

Research Translation Brief:

**What Makes a Quality College?
Re-examining the Equalizing Potential of Higher Education in the United States**

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In a Nutshell

- Though U.S. colleges and universities are known to enhance American opportunity, it is less clear whether they can lessen racial and socioeconomic inequality in achieving college degrees.
- This study shows that some colleges and universities—even those that are under resourced and non-elite—successfully produce strong *equalizing impacts* on degree completion.
- This means that their characteristics, policies, and/or practices are equalizing regarding degree completion in at least one of two different ways:
 - They elevate Black, Latino and/or lower-income students' degree completion rates above our expectations based on students' preparation for college; or
 - They close degree completion gaps between students from traditionally underrepresented groups (Black, Latino, and/or lower income) and from traditionally well-represented groups (White, some Asian groups, and higher income).
- Some of the college-level characteristics that drive these impacts are high levels of full-time student enrollment, strong first-year retention, and low proportions of STEM majors.
 - The STEM result indicates that there still is substantial work to do to create sustainable, productive pathways for underrepresented students in STEM, such that pursuing these fields will not produce the currently observed inequality between student groups.
- Given these results, federal and state policymakers should double down on policies that allow non-elite colleges to make strong funding investments in students' full-time enrollment, retention initiatives, holistic support of underrepresented students in STEM pathways.
- Policymakers also should improve college accountability policies by identifying when and how colleges equalize opportunities and outcomes between student groups, which would provide a more complete understanding of "college quality" than current accountability policies.

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The Problem

Students' experiences and outcomes in U.S. higher education are highly unequal based on their racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Students who are from traditionally underrepresented groups (Black, Latino, Native, and/or lower income) on average are less likely to attend elite colleges than are traditionally well-represented groups (White, some Asian groups, and/or higher income)¹. Even when students attend non-elite colleges, as 81% of all college entrants in the United States do², gaps in graduation rates persist: among colleges that accept 50% or more of its applicants, six-year graduation rates are roughly 50% for White students and 42% for higher-income students, but 40% for Black students, 43% for Latino students, and 35% for lower-income students.³

¹ Digest of Education Statistics 2021: Tables 302.45.

² Digest of Education Statistics 2021: Table 302.45.

³ Digest of Education Statistics 2021: Tables 326.10 and 326.27.

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The Problem, continued

That said, research to date has focused on quantifying the size of these inequalities rather than showing whether and how U.S. colleges and universities can lessen them. We know that reducing inequality in degree completion is important: all students deserve an opportunity to succeed and closing equity gaps between student groups can advance better outcomes for everyone. But are any colleges succeeding, especially among the non-elite colleges that most students attend? If so, what are they doing?

New Insights for Addressing the Problem

- **Nine of the eleven non-elite colleges in the “Metropolitan University” (or “MetroU”) system that this study examines have equalizing impacts on degree completion for underrepresented students.**
- They reduce inequality in degree completion between underrepresented and well-represented student groups in at least one of two ways:
 - They elevate underrepresented students’ degree completion rates above our expectations based on these students’ preparation for college (three MetroU colleges).
 - They close degree completion gaps between students from traditionally underrepresented and represented groups (nine colleges in the MetroU system).
- Certain college characteristics and practices drive these equalizing impacts:
 - Colleges that are larger, which also have high levels of full-time student enrollment, strong first-year retention, and low proportions of STEM majors, elevate underrepresented students’ degree completion rates above expectations and close degree completion gaps between underrepresented and represented student groups.
 - Colleges with higher combined proportions of Black and Latino students also appear to equalize degree gaps between White and both Hispanic and Asian students, but not between White and Black students.
 - Counterintuitively, MetroU colleges with high levels of spending on academic support do not appear to elevate underrepresented students’ degree completion chances, most likely because high spending in this area corresponds with high academic need among students.
 - *If high spending does not adequately target or address student needs, then higher rates of graduation for underrepresented students will not follow.*

Why Are These Insights Important?

- Reducing inequality in America requires knowing whether and how our most critical organizations—schools, colleges, corporations, government organizations, etc.—help to produce more equitable opportunities and outcomes for traditionally-underrepresented groups.
- It also means that we should judge these organizations’ “quality” not just based on their average impacts, but also on whether they equalize outcomes between different groups..
- **This is the first sociological study to make this case for U.S. colleges and universities, quantifying their equalizing impacts on degree completion by students’ race and socioeconomic status rather than focusing on average impacts for all students, alone.**
- The main findings show that non-elite colleges often succeed in advancing the difficult but necessary effort to reduce racial and socioeconomic inequality in degree completion, while also supporting many students in outperforming expectations.

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What Should Decision Makers Do?

Federal and state policymakers should:

- Double down on policies that enable non-elite colleges to make strong financial investments in students' full-time enrollment, retention initiatives, and efforts that holistically support underrepresented students in STEM pathways.
- Reform accountability policies so that assessments of college "quality" incorporate an understanding of when and how colleges equalize opportunities and outcomes between traditionally underrepresented and well-represented student groups.
- Revoke the federal student record ban, which would be necessary to facilitate assessments of college quality that focus on equalization.

Higher education leaders should:

- Invest in data infrastructures and analyses that produce an understanding of how college policies and programs impact students with different background characteristics and pre-college experiences.
- Invest in evidence-based programs that enable greater full-time enrollment, year-over-year retention, and support of STEM pathways—especially for traditionally-underrepresented students.
- Ensure that academic support investments are providing adequate and appropriate support by measuring students' progress and success when they use these programs.
- Evaluate in focused and realistic ways whether and how the college advances equity in addition to excellence.

What Do We Still Need to Know?

- What other college characteristics, practices, and programs are equalizing for traditionally represented students, especially in non-elite colleges?
- What other measures of college impact should we prioritize besides graduation rates when assessing the equalizing impacts of college quality? Some research has focused on wages over time, which is helpful, but should we also analyze things like mental and physical health over time, civic engagement, and family well-being, among many other possible outcomes?
- How might we adapt this method of assessing equalizing impacts in addition to average impacts of organizations to other settings, like corporations, health care organizations, and government service organizations, among others? Would the findings be the same?

Resources

- Full academic paper: <https://www-journals-uchicago-edu.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/10.1086/727891>
- Digest of Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/>

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