

EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE COLLEGE STUDENTS' DEGREE ASPIRATIONS FROM 1986-2003 ACROSS TWO NATIONAL DATASETS

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INTRODUCTION

African Americans tend to earn postsecondary degrees in significantly fewer numbers than their representation in the United States population (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). Understanding educational aspirations can assist us in structuring environments and interactions—in secondary and postsecondary institutions—that can help students aspire to postsecondary degrees and attend postsecondary institutions. Students may have differing academic abilities and family circumstances, but college experiences and institutional structures actively contribute toward increasing students' interest in and commitment to completing their Bachelor's and graduate degrees.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three questions guided this study. What affects African American students' degree aspirations, and how does this analysis differ compared to White students? Is there a significant difference between students' aspirations in the 1980s, early 1990s vs. the later 1990s? How might the predictors of students' degree aspirations differ across the Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) datasets?

SUMMARY OF STUDY

Data Sources

Datasets used for the study include CIRP Freshman Survey data for the years 1985-1999, and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Study (BPS, 1990:1994). The initial CIRP dataset included 500,000 students: all African American students and a random sample of approximately 250,000 White students. African American students were defined as those students who marked "African American" and any other racial/ethnic group on the survey. White students were defined as those students who marked "White" only in response to the question about race. This initial sample decreased after selecting cases that were not missing the outcome variable: degree aspirations.

Methods & Statistical Procedures

We conducted multivariate regression analyses separately for African American and White students in the CIRP and BPS datasets. The sample of students in BPS is much smaller than that in CIRP. The base population is 7,253. We only considered African American and White respondents in the sample. We regressed degree aspirations in the freshman year on similar independent variables across the datasets. Our aim was to find out if predictors of

students' aspirations differed by race, and differed by dataset. We note that aspirations were measured at the same time as the other variables in the model, so we cannot make causal conclusions.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Given that the findings between the BPS and CIRP dataset are similar to previous research studies (e.g., the ways in which the samples differ support previous work – see Carter, 1999, 2001), the following brief summary focuses on CIRP data. The larger paper details differences between CIRP and BPS.

The regression models predicted the aspirations of African American and White students similarly with the R^2 equaling .25 and .27 respectively. Despite the similar R^2 values, the models differed in which variables significantly affected the two groups' educational goals.

Background Characteristics

Similar to previous literature and research findings, there were proportionally more women in the African American sample in comparison to the White sample, and African Americans came from lower SES backgrounds—both in terms of parents' educational attainment and parents' income. 61% of the African American sample was women, while 54% of the White sample was women. The average parent income for African Americans was \$30-\$35,000 in comparison to over \$50,000 for White students. The mean level of degree attainment for White students' parents was a college degree. This is in contrast to African American students whose parents tended to have “some college” but not a postsecondary degree.

In the regression models, gender, and SES have significant effects on students' aspirations. Female Black students and male White students tend to have higher aspirations than male Black students and female White students. Students from higher SES backgrounds (higher levels of parents' educational attainment, higher levels of parent income) tended to have higher aspirations. This supports previous status attainment research as well as cultural capital research. SAT (measure of pre-college achievement) was a positive predictor for both groups of students. This seems to indicate that students' may take into account their previous understanding of their academic skills and performance when setting their educational goals.

Across both racial groups, students who were first year students after 1995 (1996-1999 cohorts) tended to have higher aspirations than students before 1995. It is not clear what might explain the upward trend in students' educational aspirations (also noted in the Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, and Hurtado 2005 HERI research brief) except that aspirations seem to be following national trends of better academic preparation of African American students and therefore higher aspirations seem to follow students' greater academic achievements.

Institutional Characteristics

African American students were more likely to attend institutions with lower levels of selectivity, higher proportions of African American students, and slightly smaller institutions

than White students in the sample. The mean selectivity (average SAT score by institution) of African American students' is 908 while for White students it was 1,017. African American students' mean of percentage Black enrollment was 37% while it was 5% for White students. Both African American and White students tended to attend institutions with similar student-faculty ratios—approximately 20 students per faculty member.

Of the institutional characteristics mentioned above, student-faculty ratio was the only negative predictor. For White and African American students, those who attended institutions with lower student-faculty ratios tended to have higher aspirations. What is interesting about this finding is that institution size (enrollment) tended to have a positive relationship to aspirations. Those (African American and White students) attending larger institutions tended to have higher aspirations. What seems to make a difference for first-year college students' aspirations is choosing larger institutions that also employ a large instructional staff. Students attending more selective institutions with larger proportions of African American students tended to have higher aspirations.

Pre-college Experiences, Self-Ratings, & Major

There were several measures of students' interactions and behaviors in high school that significantly affected African American and White students' aspirations. For example, hours per week spent talking with a teacher outside of class and tutoring other students held positive relationships to degree aspirations for both racial groups.

African American and White students who have high self-ratings on their emotional well-being and academic ability have higher educational aspirations. Anticipating changing one's career plans was a negative predictor of aspirations. Students who had declared or intended most majors tended to have lower aspirations than undeclared and unspecified fields except for African American and White students majoring in Biological Sciences and Health fields. It may be likely that those students majoring in Biological Sciences and Health planned to go to medical or related professional schools (which assumes graduate degrees) and that is why their aspirations are higher than other fields. In addition, African American students who declared Education and other Social Science majors also tended to have higher aspirations than undeclared or unspecific fields.

Financial Aid & Financial Concerns

Economic issues, resources, and concerns were similar in some instances and distinct in others for the two racial groups. Working (for pay) in high school had a positive effect on African American's degree aspirations but this relationship was negative for White students. Choosing to attend their campus because of low tuition had a negative relationship to degree aspirations for the African American and White students. Choosing a campus because the student was offered financial assistance was also a negative predictor of aspirations. It may be that students who are concerned about paying for college may be less inclined to articulate a desire to earn more than a bachelor's degree because of the predicted expense of a post-graduate education. Both African Americans and White students' degree aspirations were found to be positively affected by the following types of financial resources and aid: savings from a summer

job, work-study, other part-time employment on campus, and grants. Loans were a positive predictor of aspirations for African American students only.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

Our study affirms the importance of background characteristics on students' degree aspirations. But in addition, despite the differences in background characteristics between African American and White students, the significant predictors of educational aspirations across the regression models were quite similar.

This study could not examine how college interactions and experiences affect students' degree goals, but does provide additional information regarding what affects students' aspirations in their first year of college. Students' aspiration levels have increased between 1985 and 1999 and this increase may be related to the growth in academic performance levels. In this way aspirations may be a result of positive feedback students have received from family, teachers, and other significant others (see status attainment research). However, the significant roles that socioeconomic status and financial aid play in affecting students' degree goals also seems to indicate that students balance academic considerations with financial ones in terms of considering their future educational attainment.

Based on this study, we believe increased attention needs to be given to financial aid and the kind of information students receive during their college planning and choice processes. As first year college students, students seem to take into account the levels of financial aid awards in deciding what level of educational attainment they plan to achieve. The earlier information is provided to students about the affordability of four-year college degrees and graduate school, the more likely students – particularly low-income students – may plan to earn graduate degrees. More four-year campuses need to reach out to lower SES students and communities to help communicate the range of financial options available to students and what is involved in earning baccalaureate and graduate degrees.

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