

Instrumental or Expressive: The Meaning of College and the Educational Pathways of Disadvantaged Young Mothers

Abstract

I employ an integrated, mixed-method approach to data analysis to understand how a group of economically disadvantaged young mothers make decisions about post-secondary education over a seven-year period. Using data from The Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project, I match four waves of longitudinal survey data to in-depth interviews with a subset of 100 survey respondents. By integrating survey and interview data on a single respondent from the beginning of the analytic process, I am able to understand each woman's narrative in the context of her unfolding life course trajectory. I find that the narrative meaning a young woman attaches to a college degree is related both to her general life course circumstances reported in survey data and to the form her higher education pathway takes. I discuss the analytical challenges and opportunities accompanying my approach, many of which apply to mixed-methods data analysis more broadly.

Objectives and Preliminary Findings

Troublingly low completion and transfer rates for students in two-year colleges beg an important question: why does the "open door" of community college become a *revolving* door for so many students? While it is clear that an expectation of economic stability and chance for social mobility increasingly require a college degree, too few students at the nation's gateway institutions ultimately meet their educational goals. This pattern represents a missed opportunity to identify and nurture talented young people, and a pressing challenge for the American higher education system.

Despite the fact that nearly half of all undergraduates are enrolled in two-year institutions, the majority of research on college persistence is based on studies of four-year college students (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007). As a result, we know far too little about the experiences of students who attend two-year and for-profit schools. Survey research suggests a dominant pattern of high degree aspirations

maintained over time, but current theories of educational persistence cannot explain the disconnect between students' professed goals and progress towards them (Alexander, Bozick and Entwisle 2008).

To address this gap in the literature, I present a mixed-method account of the post-secondary pathways traveled by economically disadvantaged young mothers attending community college. Using data collected over a seven-year period, I triangulate four waves of survey data and 125 in-depth life history interviews to understand how these women strive to balance family responsibilities, limited financial means, and their aspirations for a college credential. I contend that the challenges they face are relevant to an increasingly large swath of the college-going population, given the contemporary reality of employment instability and economic insecurity. As such, their stories offer important lessons for policymakers wishing to help young people with high aspirations achieve their dreams for social mobility.

I find that the meaning a student attaches to a college degree is related both to her general life course circumstances and her higher education pathway. Two logics emerge. *Expressive thinkers* focus on the importance of a college degree as a sign of "making it." By-and-large, the students who draw most heavily on expressive motivation are those with the least information about the college landscape. As a result, their pathways look haphazard and frequently change course. The symbolic power of a degree shapes their aspirations, but these students largely do not have the information or support necessary to convert their value of education into social mobility. In contrast, *instrumental thinkers* weigh the costs and benefits of attending college. Coupled with quality information about realistic career opportunities and their educational requirements, these students strategically engage with higher education and make progress towards their goals. Without quality information, however, their cost-benefit calculations too often fail. In hindsight, many instrumental thinkers report unhelpful technical certifications or frustrating experiences at a for-profit institution that doesn't require baseline academic competency. Additionally, the few students who no longer desire a college degree are instrumental thinkers who didn't see connections between coursework and their desired career. By ending their education short of a credential, however, few appear to be on the path towards economic stability they originally sought.

Other findings suggest that standard survey questions do not accurately capture the complexity of many students' higher education pathways. By triangulating data from survey responses with students' narrative accounts from interviews, I find that they often confuse remedial coursework with college-level studies; frequently change fields of study or degree/certification sought; and start many semesters that they are unable to complete due to financial or family emergencies. Another prominent theme is difficulty transferring credits, particularly from remedial coursework and to and from for-profit institutions. Combining reliable information about students' educational pathways with insight into their decision-making processes, my dissertation illuminates a pattern of college attendance that is best described as "start and start again."

Understanding Trajectories: The Life Course Perspective

I use a life course perspective to organize my inquiry and findings. A central tenant of life course theory is that individuals forge life paths in the context of institutional and historical constraints (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003). This perspective puts primacy on understanding how social institutions, such as the family, the labor market and the educational system pattern one's life chances. After a period of fruitful discovery in the 1980s and 1990s, the life course perspective is facing a renaissance. Recent studies document that the once well-ordered transition to adulthood—finishing school, leaving home, financial independence, getting married, having children—substantially differs for today's young people compared to the lives of their parents (Berlin, Furstenburg and Waters 2010; Waters et al 2011). Against the contemporary backdrop of economic uncertainty, steps on the pathway to adulthood are often substantially delayed, overlapping, and increasingly reversible (Silva 2012). Yet, with few exceptions, research on college persistence treats college-going as a singular, sequential event, failing to account for the complexity of many students' lives outside the classroom (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007).

Additionally suggesting the importance of a life course perspective, the higher education landscape is undergoing substantial change due to the rapid expansion of the for-profit sector (Cellini and Goldin 2012). Community colleges have long been seen as institutions of second chances (Dougherty 1994; Kalogrides and Grodsky 2011), but students with pressing work and familial responsibilities

increasingly seek perceived opportunities at for-profit online institutions and technical certification programs (Hentschke and Tierney 2007). As I follow a group of students who begin their education in community college, I find that many change their fields of study or start again at other institutions. As such, my dissertation speaks to novel challenges faced by students navigating an increasingly complicated landscape of higher education in the context of undeniably complicated lives.

Data and Methods

I analyze data from a seven-year longitudinal study to understand how economically disadvantaged young mothers make decisions about how and when to pursue post-secondary education. An unusually rich and deep study of the lives of community college students, the Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project began in Fall 2003 as a randomized-design intervention to increase academic persistence at two New Orleans community colleges¹. Program participation was restricted to low-income parents; 1019 study participants completed a baseline survey and 492 of these completed a 12-month telephone follow-up before Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, temporarily closing the study institutions. Following the hurricane, research funding was secured from NIH, NSF and the MacArthur Foundation to study post-disaster recovery, building upon pre-disaster data about respondents' educational and employment history, public benefits use, family composition, neighborhood characteristics, and physical and mental health. Seventy percent of the baseline study participants were located following displacement, and two additional waves of survey data were collected in Fall 2006 and Spring 2010. Researchers also conducted two waves of in-depth life history interviews with a subset of the longitudinal survey respondents. The final dataset includes 720 longitudinal survey respondents and 125 interviews with a 100 young women. Twenty-five respondents are interviewed twice. All interview data has been fully transcribed and coded in Atlas.ti, powerful software for qualitative data analysis.

To develop an understanding of how features of the life-course trajectory interact with respondents' experiences in community college to shape their educational decision-making, I take a

¹ Further details about MDRC's Opening Doors demonstration are available in Brock and LeBlanc (2005). The Principle Investigators for the PKSRR are Dr. Christina Paxson (Princeton University Economics), Dr. Cecilia Rouse (Princeton University Economics), Dr. Mary Waters (Harvard University Sociology), Dr. Jean Rhodes (UMass Boston Psychology), and Dr. Beth Fussell (Washington State University Sociology)

person-centered approach to data analysis (Singer et al 1998; Zhao et al 2000; Dumais 2005). Person-centered strategies aim to identify multiple pathways to an outcome rather than a single average result. The basic theory is that statistical averages conceal important patterns of variation within a population, and much can be learned from seeking to describe patterns of trajectory. To identify patterns within the sample, I treat each interview respondent as a qualitative case, combining a summary of her survey responses with personal narratives from her in-depth interview. I then conduct a cross-case analysis to identify important themes across respondents' educational experiences.

I analyze the combination of survey and interview data at two levels. First, I compare longitudinal survey data on enrollment and persistence with the chronological account of a respondent's higher education experience from her interview. This analysis reveals that standard survey questions often do not accurately capture the complexity of respondents' enrollment patterns, particularly shifts between programs and institutions. Second, I seek to understand how the meaning a respondent attaches to a college degree interacts with employment and familial pressures to shape her educational decision-making. This methodology—which I call “integrated case analysis”—allows me to understand how a respondent makes sense of her educational options in the context of her life course trajectory. I discuss the analytical challenges and opportunities that accompany my approach, many of which apply to the emerging field of mixed-methods methodology more broadly.

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