

The Complexities of College for All: Beyond Fairy-tale Dreams

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Abstract

When 89% of high school graduates plan BA degrees, and low-achieving seniors who plan degrees have 80% failure rates, raising already high plans may be a poor strategy for improving college success. Using data on 7th-10th grade students, Domina et al. argue that higher plans are associated with success and suggest that my study of high school seniors is wrong. While their findings may indicate that MA plans are beneficial (although 7th-10th graders who know about MA degrees may be unusual), their research does not speak to my findings about seniors, whose plans are already very high. Contrary to Domina et al., I contend that effort may be reduced by poor articulation and information (not by high plans). I am pessimistic about poor articulation, not a “college for all ethos.” I have shown that many seniors have high plans but poor information, and this leads to predictable failures in college. Further raising those plans may improve 7th-10th grade efforts, but will not improve seniors’ college success.

Keywords

Stratification, mobility, encouraging unrealistic plans, excessive ambition, insufficient information

In my book, *Beyond College for All (BCFA)*, I called the new emphasis on getting everyone into college a revolutionary change. College for all has changed the rules in major ways, and researchers and policy makers have barely begun to think through the many implications. College for all requires changing the way high schools and colleges work. Merely advocating grander plans is not sufficient; indeed, getting everyone into college is not sufficient. As Domina, Conley, and Farkas’s (2011) article in this issue indicates, encouraging postsecondary plans may convince students to exert more effort (at least among 10th-grade and younger students), and my research has very little to say about that. However, my research indicates that, without further changes, raising plans by itself can be a cruel charade that ignores the many serious barriers to college degree completion, and it leads to a high probability of dropping out without having earned a credential and often with no payoff. Moreover,

students do not even anticipate these highly probable failures, so they do not take appropriate actions or make backup plans. If we are going to take college for all seriously, we must do a great deal more than simply convince students to raise the bar on their plans.

The article by Domina and his colleagues is a worthwhile contribution to updating the status attainment model. However, the authors assert that their analysis refutes the findings in my book, which it does not actually address. *BCFA* examines failures to provide information to seniors about their options after high school and

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the resulting consequences. In contrast, Domina et al. study the relationship between educational plans and student effort, a minor issue in my work, and they study younger students than I studied (mostly 10th grade or younger), who may be too young to be aware of open admissions. Their article also uses data from California, one of the few states that creates clear incentives, which is atypical in the United States.

THEIR ISSUE: THREE DISCREPANCIES

Domina et al.'s article focuses on a relatively minor analysis from my book, to which I devoted 3 pages in a 323-page book. The authors say that I asserted that "efforts to convince low performing students to pursue higher education have perverse negative consequences on the engagement of students in high school. (Domina et al. 2011:109). I don't believe that, and I don't say that. In those three pages, I contend that high school seniors who believe that they can attend college without working in school are less likely to exert effort in school. I show that open admissions makes school effort less important for entering college, that some college-bound seniors believe that their high school efforts are not relevant to their future careers, and that this belief is associated with reduced effort. I did not say that raising their plans would hurt their school effort.

Moreover, Domina et al.'s analyses do not use a comparable sample. They change the focus from high school seniors to two younger samples (most of whom are 7th to 10th graders). Younger students are less likely to know about open admissions, so these students' behaviors are not relevant to my contentions that some high school seniors misunderstand open admissions and its implications for the importance of high school achievement.

In addition, Domina et al.'s best data come from California. Although their article does not say it, California has taken steps to increase articulation, and it is one of the few states that explicitly publishes achievement standards for colleges at each level and stipulates clear incentives for school effort. If any state poses the kind of clear structure that would inform students about incentives, it is California. I would expect California to give students a stronger awareness of incentives, and such students may be more likely to

exert effort than in other states. Findings from California do not refute my contentions; they illustrate my contention that clarity and articulation between high school and college will improve incentives.

In their third assertion, the authors again misstate my point. It is not a vague "college-for-all norm" that causes students to postpone their efforts. It is the withholding of crucial information that would tell students about the requirements for succeeding in college and the incentives for exerting effort. As noted below, my entire book talks about information, particularly information about incentives. The authors are correct when they say that my analyses do not speak directly to the relationship between expectations and effort—that is not my contention. My contention is that poor articulation and information make it difficult for some seniors to see incentives for effort in school, and they will be less likely to exert effort. The authors do not address this contention at all.

BCFA: POOR INFORMATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

BCFA shows that many students with low achievement are planning to get bachelor's degrees. While Domina et al. suggest that encouraging young students to raise their plans will improve their outcomes, I show that 80 percent of low-achieving seniors with college plans will fail to get any degree in the next 8 to 10 years (findings from *High School and Beyond* in 1992, replicated in the National Education Longitudinal Studies in 2000). Schools are keeping these students optimistic, and Domina et al.'s article also encourages their optimism. However, while such optimism may help the 20 percent who get degrees, it is not clear that these optimistic plans help the other 80 percent, who get no degrees and some of whom get very few college credits.

The interesting sociological issue is why schools and colleges focus on raising students' plans (as Domina et al. advocate) while so thoroughly failing to provide clear information about realistic probabilities and incentives for school effort. For instance, students must take placement tests in college, which determine whether they can take college credit classes (or noncredit remedial courses), yet high schools and colleges do not notify students about these tests or about their

important implications. While upper-middle-class seniors are well informed about the value of improving their SAT scores, students planning to attend community college sometimes are totally unaware that they will take placement tests, and few students prepare for these tests. Domina et al.'s article does not deal with these questions; it merely urges students to raise their plans while saying nothing of these real barriers.

Indeed, the authors conclude that "MA expectations exert a particularly strong positive effect on student effort" (Domina et al. 2011:109). Yet this may be a narrow interpretation of their finding. Among 7th- to 10th-grade students, "MA plans" do not just indicate plans; they also indicate knowledge about master's degrees, and this knowledge probably indicates better information about the actual requirements for college. Their finding is likely to indicate that 7th- to 10th-grade students who are aware of master's degrees are more likely to have parents or schools that give them information, advice, and other kinds of support for their school efforts. Statistical controls for socioeconomic status only partly account for parent knowledge of these issues: Some parents with limited education may be aware of master's degrees and have more information about the actual workings of postsecondary education. Merely encouraging students to have plans for a master's degree will not automatically convey such information, advice, and support.

Although Domina and his coauthors do not address it, my book, *BCFA*, is about key information not being provided. Chapter 1 describes Japanese schools where trusted signals of students' achievement are provided. Japan tells low-achieving students "how well they are doing. . . . They can either revise their aspirations or increase their efforts" (Rosenbaum 2001: 16). Unlike Domina et al.'s article, Japan does not just encourage high plans; it informs students how they are doing and what they must do to accomplish their plans. While the association between plans and effort is interesting, sociologists should examine the social preconditions—Japan provides clear information about incentives. Most of *BCFA* asks if the United States does. Chapter 3 shows that 40 percent of college-bound students believe that high school performance is not related to their future, it finds that low-GPA students do not anticipate 80 percent failure rates for their college degree plans, and it speculates about reasons. Chapter 4 shows that, contrary to

the old gatekeeping model, some guidance counselors withhold crucial information, and they justify this by saying they are being kind by "not bursting bubbles." Like Domina et al.'s article, these counselors encourage high plans, which keeps students and parents happy but uninformed. Chapter 5 shows that key information is not provided about job requirements, so students do not see real incentives for school effort in the work world. Chapter 8 finds key information not provided about high school behaviors that predict later success, both education attainment and earnings. Chapter 9 finds key information not provided about how some students get good jobs after high school. To specify further what information students do not get, my later book, *After Admission* (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Ann Person 2006), indicates the ways poor information contributes to misinformed choices and failures in community colleges.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF INFLATED UNINFORMED PLANS

BCFA is not arguing against college for all; it discusses the complexities of college for all. The book shows the lack of good information for guiding the choices and actions of students, particularly first-generation students whose parents cannot provide such information. Yes, existing inequalities between subgroups persist and should be addressed, and I hope my book has suggested some options. I agree that open access is wonderful and should continue as an ideal, but if it is done without providing information about the prerequisites for college success, enrollment will not lead to degree completion. Since *BCFA* was published, the policy world has become aware that access is not enough and that college completion rates are very poor. Improving degree completion is the goal of the 23 states that have joined Complete College America, a new nonprofit organization that advocates policies I advocated in 2001 and that has endorsed ideas from our 2006 book. Another group, Women Employed, uses insights from our research to advise low-income women on how to succeed in college. Sociologists can contribute to understanding these issues and perhaps to improving outcomes. In my opinion, part of the answer is in improving information. Without that, higher plans are not

likely to be sufficient for improving degree completion outcomes.

Domina et al.'s findings seem to suggest that merely by raising their dreams a little higher and making plans for master's degrees, students will exert more effort. Although the authors seem to back away from this message in the conclusion (with vague warnings about possible diminishing returns), the thrust of their article is to focus on the positive effects of just that strategy. Indeed, they do not mention how far we have gone with this strategy already. For high school graduates in 2004 (Educational Longitudinal Study), educational plans are already extraordinarily high. Fewer than 1 percent plan not to attend college, and 89 percent plan to get bachelor's degrees. Urging these students to raise their plans does not seem like the most pressing agenda. However, if low-achieving students who plan to get college degrees still have 80 percent failure rates (as I showed was the case in prior decades), their high plans are certainly not sufficient to get them a degree. Moreover, many students raise their plans between 10th and 12th grades, and such "late bloomers" have inferior college outcomes compared to students who had such plans all along (DeLuca 2001). Advocating raising educational plans is too simple. One of the authors has made important contributions showing the kinds of social capital students need to acquire to succeed, without suggesting that students increase the scope of their plans (Farkas 1996).

The focus on students' plans as a mechanism for success carries important risks. As Ehrenreich (2009) warns, such "bright-sided" images put the burden on students so that students blame themselves for not having sufficiently high aspirations. Instead of encouraging all students to aspire to master's degrees, I would hope sociologists would identify the obstacles to student success. Sociologists should focus on the real barriers to students' success, including factors like college type, ineffective actions, and remedial placements. Stephan (Stephan and Rosenbaum 2009; Stephan, Rosenbaum, and Person 2009) has shown that after controls for college plans (and many other variables), college type is an important influence on degree outcomes, and she has shown the effectiveness of a new counseling model in making students' educational plans better informed, helping students to take effective actions related to their plans, and improving students' educational

outcomes. Naffziger (Naffziger and Rosenbaum 2009) has shown that even students with high educational plans lack crucial information and cultural skills for acting on these plans, and she shows what kinds of information and guidance can assist students in choosing colleges with better graduation rates. Sara Goldrick-Rab (2006) has shown the risks associated with college mobility for disadvantaged students. Regina Deil-Amen (2002) has shown that misunderstandings about remedial course work (obscured in many ways) may contribute to lower degree completion, even though students taking many remedial courses still retain high plans. Lofty plans are nice, but they are not sufficient. Educational reformers need to know about these barriers, and that was the goal of *BCFA*.

BEYOND FAIRY-TALE DREAMS: SOCIOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In fairy tales, children are encouraged to wish on a star to make their dreams come true. Many well-intentioned reform groups believe that raising students' educational plans will improve their educational attainment. Domina et al.'s article seems to give support to these groups, and it does so without qualification. My research has nothing to say about whether raising 7th graders' plans will increase their efforts; their article may be right on this, and that is why I believe this article is a worthy contribution to the literature. Increased effort is necessary for improved outcomes, even though its payoff varies (DeLuca and Rosenbaum, 2001).

But asserting that this refutes my findings and praising the benefits of students' plans for master's degrees is to encourage fairy-tale dreams and to neglect the crucial information and social capital that students will need to make their plans come true. Even more pernicious, a focus on encouraging plans for bachelor's and master's degrees among low-achieving seniors is incomplete. This strategy encourages unrealistic dreams and prevents students from considering realistic backup options or programs that give short-term certificates and associate's degrees on the way to their goals for bachelor's degrees.

Moreover, this strategy disparages other plans: It discourages seniors from considering associate's degrees and other potential career

pathways (Deil-Amen and DeLuca, 2010). It also demoralizes those who fall short of the bachelor's degree. Do sociologists really want to encourage unrealistic dreams and disparage students who do not get master's degrees? Encouraging students to raise their plans may squeeze more effort out of them but runs the risk of denying students the opportunity to look for more realistic options that could have good payoffs with higher probabilities.

Americans are eager to believe that a positive attitude is all that is needed for success, and consequently, those who fail have only themselves to blame. Sociologists should inform reformers and students about the many obstacles to accomplishing postsecondary educational plans and the crucial information students need for navigating the difficult transitions after high school.

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BIO

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