

**Signature Assignment Problem Statement:**  
**Economic Inequality and Higher Education**

Shannon Usher

College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

EDU 6051: Culture, Equity, Power & Influence

Dr. Christopher MacDonald-Dennis

February 20, 2022

Shortly after the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, education institutions around the country at every level were legally obligated to integrate. Many refused to do so, and it will come as no surprise that of those that refused most were institutions in the South. In 1962, James Meredith sought to enroll in the University of Mississippi. Upon realizing Meredith is a Black man, the University of Mississippi denied him entry—ultimately creating a battle between Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and President John F. Kennedy that happened at the hands of over 30,000 soldiers, injuring over 300 and killing 2.

The path to equity for all is one fraught with continually moving goal posts and road blocks. In 1962, a diverse school meant simply admitting Black students. Sixty years later in 2022, a diverse school means creating an equitable environment for all students. It is not enough for a student to be admitted to an institution. Students must also be given the tools to succeed at the institution and beyond. “Although both remain high, economic equality now exceeds racial equality in education outcomes” (Reardon 2013); this makes addressing economic inequality in higher education more important than ever.

It is well documented that levels of educational attainment have a large impact on income; someone with a bachelor’s degree made nearly double on average that of someone who had completed high school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021). Additionally, degree attainment (particularly at selective colleges and universities) is perceived to be an important stepping-stone to professional and leadership positions and a general measure of traditional success. It is also well documented that students from low-income families are severely underrepresented in higher education, also particularly at selective institutions. In the 2000-2001 school year, only 14.1% of students at MIT came from families with incomes less than \$30,000;

at Harvard that number drops to 4.4% (Pallais & Turner 2007, pp. 128-131). Bearing this in mind, higher education is a part of the cycle of income inequality in several ways:

1. High school students from lower income families are less likely to apply to and attend a 4 year institution (Haveman & Wilson 2007) (Hass 2013).
2. Rising costs of higher education, including tuition, fees, and textbooks, mean that many students do not complete their degree; only about 6 out of 10 graduate, and by race that number drops for people of color (Handel & Strempel 2021). In addition, mismatches between expectations and attainment may have negative consequences in terms of mental health, social problems, and losses to the labor market (Parker, Jerrim, Schoon & Marsh 2016).
3. Degree attainment is tied to wealth attainment; therefore, one aspect of breaking a cycle of poverty includes higher education (Taylor 2019). Of those whose parents do not attend college, “young people from highwealth families are roughly twice as likely to be upwardly mobile as those from low-wealth families” (Braga, McKernan, Ratcliffe & Baum 2018)

Educators must address these issues. Current US policy gives no incentive for low and middle-income families to save for their children’s education; additionally, most policies simply address immediate financial need through the use of Pell grants or student loans rather than address the more fundamental issues that may be related to the differences observed based on family wealth (Braga, McKernan, Ratcliffe & Baum 2018). Where public policy fails students in higher education, educators and institutions must make up the difference.

Applying Gorski and Salwell’s four levels of equity literacy, the first of four key abilities in cultivating equity literacy in educators is to “recognize even subtle forms of bias,

discrimination, and inequity.” This means that recognizing the inequity of asking students to participate in a system where money buys their access to education is simply step one of this process. Institutions then need to make the leap to the other three abilities, all of which require action and “an understanding that doing so is a basic responsibility for everyone in a civil society” (Gorski & Salwell 2015, p. 37).

In a closer examination of item one, SAT/ACT exam and prep course fees, as well as college application fees present immediate barriers to students of low-income families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions waived SAT exams as optional—some even removing it all together. Now, the question remains: should institutions remove it permanently. Further, when examining the results of the SATs, the College Board found that students with high test scores but low GPAs (called the “slackers”) were much more likely to be white, male, and well-off; students with low test scores but high GPAs (called the “strivers”) were much more likely to be female, black or Latina, and working-class or poor (Tough 2020). The SAT/ACT system as we know it is stacked against minority communities of race, gender, and class from the very beginning.

Item one and item two on this list occur just before and during a student’s college journey. Students will utilize loan packages (and their ability to even qualify, receive, or have a parent co-sign on a loan), financial aid offerings, federal grants, other scholarships, and book costs to help them decide to enroll (item one)—and during their college experience continued access to these resources make or break a student’s decision to matriculate each year (item two). Using textbooks as an example: emerging trends also include the use of Open Education Resources (OER) as alternatives to textbooks is of significant benefit to students. Research in 2017 indicates that 66% of students surveyed had not purchased a textbook due to cost (Martin

et. al, 2017). This trend was corroborated later in a separate study conducted by a different group in 2021 that showed 68.6% of students surveyed delayed purchasing a textbook due to cost, and 41.3% reported not purchasing required materials (Spica & Biddix, 2021).

Combining the two items mentioned above leads to a starting point for institutions of higher education and educators themselves, and can be described as a part of a single concept—transparency. Much of the college experience includes hidden costs: SAT fees, application fees, surprise textbook expenses, additional college fees, etc. Most students are not aware of all of these costs—and those that are know or don't need to worry about them because they already benefit from wealth and class-status. Educators in higher education have at least two tasks ahead of them as a result: contribute to the preparation of young students ahead of higher education through transparency on fees (including books!); and make more economic conscious decisions for students on campus, and account for equity in all of their decision making—from the institutional level to the unit level. For example, the institution has an obligation to consider tuition and fee pricing and repayment in their equity planning; units/departments can create an equitable space by considering equity in their curriculum and related materials and resources.

Economic inequality is by no means an issue tied strictly to higher education. In fact, higher education is just a piece of the puzzle. Educators and policymakers go back and forth on actionable items in the realm of higher education, perhaps most recently on the topic of cancellation of student debt. If educators allow this see-sawing to paralyze them from embracing equity in their institutions, higher education will continue to service only those in privileged positions and disadvantage everyone else.

## References

- Braga, B., McKernan, S.-M., Ratcliffe, C., & Baum, S. (2018, December 24). *Wealth inequality is a barrier to education and social mobility*. Urban Institute.  
<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/wealth-inequality-barrier-education-and-social-mobility>
- Gorski, P. C., & Swalwell, K. (2015). Equity literacy for all. *Educational Leadership*, 72(6), 34–40.
- Handel, S. J., & Strempel, E. L. (2021, August 31). *Building Back Better: Beyond Free College*. Inside Higher Ed.  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/08/31/investing-strategies-boost-degree-completion-not-free-college-opinion>
- Hass, N. (2013, December 1). *How do you get poor kids to apply to great colleges?* Smithsonian.com.  
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-do-you-get-poor-kids-to-apply-to-great-colleges-180947642/>
- Havemen, R., & Wilson, K. (2007). Access, Matriculation, and Graduation. In S. Dickert-Conlin & R. H. Rubenstein (Eds.), *Economic inequality and Higher Education: Access, persistence, and success* (pp. 17–43). essay, Russell Sage Foundation.
- Martin, M. T., Belikov, O. M., Hilton III, J., Wiley, D., & Fischer, L. (2017). Analysis of student and faculty perceptions of textbook costs in higher education. *Open Praxis*, 9(1), 79.  
<https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.1.432>

- Pallais, A., & Turner, S. E. (2007). Access to Elites. In S. Dickert-Conlin & R. H. Rubenstein (Eds.), *Economic inequality and Higher Education: Access, persistence, and success* (pp. 128–156). essay, Russell Sage Foundation.
- Parker, P. D., Jerrim, J., Schoon, I., & Marsh, H. W. (2016). A multination study of socioeconomic inequality in expectations for progression to higher education: The role of between-school tracking and ability stratification. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(1), 6–32. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215621786>
- Reardon, S. F. (2013). The Widening Income Achievement Gap. *Educational Leadership*, 70(8), 10–16.
- Spica, E., & Biddix, J. P. (2021). Prices They Pay: Academic achievement and progress to graduation barriers experienced by community college students due to the cost of course materials. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(6), 643–662. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09557-7>
- Taylor, K. (2019, July 25). *Poverty's long-lasting effects on students' education and success*. INSIGHT Into Diversity. <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/povertys-long-lasting-effects-on-students-education-and-success/>
- Tough, P. (2020, May 20). *Go ahead, California, get rid of the sat*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/opinion/napolitano-california-sat.html>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, April 21). *Education pays*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/emp/chart-unemployment-earnings-education.htm>