not due to changes in the admissions process. In particular, the number of Group B students with strong academic accomplishments increased by 133%, from 3,000 in Year 1 to 7,000 in Year 2. The results from Table 2 clearly show that inequities in access to selective colleges did not increase over time and, in fact, decreased between Year 1 and Year 2. However, a concerning trend revealed in Table 2 is that Group B students are more academically qualified than Group A students. While continued efforts to provide equal access to selective colleges are critical, the large discrepancy in academic qualifications between these groups must also be addressed.

Table 2. Hypothetical Enrollment Patterns to Selective Colleges by Group Membership and Student Qualifications

Group A	Year 1 Academic Achievements			Year 2 Academic Achievements		
	Not Strong	Moderate	Strong	Not Strong	Moderate	Strong
Number of high school graduates	10,000	7,000	3,000	10,000	7,000	3,000
Probability of a applying to a selective college	0.20	0.40	0.60	0.30	0.50	0.70
Probability of acceptance to a selective college	0.30	0.50	0.80	0.35	0.55	0.85
Probability of enrolling to a selective college	0.60	0.70	0.80	0.65	0.75	0.85
Number of students enrolled in a selective college	360	980	1,152	683	1,444	1,517
Group B	Year 1 Academic Achievements			Year 2 Academic Achievements		
	Not Strong	Moderate	Strong	Not Strong	Moderate	Strong
Number of high school graduates	10,000	7,000	3,000	4,000	9,000	7,000
Probability of a applying to a selective college	0.30	0.60	0.90	0.30	0.60	0.90
Probability of acceptance to a selective college	0.40	0.60	0.90	0.40	0.60	0.90
Probability of enrolling to a selective college	0.70	0.80	0.90	0.70	0.80	0.90
Number of students enrolled in a selective college	840	2,016	2,187	336	2,592	5,103

This exercise attempts to show different possibilities that explain Year 2 college-going rates. Notably, a relative decrease in selective college attendance for Group A does not necessarily suggest increasing inequalities in access between Group A and Group B students without careful examination within groups. Therefore, it is essential to consider the multiplicative process in the transition from high school to college as a vehicle that locates individuals to their colleges. However, the results from Tables 1 and 2 merely show a single permutation of how enrollment to selective colleges is increasing across group membership. In the following sections, I use the admissions process as a framework to illustrate how SES disparities in enrollment at selective institutions may increase across time.

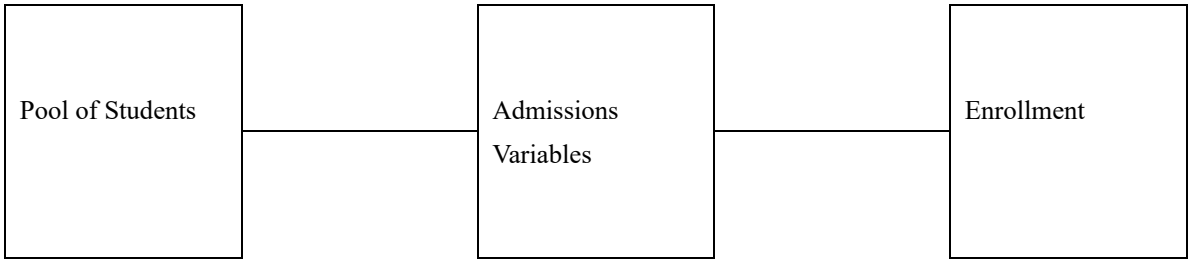

Figure 1. Basic Model of the Transition from High School to College

4. Equal Opportunity to Selective Colleges: A Basic Framework

Figure 1 shows a basic model of the transition from high school to college. The first (far left) box represents the student pool. The second (middle) box represents a sequence of admissions decisions. For example, whether the individual was accepted or not, whether the individual received a financial aid package, the type and amount of the financial aid package received, and so forth. The third (far right) box represents the first-year students. In addition, the lines between the boxes represent choice processes. For instance, the first line (to the left) represents the choice of schools a student would like to attend. Moreover, the second line (to the right) documents students' decision to enroll after receiving an accepted/rejected statement and whether receiving financial assistance. In addition, let us assume that there is an increasing SES gap in access to selective colleges (Alon, 2009; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Karen, 2002; Roksa et al., 2007). In the following sections, I present several scenarios that may explain this increasing gap.

4.1 Scenario 1

The first scenario shows equal probabilities between high- and low-SES students throughout the entire admissions process. Yet, the outcome remains that privileged students have increased their attendance rates to selective colleges compared to their less-privileged counterparts. How is this possible? It is possible when there is a shift in the distribution of the "highly qualified" applicant pool so that the absolute numbers have changed across social backgrounds. In other words, while the relative probabilities remain the same, the numbers of students who can successfully navigate the admissions process for selective colleges have changed in favor of high-SES students.

Based on their high school curriculum, approximately 21% of high school graduates from low-income families are "highly" or "very highly" qualified for college, compared to 56% of highly or very highly qualified high school graduates from high-income families (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Moreover, Turner (2004) shows that parental educational attainment has changed dramatically at different parts of the income distribution. In 1970, approximately 15% of students in the top quartile of the income distribution had mothers with a college degree. In 2000, about 40% of mothers in this group had earned a college degree. By contrast, the growth in the proportion of mothers earning a college degree remained modest among those from the bottom quartile of the income distribution, from 3% in 1970 to 6% in 2000. Since family background and academic achievement are correlated, the number of qualified students from high-income families may outpace those from low-income families. This scenario still concerns equal opportunity issues but places the concern outside the admissions process and reflects issues that more closely resemble an unconditional conception of equalizing conditions.

4.2 Scenario 2

In Scenario 2, imagine that the distribution of the applicant pool for high-SES students and low-SES students is comparable in terms of academic qualifications. Also, imagine that comparable distributions of individuals from both SES levels applied to selective institutions.

In this scenario, inequality may occur if the admissions agents favor those with high-SES backgrounds over those with low-SES backgrounds.

McPherson and Schapiro (1991) show that even among the most talented students, low- and middle-income families are less likely to be admitted to a Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) school than students from high-income families. These schools comprise 31 highly selective public and private colleges and universities.[1] Stevens (2007) shows the complex nature of college admissions. When variation among applicants is low, the admissions committee emphasized fine-grained distinctions as critical markers of separation. How much an applicant would cost the college and how seriously the college wants to establish an applicant pipeline with a high school are also important factors when deciding upon admitting students. Zweigenhaft (1993) finds that some private high schools serve as "feeder" schools for Harvard, where graduates from these schools enjoy admissions advantages despite lower academic credentials. With the possible exception of race, other non-academic factors tend to benefit high-SES students. For example, Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) show that few recruited athletes come from the bottom of the income distribution, and their study reports that a higher proportion of legacy applicants are from the bottom of the income distribution than the proportion of recruited athletes that come from this part of the income distribution.

4.3 Scenario 3

Now imagine that, in both SES groups, an equal representation of them was accepted. Perhaps an even bolder scenario: imagine that students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely accepted than high-SES students. If this is the case, how can we observe our outcome of increased disparity across SES? The outcome may still occur for at least two reasons.

First, high-SES students may apply to selective colleges at higher rates than their similarly qualified low-SES counterparts. Studies show that a notable portion of family background variation in college destination is attributed to differences in who applies to college (Brown & Hirschman, 2006; Manski & Wise, 1983). Attending a four-year institution largely hinges on submitting an application because approximately 80% of four-year institutions require a formal application for admission (An, 2010). Research further suggests that an SES gap exists in applying to selective colleges, and this gap is increasing over time (An, 2010; Turley et al., 2007).

Second, the SES disparity in enrollment to selective institutions may also occur if the financial aid package does not entirely cover all college expenses, especially for low-SES students. High-SES students are more likely able to cover the remaining cost than those from low-SES backgrounds. Studies show that the cost of college attendance has increased over time, and these increases do not affect all students the same way. In terms of net price—what students pay for a year of college (e.g., full-time room, board, tuition, and fees after accounting for grant aid)—families of low-income students pay substantially less than their middle- and upper-income counterparts (Heller, 2011; Hill et al., 2005; McPherson & Schapiro, 2002). While low-income families generally pay the least amount in terms of net tuition, the relative cost of attendance tends to be largest among the lowest income group

(Dezhbakhsh & Karikari, 2010; Heller, 2011).

However, some highly selective private institutions, such as Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, practice need-blind admissions where the institution meets the total needs of an admitted student through a combination of grant and self-help aid (work-study and loans) (Dezhbakhsh & Karikari, 2010). Some institutions provide grant-aid packages that cover almost the entire net price. For instance, admitted students at the bottom 20% of the family income distribution paid under $1,000 or 6% of their family income at Williams College in 2001. By comparison, those at the top% of the income distribution paid about $23,000 or 20% of their family income (Hill & Winston, 2006).

How much an institution can cover a student's net price with grant aid is due, in part, to the institution's wealth. Affluent schools can cover a higher proportion of net price with grant aid than less affluent schools (Hill et al., 2005). In many selective schools, low-income students and their families have to contribute a larger share of their income than those from the top of the income distribution. As a result, the unmet need remains high for many at the bottom of the income distribution (Dezhbakhsh & Karikari, 2010; Heller, 2011; Long & Riley, 2007).

Some of this increase is due to the declining purchasing power of Pell Grants. In the past, low-income students used Pell Grants to lessen the financial burden of attending college. In a classic study, Manski and Wise (1983) estimated that overall college enrollment increased by 21% due to the Pell Grant program, with a heavy concentration among low-income students. However, the purchasing power of Pell Grants has reduced dramatically over the past 25 years. In 1975, the Pell Grant's maximum award covered 84% of the institutional cost of attending four-year public universities (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). In 2018, only 23% of public four-year institutions were affordable for students that received an average-sized Pell Grant (AlQaisi, 2021). The declining opportunities for low-income families to pay for their child's college may dissuade low-income students from enrolling at selective colleges.

4.4 Scenario 4

A variant of Scenario 3 is that low-SES students receive enough financial aid to cover college costs. At first blush, one might expect that financial resources favoring low-SES students would increase their enrollment to selective institutions and thereby equalize opportunity. I, however, argue that this variant is potentially unequal, especially if the increase in financial aid is loans rather than grants. Beginning in the 1980s, grants accounted for 55% of available aid, while loans accounted for approximately 40% of the aid. In ten years, the situation reversed, in which loans now account for 60% of available aid (Gladieux, 2004). In 1984, approximately 90% of all state aid awarded was need-based. By 2005, the share of all state aid awarded that was need-based declined to 80% (Doyle, 2010). Another study shows that need-based aid increased by 47%, while merit-based aid increased by 212% from 1995–96 to 2003–04 (Monks, 2009).

How can one argue unequal opportunity if the colleges and universities provide fair admissions and generous financial packages? Recall that the multiplicative approach requires

consideration of the entire admissions process. If universities merely admit students from both SES levels fairly without compensating for background differentials, then the university, in effect, still favors those with privileged backgrounds. In addition, aid in the form of loans to low-income students may lower the probability of enrolling in selective colleges, although previous research finds mixed results (Dowd, 2008). Moreover, institutions may use merit aid to recruit high-ability students into their student body. Because academic accomplishments are positively correlated with socioeconomic status, an increase in merit aid may crowd out low-income students. Some evidence indicates that merit aid policies decrease the representation of low-income students (Griffith, 2011). Under this scenario, colleges and universities are not fully addressing the need of low-income students. In other words, the probabilities of enrolling between high-SES and low-SES students are not the same, in which the probabilities favor high-SES students over low-SES students.

4.5 Scenario 5

In Scenario 5, students from low-SES backgrounds—while motivated to go to college, are academically prepared, have been accepted, have adequate funding to attend, and remain in college—may not be able to go if external constraints disallow the individual from enrolling at a selective institution. For example, the distance of the university may be far enough where the removal of individuals from their family can cripple the earnings potential of the family. Therefore, some students may only attend selective institutions if they can continue to live at home and contribute to the family. For example, low-income, academically qualified students are more likely to attend a selective college if the college is relatively nearby (Ovink et al., 2018).

In this scenario, I argue that access is equitable, at least at the university level, since the university has given the individual ample opportunities and necessities to attend their institution. One possibility to increase low-SES student enrollment, at least for this example, is for the universities to pay adequate subsidies to the family for the student to attend their university, but it may be unrealistic to implement.

4.6 Scenario 6

Similarly, one may view situations where equal probabilities exist throughout the entire process except for the achievement distribution of the applicant pool (first box at the left) as equitable college access if the difference between high- and low-SES students is due to factors outside of the admissions process. For instance, students from different social backgrounds may exhibit different motivations and aspirations that lead to varying patterns of college choice. If students from high-SES backgrounds are systematically more motivated than those from low-SES backgrounds, then the issue is not unequal opportunity but differences in student characteristics.[2] However, one may view this link as unequal if the admissions process has altered a student's motivations and aspirations.

Inequality may occur if admissions-related information is systematically disseminated in a way that favors high-SES students and hinders low-SES students. Burbules, Lord, and Sherman (1982) argue that an opportunity cannot exist when there are constraints on an

individual's ability to decide (e.g., lack of information or confusion). Several selective colleges and universities admit students under a need-blind admission policy, suggesting that if a student is accepted, the college will meet many of the economic barriers faced by low-income students. However, suppose privileged parents and students have a better understanding of the costs of attending a selective institution than less-privileged students (Davies & Guppy, 1997; McPherson & Schapiro, 1991; Warnock, 2016). In that case, a pattern of inequality may exist because less-privileged students may not have the same resources and information to guide them on their college choice options. Low-income students tend to have fewer information sources and do not make the necessary arrangements to attend four-year colleges and universities that their high-income counterparts do (Terenzini et al., 2001).

However, other scholars point out that lacking college cost and financial aid information is insufficient to explain the stark gaps between low- and high-income students in their college participation rates. Parents and students from both low- and high-income families tend to overestimate tuition and underestimate financial aid opportunities (Avery & Kane, 2004; Grodsky & Jones, 2007). Furthermore, both groups tend to overestimate the wage benefits of going to college. Studying students in Boston, Avery and Kane (2004) show that disadvantaged students advised by "coaches"—college students who are sent to high schools to advise disadvantaged students on the steps to apply and enroll in college—improve their likelihood of attending college. Even if both groups have poor information and severely overestimate college costs at selective institutions, high-SES families can buffer the over-inflated costs better than low-SES families. This statement suggests that low-SES families need more accurate information about college costs and the application process than high-SES students to attend selective institutions (Grodsky & Jones, 2007).

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed to integrate two important but generally non-overlapping research agendas in stratification research that consider the transition from high school to college. Studies that focus on the allocation patterns in college destinations typically overlook the intermediary steps between high school completion and college enrollment. As such, previous studies generally confound the academic quality of the applicant pool and the allocation process of admissions. Conversely, studies that consider how the admissions process influences students' college enrollment often concentrate on a single aspect of the admissions process, making it difficult to document the relative contributions of different stages.

By integrating these two streams of research and simultaneously examining the admissions process, stratification researchers can isolate the locations to which inequalities exist between members of different social backgrounds. I further encourage researchers to explore descriptively the distribution of the applicant pool by academic achievement. By examining the distribution of the applicant pool, researchers can address two research questions. First, has the pool of academically prepared students changed across time by social background? Second, has the relation between academic preparation and admissions qualitatively changed

over time? For instance, as more low-SES students become academically prepared, high-SES students and their parents may seek ways to maintain their status by taking an even more academically rigorous course load (e.g., Advanced Placement). Prior research has shown that despite near saturation in high school graduation across family backgrounds, high-SES students maintain their advantage over low-SES students by taking a more rigorous high school curriculum (Attewell & Domina, 2008; Lucas, 2001). While low-SES students may be academically prepared to succeed in college, they may be disadvantaged in the admissions process as their credentials may be less impressive than their high-SES counterparts.

The allocation of individuals to social positions has been a major issue in social stratification. At the core of this issue is the relative importance of ascription and achievement in the allocation process. Research in social stratification has shown that ascription and achievement impact a high school graduate's college destinations. However, the process through which graduates transition from high school to college is generally neglected, thereby masking the allocation process. By incorporating different stages of the admissions process into college destination models, social scientists are better equipped to answer how social origins and academic accomplishments interact with college destinations.

References

Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. (2001). *Access denied: Restoring the nation's commitment to equal educational opportunity*. Author.

Alon, S. (2009). The evolution of class inequality in higher education: Competition, exclusion, and adaptation. *American Sociological Review*, *74*(5), 731-755. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400503

Alon, S., & Tienda, M. (2007). Diversity, opportunity, and the shifting meritocracy in higher education. *American Sociological Review*, *72*(4), 487-511. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200401

AlQaisi, R. (2021). *College affordability gap grows for students from low-income backgrounds*. National College Attainment Network.

An, B. P. (2010). The relations between race, family characteristics, and where students apply to college. *Social Science Research*, *39*, 310-323. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.08.003

Astin, A. W., & Oseguera, L. (2004). The declining "equity" of American higher education. *Review of Higher Education*, *27*(3), 321-341. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2004.0001

Attewell, P., & Domina, T. (2008). Raising the bar: Curricular intensity and academic performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *30*(1), 51-71. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373707313409

Avery, C., & Kane, T. J. (2004). Student perceptions of college opportunities: The Boston COAH program. In C. M. Hoxby (Ed.), *College choices: The economics of where to go,*

when to go, and how to pay for it (pp. 355-394). University of Chicago Press.

Bastedo, M. N., & Jaquette, O. (2011). Running in place: Low-income students and the dynamics of higher education stratification. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *33*(3), 318-339. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373711406718

Blossfeld, H. P., & Shavit, Y. (1993). Persisting barriers: Changes in educational opportunities in thirteen countries. In Y. Shavit & H. P. Blossfeld (Eds.), *Persistent inequality: Changing educational attainment in thirteen countries* (pp. 1-23). Westview Press.

Bowen, W. G., Kurzweil, M. A., & Tobin, E. M. (2005). *Equity and excellence in American higher education*. University of Virginia Press.

Brown, S. K., & Hirschman, C. (2006). The end of affirmative action in Washington State and its impact on the transition from high school to college. *Sociology of Education*, *79*(2), 106-130. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070607900202

Burbules, N. C., Lord, B. T., & Sherman, A. L. (1982). Equity, equal opportunity, and education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *4*(2), 169-187.

Clinedinst, M. E. (2019). *State of college admission: 2019*. National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Cook, P. J., & Frank, R. H. (1993). The growing concentration of top students at elite schools. In C. T. Clotfelter & M. Rothschild (Eds.), *Studies of supply and demand in higher education* (pp. 121-140). University of Chicago Press.

Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (1997). Fields of study, college selectivity, and student inequalities in higher education. *Social Forces*, *75*(4), 1417-1438.

Dezhbakhsh, H., & Karikari, J. A. (2010). Enrollment at highly selective private colleges: Who is left behind? *Contemporary Economic Policy*, *28*(1), 94-109. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7287.2009.00166.x

Dowd, A. C. (2008). Dynamic interactions and intersubjectivity: Challenges to causal modeling in studies of college student debt. *Review of Educational Research*, *78*(2), 232-259. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308317252

Doyle, W. R. (2010). Does merit-based aid "crowd out" need-based aid? *Research in Higher Education*, *51*(5), 397-415. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9166-3

Duta, A., An, B., & Iannelli, C. (2018). Social origins, academic strength of school curriculum and access to selective higher education institutions: Evidence from Scotland and the USA. *Higher Education*, *75*, 769-784. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0166-5

Espenshade, T. J., Chung, C. Y., & Walling, J. L. (2004). Admission preferences for minority students, athletes, and legacies at elite universities. *Social Science Quarterly*, *85*(5), 1422-1446. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0038-4941.2004.00284.x

Gladieux, L. E. (2004). Low-income students and the affordability of higher education. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *America's untapped resource: Low-income students in higher education* (pp. 17-57). Century Foundation Press.

Griffith, A. L. (2011). Keeping up with the Joneses: Institutional changes following the adoption of a merit aid policy. *Economics of Education Review*, *30*(5), 1022-1033. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.05.003

Grodsky, E., & Jones, M. T. (2007). Real and imagined barriers to college entry: Perceptions of cost. *Social Science Research*, *36*(2), 745-766. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.05.001

Guiton, G., & Oakes, J. (1995). Opportunity to learn and conceptions of educational equality. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *17*(3), 323-336. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737017003323

Heller, D. E. (2011). Trends in the affordability of public colleges and universities: The contradiction of increasing prices and increasing enrollment. In D. E. Heller (Ed.), *The states and public higher education policy: Affordability, access, and accountability* (second edition) (pp. 13-36). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hill, C. B., & Winston, G. C. (2006). Access: Net prices, affordability, and equity at a highly selective college. *Economics of Education Review*, *25*(1), 29-41. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2004.11.004

Hill, C. B., Winston, G. C., & Boyd, S. A. (2005). Affordability: Family incomes and net prices at highly selective private colleges and universities. *Journal of Human Resources*, *XL*(4), 769-790. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.XL.4.769

Hoffer, T. B. (2002). Meritocracy. In D. L. Levinson, P. W. Cookson, & A. R. Sadovnik (Eds.), *Education and sociology* (pp. 435-442). Routledge Falmer.

Hurwitz, M. (2011). The impact of legacy status on undergraduate admissions at elite colleges and universities. *Economics of Education Review*, *30*(3), 480-492. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2010.12.002

Karen, D. (1991). The politics of class, race, and gender: Access to higher education in the United States, 1960-1986. *American Journal of Education*, *99*(2), 208-237. https://doi.org/10.1086/443979

Karen, D. (2002). Changes in access to higher education in the United States: 1980-1992. *Sociology of Education*, *75*(3), 191-210. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090265

Kingston, P. W. (2006). How meritocratic is the United States? *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *24*(2), 111-130. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2005.02.003

Klugman, J. (2012). How resource inequalities among high schools reproduce class advantages in college destinations. *Research in Higher Education*, *53*(8), 803-830. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-012-9261-8

Long, B. T., & Riley, E. (2007). Financial aid: A broken bridge to college access? *Harvard Educational Review*, *77*(1), 39-63. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.77.1.765h8777686r7357

Lucas, S. R. (2001). Effectively maintained inequality: Education transitions, track mobility, and social background effects. *American Journal of Sociology*, *106*(6), 1642-1690. https://doi.org/10.1086/321300

Manski, C. F., & Wise, D. A. (1983). *College choice in America*. Harvard University Press.

McPherson, M. S., & Schapiro, M. O. (1991). *Keeping college affordable: Government and educational opportunity*. Brookings Institution.

McPherson, M. S., & Schapiro, M. O. (2002). Changing patterns of institutional aid: Impact on access and education policy. In C. Westport (Ed.), *Condition of access: Higher education for lower income students* (pp. 74-94). Praeger Publishers.

Monks, J. (2009). The impact of merit-based financial aid on college enrollment: A field experiment. *Economics of Education Review*, *28*(1), 99-106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2008.03.002

National Center for Education Statistics. (2000). *The condition of education 2000*. (2000-062). U.S. Department of Education.

Ovink, S., Kalogrides, D., Nanney, M., & Delaney, P. (2018). College match and undermatch: Assessing student preferences, college proximity, and inequality in post-college outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, *59*(5), 553-590. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9482-y

Roderick, M., Coca, V., & Nagaoka, J. (2011). Potholes on the road to college: High school effects in shaping urban students' participation in college application, four-year college enrollment, and college match. *Sociology of Education*, *84*(3), 178-211. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040711411280

Roksa, J., Grodsky, E., Arum, R., & Gamoran, A. (2007). United States: Changes in higher education and social stratification. In Y. Shavit, R. Arum, & A. Gamoran (Eds.), *Stratification in higher education: A comparative study* (pp. 165-191). Stanford University Press.

Stevens, M. L. (2007). *Creating a class: College admissions and the education of elites*. Harvard University Press.

Terenzini, P. T., Cabrera, A. F., & Bernal, E. M. (2001). *Swimming against the tide: The poor in American higher education*. College Board.

Turley, R. N. L., Santos, M., & Ceja, C. (2007). Social origin and college opportunity expectations across cohorts. *Social Science Research*, *36*(3), 1200-1218. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.09.004

Turner, S. E. (2004). The growing concentration of top students at elite schools. In C. M.

Hoxby (Ed.), *Going to college and finishing college: Explaining different educational outcomes* (pp. 13-56). University of Chicago Press.

Warnock, D. M. (2016). Inequalities at the outset: Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences in parents' perceptions of paying for college. *Journal of College Student Development*, *57*(5), 503-521. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0066

Zweigenhaft, R. L. (1993). Prep school and public school graduates of Harvard. *Journal of Higher Education*, *64*(2), 211-225. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1993.11778423

Notes

Note 1. Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005), however, find contradictory evidence in which they find no discerning difference based on SES.

Note 2. This does not suggest that differences in student characteristics cannot be considered unequal opportunity under a more general conceptualization of equality of opportunity. A student's motivations and aspirations derive from differences in learning opportunities throughout their life cycle. However, as previously mentioned, this approach tackles much larger societal issues and is outside the scope of this paper.

Copyrights