

Signature Assignment Proposal:
Economic Inequality and Higher Education

Shannon Usher

College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

EDU 6051: Culture, Equity, Power & Influence

Dr. Christopher MacDonald-Dennis

January 30, 2022

What is the problem/need you will focus on?

I want to focus on economic inequality and higher education. More than ever, we understand that students' privileges impact their experience with higher education, in levels of access and experience. I want to address the need to level the playing field for students applying to and attending institutions of higher education and find ways to bridge the gap between the privileges one student might have over the rights every student has.

How does the problem/need impact equity in education?

Economic inequality can drastically change the success of a high school student. One student might need to work to help support their family and their grades are the sacrifice, and another student has probably never worked a day in their life before applying to college. SAT/ACT exams are also expensive, and prepping for them are also expensive. Even applying to a college comes with a fee. Economic inequality also means the difference between working through college, the ability to apply for financial aid, the ability to apply for a loan or have a parent co-sign on a loan, the ability to purchase course materials, where a student might go to school. The list goes on. As a result, this directly impacts the equity of higher education and who gets to experience it.

Why is this an important problem/need for educators/the educational system to address?

Not addressing the economic inequality of higher education will mean that education is no longer attainable by all people, and keep knowledge behind paywalls. The more people excluded from educational attainment, the less successful our nation will be; there will be less skilled workers in the job market, there will be less educated voters to impact policy, and for many people higher education would have been the time they develop major social skills and community values.

Identify how you will address the identified problem/need.

I intend to create a workshop series for faculty and staff of an institution (I will most likely use Northeastern for my model, as I am an employee here) who have a hand in institutional, college, and unit planning. Economic inequality can display itself differently at each level at an institution, so it is important to include breakout sessions for each level of the institution. For example, the institution controls pricing and repayment so that conversation might be better suited for institutional planning and the units/departments have control over curriculum so conversations of equitably priced materials and resources for students might be better suited there.

References

Cheslock, J. J., & Shamekhi, Y. (2020). Decomposing financial inequality across U.S. higher education institutions. *Economics of Education Review*, 78, 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.102035>

Cheslock and Shemkhi use a decomposition method to evaluate and understand differences in inequality trends from the years 2004 to 2017. Their results show that institutional type affects the levels of inequality and the correlation between per-student expenditures and enrollments.

Dickert-Conlin, S., & Rubenstein, R. H. (Eds.). (2007). *Economic inequality and higher education: Access, persistence, and success*. Russell Sage Foundation.

This book is much like our text for this course. It is a collection of papers, articles, and essays across many topics related to economic inequality and higher education. It is broken into four parts: introduction, external factors, the role of institutions, and looking to the future.

Nikula, P.-T. (2018). Socioeconomic inequalities in higher education: A meta-method analysis of twenty-First Century Studies in Finland and New Zealand. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(12), 2305–2320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1326024>

Using Finland and New Zealand as a backdrop for research, Nikula proposes changes to the way we use socioeconomic status (SES), as it is often constructed from various data sources. Nikula proposes a meta-method analysis that deconstructs existing methodological approaches and suggests avenues for further research.

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>

Parker et al. addresses two pathways in their research: “a primary pathway via achievement and a secondary pathway, which reflected the association between socioeconomic status and expectations conditional on achievement.” This particular research is important as many other papers of its type do not distinguish between primary and secondary pathways.