

Schudde, L. (2013). Heterogeneous Treatment Effects in Higher Education: Exploring Variation in the Effects of College Experiences on Student Success.

Abstract

Disparate graduation rates among students from low- and high-income families in the United States have serious implications for social mobility. Yet most sociological research still views postsecondary education as a “black box,” treating the college degree as an input or output for understanding other phenomena. The underlying mechanisms that produce inequality in college outcomes remain unclear. Uncovering stratifying processes occurring *during* college is necessary in order to understand the sources and remedies of inequality.

Examining the “experiential core” of college life – the social and extracurricular world of postsecondary education – sheds light on processes in which inequalities manifest and reproduce. Research on college student experiences often assumes that specific activities are experienced the same way for socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students. Investigating variation in the effects of college experiences offers insight into the production inequality in outcomes.

This dissertation uses experimental and quasi-experimental methods to estimate the effects of college experiences – including interactions with faculty and peers, financial aid, and living in campus residence halls – on outcomes and variation in the effects across subgroups. Chapter 1 examines the impact of social and academic interactions with peers and faculty on achievement and retention and investigates variation in effects across family income. Chapter 2 leverages multi-level path analysis and an experimental study of a private need-based grant to understand how the pathway from financial constraints to college outcomes is mediated by academic engagement with faculty and peers. Chapter 3 explores variation in the effects of first-year living conditions on early college retention across family income and parents’ educational attainment.

The results bolster support for an emergent literature emphasizing the cultural divide between low-income students and their affluent peers on college campuses. Findings suggest that students from low-income families benefit less from social and academic interactions with faculty, staff, and peers than their more advantaged counterparts. They also benefit less from living on campus – a hallmark of “engaged” college life. While need-based financial aid appears to increase students’ academic engagement with peers, aid alone will not alter dominant campus climates that make it difficult for these students to adjust to college life.