The modern day labor market requires workers with an increasingly sophisticated set of skills. Globalization and the technological revolution has significantly impacted and profoundly changed the labor market over the past decade. In order for the United States to retain an economic competitive advantage, it must dramatically increase its number of highly skilled, educated workers. In order to do so, the U.S. is in desperate need of boosting the percentage of college-educated citizens and taking steps towards remedying the high numbers of students who attend, but do not complete, their undergraduate education. As it stands now, only 57% of matriculated college students graduate in the United States.

Understanding this alarming dropout trend, the Obama Administration has called upon the American public to increase its overall number of college graduates by eight million within the next ten years. While the graduation goal is meritorious in its aim, it fails to consider why the U.S. is unable to graduate so many of its matriculants.

This thesis asserts that social stratification, the culture of poverty, and the possession of “culture capital”, or lack thereof, affects the dropout rate, and claims that the Obama Administration’s primary focus on pecuniary-based policies fails to comprehensively consider why students drop out. The impact of social class and the lack of “cultural capital” on dropouts will be elucidated in this thesis through a review of the
NCES data on they types of students who drop out; by looking at stakeholder policy recommendations; through an analysis of social stratification and its impact on upward social mobility; and, by examining the role that institutional fit plays in undergraduate persistence. Finally, the understanding that policy initiatives and programmatic solutions aimed at remedying the attrition condition will require sensitivity to, and consideration of, social class background will be made evident.
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INTRODUCTION

The United States of America has fallen from first place to twelfth place in the number of 25- to 34-year-olds with at least an associate’s degree or higher among developed nations.\(^1\) Recognizing the alarming trend of falling behind in the percentage of college educated citizens, President Obama, in a speech at the University of Texas at Austin in 2007, challenged the nation to once again regain primacy in the attainment of higher education among developed nations by the year 2020. As it stands now, only about 40 percent of young Americans hold at least an associate’s degree. For America to reclaim preeminence in leading developed nations in the rate of overall college degree competition, it is necessary for our nation to increase its number of college graduates to approximately 60 percent of 25- to 34-year olds.\(^2\) In sum, the Obama Administration aims to add 8 million more graduates by the end of this decade.

The need to increase the number of American college graduates goes beyond that of just a desire to lead developing nations in higher education attainment. In order to continue to be a competitive nation in the global market place, America must educate and ready the next generation for a labor market and workplace which demands an increasingly sophisticated set of skills from its employees. As the number of jobs available to those with no more than a high school diploma continues to abate, it becomes of utmost importance that America begin to improve upon its college graduation rate or


suffer a loss of economic advantage and global competitiveness. “Put another way, while
the total number of jobs in America has grown by 63 million, the number of jobs held by
people with no post-secondary education [has] actually fallen by some 2 million jobs.
Thus, over the past third of a century, all of the net job growth in America has been
generated by positions that require at least some post-secondary education.”\(^3\)
Not only is America at risk of losing its global competitive advantage, those Americans who
fail to complete any post-secondary education or training will face obstacles in the job
market not known a generation ago, as those without a college degree will experience
higher rates of unemployment, increased job insecurity, a widening skills gap, and
considerably reduced wages. The failure to increase the number of college graduates in
America will be economically devastating, both domestically and in the global
marketplace.

Furthermore, over the past several generations, the “aspirations gap” has
continued to widen. That is, an increasingly large number of students desire to attend and
graduate from college; however, students’ ability to actually earn their degree is failing to
keep pace with the growing desire to graduate from college.\(^4\) As it stand now, the
national graduation rate hovers around 56% after six years and “only about 4 in 10
Americans have obtained either an associate’s or bachelor’s degree by their mid-

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While in America approximately 40%, have the equivalent of an undergraduate degree, twelve other developed nations have already surpassed our nation: Canada leads the pack with a college completion rate of 55.8%, followed by Korea and Russia both at 55.5%, Japan at 53.7%, and Ireland at 43.9%, to name the top five.\textsuperscript{6}

This reality is not lost to the Obama Administration. In addition to the 8 million more graduates by 2020 goal, as set by President Obama in 2007, the Administration continues to focus on, and is actively creating, a higher education policy agenda. This agenda includes supporting higher education initiatives, backed by federal programmatic and economic support, aimed at improving the available opportunities for all Americans to receive some form of post-secondary education or training. The Administration hopes to do so by “increasing the total amount of funding available for Pell Grants,”\textsuperscript{7} investing in community colleges, increasing support for minority-based institutions, expanding income based repayments, and reforming student loans.\textsuperscript{8} And while these initiatives will surely provide many Americans with the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education, these economic-based approaches, which support change primarily through the reallocation of federal funding, merely increase matriculation opportunities. This thesis finds that the federal higher education policy agenda disproportionately focuses on bolstering “access” opportunities and neglects to fully support graduation-centered

\textsuperscript{5} Symonds, Schwartz and Ferguson, \textit{Pathways to Prosperity}, 6.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 17.


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
policies. This unbalanced support of “access” policies over “completion” policies fails to address why students dropout.

Many Americans across the country are enrolling in post-secondary education; they are finding access into the system. The problem lies in the completion of their degree program. America is falling behind in its percentage of college graduates because of an exorbitant attrition rate, not necessarily because of a low matriculation rate. Even more concerning is the fact that the dropout rate is unequally distributed among social classes. Americans from higher-SES backgrounds are enrolling and completing their degrees at a higher rate compared to their lower-SES peers.

Additionally, this thesis argues that America is falling behind in training and educating its citizens beyond that of the secondary education system due to an attrition rate that disproportionally affects the lower classes. The likelihood of successfully graduating from college is stratified by income where those at the bottom of the income distribution pyramid are the least likely to graduate from college irrespective of academic ability. This reality is perpetuated by a system that provides opportunities and advantages to higher-SES individuals through exclusive access to, and accumulation of, cultural capital. Conversely, America’s system of social stratification limits access to cultural capital resources and economic and educational opportunities for its lower-SES class members. If the Obama Administration is to reach its graduation goal, it must turn from a seemingly overreliance on supporting entrance measures to a policy agenda focused on helping underserved, low-income, and first-generation college students succeed in completing their degree.
To illuminate this argument, the first chapter will make the case for the undergraduate degree; that the investment in a college degree, if completed, is a worthwhile one, and one in which all members of society should have the opportunity to pursue if so desired. Chapter II will review and analyze data concerning social stratification and degree attainment, followed by chapter III that explores the current stakeholders’ policy agenda for improving upon the attrition condition. The second half of the thesis, chapters IV through VI, will examine how class-based characteristics impact successful application, matriculation, and graduation, as well as suggest that focusing on solutions that incorporate social and academic integration, especially for low-income students, early on will support the effort to graduate more American students of all class backgrounds. Thus, the exploration of how social stratification impacts the graduation rate provides a relevant context from which to address America’s attrition condition. To conclude, an examination of programs that have achieved success in inculcating underrepresented undergraduates with a college-going culture and provide matriculated students with integration-based support will be discussed in an attempt to underscore a handful of programs that have achieved modest gains in combatting the attrition condition and therefore provide a example for higher education professionals, policy makers, and university institutions to emulate.
CHAPTER I
THE CASE FOR THE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE DEGREE

As the cost of an undergraduate degree rises and national unemployment hovers around nine percent, many news media commentators such as CNN Money, The Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, and U.S. News and World Report have questioned the value of an undergraduate degree. Additionally, as the employment recovery from the recession of 2008 inches along at a snail’s pace, a more philosophical question has arisen: Is college right for everyone? In the college attainment debate, two key issues have emerged, one is the issue of return on investment (ROI) for the undergraduate college degree, the other a philosophical issue of entitlement.

Before exploring why the United States has a questionable undergraduate college completion rate and the ensuing discussion of how social stratification impacts degree attainment, it is necessary to first address the current college “worth” and “rights” arguments, thereby providing a perspective from which the analysis of degree completion and social stratification can be examined. As the issues of value and rights are examined in greater detail, the position that an undergraduate college degree is valuable and covers its costs in the long run, and that every American deserves the opportunity to engage in postsecondary education and/or training will be made evident.

College Degree: Financial Return on Investment

The college degree costs more now proportionally than it ever has in American higher education history. In addition, the rate at which tuition is increasing each and
every year, at both public and private non-profit institutions, is outpacing the rate of inflation. This concerning trend has led many potential students and their parents to question the value or ROI of the four-year undergraduate degree. The up-front costs, whether paid for by parental assistance, federal and/or private loans, work, or a combination of these sources, is a substantial and potentially prohibitive consideration for many young individuals wrestling with the decision of whether or not to attend college. Oftentimes, students take out loans in order to pay for their college education that, in turn, leaves them with a hefty amount of debt upon graduation. Before many students even secure full-time employment for the first time they can be saddled with five-figures of school debt. Considering that American unemployment is at a staggeringly high rate, many students wonder if their degree will pay for itself in better employment opportunities and compensation, if not provide a return on their investment.

To answer this question, it is important to realize that there are two types of returns, monetary and non-monetary, to consider in valuing the college degree. In the long run, earning an undergraduate degree most often pays for itself many times over, both financially and intrinsically speaking. In the third edition of *Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*, published in 2010 by the College Board, Sally Baum investigates the value of the college degree and finds that there are indeed both individual and societal returns on the investment.¹ In the executive summary, Baum states that “[s]tudents who attend institutions of higher education obtain a wide range of personal, financial, and other lifelong benefits; likewise, taxpayers and

society as a whole derive a multitude of direct and indirect benefits when citizens have access to postsecondary education.”

In terms of real financial outcomes, Baum found that the median annual income for those individuals who completed a four-year undergraduate stood at $55,700. This figure is $21,900 more than the median income of individuals with only a high school degree. When considering the average career spans nearly forty years, those workers with an undergraduate degree earn over $800,000 more over their lifetime than those workers without a college degree. When this figure is adjusted for the cost of the degree including interest payments on federal and private loans, adjusting for the opportunity costs associated with the delay of entry into the workforce, and adjusting for inflation, the additional lifetime earnings for those with a college degree fall within a range of about $400,000-$500,000 above those workers with only a high school diploma.

Baum’s research clearly highlights the financial advantage afforded to those individuals who obtain a four-year undergraduate college degree, even when adjusting for loan repayment and inflationary effects. Many experts in the field, while differing in the total additional “amount” of earnings a college graduate will make when compared to an individual without a college degree (some estimate the return to be well over $1

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2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid.

million),\(^5\) overwhelmingly conclude that those with an undergraduate degree will out earn those without a college degree.\(^6\)

However, it is important to note that not all degrees and majors guarantee such lucrative returns. Mark Kantrowitz, in an article entitled “Is College Worth the Cost,” stated, “…the increase in lifetime income for an Associate’s degree is about half of that for a Bachelor’s degree. Students who pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics will earn higher salaries than students who pursue degrees in art, music, history, culinary arts or sociology. Students who attend more expensive colleges, switch majors or take longer to finish will accumulate more debt, making the cost/benefit ratio less favorable.”\(^7\) While most often a college degree is a financially prudent investment, the investment does vary by certain factors such as major, type of school, and length of time to completion. Regardless, there is a financial return on investment in a college education.

**College Degree: Non-financial Return of Investment**

When deciding whether or not to attend college, prospective students can easily overlook the non-financial benefits of earning an undergraduate degree. With the national focus attuned to debates on the rising cost of college tuition, funding

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\(^6\) Mark Kantrowotz, a financial aid expert and publisher of FinAid.org, estimated the additional lifetime earnings for a college graduate is improved by around $1.2 million.

\(^7\) Kantrowitz, “Is a College Degree Worth the Cost?”
accessibility, employment and monetary outcomes, and financial aid reform, the non-financial benefits of a college education fail to receive adequate recognition.

There are indeed many added benefits, to both the individual and to the nation as a whole, when our citizens complete their undergraduate degrees. These benefits include better health outcomes, such as lower rates of obesity and smoking and an increased emphasis on exercise; societal benefits, including higher rates of voter participation, increased participation in volunteering, and increased tax revenues; lower unemployment; and, the intrinsic rewards associated with goal accomplishment and education achievement.\(^8\)

Arguably of greatest additional benefit to society is the increased tax revenues college graduates provide for their local, state, and federal governments. Society also benefits in the decreased utilization of welfare benefits and from the lower rate of incarceration among the college educated. In the executive summary of *Education Pays: 2010*, Sandy Baum found that in 2008, nearly 8 percent of high school-only graduates’ households relied on the Federal Food Stamp Program as compared to just over 1 percent of college graduates’ households, and that “[s]pending on social support programs and incarcerations costs are much lower for college graduates than for high school graduates.”\(^9\)

A college education is also correlated with a healthier lifestyle, which in return reduces the cost of healthcare for both the individual and society. The report *Education Pays: 2010* found that “[w]ithin each age group, college educated adults are less likely

\(^8\) Baum, *Education Pays*, 4.

\(^9\) Ibid.
than others to be obese. In addition, children living in households with more educated parents are less likely than other children to be obese.\textsuperscript{10} Along with the decreased rate of obesity amongst college-educated Americans, smoking was also found to be less prominent; in 2008, the smoking rate among those with a college degree was 9 percent of all adults, while the rate of smoking among high school-only educated individuals was around one-quarter or 27 percent of all adults.\textsuperscript{11}

There are a host of non-financial benefits associated with earning an undergraduate degree. Not only are college graduates healthier, they also tend to be happier. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center on happiness, respondents with a college degree were more likely to rate themselves as happy compared to high school only graduates.\textsuperscript{12,13}

Lastly, college graduates are less likely to be unemployed compared to non-graduates. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ economic news release titled “Employment status of the civilian population 25 years and over by educational attainment,” as of December 2010, the unemployment rate for “high school graduates

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{13} Pew Research Center survey on happiness methodology: This survey, conducted in 2005, interviewed of 3,000 participants across the U.S. The survey was a nationally representative sample adults aged 18 or older. The center interviewed participates in both English and Spanish and was “conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associated International.”
with no college” was 9.8 percent.\footnote{\textsuperscript{14} United States Department of Labor, “Economic News Release: Employment status of the civilian population 25 years and over by educational attainment,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, \href{http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t04.htm}{http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t04.htm} (accessed August 26, 2011).} However, those workers in the “Bachelor’s degree and higher” category had an unemployment rate of 4.8 percent. The disparity in employment opportunity is remarkable. Quite clearly, those individuals who earn a college degree are more likely to experience less unemployment over their working life, positively adding to their additional lifetime earnings.

Lifetime income trending analysis, labor statistics, and research by the College Board and the Pew Research Center on health and welfare benefits all conclude that there is value, both monetary and non-monetary, in earning an undergraduate degree. Over time, the financial up-front tuition costs and the opportunity costs associated with a college education are more than repaid. Even as the cost of tuition rises rapidly, investing in a college education still reaps a wealth of returns.

The case for the value of a college degree is made quite easily; most of the time, college is a wise investment. However, after answering the question regarding the value of the typical undergraduate college degree, there lies a debatable concern: If college is a wise investment, then is college right for everyone? Should it be made available for every American who desires a degree? Is a Bachelor’s degree an entitlement?

\textit{College Degree: An Entitlement?}

Before determining if college is for everyone, it is first important to understand the role of college in American society. For the most part, American success, or the determination of who gets the best job and its associated rewards, has been built around...
the principle of meritocracy or the idea that an individual will be rewarded based solely upon his or her ability, efforts, or merits given the equality of opportunity. The key concepts of equality of opportunity and success based on merits are the principles on which American society is based. The university system plays an integral role in determining one’s achievements or successes, and thereby, directly influences the determination of who gets the rewards (i.e. jobs) in a society based upon meritocracy.

In “College for All?” Anthony P. Carnevale states, “[t]he American belief in “college for all” arises from deep in our individualistic cultural bias. We welcome an increasing reliance on college as the arbiter of individual career opportunity since, in theory at least, using education to mediate opportunity allows us to expand merit-based success without surrendering individual responsibility.”15 College, or the undergraduate degree, then becomes very important in determining who is successful in American society. In judging an individual based upon his or her merits, there is no other determining factor more influential or predictive of success than that of the Bachelor’s degree. However, many argue that not everyone is meant to attend college. This sets up a contentious debate. In order to operate on the basis of equality of opportunity and meritocracy, it would seem as though each individual should be provided with the same chances to succeed. That is, each member of American society should be able to access some form of postsecondary education or training in order to sustain equality of opportunity.

As it currently stands, there is a lack of other alternatives for individuals to pursue should they choose not to attend college. This lack of alternative options, such as high quality job training or apprenticeships, makes the university degree even more of an asset in determination of success or the allocation of jobs. Therefore, it becomes vitally important to provide some sort of postsecondary education or training opportunities for all Americans.

Not only does the lack of viable alternatives to the undergraduate degree make postsecondary education a necessity, but the shift in the economy and in the types of jobs that will be in demand in the coming decade emphasize the need for equal access at the postsecondary level. Jobs that require formal postsecondary education are on the rise due in part because of the shift in the American economy from a post-industrial focus to a “knowledge-based” economy. Carnevale explains, “The share of white-collar office jobs, for instance, has risen from 30 to 40 percent of all jobs since 1973. In 1973, only 38 percent of office workers had some kind of postsecondary education. Today 69 percent of them do, while 37 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree, making offices one of the most highly educated workplace in the country.” In order to keep up with the growing demand, both domestically and internationally, for an educated, knowledge-based workforce, Americans must focus on providing postsecondary education and training opportunities to each member of society.

The rate at which Americans are failing to complete their degrees or enter into postsecondary education is a reflection of a system in need of reform, as opposed to the

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.
idea that postsecondary education is only an opportunity afforded to certain members of our society. If the college degree is to become the yard stick by which all members are measured in a knowledge-based economy, then principally, as a nation founded on the equality of opportunity, the higher education system must adapt to meet the needs of a growing, diverse population requiring formal postsecondary education and training.

The understanding that an undergraduate degree is worth the time, effort, and financial investment, and that postsecondary education should be made accessible to all, not just reserved for select members of our society, emphasizes a growing concern in the ability of the U.S. higher education system to achieve success in graduating its students. A low graduation rate for matriculated students, in combination with a lower proportion of graduates globally, has led to the Obama Administration’s goal of graduating 8 million more in the coming decade. This ambitious goal and the staggering dropout rate have led to a primary concern: why do students who meet enrollment criteria and successfully matriculate fail to complete their degrees? In order to begin implementing policies and programs aimed at remediating the dropout rate, a thorough analysis of the reasons why students drop out will provide an informative basis from which to address this growing concern. In establishing the foundation from which to approach an analysis of those factors that influence the graduation rate, a review of data collected from the National Center for Education Statistics and an examination of the current policy recommendations from the most prominent stakeholders contextualizes the national higher education conversation.
CHAPTER II

THE CURRENT STATE OF ATTRITION IN THE U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

As the Obama Administration has turned its attention to higher education policy, the national focus, the news media, and universities alike have also been paying more attention to the national higher education crisis. Given the economic recession and the increasingly sophisticated requirements of the global job market, it is apparent that the United States may be falling behind in global competitiveness. In an effort to address this growing concern, issues in higher education have come under close scrutiny over the past several years. Policy makers and collegiate institutions have begun to examine the state of affairs, and by doing so, they have questioned the quality of the four-year degree, evaluated the degree to which our secondary educational institutions are preparing students for the challenges of university participation, and taken issue with the alarming rates of attrition amongst matriculated students.

If the United States is to succeed in the Obama Administration’s call to increase our total number of graduates by 8 million more over the next decade, it is clear that actions, by way of informed policy decisions, must be considered immediately in an effort to increase the overall number of graduates in order to reach the goal by the year 2020.

First of all, it is important to consider the state of our attrition problem, to define the status quo. The national concern over our current dropout or non-completion rate assumes to some extent that there was a period of time when the United States enjoyed a respectable rate of graduating students; that at some point in time, American students
were enrolling in four-year degree granting institutions, and they were graduating from those institutions at a higher rate than students who enroll and graduate from a four-year degree program today. However, in a recent study by John R. Thelin entitled, “The Attrition Tradition in American Higher Education: Connecting Past and Present,” Mr. Thelin finds that the so-called “golden era” of undergraduate degree completion is more of a nostalgic recollection than an accurate reflection of the graduation rate. In his analyses of historical college graduation data dating back over the last century, he finds that our “notion of a “Golden Age” of college completion may be driven, in part, by the way that college presidents, in their annual reports from a century ago, usually exaggerated or overestimated the retention rate in their summaries… [and that] a closer look produces the provocative suggestion that college drop outs are a perennial problem in American higher education.”

Throughout his article, Thelin argues that since 1900 attrition has been a long-standing problem, and that only recently, over the last few decades, has the nation turned its attention towards this long-standing problem.

If American undergraduate students have often struggled to graduate, then it important to evaluate the status quo in order to understand the ways in which the problem has been conceptualized and to provide direction for national higher education policy recommendations and initiatives.

Looking back historically, one might assume that the rate at which students successfully complete their degrees and graduate from college has increased since the 1970’s due to the introduction of the Pell Grant, Guaranteed Student Loans, and

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increased financial support from state-run initiatives. Additionally, the 1970’s also welcomed more students from diverse backgrounds into the college setting as the elitist characteristics of the college degree waned and enrollment increased among women, African-Americans, and those from less affluent family backgrounds. Again it is intuitive to assume that the graduation rate has improved over the past forty-odd years given the utilization and formalization of federal financial aid opportunities and as the barriers to matriculation significantly eroded in the 1960’s to 1970’s. However, the data tells a very different story regarding the state of the U.S. college attrition after matriculation. Perhaps the civil rights movement and the increase of financial aid accessibility have improved matriculation, but the impact on graduation has been minimal. To better understand the current graduation picture, the National Center for Education Statistics provides a wealth of data collected to inform those stakeholders with interest in improving the higher education system in the U.S.

The National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES, was created out of a congressional mandate to collect and analyze data and to report on the status of the U.S. education and vocational systems and institutions. The Center falls under the Department of Education and focuses on a variety of educational indicators at the primary, secondary, postsecondary, and vocational levels. The Postsecondary, Adult, and Career Education division, or PACE, oversees the collection and analysis of data on adult education; this

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division is responsible for the collecting and reporting on data specifically as it pertains to college graduation.

According to the NCES, “PACE maintains a robust publication and dissemination program to share the results of these studies with the public.”\(^4\) The NCES is one of the few entities that collect and report on higher education data on a national scale. In fact, the United States does not require public collegiate institutions to collect, analyze, or report on data pertaining to graduation or dropout rates even though other similar countries, specifically the United Kingdom and other European nations, are required to report on dropout rates and to “calculate league tables, institutional benchmarks, or otherwise employ these data to shape performance of the nation’s universities.”\(^5\) While the States receive federal funding, grants, and a variety of other types of funding in support of higher education, U.S. collegiate institutions are not required to submit data to the federal government on the percentage of enrolled students who graduate. Thus when looking into the low graduation rates among public undergraduate institutions, the National Center for Education Statistics is one of the few resources that provides data from which to interpret various indicators of performance. The interpretation or analysis of this data allows one to apply a conceptual framework in an effort to better understand the graduation and dropout process and from which to offer policy and research recommendations.

\(^4\) Ibid.

There are three significant NCES studies that present a clear picture of the college attrition problem currently facing educators, prospective and current students, and our nation. These studies are provided in a report entitled The Condition of Education and are described here as Indicator 22, Indicator 18, and Indicator 21.

**National Center for Education Statistics Data**

**Indicator 22: Postsecondary Attainment of 1988 8th-graders**

In the study Indicator 22, a cohort of 1988 8th-graders were followed through their secondary and postsecondary education participation in a longitudinal study completed by the NCES. The goal of the study was directed at analyzing degree attainment and determining which 8th-graders would earn a four-year college degree and which 8th-graders would not earn a degree. The study identified which individual characteristics, such as the students’ socioeconomic status or certain achievement traits, were correlated with a successful outcome. A successful outcome was defined as the attainment of a four-year undergraduate college degree.

In 1988 the average American 8th-grader was 13-years to 14-years-old which made the cohort between 25-years and 26-years-old at the conclusion of the longitudinal study. By the time the results were reported, the students would have had approximately seven to eight years to complete the average four-year degree.

By the year 2000, the investigation found that over three quarters of the cohort participated in some sort of postsecondary education. This high rate of participation

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indicates the growing accessibility of postsecondary opportunities and the students’ overwhelming desire to obtain some sort of higher education instruction; however, the rate at which the cohort was successful in earning an undergraduate college degree was not as high as the participation rate.

The results indicated that of those 1988 8th graders who participated in postsecondary education, only 47 percent managed to earn some sort of degree or certification short of an undergraduate degree, whether an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, or other form of 2-year certificate. And only 30 percent of those who participated in postsecondary education earned the four-year undergraduate degree. In other words, while nearly 75 percent of the group desired postsecondary education, only one-third were successful in earning a four-year degree.

**Indicator 22: Findings and SES Correlation**

When identifying the associated individual characteristics, Indicator 22 found that “the likelihood of completing a bachelor’s or higher degree increased with students’ socioeconomic status (SES)…” The results indicated that only 7 percent of low-SES students earned a college degree, while 24 percent of the cohort in the middle-SES earned a college degree, and 60 percent of the high-SES group earned a 4-year degree by the year 2000. The NCES defined the four strata of socioeconomic statuses (the high SES strata, the 2 middle SES stratas which are grouped together, and low SES strata) by standardizing the mother’s education attainment, the father’s education attainment, the

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7 Ibid.
mother’s occupation, the father’s occupation, and the family household income. The results are illustrated in the following table:

Table A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family SES</th>
<th>No postsecondary education</th>
<th>Some postsecondary education; but no bachelor’s degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s or higher degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest quartile</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle two quartiles</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest quartile</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these findings may paint a dismal picture for students in the lower SES strata, the study did find a few potentially mitigating factors: academic preparation and achievement.  

If a student was a high achiever and/or the student had rigorous academic preparation then the extent to which SES negatively influenced degree attainment was diminished to some extent.  

The greatest impact achievement and academic preparation had on the students were found in the low SES group. “Among low-SES students, high achievers on 8th-grade mathematics tests [an indication of an overall achievement variable] were about 10 times more likely than low achievers to complete a degree by

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8 Kridl, Condition of Education 2003, 133.

9 Ibid.
2000. In contrast, among high-SES students, high achievers were only 2.4 times more likely than low achievers to complete a degree.\textsuperscript{10}

While a student’s socioeconomic background plays a large role in his or her degree attainment outcome, a low SES student can potentially overcome this barrier if the student has adequate academic preparation or is considered a “high achiever.” However, students in the low-SES groups are more likely to receive poor secondary academic preparation, and earning a degree is more often influenced by family background as opposed to the student’s desire or effort.

In looking ahead, if the United States is to pursue a higher education agenda of increasing the overall number of college graduates by 8 million by 2020, then the factors attributed to family background (i.e. SES) that prohibit degree attainment must be addressed and remediated. The impact of SES and associated individual characteristics will be explored in greater detail in Chapter IV.

The second NCES study that lays the foundation for the exploration of the attrition crisis is Indicator 18, a study of students’ need for subject remediation and their likelihood of degree completion.

\textbf{Indicator 18: Remediation and Degree Completion}\textsuperscript{11}

The NCES in “The Condition of Education 2004” studied a cohort of students who entered postsecondary education between 1994 and 2000. This study reviewed data

\textsuperscript{10} Kridl, \textit{Condition of Education 2003}, 47.

to find the percentage of students who needed remedial education after the completion of their secondary schooling. Once the group of students needing remediation was identified, those students were followed in order to determine their likelihood of earning a postsecondary degree or certificate.

The Remediation and Degree Completion report found that 61 percent of students who enrolled in a two-year degree or certificate programs required remediation in at least one subject, and that 25 percent of students enrolled in a four-year degree program required remediation in at least once subject. It was also found that students who enrolled in any type of remedial course, in either a two-year or four-year degree program, were less likely to graduate as opposed to those students who did not require any remediation.

Indicator 18 also concluded that students who required remedial reading had the highest degree non-completion rates compared to those students who required remediation in other subjects (e.g. mathematics remediation).

Table B that follows, as extracted from Table 18-1 in Appendix 1 Supplemental Tables in “The Condition of Education 2004,” provides data on the percentages of students who require remedial courses grouped according to the students’ SES quintile. The table shows that the lower the student’s SES quintile the higher the percentage or likelihood the student would need some sort of remedial course.
Table B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic status quintile</th>
<th>Any remedial reading</th>
<th>No remedial courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>81st -100th percentile</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61st-80th percentile</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41st-60th percentile</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st-40th percentile</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st-20th percentile</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Findings extrapolated from Table 18-1: Percentage distribution of 1992 12th graders who enrolled in postsecondary education by type and intensity of remedial coursework, by selected student and school characteristics: 2000*

As interpreted from table B above, those students with the lowest SES classification, the 1st-20th percentile, were three times as likely to need remedial reading as compared to those students in the highest SES classification, the 81st-100th percentile. In addition, those students in the highest SES quintile had the highest percentage of students who did not require any formal subject remediation; while only 36.8 percent of students in the low quintile did not require any formal subject remediation.

Simply stated, those students who needed any type of remediation, but especially reading remediation, were less like to earn any type of degree. It is surprising that many new college students require at least one subject remediation. The findings lead to many systemic questions: Are these deficiencies reflective of the secondary public education system? How does the secondary education system address the need for higher quality college preparedness? If the Obama Administration has called on the nation to produce

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more college graduates, then the data in this study points to the need for greater improvement in college preparation. And if education policy is going to be aimed at increasing the graduation rate, it must direct policy initiatives towards increasing the students’ college preparedness at the secondary education level. As this study would assume, efforts to improve upon college preparedness would also require determining those characteristics within the SES classification quintiles that influence the need for remediation. Once those characteristics have been identified, then policy can directly influence, if not change, the nature of the problem, thus increasing the national graduation rate. Again, the correlation between college completion and SES has been identified. This study supports the idea that social stratification plays a prominent role in university attrition, given that low-SES students are in greater need of subject remediation, and that students who need remediation are less likely to graduate.

Lastly, Indicator 21 presents the most current data on the U.S. graduation rate. In combination, these three studies provide a vantage point from which to explore how social stratification impacts attrition. An examination of the status quo is illuminated in the analysis of Indicator 21.

**Indicator 21: Postsecondary Graduation Rates**

If U.S. higher education policy is focused on increasing the overall percentage of citizens with a bachelor’s degree or higher, it is necessary to look at the actual data regarding the graduation rate as it currently stands. From this indicator, a baseline can be

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set from which policy initiatives can strive to improve upon. The National Center for Education Statistics reported on Indicator 21: Postsecondary Graduation Rates in “The Condition of Education 2010” briefing. This report found that approximately 57 percent of students who began their undergraduate degree in 2001-2002 managed to graduate from a four-year institution within six years of enrollment. This percentage is quite striking when compared to other western nations, such as the United Kingdom, which sustains a matriculated, undergraduate graduation rate of 82 percent.\textsuperscript{14}

According to Indicator 21, the rates of completion varied according to the type of institution that the student attended. The highest rates of graduation were found among students who attended private not-for-profit institutions, while the lowest graduation rates were found among students who attend private for-profit institutions. The graduation rate for students who attended public not-for-profit universities fell in the middle between private not-for-profit and private for-profit institutions. Figure A presents the percentage of students who completed an undergraduate degree grouped by the time it took to earn the degree (4 years, 5 years, or 6 years) and by the type of institution from which the degree was earned (private for-profit, private not-for-profit, public not-for-profit).

\textsuperscript{14} Weko, \textit{New Dogs and Old Tricks}, 5.
Figure 1 shows that the lowest rates of completion fell in the private for-profit, 4-year rate category; only 19 percent of students who enrolled were able to complete their degree. The highest rates of completion were found among students who attended private not-for-profit colleges and universities within 6 years of matriculation. With nearly a 45 percent swing between the lowest and the highest rates completion, these data indicate variation due in part to the individual characteristics of the students within each group, and as the previous Indicators conclude, the greatest factors may be those associated with the students’ socioeconomic status.

Indicator 21 also divided the graduation rate data by race and gender and found differing rates among these student types as well. The study found that ethic group

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15 Ibid., 73.
Asian/Pacific Islander had the highest rates of degree completion at 67 percent over six years. This ethnic group was followed, in descending order, by the White/Caucasian group at 60 percent, the Hispanic group at 48 percent, the Black/African American group at 42 percent, and finally the American Indian/Alaskan Native group, the ethnic category with the lowest graduation rate of 40 percent.\textsuperscript{16}

The graduation rates, as identified in Indicator 21, in addition to varying by race or ethnic origin, also varied by gender. The Postsecondary Graduation Rates study found that “[i]n both public and private not-for-profit 4-year institution, the 6-year graduation rates for females were higher than the rates for males. For example, in public not-for-profit institutions, approximately 58 percent of females seeking a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent graduated within 6 years, compared to 52 percent of their male counterparts.”\textsuperscript{17} A difference was again found in comparing the graduation rates by females and males who attended private not-for-profit institutions, where 67 percent of females graduated within 6 years and 61 percent of males graduated within 6 years of matriculation.\textsuperscript{18}

Each of the NCES Indicators presents a rather underwhelming status quo regarding the U.S. collegiate attrition condition. While many educators, commentators, and higher education stakeholders have overwhelmingly focused on increasing funding in hopes that pecuniary actions might bolster the graduation rate, often times, a student’s

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
individual characteristics, such as SES associated factors remain overlooked and unaddressed.

The data presented in Chapter II underscores the need for higher education stakeholders, such as local, state, and federal governments, to address the low graduation rate by implementing new policies that address the systemic reasons why students fail to graduate related to their SES background. The following chapter provides an analysis of current higher education stakeholders and their policy recommendations.
CHAPTER III
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The data tell a sobering story. The status quo in higher education cannot support the demand for a high-quality, college-educated workforce. With advances in communications, technology, and the sciences, more and more of the workforce will require, at a minimum, a four-year college degree. “Occupations with high levels of non-repetitive tasks, such as professional and managerial jobs, tend to require postsecondary education and training. These types of jobs are growing, while positions dominated by repetitive tasks that tend to require high school or less, like production jobs, are declining.”¹

In an executive summary, published by Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, the desperate need for increasing the proportion of college graduates in the coming years is undeniable. The summary states:

…by 2018, we will need 22 million new college degrees—but will fall short of that number by at least 3 million post-secondary degrees, Associate’s or better. In addition, we will need at least 4.7 million new workers with postsecondary certificates. At a time when every job is precious, this shortfall will mean lost economic opportunity for millions of American workers. This shortage is the latest indication of how crucial postsecondary education and training has become to the American economy. The shortfall—which amounts to a deficit of 300,000 college graduates every year between 2008 and 2018—results from burgeoning demand by employers for workers with high levels of education and training. Our calculations show that America’s colleges and universities would need to increase the number of degrees they confer by 10 percent annually, a tall order.²

² Carnevale, Help Wanted, 2.
The United States’ ability to meet the needs of the current shift in the economy, from blue-collar jobs to white-collar positions, ultimately impacts our success in competing in the global economy. The White House has reported that nearly eight out of every ten newly created jobs will require some sort of post-secondary education, and with this in mind, focusing on finding solutions to this growing problem becomes of utmost importance over the next decade. If the issues are not addressed now, it becomes even more difficult in later years, as the competitive, global economy could potentially leave the United States behind in the race to secure economic prosperity.

The need to increase college graduates, the need to create a sustainable, educated workforce, and the need to improve the quality of education provided by our public and private academic institutions has not been ignored in recent years. Universities, policy institutes, academic associations, and the Obama Administration are all acutely aware of the problems at hand, but how to address these problem remains unresolved.

The policy-oriented stakeholders, most notably the Obama Administration, the College Board, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, have all presented and published their own set of recommendations for addressing the need for an affordable, quality post-secondary education for all Americans who wish to pursue an undergraduate degree. A review of these policies and policy recommendations sheds further light on the barriers to achieving the 2020 goal. And while these publications are informative in helping overcome some of the obstacles pursuant to college-educating the

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American public, often times the more systemic issues, which predictably impact the dismal graduation rate, are left unaddressed, namely the impact of social stratification (SES) on higher education and the lack of cultural capital among lower socioeconomic stratas.\(^4\)

To better understand the federal orientation toward higher education policy, it is informative to review the steps the Obama Administration has taken toward higher education policy reforms.

**The Obama Administration**

The Obama Administration has focused extensively on higher education, both during the campaign and now through the White House. Many of the key issues in higher education on which the Administration has focused include financial aid reform, college access and readiness, teacher preparedness, and the support of community colleges.

On August 9, 2010, President Obama made his first public speech at the University of Texas at Austin (UTA) that focused *only* on issues in higher education.\(^5\) In his speech, he outlined the need for improving the proportion of college-educated citizens in the United States as compared to other western nations and established the goal of increasing the total number of college graduates by eight million by the year 2020. The President remarked, “…I want us to produce 8 million more college graduates by 2020,”

\(^4\) These issues are covered in chapter IV and V.

because...America has to have the highest share of graduates compared to every other nation...In a single generation, we’ve fallen from first place to 12th place in college graduation rates for young adults."\(^6\) The Administration’s goal, in turn, will direct the course of policy recommendations and higher education policy creation for many years to come.

During the UTA speech he highlighted three specific areas that the Administration would concertedly focus their policy initiatives on over the course of his time in Office. The three policy driven topics included: making college more affordable, ensuring that college degrees are adequately preparing the students for transition into the workplace, and focusing on college completion.\(^7\)

In order to make college more affordable, the Obama Administration realizes the need to focus on policies that make paying for a four-year degree a real possibility for all potential students. Taking actions that help American students pay for their degree is directly related to increasing the graduation rates. If sound financial measures are implemented, then students who might otherwise drop out of their degree program because of an inability to secure funding would no longer contribute to the low graduation rate.

Clearly, there is a need to make the American undergraduate degree more affordable. President Obama has remarked, “[e]ven as family incomes have been essentially flat over the past 30 years, college costs have grown higher and higher...; they have gone up faster than housing, gone up faster than transportation. They’ve even

\(^6\) Ibid., 3.

\(^7\) Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks, 3.
gone up faster than health care costs…”

The second topic the Administration is focusing on is ensuring that degrees earned will provide the student with the skill set necessary for success in the workplace. Achieving this goal will include enacting policies that focus on recruiting and retaining high quality teachers and professors and will also include encouraging university institutions to implement curriculum which supports the transfer of skills from the classroom to the workplace. And in terms of federal public policy, this initiative involves supporting community colleges, “by tying the skills taught in [the] classroom to the needs of local businesses in the growth sectors of [the U.S.] economy.”

The third topic that the Obama Administration is addressing in order to reform higher education is improving the graduation rates. “The third part of our strategy is making sure every student completes their course of studies…Over a third of America’s college students and over half of our minority students don’t earn a degree, even after six years.” And while the realization that increasing the number of U.S. college graduates ultimately relies on improving upon the dropout rate, during the University of Texas at Austin speech, the President did not outline why the graduation rates were low, nor did he address how to focus on remediating those factors that are predictive of dropping out. In order to successfully address the third goal, it is important to understand the root of the problem before setting graduation targets. The Administration would be better served by first investigating addressing the issue of \textit{why} the graduation rate is lower than that of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 5.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
comparable nations before challenging the nation to a 2020 graduation goal that seemingly remains uninformed.

In the UTA speech, the President included three steps that the United States needs to take if it is to improve the problems in the American higher education system; of the three issues presented, the third issue, taking steps to improve the graduation rate, was emphasized the least. Unfortunately, it seems as though this is the most important higher education policy agenda item. In the transcription of the President’s speech, of eight pages in length, only one paragraph was devoted to this issue. There is a multiplicity of factors that invariably impact the graduation rate; therefore it’s not surprising that remedying this issue has received the least amount of attention. It is probable that many policy makers, including the White House and university administrators, do not know where to begin in addressing the poor graduation rate. However, it is beneficial to examine how social stratification, or factors relating to SES, impact graduation and reinforce dropping out. Only by addressing the factors associated with the low graduation rate might achieving 8 million more graduates by 2020 be a real possibility.

In tandem with the Administration’s emphasis on the three areas of focus for policymakers in higher education as defined in the UTA speech, the Obama Administration has already devoted much of its time and energy to creating financial aid reform in an effort to increase college accessibility (the first area of focus). While college accessibility through financial aid reform is invariably important, it may ignore the more systemic issue of how social stratification impacts persistence to graduation. The assumption that making college more affordable will automatically improve the
graduation rate will not fully address the problem. There are a multiplicity of factors associated with dropping out, of which funding accessibility is only one of the factors. Before looking at the factors that directly impact the graduation rate, specifically associated with social stratification and underrepresented students, the Obama Administration’s recent financial aid reform merits analysis, in addition to a review of current policy issues and initiatives addressed by the American Association of State College and Universities and The College Board.

*The Obama Administration: Economic Initiatives and Affordability*

The Obama Administration did not just set a goal for increasing the total number of college graduates in the coming years, but it also created and enacted federal legislation aimed at reforming federal student aid in an effort to overcome accessibility and affordability barriers to earning an undergraduate degree.

The federal government has a long-standing history of enacting higher education legislation and creating departments and committees aimed at addressing the most outstanding higher education concerns of the day. The Office of Education was created in 1867 to collect information on schools and teaching in order to monitor and facilitate the success of emerging collegiate institutions. The Department of Education, as it was renamed in 1980 as a cabinet level agency, reflects the federal government’s on-going interest in higher education issues and public policy since the late 19th century.¹¹

There have been several landmark acts of congress that have significantly

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impacted how higher education is funded in the United States. A significant time for such legislation was directly following the Second World War, a time when higher education legislation history was marked by the passage of the “G.I. Bill” in 1944.\textsuperscript{12} This bill provided U.S. military veterans with higher education benefits, including special loan and tuition credits.\textsuperscript{13}

The next major step taken by the Federal Government was in 1958 with the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). This act was passed during the Cold War and was designed “to ensure that highly trained individuals would be available to help American compete with the Soviet Union in scientific and technical fields…[and] included support of loans to college students.\textsuperscript{14}

The NDEA was then followed by a slue of acts during the 1960’s-1970’s civil rights era aimed at improving higher education and included Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,\textsuperscript{15} Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972,\textsuperscript{16} and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.\textsuperscript{17} These acts primarily addressed issues of equal access to

\begin{itemize}
  \item This bill would ultimately sent nearly 8 million war veterans to college who might not otherwise have had a chance to attend.
  \item Ibid.
  \item According to the U.S. Department of Justice the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs receiving federal financial assistance.
  \item Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 provided that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance…” according to Department of Justice Civil Rights Division.
  \item The Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division states, “Section 504 prohibits the exclusion, the denial of benefits, and discrimination by reason of disability in programs…receiving federal funds….”
\end{itemize}
federal education funds for minority and protected classes and made discrimination on
the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin illegal.

The Obama Administration’s focus on issues of higher education is nothing new as the history of the Department of Education reveals. Today, the Department of Education provides loans and other forms of assistance to well over 14 million postsecondary American students.\(^\text{18}\) In fact, the largest and most progressive federal legislation in higher education to date was passed and signed into law on March 30, 2010. Formally named The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA), the act was part of the Health Care Reconciliation Bill and “embrace[d] the president’s challenge. It [aimed to] help [the U.S.] reach [the] goal of producing the most college graduates by 2020 by making the single largest investment in federal student aid ever.”\(^\text{19}\)

This act comprised several important components, each of which promoted the Obama Administration’s higher education agenda by bolstering college accessibility and affordability. SAFRA’s most outstanding and sweeping reforms include: increasing the Pell Grant, requiring the Direct Loan Program for all eliminating the private banks’ distribution of student loans, and making federal loans more affordable in repayment.\(^\text{20}\) It is hoped that a ripple effect from these reforms might improve upon the graduation rate thus making the 8 million by 2020 goal within reach.


\(^{20}\) Kittredge, “Student Aid.”
The Pell Grant

The Pell Grant provides low-income postsecondary students with funds (that do not have to be repaid) for undergraduate college tuition. The Pell Grants are need-based; the recipients of these grants can choose from over 5,400 participating undergraduate universities and institutions to attend.\(^\text{21}\) The SAFRA of 2010 invested over $36 billion over the course of ten years to maximize the Pell Grant awards; the act also includes measures that will adjust the Pell Grant award amount each year for inflationary purposes. “Starting in 2013, the scholarship will be linked to match rising costs-of-living by indexing it to the Consumer Price Index. This includes an investment of $13.5 billion to fund a shortfall in the Pell Grant Scholarship program due to increased demand for the scholarship.”\(^\text{22}\)

While the expansion of the Pell Grant makes the college undergraduate degree more accessible and affordable for low-income students, it is doubtful that this provision will make a significant impact on improving upon the college graduation rates. The failure to graduate many matriculated students is a systemic issue rooted in the culture of poverty that pecuniary remediation measures alone cannot absolve.

The Direct Loan Program

Another financial provision in the SAFRA legislation includes the requirement of


\(^{22}\) Kittredge, “Student Aid.”
the Direct Loan Program for all. Prior to the Direct Loan Program, students could borrow funds for their education through multiple institutions, and the federal government insured these loans. The SAFRA legislation cut out the “middle-man.” As of July 2010, all “student loans [originate] through the Direct Loan program, instead of through the federally-guaranteed student loan program. The Direct Loan Program is a more reliable lender for students and more cost-effective for tax payers.”23 Again, this program makes it easier for students to gain access to the funds that they require in order to attend a two- or four-year college. In addition, the Direct Loan Program’s goal is to streamline the lending process, making the application, disbursement, and repayment of student loans an easier process.

The Direct Loan Program will have little, if any, impact on the graduation rate. While the Program is beneficial to all higher education students who fund their education through students loans, the dropout rate is more significantly impacted by awareness, or rather unawareness, of educational and funding opportunities, not by which organization, whether the federal government or private banks, is providing the student loan.

Repayment Affordability

Another major accomplishment of the SAFRA legislation was making higher education loans easier to repay. As the cost of the four-year degree continually outpaces the rate of inflation, Congress was concerned with the ever-increasing financial burden of higher education debt. In an effort to combat this barrier, and to make it more affordable

23 Ibid.
for students to go to college and to pay for their degree, repayment affordability provisions were included.

Under SAFRA, once a student’s loan enters into its repayment period, that is six months after graduation, the borrower will have the flexibility to make payments that are no larger than fifteen percent of his or her discretionary income. The Committee on Education and Labor states that SAFRA makes loans affordable “by investing $1.5 billion to strengthen an Income-Based Repayment program that currently allows borrowers to cap their monthly federal student loan payments at 15 percent of their discretionary income. These new provisions would lower this monthly cap to just 10 percent for new borrowers after 2014.”

In addition, the Income-Based Repayment program also caps lifetime payments at 25 years. Therefore if a borrower qualifies and participates in the program, after 25 years has passed any remaining balance on the loan will be cancelled/forgiven.

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, while not a part of SAFRA, was introduced in 2007 and provides repayment flexibility and support to those who after graduation wish to pursue employment in the public sector. As the cost of a four-year, undergraduate degree has steadily risen over the past decade, those who wish to work in the public sector may find it prohibitive because often times the student will have substantial loan payments which can not be met by the typical public sector salary.

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24 Ibid.

According to Mark Kantrowitz, editor of FinAid, LLC, “the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 established a new public service loan forgiveness program. This program discharges any remaining debt after 10 years of full-time employment in public service.”

Economic Initiatives and Affordability: Remarks

Providing students with a wide variety of repayment options and assistance combats the barriers of college access and affordability. The SAFRA legislation has made it easier for students from low-SES backgrounds to secure and repay higher education loans. However, the extent to which these financial reforms will make a significant impact on the graduation rate remains questionable. Bolstering accessibility and affordability of the university degree does not necessarily predict successful completion.

In addition, a major problem with the newly instituted student financial aid reforms is lack of awareness; the programs are only effective if they are utilized. There remains a gap between the availability of loans services and repayment plans and its use, especially among low-income students. Again, there may be merit in looking at ways to increase awareness of the various types of aid available to prospective students in order to maximize the benefit of financial aid reforms.

While the federal government seems to be the largest contributor of higher education policy initiatives in the public sector, the American Association of State

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Colleges and Universities and the College Board are additional stakeholders, each with their own set of recommendations, in the effort to increase the total number of U.S. college graduates by 8 million in the next ten years.

**The American Association of State Colleges and Universities**

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is an association whose 400-plus members are representatives of public state higher education institutions. The organization primarily provides state colleges and universities with research, policy analysis, and policy recommendations. The AASCU asserts that its “members work to extend higher education to all citizens. Access is a hallmark of AASCU institutions, colleges and universities that embrace students who have been underrepresented in higher education as well as those who are first generation college students.”

Each year, the AASCU policy analysis research team publishes a policy brief that includes the primary concerns and policy issues of that year which affects its institutional members. *The Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2010* provides a list of issues that have been most notably impacted by the economic recession of 2008 and the resulting state budget cuts.

The briefing acknowledges the Obama Administration’s effort to increase the national graduation rate, however it points out that the policy initiatives at the federal-level are quite different from policy initiatives, and constraints, at the state-level. For

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example, the Administration has “placed higher education near the top of [the] policy agenda, focusing on increasing college access and participation by all Americans and backing it with an ambitious slate of proposed federal policies and programs.”28 While, “at the state level…rhetoric and policy action were considerably more subdued, with most attention focused on mitigating the effects of state funding cuts to public postsecondary education institutions.”29

Of the ten issues identified in the 2010 report nearly half of those issues related to some sort of funding constraint. While public postsecondary education institutions agree with the federal efforts to increase college accessibility and produce 8 million more graduates by 2020, they often times lack the funds that would be required to meet this ambitious goal.

The report’s number one policy issue for 2010 for state colleges and universities is the impact of the “States’ Fiscal Crisis.” The Great Recession of 2008 severely impacted many States’ ability to fund the programs and initiatives that would aid the achievement of the federal graduation goal. “Public colleges and universities throughout most of the U.S. are performing budgeting triage in the wake of major reductions in state appropriations… Such dollars are critical to keeping tuition prices affordable, especially in light of current spikes in student enrollment accompanying state economic

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29 Ibid.
downturns.”

Essentially, the Obama Administration’s higher education goals (i.e. federal initiatives) require capital investment in order to implement, and push for achieving these goals comes at a time when states are struggling to find and secure the needed appropriations for their core programs not to mention implementing new programs. With multiple funding issues all vying for a smaller and smaller allocation of federal, state, and local funds, the issue of increasing college graduates by 2020 may be a less prominent concern for higher education institutions than finding the funds to secure higher education programs and initiatives that maintain the status quo.

The second most important issue, as identified in The Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2010, concerns the mounting pressure to meet the goal of increasing college graduates. The report acknowledges that institutions “…are being pressured to graduate more students from both two-year and four-year colleges and universities [and,] the states and their four-year public institutions will be required to demonstrate more accountability and more precise measurement of where students will go after high school.” This pressure to meet the imposed federal benchmark may provide the catalyst, at the public state university level for an examination into why many undergraduate students fail to complete their degree within six years of matriculation. Quite clearly, for the foreseeable future, state-run universities will have to find ways in which they can measure their performance, in order to prove that they are making

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30 Ibid., 2.
31 Ibid.
appreciable gains as far as graduating their students is concerned. It is hoped that this federal pressure will provide an incentive for college and universities which receive public funds to investigate how students’ individual differences impact completion trajectories and act upon these findings accordingly.

In fact, as early as 2006 (two years before the Great Recession and three years before Obama took office), the AASCU published a report in *Perspectives* titled, “Graduation Rates and Student Success: Squaring Means and Ends,” which acknowledged that students’ individual differences impact graduation, especially those individual differences related to social stratification and socioeconomic status. “Put simply, the data document that student success in college depends largely on (1) academic preparation and college readiness and (2) various aspects of socioeconomic status.”32 Clearly the problem in graduating America’s college-bound youth is a problem that pre-dates the financial impact of the recession and Obama’s new initiatives in higher education, and it could be claimed that this failure to graduate a reasonable amount of students began decades ago.33

Along with a host of other issues, from the tuition hikes that are outpacing inflation, to maxing out enrollment capacity, to the lack of college readiness at secondary public schools, to issues of teacher effectiveness, the AASCU has identified the impact of the states’ financial crises and the Obama Administration’s goal of increasing college

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32 American Association of State Colleges and Universities, *Perspectives*, 3.

33 John R. Thelin in *The Attrition Tradition in American Higher Education* asserts that the attrition problem among American undergraduates dates as far back as pre-WWII, and that during the “Golden Age of Education” (roughly 1945-70’s), the high drop-out rate was viewed as a reflection of the American colleges’ rigorous intellectual demands and top-notch curriculum and faculty.
graduates by 8 million (in tandem with reducing the drop-out rate) as the most important policy issues facing public higher education institutions in 2010 and beyond. While the AASCU policy briefing is a robust examination of current policy issues, again, the organization fails to directly address the more systemic issues at the root of many of these problems. Mentioned briefly in a policy report in 2006, it seems as though the impact of social stratification or SES on student outcomes permeates each of these policy issues in differing but significant ways.

In addition to the Obama Administration and the AASCU, The College Board is also a stakeholder in U.S. higher education system and has made a consistent and concerted effort to research, analyze, and report on the most significant topics in higher education today. The College Board offers a wealth of studies and policy recommendations for legislators and educators, especially in those areas addressing the impediments to college access and completion.

The College Board

The College Board is “a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board is composed of more than 5,700 schools, colleges, universities and other educational organizations.” It is most well known for its Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs.

In addition to its testing programs, the College Board “serves seven million

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students and their parents, 23,000 high schools, and 3,800 colleges through major
programs and services in college readiness, college admission, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrollment, and teaching and learning.”

The College Board provides a variety of higher education information and research for professionals, students, parents, and administrators. The College Board’s Advocacy & Policy Center divides its research into three categories or project areas: College Preparation and Access, College Affordability and Financial Aid, and College Admission and Completion. The Advocacy Center, under its College Admission and Completion program, recently published a report addressing the issues of college completion called *The College Completion Agenda: State Policy Guide* in collaboration with the National Conference of State Legislatures. The report was produced in an effort to “translate research and innovation into effective public policy” concerning college completion through providing the States with a set of 10 policy guidelines or recommendations aimed at improving the overall graduation rate in recognition that “[a]chievement gaps persist, with significant disparities for students from low-income families and for minority students.”

Of the ten recommendations outlined in their report, several topics highlight the

35 Ibid.


37 Ibid., 2.

38 Ibid., 3.
need to address the impact of individual characteristics, such as SES, on the graduation rate. Those recommendations/topics include dropout prevention, improving financial aid and college affordability, and addressing college completion.

**Dropout Prevention**

According to *The College Completion Agenda*, nearly 7,000 students dropout of high school each day; this adds up to a total of nearly 1.3 million each year. And it often affects underrepresented students disproportionately, where nearly half of all African American, Native American, and Latinos fail to graduate. If a large proportion of minority and low-SES students fail to graduate high school at the customary time, graduating from college become extremely unlikely, if not impossible. While high school dropouts can pursue their GED later on, their chances of obtaining a four-year college degree diminish significantly over the course of their lifetime.

The College Board points out a significant factor impacting the low (college) graduation rate: if low-income students are not able to complete high school, they most certainly will not complete an undergraduate college degree, and that if low-income students are to pursue the four-year degree as a viable option, the States must implement measures aimed a increasing the graduation rate from secondary school.

The *College Completion Agenda* suggests that this improvement can be achieved through “identifying and supporting struggling students,” implementing “dropout recovery programs,” and making the middle- and high-school experience more

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39 Ibid., 50.
pleasurable.40

**Improving Financial Aid and College Affordability**

Just as the Obama Administration has taken aim at improving the financial aid process and college affordability through recent legislative action, The College Board’s Advisory and Policy Center has also designated affordability as a key recommendation in improving higher education.

*The College Completion Agenda* report acknowledges that the rising cost of an undergraduate degree comes at a time when there are fewer well-paying jobs for those who have not received a degree; this puts pressure on the States to implement programs designed to support college affordability.41

Unfortunately, a reoccurring trend of the last decade has been the substantial increase in merit-based scholarship in tandem with a decrease in need-based scholarships. Although merit-based scholarships retain high-performing students in their home state (and may contribute economic returns), it negatively impacts low-income students’ ability to complete or even attend college. The report finds that “[t]here is considerable evidence that, while the simplicity and assurance of some of the state merit-based programs have a positive effect on college enrollment, aid to low-and moderate-income students has much more impact on students enrolling and graduating than aid distributed

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40 Ibid., 54-55.

41 Ibid., 110.
to more affluent students.”

If the nation is to reach the 2020 goal, it must aim at making college affordable for all and accessible for the underserved and low-income students. Many students from low-SES backgrounds believe that they cannot go to college because it’s unaffordable. “Students cite the inability to afford college as the most common reason for not attending. Research has found that much of this perception is inaccurate. Students presume they cannot afford college but don’t know much about the different kinds of financial aid.” The state higher education policy “recommendations,” as defined by The College Board, should include a comprehensive awareness/outreach component.

**College Completion**

The Obama Administration’s higher education goals and the College Board’s state policy recommendations fall in alignment again in their efforts to increase the college completion rate.

*The College Completion Agenda* states that there are many factors associated with dropping out. Those traits or characteristics which statistically predict that a student may drop out include working in addition to attending college (especially if the student works over 20 hours per week), having dependent family member(s), being a first generation college student, having poor secondary preparation, living off-campus, and being unable

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42 Ibid., 111.

43 Ibid., 114.
to afford college.44

These factors tend to impact low- and moderate- income students disproportionately compared to middle- and upper-income students. The failure for lower-SES students to complete college is attributable to those factors identified by the Obama Administration, the College Board, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and to factors associated with the “culture of poverty” and social stratification.

To better understand how and why low-SES students fail to graduate even after they have enrolled, it is best to look at the “culture of poverty” factors associated with low-SES students in an effort to illuminate why these students find the barriers to graduation more prohibitive than more affluent students.

If these “culture of poverty” factors, such as individuals differences in expectations, differences in academic and career goals, differences in social behaviors within peers groups, and differences in college preparation and readiness, can be recognized as a large, if the not the largest, contributor to the dropout phenomenon, then the stakeholders discussed above must find alternative solutions to improving upon the graduation rate that goes beyond a seemingly disproportionate emphasis on college access.

College access and college graduation are two sides of the same coin, and thus deserve to be equally treated. If the United States is once again to reclaim its place at the top of the list of college educated nations, and meet the Administration’s goal of increasing the total number of college graduates by eight million by 2020, those “culture

44 Ibid., 26.
of poverty” factors, perpetuated by social stratification, associated with non-completion that affect low- and moderate- income students must be identified, addressed, and remediated.
CHAPTER IV

U.S. FOUNDING PRINCIPLES AND THEIR IMPACT ON SOCIAL MOBILITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The Equality of Opportunity, Meritocracy, and Upward Social Mobility

What sets United States apart from other nations is a core set of values that arise from our country’s philosophical orientation adopted during America’s founding. This political and social orientation, established by the framers of the U.S. constitution from the very beginning, centered on the principles of the equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and social mobility. These philosophical precepts define the central tenets of our political system, and underpin the essential values of personal freedom and individual liberties. This core set of original principles laid the foundation to “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty…” so that all American citizens can pursue the “good life.”

These notions, now sometimes taken for granted, were revolutionary for America’s founding fathers’ generation. Before the introduction of the equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and social mobility, most societal organizations or political systems were constructed around a hereditary system of social status positions. In this type of political and social organization, an ascribed hierarchy based on heredity or family origin determined an individual’s social status position. In an ascribed social status classification system, such as a monarchy, there are many positions at the bottom

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1 This quote is an excerpt taken from the preamble of the U.S. Constitution.

of the hierarchy; a lower position is characterized by poverty, little or no education, and occupations that revolve around menial tasks, physical labor, or slavery. Those at the top of the hierarchy, where there were very few positions, enjoy great wealth, prestigious occupations, and political power. Much like a caste system, one’s position in a closed social stratification system is ascribed at birth. In this case, a father will pass down his social status position to his offspring; the hierarchy is rigid and participants are immobile. Those individuals in lower status positions do not have the opportunity to move into a higher social status position regardless of desire or ability and are destined by birth to remain in the social status position to which they were born.

In this type of very rigid social organization, the “middle class” is virtually non-existent. Moreover, in closed social stratification systems the classes are bifurcated; a minority of rich, powerful elites rule the large, impoverished lower class. Therefore, only a small minority is able to take part in and enjoy the “good life.” America was founded in direct opposition of this type of system. The founders envisioned a political and social community where all citizens had the opportunity to take part in selecting their leaders based upon a leader’s achievements or one’s ability to succeed in a leadership role. Thus, democracy was born and political power became tied to an individual’s merit-based effort, instead of being tied to an individual’s birthright.

As the basis for political power shifted from birth to merit certain core principles soon followed, such as the equality of opportunity and meritocracy, as the basis for organizing the social and political systems. These principles, in turn, created a social stratification system that was open. In an open social stratification system movement from one class to another, termed social mobility, is based upon an individual’s achievements (i.e. merits) instead of being tied to one’s parental social status position.
An open system of social stratification can only exist congruously with the equality of opportunity. According to the equality of opportunity, “the assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is determined by some form of competitive process, and all members of society are eligible to compete on equal terms.” The founding ideal of the equality of opportunity based upon meritocracy is what continues to set America apart, even today.

Theoretically, in America’s open system of social stratification, all individual members are given the opportunity to compete for a limited number of status positions at the top (i.e. positions usually tied to prestigious occupations and associated with greater wealth), and those who are successful in the process of equal competition are the individuals who will move into higher status positions in the hierarchy regardless of the position the individual’s father held. The principle of the equality of opportunity assumes that all members have an equal chance to compete, and this sets the stage for a social status assessment based upon one’s merits.

In a meritocratic system, one’s desires, efforts, and achievements are more important in determining one’s social status position than their ascribed status determined by birth. Simply, those who desire to move from their current position in the social status hierarchy to a higher position have the opportunity to do so if they work hard enough; according to the principle of meritocracy, the pathway to achieving upward social mobility is transparent and universally available for all members who desire to pursue higher social positions and to the extent that they are successful in competing for the limited number of those positions usually tied to prestigious, high-paying jobs.

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A social system based upon the equality of opportunity and meritocracy is seen as the fairest possible system of social organization, especially when compared to traditional hierarchical, monarchical, or caste-type organizations. Most democratic nations operate according to some form of meritocracy based upon the equality of opportunity. In theory, it would seem as though that in the United States each individual member has the opportunity to achieve their highest desired social status position if one works hard enough; that all members start the race for esteemed social status positions (and their associated with rewards) from the same point. However, in reality the movement among status positions is much more rigid than the theory would assume, and upward social mobility, while possible from some, is very difficult for those in the lowest positions.

The organization of America’s social and political systems isn’t always in concert with these idyllic principles. As with all theoretical ideals, at times the founding principles do not hold true for every case, and for every class, all of the time. Inequality and rigid social class immobility can permeate America’s social and political systems; this holds especially true for those at the very bottom of the hierarchy, our lowest-income citizens, who face the greatest barriers to successful upward mobility. 

Over the course of the last century, higher education has played an integral role in determining occupational outcomes, and subsequently one’s social status position. The undergraduate degree is the American symbol of successful merit-based achievement and provides an entryway into the competition for prestigious jobs. In fact, it can be argued that the undergraduate degree is the single most important factor in becoming upwardly mobile or retaining a middle or upper class status position.
The Role of the Undergraduate Degree and Upward Social Mobility

In America, access to a free, public education for all citizens is the mechanism through which the opportunity to fairly compete for jobs in the marketplace is equalized. In theory, the public education system provides each individual, regardless of his or her family background or ascribed social status, with the same set of skills and opportunities required to compete for various status positions (i.e. jobs) within the social organization. Free, public primary and secondary education is an entitlement for each American citizen. Thus, it reasons to assume that each individual, given equal access to a free, public education, has the same opportunities to compete in the collegiate educational and occupational playing field.

Education, including primary, secondary, and postsecondary, plays a vital role in determining who succeeds in the meritocratic, competitive process and in determining who achieves upward social mobility. If one is successful in the “equal” competitive educational process, then one is provided with prestigious occupational opportunities and its associated rewards. In this system, it is assumed that all individuals are given the same opportunities through the access to education from which to compete; it is this access to education that creates the equal playing field. It also reasons that those who are successful in competing for the higher status positions are equally rewarded based upon their varying degrees of achievement. All things being equal, two individuals with similar achievements can expect similar rewards. And by virtue of having access to free, public primary and secondary education and having access to postsecondary educational opportunities, all Americans have equal opportunity to achieve upward social mobility. Therefore, education, especially the undergraduate degree, is one of the most important
factors in determining individual achievements. Without a four-year college education, one is greatly limited in his or her ability to achieve upward social mobility.

Postsecondary education can be seen as the gatekeeper of the allocation of higher social status positions; college graduates have the opportunity, provided by the skill set acquired or “achieved” during their college pursuits, to win prestigious, high-paying jobs in the competitive job market. Without a college degree, access to this opportunity is severely limited. Individuals who are unable to complete an undergraduate degree are faced with fewer opportunities to achieve higher social status positions, therein, achieving upward social mobility is highly unlikely and downward social mobility, or moving into a lower socio-economic status position, becomes of concern.

The theory of the equality of opportunity based upon meritocracy would then assume that those individuals who fail to complete their degrees are completely responsible for their decision to drop out; they have only themselves to blame. The system assumes that all matriculated students are equal since they were all given the same primary and secondary opportunities and because they equally achieved the requirements of admissions into their selected college or university. Therefore, the student is wholly responsible for dropping-out if he or she chooses to do so. The system also assumes that all students face the same obstacles in the completion of their degrees. However, contrary to the principle of equality of opportunity, inequality (to successfully complete postsecondary education) persists among students enrolled in the same school and even in the same degree program or major. Then how is it that in a system founded on the principles of equality of opportunity and meritocracy, seemingly similar students end up with dissimilar graduation outcomes? And, if all students in a particular postsecondary educational institution meet the admission criteria and were successful in their secondary
schooling, why is it that only approximately 57 percent graduate? Answering these questions illuminates the dropout phenomenon and provides an informed platform from which to pursue policy agendas aimed at improving upon the American collegiate completion rate. And to do so, it is important first to understand how Status Attainment Theory, the Ration Action models, and Theory of Social Reproduction explain the nuances in who succeeds in completing college and who fails. From this theoretical perspective, exploring individual differences, college integration, and mediating factors brings perspective to stakeholders in the graduation debate in elucidating why dropout occurs.
CHAPTER V

THEORY-BASED SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Status Attainment Theory

There are several theoretical models that assess how social stratification, or “the persistence of positions in a hierarchy of inequality, either over the lifetime of a birth cohort of individuals or, more particularly, between generations,” impacts higher education achievement thus predicting one’s social mobility trajectory. And, perhaps one of the most well known models is the Status Attainment Theory popularized in the 1960’s by Peter M. Blau and Otis Duncan. Blau and Duncan claimed that an individual’s father’s income and educational background significantly affected his son’s income and educational outcomes. The pair theorized that even when all other factors we held equal, the achievements of one’s father, measured as his income and education, greatly influenced his son’s social status position, educational outcome, and occupational position.

However, there are many factors that contribute to achieving a higher status position, a process known as upward social mobility, and these factors tend also to be predictive of a successful college experience. Blau and Duncan sought to isolate those characteristics associated with social status and upward social mobility. Their research included examining a host of characteristics, such as cognitive ability (i.e. intelligence), individual personality qualities such as motivation and persistence, previous education

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2 Ibid., 2360.
successes or failures, and one’s social origins, to determine if there was a connection between social origin and successful social mobility.

Before Blau and Duncan’s research into the associations of individual characteristics and status positions, it was often thought that social origin played a trivial role in upward social mobility, and that what mattered most were characteristics such as intelligence and motivation, this being the assumption of America’s open social stratification system and principle of equality of opportunity. However, Status Attainment Theory changed this conception dramatically. According to their model, social origins, again defined as parental education and occupation status, significantly “contribute to stratification in the distribution of educational and occupational attainment”\(^3\) and status positions. That is, if an individual’s father failed to complete high school and was a low-wage worker, the offspring’s likelihood of completing a college degree or obtaining a higher-wage occupation was significantly diminished, irrespective of academic ability or motivation. They also found the opposite to be true: if an individual’s father completed college or a professional degree and obtained a high-wage employment position, his children’s probability of completing college and obtaining a high-wage position was all the more likely.\(^4\)

Blau and Duncan’s Status Attainment research shed light on how previously neglected family background characteristics were indeed tied to upward social mobility, specifically those relating to one’s socioeconomic status, contrary to the equality/meritocratic rhetoric.

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\(^3\) Ibid., 2361.

\(^4\) Ibid., 2360-61.
At the time, there were a few limitations to Blau and Duncan’s work. First of all, in its original form, Status Attainment Theory was merely descriptive. The research did not explain how a father’s educational and occupational background would impact his offspring. It merely made a case that a child is impacted by his parent’s social status position, but the research was unable to identify how SES associated characteristics influenced or predicted this pattern of heredity.

Another limitation in Status Attainment Theory was the analysis of too few variables associated with status outcomes. In Blau and Duncan’s research, only the father’s education and occupation were analyzed as factors that influence his offspring’s educational and occupational outcomes. The analysis of only two outcome characteristics did not provide a large enough scope from which to draw informative conclusions.

To remedy these limitations and build upon the first body of Status Attainment research, Blau and Duncan expanded their theory into what is known as the “Wisconsin Model.” This research sought to remedy the limitation of minimal variable analysis by creating a model that considered both the father’s and the son’s education and occupation backgrounds, but also added sociopsychological variables into the analysis. These sociopsychological variables included academic aspirations, the influence of peer groups on one’s academic aspirations, parent’s SES, academic performance, and mental ability. It was thought that the analysis of family background characteristics and sociopsychological factors together might illuminate how ascriptive social status traits

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influenced upward social mobility in a more comprehensive manner than the original Status Attainment Theory provided.

The Wisconsin Model revealed that one’s family SES and peer group significantly impacted future education and occupational outcomes. “The ascriptive effect of family SES works most importantly through significant others on aspirations, while aspirations, in turn, directly affect educational attainment. But educational attainment has the strongest effect on occupational attainment, and educational attainment, it is argued, is in part an achievement variable.”

The Wisconsin Model explored the idea that there was impactful, predictive characteristics related to one’s social class, or SES position, that influenced, either positively or negatively, upward social mobility. The Model found that one’s peer group greatly influenced education and occupation outcomes. And it can be argued that peer groups are formed according to strict class, or SES, lines. Therefore, a lower-income student is more likely to have a lower-income peer group. And, the lower-income peer group will maintain relatively similar educational and occupational aspirations. In turn, the lower-income groups find less success in institutions of higher education because their peer group and family background have not provided them with exposure to the college culture; whereas those middle- and upper-income peer groups are persistently exposed to, at an early age, college-going expectations and information.

The Wisconsin Model included sociopsychological factors, such as achievement variables, one’s peer group, and SES into the analysis of Status Attainment. It marked the beginning of research into a host of sociopsychological factors that impacts upward social mobility. It is from this Status Attainment research that successes and failures in

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6 Ibid.
the system of higher education should be explored. Time and time again, a student’s higher education achievement, or lack thereof, is strongly correlated with his or her social class or family SES.

In addition to Status Attainment Theory, Ration-Action models and the Theory of Social Reproduction also explain how educational and occupational successes and upward mobility function in American society. These theories support the argument that SES-based characteristics greatly influence who succeeds or who fails in higher education, who drops out of college, and who persists.

**Ration-Action Models**

While the Status Attainment Theories established the link between family background characteristics and peers groups and educational and occupational success, Ration-Action models look at how decisions, such as the decision to drop out or persist in college, are made. It is theorized that the decision-making process is impacted by personal preferences and individual perceptions. According to models of Ration-Action, the decision-making process is driven by an internal evaluation of the benefits versus the costs of making any choice. The evaluation process is dependent upon the individual’s perceptions that are formed from his or her life experiences. The process of internal evaluation is referred to as a cost-benefit analysis.

Stepping away from theories rooted in a sociological tradition, Ration-Action models are closely related to theories of rational choice that originated out of the field of economics.\(^7\) However, models in the Ration-Action, or economic, tradition do provide

insight into the mechanisms of human behavior and its role in the decision-making process. Ration-Action models attempt to explain how any personal choice one makes is informed by one’s life experiences. These so-called life experiences include factors such as socioeconomic status, peer group, family attachments, and past secondary school successes or failures, to name a few. Given the intricacies of the decision-making process, especially when it comes to making the decision to drop out of college, Ration-Action models attempt to explain how, and better understand why, a student decides to drop out (or persist), aside from the immediate or triggering reasons, by evaluating the paths that lead to the decision moment.

If higher education stakeholders can, by viewing the problem through the Ration-Action framework, better understand how dropout decisions are made and what precedent factors influence the decision-making process, then efforts to remediate attrition can more precisely target those precedent factors at the root of the decision-making process.

According to Eric Grodsky, in his evaluation of social stratification in higher education, “[r]ational action theory assumes that individuals act in ways that maximize the likelihood that their preferences will be satisfied, given the constraints they face.” Preferences and perceptions vary widely from one individual to the next. Often times, preferences and experiences are similar within social classes, where those from lower-income families share similar preferences and experiences, and those from higher-income classes tend to share similar preferences and experiences. At the micro-level, the different sub-groups of social classes share similar cultural norms. It is the shared experiences formed along class lines that position the individual to perceive a situation a certain way, and then act or make a decision based upon those perceptions. This is why

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those from differing classes or socioeconomic backgrounds will make different decisions with differing trajectories when faced with the same decision-making circumstance. Perceptions, such as ability to get into a selective college, to get good grades, to finish college, and to “fit-in” at college, are mediated by life experiences, which are similar along class lines and ultimately impact the attrition decision in a predictable manner.

Ration-Action models rely heavily on the use of cost-benefit analysis. Essentially, for each decision one makes, a student must assess the added benefit of making such a decision versus the cost of making the decision. In making the decision to drop out of college, a student will weigh the perceived cost of continuation. “Students and their parents make educational continuation decisions based on the perceived costs and benefits of school continuation and their subjective assessments of the probability of success.” The perceived cost of continuation and success varies by class or socioeconomic background. Students from lower-income backgrounds have a tendency to perceive the costs associated with the continuation college as greater than the benefits of continuation. Often times, the benefit of pursuing full-time employment that provides immediate cash flow outweighs the intangible benefit of future earnings associated with college completion. However, middle- and upper-income students perceive persistence in college as more beneficial. The higher-SES students are seemingly more attuned to the future rewards associated with college persistence, and they will choose to delay entry into the workforce in order to hold out for the more prestigious job opportunities that provide higher wages and are only available to those who have completed their four-year, undergraduate degree.

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9 Ibid., 2364.
Ration-Action models are beneficial in examining how differing perceptions of the value of a four-year undergraduate degree impacts the cost-benefit analysis. In measuring its worth, certain college values are perceived differently by social class status, such the perception of the cost to attend (the tuition impact) and as the perception of the return on investment. Low-income students are more likely to perceive the overall cost of attendance as a greater financial amount relative to their family income than more affluent students. Simply put, even though the tuition dollar amount is the same for students of all income strata, the perception of cost is greater for lower-income students. Therefore, in the cost-benefit analysis of pursuing an undergraduate degree, it costs more for low-income students to attend college; Ration-Action models would then predict that a student from low-income background would choose not to go to college, or to drop out of college, due to perceptions formed by life experiences, not directly related to academic success or failure.

Ration-Action models, such as the cost-benefit analysis, while originating out the field of economics, are useful in exploring the attrition phenomena by evaluating a student’s decision-making process. It is an informative theory, but its evaluation is retroactive in nature. However, it is useful in estimating which precedent factors most impact the attrition decision and in illuminating how personal preferences and perceptions predict the continuation decision.

**Theory of Social Reproduction**

Status Attainment theory and Ration-Action models are limited theories in that they can only identify or describe the processes involved in student attrition; the former theories lack provisions for explaining how social class status is generationally passed
down from parents to their children, in the case of Status Attainment theory, or how personal preferences and perceptions are formed within social classes that impacts the cost-benefit analysis in the case of Ration-Action theories. The Theory of Social Reproduction, first articulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, addresses how social class, or socioeconomic status, impacts upward social mobility. This theory can then be applied to the study of undergraduate attrition and completion and illustrates how class status is often influential in determining collegiate success.

Bourdieu’s theory examined how preferences, tastes, and perceptions are formed along class lines and how the dominant class’s cultural institutions reinforce class-based worldview orientations. Bourdieu’s theory contends that the ruling class’s institutions (e.g. the government, universities, and professions) reinforce the legitimacy of the social structure and perpetuate a norm where those in higher-SES status positions maintain their standing and suppress the upward social mobility opportunities of the lower-SES members. These class-based norms and assumptions, such as restricted social mobility, however, are in direct opposition to America’s founding principles of the equality of opportunity and meritocracy. While admittedly there are more opportunities for upward social mobility in a democratic, capitalist society, class-based inequality reinforced by the prevailing social and cultural institutions nonetheless persists, often by tacit, unrecognizable means.

The American cultural narrative and its founding principles hold claim to the idea that America has an open social stratification system; however this masks the underlying reality that social status positions are often generationally stagnant and exist within a rigid system of social stratification which endures under the pretense of equality. While America’s system of social stratification may be more rigid than one might casually
assume, its democratic-based political system created a greater diversity of positions within the hierarchy as compared to other political systems based on a small number of ruling elite. In the United States, there are more social status positions within the hierarchy, the middle class often being subdivided into three classes of its own. But according to the Theory of Social Reproduction, upward social mobility is curtailed among the diversity of status positions, especially for those in the lowest social status positions.

America’s structural immobility, and the legitimization of the ruling class’s cultural institutions, impacts college completion. The four-year university, as a dominant cultural institution, reinforces the tastes, interests, linguistic and communication styles, hobbies, and preferences of the ruling-class (i.e. high-SES students). This then, creates an atmosphere conducive of success for upper-income students, and consequently creates barriers to success for lower-income students.

The Bourdieuan literature attempts to explain how class position, or SES, affects one’s educational and occupational outcomes and how one’s social class is often reproduced. “Bourdieu recognized that economic class positions that individuals hold share [similar] worldviews and also what is usually called culture.” By virtue of being a member of a certain social class group, one is socialized into his class group and inculcated with the group’s prevailing norms. Bourdieu, explains, “when the conditions of existence of which the members of a group are the product are very little differentiated, the dispositions which each of them exercises in his practice are confirmed

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10 Kerbo, *Social Stratification and Inequality*, 395.
and hence reinforced both by the practice of the other members of the group.\textsuperscript{11} The individual essentially adapts to his surroundings by developing a worldview, preferences, and interests that have been informed by the collective class group experience. The fidelity amongst the proximal members creates the “in-group.” Since the experiential orientations of the class groups or subcultures are dissimilar, members from a different class group are excluded from acceptance. The discrimination against non-members, especially top-down exclusion, contributes to the proliferation of social reproduction and explains why high-SES students adapt and succeed in college, a high-SES institution, to a greater degree than lower-SES students.

Theorists and sociologists in the Bourdieuian tradition attempt to explain the process of social reproduction, or the handing down of one’s economic social status position to one’s offspring, by identifying the differences in the interaction styles and communication patterns within the different social class groups or “subcultures” and how these differences create discrimination among class groups resulting in social class immobility; Pierre Bourdieu maintained that the social system was divided markedly along class lines, and that this division created unique, exclusive “subcultures” with a defining foundation based upon social class. Social class then becomes the primary source for the origination of preferences, interests, and communication styles among these self-selecting subgroups. The “subcultures” have a diversity of preferences, tastes, norms, and interests that then become indicators of class origin. This establishes the criteria from which inclusion or exclusion into the prevailing classes’ cultural institutions is determined. In summarizing this idea, Bourdieu, in Outline of a Theory of Practice,

states, “[t]hrough differing class subcultures people of different classes tend to draw lines around their class “ingroup” and the “out-group” of people in other class positions. Thus, people in higher-class positions come to define those of lower-class positions as different and perhaps not as capable of fitting into higher positions in the class system.”

Therefore, social reproduction is reinforced as “in-groups” endeavor to keep others from joining their ranks.

The process of excluding the lower-SES class members from achieving upward social mobility often takes place through dominant cultural institutions, such as institutions of primary, secondary, and higher education. According to Bourdieu, at the earliest of stages of life an individual will receive and incorporate its class’s cultural capital through one’s peer group and educational experiences. Cultural capital is defined as non-economic advantages or assets used in the social context to transmit one social status standing to others and aid one in achieving acceptance in the “in-group” or class subculture. Early on, cultural capital is transmitted from parent to child. It is then reinforced by the child’s educational experience and by his or her chosen (or accepted) peer group.

Cultural capital is created and transmitted to the child most recognizably through sophisticated linguistic communication patterns within the familial and educational settings. Different subcultures, again based on class, have unique styles of linguistic communication. Institutions of higher education utilize and reinforce the linguistic capital of the high-SES subculture. Therefore, those from low-SES status positions, who

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12 Ibid.

13 The term “cultural capital” originated from Pierre Bourdieu’s body of research.

wish to attend and excel in college, must adopt the style of the high-SES group in order to succeed (i.e. complete). Often times this style is based upon communication patterns and linguistic style not customary to the low-SES student’s family, school, and peer group experiences. This makes it difficult for lower-income students to succeed in the college setting and creates inequality among students beyond academic capability. Bourdieu contends, “…language is not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family.”15 The student’s family and peer communication patterns are the original transmitters of cultural capital, and based upon this primary inculcation and reinforcement of customary, class-based linguistic practices, the child then forms an orientation or worldview that is reciprocally validated by the child’s educational experiences and social interactions.

As more and more students from all class subcultures gain equitable access to higher education opportunities, the disparities in attrition by class can then be assumed to result from the process of institutional exclusion (i.e. university-based discrimination). Low-SES matriculated students may find it hard to adapt, or to find acceptance in an “in-group,” because they have less cultural capital to utilize as an integration tool than the student’s higher-SES peers. Institutions of higher education play a seminal role in the achievement of upward social mobility for the lower classes if a student is able to adapt to the dominate class’s cultural norms. And according to Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction, more often than not, the disparities in culture capital by class subculture,

especially indicative of differences in the linguistic skill set, results in achievement inequality manifest in a higher attrition rate among lower-income students.

The cycle of rigid social mobility and generational social status reproduction is perpetuated as “colleges and universities…exclude the disadvantaged and legitimate the achievements of the children of the ruling class by granting them credentials, [another] key form of cultural capital.”\textsuperscript{16}

When looking at the college attrition problem in America, some have argued that the answer to achieving 8 million more graduates by 2020, and lowering the dropout rate in the coming decade should involve focusing on higher education policies aimed at increasing equal opportunity through bolstering college access; federal scholarships and student loans for instance achieved a greater degree of equality by providing all citizens with access to funds needed to pay for their degree course. However, increasing equal access is not the same as creating equal opportunity to succeed once matriculated. Thus, focusing solely on access measures continues to leave America with poor graduation rates, an inadequate number of highly skilled workers, and inequality in graduation rates among matriculated students stratified by socioeconomic status.

According to the Theory of Social Reproduction, “[e]conomic obstacles are not sufficient to explain” disparities in the educational attainment of children from different social classes.\textsuperscript{17} Bourdieu went beyond relying on the “economic” explanations to answer the questions of inequality and examined how the culture of poverty, through the process of classed-based socialization, the transmission of cultural capital, and the

\textsuperscript{16} Grodsky, “Social Stratification,” 2364.

\textsuperscript{17} Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Pr (Tx), 1979), 8.
legitimizing structural institutions of the ruling-class, impacts upward mobility and occupational and financial outcomes.

When viewed in the context of college completion, Bourdieu’s theory does more than just describe the lower-income student dropout phenomenon; it explains how students are culturally unprepared to succeed in the college setting regardless of academic ability.

Against the backdrop of American’s founding philosophical principles of equality of opportunity and meritocracy, Blau and Duncan’s Status Attainment Theory states that more often than not a parent will passed down his social status position to his children; Ration-Action models, out of the field of economics, examines how the decision-making process is impacted by individual’s preference set as one continually evaluates and re-evaluates the cost versus the benefit of every decision one makes; and, The Theory of Social Reproduction explains how cultural capital, the formation of subcultures, and institutional legitimization reinforces generational social status heredity. Each of these theoretical models explains how many academically capable students enter college but leave before completing their degree. In addition, Bourdieu’s analysis reveals how social status impacts the probability of college completion, and thus upward social mobility.

These theories inform how the process of social stratification operates in the United States; and, social stratification informs how college dropout occurs. These theories can be seen as the macro-analysis of the dropout phenomenon. Looking deeper into the dropout process, by exploring how individual differences, institutional integration, and mediating factors are impacted by the culture of poverty, provides the foundation from which to offer solutions, continued research, and policy initiatives for improving upon the graduation rate and achieving 8 million more by 2020.
CHAPTER VI

THE GRADUATION GOAL AND FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Moving away from the theory-based approaches, it is helpful in understanding how the culture of poverty impacts student attrition to explore the ways in which individual differences (e.g. student perceptions, intentions and behavior), college choice, and institutional and academic integration affect the dropout decision. Throughout this assessment, the case that poverty, or a student’s SES background, influences the dropout decision will be made.

The Internal Constructs Affecting Degree Completion: Self-Efficacy, Expectations and College Choice

Much of the student departure debate singularly revolves around how the sociological or environmental factors, such as peer group, and cultural, structural, and intuitional characteristics, influence the decision to drop out. However, when focusing only on how the society at large impacts student departure, characteristics unique to the study of human behavior, recognized as the psychological approaches, are often left out of the departure discussion. In fact, it is the combination or interplay of psychological and sociological variables that give rise to human behavior. “Psychological” or internal elements are created within an individual in conjunction with the social world; both internal and external elements impact the formation of the other in a reciprocal, symbiotic manner. Individual conceptions, the greater social structure, and one’s behavior are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. Decision-making (i.e. human behavior) is a result of how individual attitudes and intentions, which are formed through social
interactions, are realized and result in human behavior or agency. Thus, it is important to understand how one’s internal dialogue and individual performance evaluations (i.e. the psychological component) impact a student’s dropout and persistence decisions (i.e. behavior or agency).

In terms of dropout and persistence behavior, a student’s social class mediates the development of internal constructs that are influenced and reinforced by college choice and collegiate structural integration. Before evaluating the “external” factors influencing persistence, it is first beneficial to evaluate the role “psychological” or internal constructs that impact educational success and failures. These psychological constructs are: self-efficacy, attitudes towards education (e.g. feelings regarding the value of education), and intentions and expectations.

*Self-Efficacy*

Social Cognitive Theory provides the most comprehensive argument for how one’s educational self-efficacy is developed and maintained. According to Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is defined as “people’s judgments of [regarding] their [ability] to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance.” Essentially, self-efficacy is one’s belief about whether or not one is capable of successfully completing a certain task or objective. Research in career and education development has found that self-efficacy is more a reflection of one’s

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2 The interplay among internal, personal characteristics, behavior, and the social world was an idea first espoused by Albert Bandura in his work on Social Cognitive Theory. He termed the interplay “triadic reciprocity.”

perceived ability as opposed to one’s actual ability. Even though past performance informs one’s perception of task capability, “self-efficacy beliefs are not synonymous with objectively assessed skills; in fact, self-efficacy often yields only moderate relations with objective ability indices.”

Given that self-efficacy is tied to performance beliefs or attitudes, it is then reasonable to assume that there are vast arrays of individual differences that can impact the formation of one’s self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy, especially as it relates to individual education performance evaluation, begins in childhood. The child’s family will prepare him, before the child even enters the school system, for what to expect regarding his educational experience. And, the parents’ evaluation of their child’s potential educational success or failure is often based upon the their own educational self-efficacy and past educational experiences. Thus, a child has a tendency to inherit how to think about school (i.e. self-evaluation of the potential for educational success) from the child’s parents even before his first actual school experience. Thinking back to Blau and Duncan’s Status Attainment Theory, it can be assumed, to some degree, that way in which educational and occupational outcomes are generationally passed down is through the unconscious transmission of educational self-efficacy from the family to the student. Additionally, educational self-efficacy is culturally transmitted and reinforced by the family’s “in-group” or socioeconomic status position.

Attitudes, interests, preferences, and worldview (again, formed by one’s social status position) inform an individual’s educational success perception. In a cyclical

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5 Ibid.
fashion, an individual’s internal worldview is influenced by one’s class status position, reinforced by the system of social stratification, and passed down to the next generation through SES-based socialization. In Robert Lent’s research exploring how Social Cognitive Theory impacts academic interest, career choice, and performance, he summarizes how self-efficacy and personal interests are developed and transmitted from society at large to the individual:

Through repeated activity engagement, modeling, and feedback from important others, children and adolescents refine their skills, develop personal performance standards, form a sense of their efficacy in particular tasks, and acquire certain expectations about the outcomes of their performance.

These perceptions of self-efficacy and outcome likelihood figure prominently in the formation of interests. More specifically, it is likely that people form enduring interests in activities in which they view themselves to be efficacious and in which they anticipate positive outcomes. Indeed, it may be difficult for robust interests to blossom where self-efficacy is weak or where neutral or negative outcomes are foreseen.⁶

The perception of one’s ability to succeed in college is stratified by income; that is, a higher percentage of high-income students attend and graduate from college as compared to lower-income students. This trajectory of success or failure doesn’t originate during the high school years or with college matriculation; it begins in childhood as one is socialized into his or her SES status position and develops one’s unique educational success perception. The perception of academic success or failure, then, can often become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, it not singularly the internal, class-based perception of academic ability that impacts performance. The environment, or actual educational experiences, also influences decision-making and academic self-efficacy; but again, the class-based social structure creates the environment in which the student interacts. It is understood that

⁶ Ibid., 89.
lower-income students have limited access to educational opportunities, and that as a family’s wealth increases, so too does their access to the cultural capital that allows for academic success. Limited “educational access can influence the quality and types of learning experiences one receives.... Personal expectations or performance standards, forged through learning experiences, may also blend with social realities to enhance or delimit academic/career options.”

Therefore, limitations or successes in academic performance are a product of internal, self-efficacious perceptions and environmentally based educational experiences.

**Educational Expectations**

Another psychological or internal construct closely tied to self-efficacy and performance perceptions that influences academic graduation outcomes are academic expectations. The rate of higher education aspirations and expectations among low-income students has risen dramatically over the past thirty years. William G. Bowen, in *Crossing the Finish Line*, found that the “aspirations gap” is almost nonexistence compared to the gap found several decades past. Bowen asserts:

> Especially noteworthy is the evidence of rising aspirations among students of low socioeconomic status (SES): whereas in 1980, 22 percent of...10th graders aspired to a bachelor’s degree or higher, in 2002, 77 percent of...10th graders aspired to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher. The conclusion is simple: there are no longer pronounced aspiration gaps by race or SES.

> The presence of high aspirations does not mean, however, that anything like all high-aspiring students know how to translate their aspirations into realities. On the contrary, there is much evidence of limited knowledge of how to prepare for college and how to enroll....

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7 Ibid., 105.
8 Ibid.
The disparity in high aspirations that result in successful graduation by SES background leads one to assume that there are significant differences between aspirations and expectations among students of differing socioeconomic statuses, especially for matriculated students. Once admitted into college, it is assumed that all students have similar aspirations: each wants to earn their respective degree. However, once students actually experience college (i.e. after the first semester), expectations of degree completion or the overall value of a degree’s return on investment are reevaluated. A disproportionate number of low-income, first-generation college students will value dropping out to college to enter the job market over persisting to graduation. Essentially a low-income student is more likely than a high-income student to modify his graduation expectation in favor of pursuing alternatives to degree completion. Unfortunately, most alternatives lead to fewer occupational opportunities, higher rates of unemployment, and lower lifetime earnings.

At some point during the college experience, for those who dropout, the intention to complete one’s degree is reversed. Most often this reevaluation is prompted due to real or actual low academic self-efficacious perceptions. “Theoretically, if academic self-efficacy is low, outcome expectations regarding finishing college are not favorable, and/or performance goals are discordant with persisting, then a student would be at risk for leaving college.”10 The shift in one’s intention to graduate, while internally based, is extremely sensitive to external academic environment.11 Low-SES students are more likely to reevaluate their intention and/or expectation to graduate due to (low) internal


11 The impact of intuitional integration on a student’s success or failure will be further elaborated upon later in this chapter.
academic self-efficacious perceptions and their actual experience during their first semester.

If the aspirations for matriculated students are high, then understanding how graduation expectations and intentions, especially of low-income students, change during their first semester becomes particularly salient to remedying the American graduation deficit.

*College Choice*

Considering that the formation of educational expectations, including graduating, is highly sensitive to the student’s first semester college experience, it would reason to assume that choosing the best college, one where the student will develop a high degree of academic self-efficacy, find an adequate amount of institutional support, and successfully integrate into the college community, would be most conducive to forming commitment-to-graduation goals and persisting in college. Thus, understanding how one’s SES background impacts college choice is key to understanding America’s problem with undergraduate attrition.

College fit research, such as conducted by Patricia M. McDonough in *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*, indicates that “…the college one attends significantly affects one’s chances of completing the baccalaureate, and that the proportions of students who persist until they graduate vary widely across institutions, even after academic ability is controlled.”12 Given this, it is important to realize that the factor that has the greatest impact on college selection is the student’s

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social class background. “The most stubborn barriers to parity in entrance to
college…are in social class background rather than race, ethnicity, or gender. Social
class status exerts twice as much effort on the selectivity of a student’s college choice as
does ethnicity or gender.”

Even when controlled for academic ability, students from a
low-income background have a tendency to apply to and attend inexpensive public
universities that have higher rates of undergraduate attrition, as compared to high-income
students who more often apply to and attend private, competitive, and elite institutions
associated with graduation rates that fall between 85%–95%.

Low-income students may also find that they have less higher educational
opportunities (i.e. fewer colleges to choose from) than their high-income peers. College
choice research has found that high-income students often apply to more colleges and
that their college application and selection process is less affected by tuition in the
decision making process. However, for the lowest-income students, tuition is the single
most important factor in deciding what college to attend, especially when uniformed
regarding financial aid opportunities. Taken in context with the growing cost of
application fees, which can range for $40 to $80 each, it has been found that lower-
income students apply to vastly fewer collegiate institutions, therefore limiting their
educational opportunities, as compared to higher-income students who might apply to
dozens of universities across the nation irrespective of application fees or tuition rates.

Higher rates of attrition among students may occur when the selection of a
collegiate institution is based upon financial constraints and not upon academic, social, or

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13 Ibid., 5.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 11.
programmatic fit. Again, the single most important factor for college choice among low-SES students is cost of attendance; and, the assumption regarding who will pay for college is strikingly different between low- and high-income students. McDonough finds that “… low SES students’ language about financial responsibility was reversed from that of the high SES students’. The low SES students were responsible for financing college, which their parents (or sometimes extended family networks) “helped out.””  

16 Low-income students internalized the college cost burden feeling as though they were ultimately responsible for the majority of their college fees. Conversely, high-income students relied upon their parents to subsume the financial obligation pursuant to attending college. McDonough found that “[a]ll of the high SES students…simply assumed expenses were something their parents “would handle” once acceptances were in hand and that parents would tell them if they were considering colleges out of their price range.”  

17 Ultimately, low-income students must manage the pressures of college research, applying to colleges, university selection, and finally financing their degree with less family support than high-income students. For low-income students, balancing these obligations ultimately limits their educational opportunities and may result in selecting a college that doesn’t necessarily “fit” their academic ability, social needs, or occupations aspirations. The stresses associated with funding one’s college degree continues year-to-year until graduation, as low-income student must continually evaluate whether or not the cost of attendance is worth the return on investment; this continual re-evaluation of college affordability increases the likelihood of dropout for low-SES students.

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16 Ibid., 143.

17 Ibid., 147.
Access to consistent and transparent information regarding an institution’s tuition costs and graduation rate would inform the decision-making process and help students of all backgrounds find the right college fit. A study by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research found that “…parents with less education, lower incomes, and less knowledge of the college application process experienced large and significant information effects…” Essentially, when given robust, quality information regarding a college’s institutional financial aid options and graduation rates, the low-income students and parents were better able to select a college that would provide the best fit for the student and would increase the likelihood of persisting. Lower-income students have less available institutional information at their disposal from which to make their college selection, thus contributing to America’s high undergraduate attrition rate.

The External Constructs Affecting Degree Completion: Academic and Social Integration

Over the past several decades, Vincent Tinto has conducted the most influential research into the process of how institutional integration affects the dropout decision. Tinto’s work sought to investigate how the relationship between the student and the institutional structure influences commitment to college completion. Essentially, Tinto argued that “the process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experience in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and

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institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout.”

Like all forms of social organizations, a college or university has its own unique social structure with member recognized rules, norms and values. If a student is to succeed in college, he or she must adapt to the college culture and act within its boundaries. It is important to realize, however, that the institutional structure within the university is also socially stratified and influenced by class-based norms like all other forms of social organizations such as neighborhoods and workplaces. Tinto would argue that the most important predictor of college success (i.e. completion) would be the degree to which the student is fully integrated into the university’s social and academic structures. And since the university social structure is dominated by class-based norms and values, it would reason to assume that lower-income students find greater difficulty in fully integrating into the institution’s social structure. Tinto asserts:

Given individual characteristics, prior experiences, and commitments, the model argues that it is the individual’s integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college. Given prior levels of goal and institutional commitment, it is the person’s normative and structural integration into the academic and social systems that lead to new levels of commitment. Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion.

Tinto identifies two types of institutional fit variables that create the whole of college community integration: social integration and academic integration. If the student is to successfully integrate into the college community, it becomes vitally important for low-income students to integrate into both the academic and social

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20 Ibid., 96.
university structures. With an understanding of how the internal or “psychological” constructs impact educational decision-making behavior, examining how the external processes, both academic and social integration, impact graduation probability will further illuminate the attrition condition.

Academic Integration

According to Tinto, academic integration “is determined primarily by the student’s academic performance and his or her level of intellectual development.” If the student is successfully integrated academically then he or she has a high probability of successfully completing college. Therefore, academic success or getting “good grades” during the student’s first semester becomes important to the formation of strong academic self-efficacy, which, in turn, leads to a stronger commitment to college completion. As the student’s level of institutional commitment rises, as a byproduct of successful academic integration, there is a “corresponding increase in the likelihood of persisting at the institution.”

However, successful academic integration does not only consist of receiving good grades, it also consists of positive interactions between the college faculty and the student. In Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini’s research into freshman year persistence characteristics (modeled after Tinto’s theory of institutional integration), the pair found statistically “significant associations between the frequency of student-faculty

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22 Ibid., 62.
informal contact and college persistence.” The research also suggests that “the quality and impact of student-faculty informal contacts may be as important to students’ institutional integration, and, thereby, their likelihood of persisting in college, as the frequency with which such interactions occur.”

The correlation between the student-faculty relationship and college persistence would then support the idea that in order to establish strong feelings of academic integration during the freshman year, low student-faculty ratios and having an open supportive faculty advisor strengthens institutional commitment and is conducive to academic success. For low-income students who often times don’t have other types of support (i.e. from the student’s family), faculty/academic support then becomes extremely important in successful academic integration.

In “Access Without Support is not Opportunity,” by Cathy Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, the need to provide low-income students with specialized academic support in order to achieve institutional integration is recognized. Providing low-income students with access only opportunities (e.g. financial aid, open admittance) doesn’t necessarily lead to academic integration or success. In fact, focusing only on providing low-income student with increased access to educational opportunities and failing to provide students with academic support “ignore[s] the fact that without support many students, especially those who are poor or academically underprepared, are unlikely to succeed...[and] our

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23 Ibid., 72.
24 Ibid.
gains in access have not closed the gap in four-year degree completion among low-income and high-income students."

In order to increase the graduation rate, students’ successful academic integration is a key component to building strong graduation commitments. It is especially important among low-income students, who have limited academic support alternatives, to find academic support on-campus through increased formal and informal student-faculty interactions. In addition to academic integration, it is also important for the student to build positive social relationships within the institution. Social integration is the second component in establishing strong graduation commitments, especially among low-income students.

Social Integration

Feeling as though one belongs as a valid member of a social community is important in maintaining membership within the social group. In the university setting, having a high degree of social integration is closely tied to developing strong friendships. And student who has successfully socially integrated with his or her fellow peers feels as though they fits into, or is at one with, the college climate. The less a student feels closely connected to other students in the college community, the more likely the student is to dropout. Without close on-campus relationships, the student’s social support system is diminished; this forces the student to seek out other forms of off-campus social support and can potentially lead to attrition. Without a feeling of camaraderie with or fidelity to the student body the likelihood of dropping out increases exponentially. For the student

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to have the best chance of graduating from college, the student must have both strong academic and social integration with the collegiate institution and one’s peer group.

Again, for successful social integration, it is very important for the student to feel comfortable with their new peer group. It is also important that the student’s sense of “fitting-in” is developed early on in their college experience. Yvonne Raley, in Why We Quit explains that “[o]ne of the key influences on a student’s commitment to completing college is whether the student integrates successfully into social circles early on.”

Additionally, William G. Spady, in Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis, states that “[t]he literature on dropouts…reveals that various measures of interpersonal orientations, friendships support, and extracurricular involvement are generally associated with staying in college.” Therefore, the sooner the student feels comfortable within the new community and is able to establish institutional connections through friendships early on, the likelihood of persisting to graduation increases. In fact, Tinto points out “…that the first eight weeks of college are a particularly critical period for determining whether a student will stay the course.”

There are many ways in which the student can socially integrate into the college community. Some examples include joining special interest clubs, participating in matriculating activities and events, living on-campus, joining a school sponsored competitive or recreational sports team, and establishing friendships with other students. However, research indicates that the establishment of friendships with other students in


the college community is the most important social integration factor as far as its impact on graduation persistence is concerned. Even when the student feels as though he has not fully integrated into the college community or is feels apart from the social climate of the student body as a whole, if he is able to establish and maintain friendships with a few of his fellow students, he is more likely to persist even if he lacks full social integration. Tinto explains that “[o]nce perceptions of social interaction (via friendship) are taken into account, perceptions of “social fit” are relatively unimportant in explaining dropout behavior.” So, even if the student hasn’t fully adapted to the college climate or involved himself in extracurricular activities, having close friendships create a sense of social inclusion and persistence increases.

Even more so than academic integration, social integration may be particularly difficult for low-income students. “Social integration, like academic integration, involves notions of both levels of integration and of degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment.” College, after all, is a community defined by the more affluent class; the university experience more closely aligns with the higher-income student’s perceptions and worldview. At the outset, low-income students may struggle to “fit-in” in an otherwise foreign social community and often times find that they have little in common with their peers and feel uncomfortable with the college climate. Students who are unaccustomed to the university setting often lack the culture capital needed to help them adjustment into their new social community. Students with the cultural capital necessary for collegiate social integration will adapt to their new surroundings rather

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
easily as compared to those who not only have to adapt to new physical surroundings and to the separation from their support system, but also have to adapt to a new culture (that of the higher classes) all together. As each student sets foot on campus, it is more likely that the low-income students will encounter more students from higher-income backgrounds than students from their similar background making the first impression one of felt exclusivity. Therefore, it may be more difficult for low-income students to form the friendships early on, a time when it is vitally necessary to feel included in the campus community in order to achieve social integration.

If a student can integrate, both academically and socially, into the university setting, then the student’s chance of persisting to graduation is tremendously improved upon. But how can students from varying backgrounds find friends with similar interests, develop a new support system, transition into not only adulthood but into a new physical environment, and sustain the necessary academic performance needed to complete their coursework? Answering this question would undoubtedly illuminate the attrition problem in America today. If higher education stakeholders could understand or tease out the mechanisms or processes by which students integrate into the college community or fail to do so, then finding and implementing practical solutions to reaching the 8 million more college graduates by 2020 would be elucidated. If a student has the academic capabilities of gaining admittance into college (e.g. acceptable grades, SAT score, etc.), then it would seem that finding the right college, one where the student maximizes their chances of fitting in academically and socially, is key to maximizing the probability of graduating.

It is especially important for low-income students to feel academic and social integration early on during their college experience. This is better facilitated if students
are informed of their institutional options and select a college that provides them with the best fit. Tinto and McDonough have shown how improving upon student-institution integration and selecting the right college leads to a higher probability of persistence especially among low-SES students. Therefore, in order to achieve the Obama Administration’s call to reach 8 million more graduates, it is necessary to leverage programs, sensitive to students from low-income backgrounds that focus on helping student select the best university and degree course tailored to their specific needs, and once matriculated, assimilates the student into their new college community.
CONCLUSION

SUCCESSFUL MODELS FOR CONSIDERATION

Decades of research into higher education outcomes has facilitated a greater understanding of the characteristics associated with those who go to college, those who graduate from college, and those who ultimately drop out. The literature overwhelming indicates that students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students are the least likely cohort to earn a four-year undergraduate degree. This thesis has examined the sociological factors, in the form of cultural capital, that make it difficult for low-SES students to overcome the obstacles associated with completing the college degree. In addition, through the examination of stakeholder policy initiatives and recommendation reports, it was determined that America must take action now if it is to increase the overall percentage of citizens with a college degree, a necessity if America is to retain a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. It is from this recognition that the Obama Administration has taken great strides to position higher education near the top of its policy concerns. The Administration has already implemented policies and programs aimed at improving college access and financial aid to the neediest students. However, as this thesis has consistently pointed out, the American attrition problem goes well beyond that of the issue of college access or that of pecuniary concerns. If low-income and first-generation college students are to succeed once they arrive on campus and persist to graduation, it is necessary investment in programs aimed at facilitating academic and social integration.

In fact, there are already a handful of successful programs in place on college campuses all across the nation, models which offer underserved, low-income students
support, beyond financial aid, that assists the student in overcoming barriers to graduation not otherwise faced by his or her higher-SES peers.

There are also successful programs that focus on the dissemination of college information or “tools for success” in order to increase the graduation rate. These models believe in establishing a college-going culture among students lacking the cultural capital necessary to select and apply to a university of best fit and to assist these students in persisting once matriculated. Two outstanding examples, which incorporate the dissemination of college information and strive to facilitate academic and social integration, are the Georgetown Scholarship Program at Georgetown University and College Summit.

The Georgetown Scholarship Program (GSP) is a unique program that offers a combination of financial aid and social support. The program does so by providing low-income students with larger grants and financial aid assistance and by offering GSP students with a support network. The GSP support network provides students with opportunities to fully integrate into the University by connecting them with peers from similar backgrounds in effort to facilitate on-campus camaraderie and friendships, by connecting the students with personal and professional mentors; by organizing various social functions such as ice cream socials, service and volunteer opportunities, and weekend away excursions; by providing the students with an “open door” to GSP staff and volunteer mentors; and, by offering a select number of student the opportunity to arrive on-campus a week before their peers matriculate to adjust to their new campus, college community, and city. Programs like GSP, when housed and coordinated through

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1 Recall from Tinto’s research that the single most important factor associated with successful social integration is the establishment of a few close friendships.
the university become instrumental in identifying, reaching out, and assisting those students in need of additional assistance once they arrive on campus. Especially important for freshman students, the additional outreach increases the odds of persistence by addressing not only their financial need but also by supporting low-income and first generation college students acclimate to their new community thereby bolstering the students’ odds of persisting to graduation.

Successful programs designed to assist underserved students enter and graduate from college also operate outside of the campus purview. In fact, there are many nonprofit organizations which aim to provide the neediest students with many different types of assistance, from after school programs that provide additional college preparation for high school aged students to programs aimed at inculcating middle school aged students with a college-going mentality. Programs that address the special needs of low-income and first generation college perspectives are often mission-based, non-profits and vary widely in their outreach capabilities. However, one of the most outstanding organizations, both in its ability to consistently achieve results and in its impact within the communities in which it operates, is College Summit.

College Summit was established in 1993, and while the organization was originally founded in Washington D.C., it now operates in well over a dozen states and communities across our nation. The goal of College Summit is to provide the neediest school districts with a curriculum that raises college awareness among low-income and first generation college students. The organization achieves this goal by providing high school students with college counseling, college identification, personal statement writing, college application assistance, and mentoring. “Over the past decade, College Summit has worked in partnership with schools, school districts and colleges to develop a
sustainable model for raising college enrollment rates community-wide.” In addition to providing students with access to information and college tools and resources, College Summit also offers intensive college preparedness workshops held during the summer for identified “rising seniors” in their partnered school districts. These students have the opportunity to attend a 4-day summer workshop hosted by a local university. The students, staff, and volunteers all stay on-campus and reside in the college dorms for the entire event. In addition to actually experiencing a college campus, the students attend an intensive boot camp style workshop to identify prospective colleges, create an application checklist and timeline, and write their personal statement. The students leave the workshop having been given the some of the cultural capital required to turn the dream of earning a college degree into an actionable roadmap to achieving that aspiration. Additionally, the students return to their school district as “peer leaders” and share their experience, college knowledge, and resources with their fellow classmates, thus inculcating an entire school with a dose of college awareness and excitement.

Programs like College Summit help students meet the challenge of identifying and adequately applying for college; essentially this “access to information” addresses the fundamental lack of cultural capital that exists in low-income households. However, as this thesis has explored, the challenges do not cease upon matriculation. Assisting these students, through programs such as GSP, with the transition from their household community to their new college community, is the next step in establishing equity among all matriculates so that each and every student with the aspiration to earn their undergraduate degree is given the opportunity to achieve that goal.

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As illustrated throughout this thesis, low-income students are disproportionately represented in the approximately 56 percent of college students who dropout of college and fail to earn their baccalaureate degree. However, the attrition rate isn’t just a problem of the poor; America, as a nation, suffers when any matriculate drops out. The need for a skilled workforce, educated beyond that of secondary school, will only increase in the coming years. To maintain global competitiveness, to reclaim America’s standing as a premier nation in terms of its percentage of educated citizens, and to adequately ready the next generation for the workforce, the deficiencies and inequities in our education system must at once be addressed. The Obama Administration, realizing this need, called on the nation to graduate 8 million more within the next decade. This thesis has made the argument that the dismal “attrition condition” is a result of America’s inability to reach out to all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic status, and provide them with the equal opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. Understanding the root causes of these educational failings paves the way for the development and implementation of programs designed to establish class equanimity and provide low-income and first generation college students with college-going cultural capital and financial aid. Making these necessary adjustments will ready America to reclaim its foothold as the leading nation in terms of its college graduates, its highly skilled workforce, and as a nation in which each citizen is given an equal opportunity to achieve their educational and occupational aspirations.


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