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## Research Report Critique: A Primer on the College Student Journey

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# Research Report Critique: *A Primer on the College Student Journey*



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**A** *Primer on the College Student Journey*, published by the American Academy of Arts & Science in 2016, reports the “major trends in undergraduate education” that were identified by tracking the experiences of the students in the study (p. v). The tone of the primer is academic, yet accessible, with statistically-driven evidence and visual representations of the data. The introduction breathes life into the document, moving beyond analysis to communicate the nuanced stories behind the data. Readers are implored to understand that “getting a college degree really represents the outcome of a process or, perhaps better, of a journey” (p. 2). Statistical evidence is the driving force of the document, but consideration is consistently given to the students’ stories behind the data.

The introduction provides a brief overview of the historical context in which these students were pursuing higher education, including the effects the “economic distress” of the Great Recession had on their college and job attainment experiences (p. 3). Financial and economic implications of higher education are prominent features in discussions of the cost and value of higher education, thus, graduation rates, employment rates, and post-

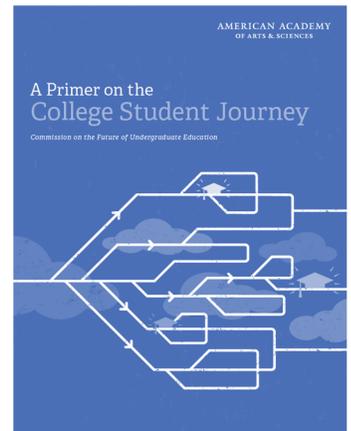
college earnings are central foci and assumed measures of success.

This primer presents “the most up-to-date evidence on the current state of affairs in higher

education” (p. 2). Although a number of studies are cited throughout the rest of the publication, the introduction focuses on a longitudinal study conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics. The study began in 2002, when the students were high school sophomores, and continued until 2012, when they had emerged into the workforce, and it provides a compelling and convincing of argument for the value of higher education to the life of the student and the success of society.

## Section 1

Through careful analysis of the processes regarding higher education, issues surrounding accessibility have been brought to the forefront as what to consider when it



comes to students enrolling in colleges and universities. In section one of *A Primer on the College Student Journey*, the focus is on “Getting Ready for College,” which includes issues of accessibility and how those issues affect various groups who are seeking higher education.

The article established the one unifying admission criteria across the spectrum of higher education: either a high school diploma or educational equivalent. Though the numbers of those who graduate high school have increased, we still find disparities among race, ability, and socioeconomic class (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016). Ultimately, because this is the first step in the application processes and accessibility of higher education, high school graduation rates are integral, this report argues, to understanding how students are preparing for college.

Correlational indicators of higher education enrollment include maintaining a GPA minimum, doing well academically in terms of state-sanctioned exams, as well as other opportunities in which students have a chance to academically outperform their peers. In contrast, the barriers indicated are “academic struggles, financial hurdles, low college awareness and/or aspirations, and an inability to complete instrumental requirements such as applying for financial aid” (American Academy of Arts & Sciences,

2016). The barriers are brought on by a “lack [of] sufficient support” as a result of students’ status in relation to higher education.

A few interesting points to take away from this article is the inclusion of non-traditional learners, as well as what the conditions are for students who do cross that barrier and make it to a higher education institution. Including non-traditional students in this population of preparing for college is a necessary one, though the section that addresses this population in the article is minute and does not necessarily categorize issues facing this population. The research on traditional students, however, indicates that though students are able to be admitted into a university, their continued success often rests on catching up academically through remedial courses and the like. What does this say about the state of entering higher education? The authors do not make it clear, but perhaps give the audience something to think about in terms of higher education admittance being more of a hoop-jumping procedure only open to privileged classes—that merit alone is not quite enough.

In sum, though this section points out a variety of concerns within the realm of accessibility, the research is foundational in nature. This section provides a very basic understanding of the issues facing accessibility in college as an issue of support throughout high school. Various populations and the disparities were considered, however,

the detail of what creates those disparities and perhaps a section on future considerations in order to better this issue is missing from the article. This is a great start in terms of identifying some of the barriers and successes we see from students who are pre-college; we would just like to see it be taken further or that future considerations be acknowledged in laying out problems.

### Section 2

Section 2 was developed to highlight a diverse depiction of the student journey getting into college. This section does so by exploring “student enrollment trends and the institutions [in which] students attend” (p. 12). Material presented in this section does take into perspective the realities of present day America, in terms of economic and social issues students face when pursuing post-secondary education.

Section 2 highlights various issues that current students face while attempting to get into college, issues such as the gap in college access. While minorities are enrolling in college more rapidly than ever before, causing a narrowing of the access gap, there still are disparities within access to higher education based on income (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2016). Low-income students have significantly lower rates of college enrollment than their affluent peers (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2016). Also highlighted in Section 2 are the evolving characteristics of

students in higher education, such as the influx of international students seen recently. University of Michigan researchers concluded that a 10% decrease in state appropriations for education was correlated with a 12% increase in international student enrollment at public universities, something that must be addressed (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2016).

Although contributors to Section 2 focus primarily on low-income students and students of color, the information is presented objectively and provides facts supporting the main arguments proposed throughout the section. Section 2 sets out to highlight current trends in student enrollment in higher education and the types of higher education institutions students are choosing to attend. The contributors accomplished this goal by presenting current statistical information supporting those trends. For example, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2016) states that “by 2014, 81% of high-income high school graduates immediately enrolled in college, compared with 52% of low-income students” (p. 14). This highlights that gaps in college enrollment for low-income students and high-income students continues to be a challenge for researchers in higher education.

Section 2 of *A Primer on the College Student Journey*, provided a good sample of the literature surrounding low-income students, but contributors could have gone into more

detail in regard to the significance of their findings. For example, it was recognized that Black and Hispanic students are enrolling in two-year colleges at higher rates than their Asian and White peers. To give readers a better context of the circumstances surrounding those students, contributors could have presented more analytical information on why.

Overall, Section 2 was strong in its ability to objectively shed light on current trends in post-secondary enrollment. However, it could have gone deeper into the significance of the facts presented. The *Journal of College Access'* overall mission focuses on current trends in enrollment. Section 2 provides a significant amount of data on a good number of issues that different students are currently facing when considering college.

### Section 3

Section 3 was intended to explore the cost of college. For many students and families, the cost of attendance to a college or university is the main determinant when deciding where to enroll in higher education. More specifically, students and families base their decisions on the cost of attendance published on the college websites. These “Sticker Prices” (p.26) reflect the costs of attendance and are made to be attractive to prospective students. If the sticker price appears to be too high, students and families rule out colleges because they are disconnected from higher educational resources. Families face

difficulties when trying to attain information about scholarships and grants opportunities available to students.

According to the research presented in Section 3, students and families unfortunately rule out many colleges they can afford. Section 3 presents data and other analytical information as a way to examine sticker prices, net prices and total net prices (tuition, fees and room and board) for public 2-year, public 4-year, private 4-year and for profit colleges. About 66% of all students do not pay sticker prices, in fact, “the majority receive grants and scholarships that reduce their required prices below the sticker price and, as a result, published prices do not capture the true cost of attendance for most students and their families” (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016, p. 26). The graphs further reinforce that students and families are able to afford colleges by highlighting that the net prices are lower than the advertised sticker prices.

Aside from scholarships and grants, students and families rely on some form of financial aid to pay for college. The American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2016) found that 66% of all students receive some sort of financial assistance and current trends have shown that increases in the cost of attending college has contributed to the increase of “students relying on student loans to pay for college” (p. 41). Colleges that

produce research and advanced degrees are funded at much higher rates than community colleges and colleges awarding master's degrees. Essentially, funding for higher education should emphasize student needs, particularly low income populations, rather than producing research that is being produced not positively connected to student success of this population.

While Section 3 argues that most families need not to focus on the sticker price but rather on the net prices, it fails to provide further implications for how families, students and colleges can acquire such information prior to ruling out a college. Another limitation in this section is that it does not include the cost of textbooks, access codes, utilities, supplies that students and families incur per semester. Overall, Section 3 was successful in highlighting the cost of college, types of funding, adjustments to funding and current trends.

### Section 4

Section Four, or "Getting Through and Getting Out," discusses seven areas of the college process. Those areas are 1) developmental and remedial classes, 2) transfers, 3) under matching of student to institution, 4) extended time to degree, 5) graduation rates, 6) attainment rates, and 7) credentials conferred. All of these sections discuss how each of the seven topics affects the undergraduate student during their

undergraduate experience and progress toward graduation.

In this section, developmental courses or remedial education are presented as a factor that negatively influences students' progress towards graduation. Although most institutions of higher education offer these courses to help students reach a college academic level, many students do not complete remedial courses and move on toward degree-related coursework. Additionally, at least one remedial course is taken in higher education with 68% at community colleges and 40% at four-year institutions. The poor progression through these courses adds additional time to degree completion.

Other influencing factors for undergraduate degree completion include transferring, under matching, and extended time to degree. Transferring from one institution to another is defined and obstacles of the process were discussed. This section reviews the transfer process as a negative occurrence for undergraduate students because it adds to the delay in obtaining a degree. Additionally, it is reported that low-income or traditionally marginalized students who under-match, or attend colleges and universities less competitive than those they could have attended based on their academic record, may lead to a delay in graduation. Finally, a true descriptor of the length of time to obtain a

bachelor's degree is presented as that of almost six years and approximately four years for an associate's degree. The actual time to degree can be extended for students who struggle financially.

The last three topics discuss actual graduation and degree attainment rates as well as credentials. For bachelor's degrees, the data unfortunately indicates less than 50% graduation rates within four years. Although the percentage increases to 59% in six years, these rates vary depending on other factors such as gender, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, among others. Further, the organizational authors acknowledge institutions are aware of the dismal graduation rates but few, if any, changes are occurring due to the challenge of this task. Similar factors influence overall attainment rates. The author discusses that women, white and Asian students, and students in high-income families have attained more degrees, collectively, as compared to people of color and low-income students. The credentials section finally discusses the low levels of associate and bachelor degrees awarded.

In conclusion, section four has a comprehensive discussion of seven major issues that affect undergraduate students' progression through college. Those seven items were objectively presented with additional influencing factors.

### Conclusion

Following the four main sections of the primer is a conclusion that discusses some of the effects that college has on students after they graduate. Examples of positive, non-monetary outcomes of higher education include higher voting and volunteer participation rates as well as improved personal and family well-being (p. 46). The reader is reminded that "the people who attend and especially those who complete college were significantly different in many ways before they enrolled" (p. 46). The "issues of causation" noted early in the document are addressed in the conclusion, as the author cites studies that identify causal relationships between higher education and positive outcomes (p. 5 & pp. 46-48).

One noteworthy statistic is the earnings gap between those who have attained a college degree and those who have not. In 2011, the average earnings of individuals with a bachelor's degree were \$21,000 higher than those with only a high school diploma (p. 48). However, the reader is cautioned about giving "outsized attention" to the monetary aspects of higher education without recognition of other benefits of education (p. 46). The organizational authors also caution the reader in interpreting averages, which do not display the full range of variation within a set of data. The journey of a student whose data represents the lowest figure in a single average is likely quite different from the

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journey of a student who represents the top edge of an average.

*A Primer on the College Student Journey* is a useful resource for leaders within higher education, as well as for students and their families or any other stakeholders that interact with higher education. One limitation, however, is that for all of the data presented, there was a lack of deeper analysis of the findings and their implications. The author addresses this by stating that future publications will address many of the questions that were left unanswered in the primer. 

### References

American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2016). *A Primer on the College Student Journey*. Retrieved from <https://www.amacad.org/content/publications/publication.aspx?id=22363>