

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This essay uses the data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, Third Follow-up (NELS:88/94), to study access and choice issues related to postsecondary educational experiences of a national sample of young Americans who were eighth graders in 1988. Most of these young people are now leaving their teenage years and are engaged in independent decision-making and adult experiences in areas such as marriage and parenting, postsecondary education alternatives, and labor market searches and employment. Acquiring additional training and/or continuing formal study beyond high school are important objectives for many people in their twenties. Thus, this summary report focuses on two fundamental postsecondary education issues--access and choice--during the initial two-year period after high school.

Postsecondary education in the United States entails considerable heterogeneity and flexibility. Although curricular differences certainly exist in elementary and secondary education, they are relatively minor in comparison with the postsecondary landscape (i.e., institutional type, the type and length of certificate and degree programs, and so forth). Furthermore, whereas legislation requires nearly universal participation for all children under age 16, participation in postsecondary education is voluntary.<1> Finally, while students progress through elementary and secondary school in a more or less regular fashion, progressions in postsecondary education do not have this same inherent regularity.

The factors affecting participation in elementary and, to some degree, secondary education result in education systems that mirror the nation's population. In the absence of these forces, however, the postsecondary education system is highly subject to individual preferences, decisions, opportunities, and constraints. The consequences can be both positive and negative. On the positive side, individual choices may result in a closer match between predilections, abilities, and goals on the one hand, and postsecondary educational decisions concerning participation, curriculum, intensity, and timing on the other. On the negative side, constraints may lead to lost opportunities as well as social or economic inequities.

The analyses that follow document the experiences of and effects on various economic, social and ethnic groups as they participate in and navigate through the heterogeneity in American postsecondary education. As noted above, there is enormous diversity by type and length of program, intensity of enrollment (i.e., full- vs. part-time), institutional size and control, and the relative cost of postsecondary education alternatives. There may not be the full diversity or representation of the American population in postsecondary education, however, if significant barriers to access and choice exist. This could occur through deliberate means as when some state postsecondary education systems restrict access (and distribute students) on the basis of high school performance. It could also occur implicitly, such as when students and their parents consider their options and constraints in making postsecondary enrollment decisions, and limit their participation to ways that they would otherwise consider less desirable. (Of course, some inequalities in the enrollment distribution by, say, gender could occur across institutions or programs as the result of individual student preferences, and thus are not the result of access or choice barriers.)

The National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) has to date collected for 1988 eighth grade cohort members data that bracket an individual's life, from approximately ages 14 to 20. Cohort members were surveyed in 1988, 1990, 1992, and 1994. This period encompasses years in which lifestyle expectations are formed and perhaps cemented, information on many fronts is gathered and assessed, and important decision making, some of which includes or at least affects postsecondary education, occurs. The 1988 to 1994 time period covered by NELS:88 is also marked by important continuing trends in American labor markets and higher education, environments into which most members of the 1988 eighth grade cohort have just entered. These include the increasing tendency of individuals to mix work and learning by holding jobs while continuing their formal education, as well as contemporary educational paths that entail interruptions and adjustments rather than continuous, seamless enrollment patterns. The rising premium on skills and college degrees, the widening inequality of earnings across skill levels, and the increasing net financial burden on those who seek college degrees (as tuition levels continue to rise and financial aid programs shift from grants to loans) represent additional personal and societal concerns. NELS:88/94 data represent a rich source of information which can shed light on obstacles to and opportunities to participate in postsecondary education as seen by those who were in the eighth grade in the United States in 1988.

Access to postsecondary education can be affected by many factors. Students' academic aspirations or expectations, the quality and level of their preparation, and their achievements are cardinal influences. Personal considerations, such as peer influences, family background, and lifestyle choices may also affect postsecondary enrollment decisions. Through providing descriptive information about access in tables and accompanying narrative, this report addresses many of these issues. The tables explicitly examine factors influencing postsecondary education decisions by sex, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and tested achievement.

Throughout the document, special attention will be paid to students who scored in the highest quartile of the composite of the math and reading cognitive tests administered in NELS:88/92 (the Second Follow-up). Obstacles to access, if they exist at all, should be less severe for these students, a group which has demonstrated its intellectual readiness for postsecondary education. The presence of obstacles to access here may be cause to evaluate education policy in light of meritocratic principles. The other focus will be those who enroll in public and private four-year institutions.

Choice and access are related to each other in the sense that access factors may limit choices. Beyond this, choice is related to such considerations as institution or program type, the timing and intensity of enrollment, and other institutional characteristics, such as its location, reputation, size, cost, and social environment. As with the discussion of access, the narrative summaries and tabular displays discuss choice in the context of sex, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and tested achievement.

There are, to be sure, other dimensions of access and choice. These would include: nontraditional enrollments, remedial course-taking, training and retraining opportunities, and life-long learning (i.e., adult continuing education). Although important in and of themselves, these areas are beyond the scope of this essay.