

3. COLLEGE STUDENTS' DEGREE ASPIRATIONS: A THEORETICAL MODEL AND LITERATURE REVIEW WITH A FOCUS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDENTS

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Quite a few comprehensive studies on undergraduate experiences and general models of degree attainment and attrition have highlighted the importance of measuring educational aspirations. Many researchers theorize that student educational aspirations have strong effects on (or strong relationships with) a variety of outcomes, particularly college choice, student retention, and graduate school enrollment (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1993).

However, educational aspirations are less often studied as *outcomes*. A few higher education researchers have studied the factors that influence educational aspirations (e.g. Astin, 1977, 1993; Hearn, 1987, 1991; Pascarella, 1984), but scholars and researchers still have cursory knowledge about why the aspirations of racial/ethnic minority students and White students differ significantly.

The purpose of this chapter is to review and synthesize the literature related to educational aspirations. This review attempts to summarize what is known about aspirations in general and the aspirations of African American and Latinos specifically. I also posit a research and conceptual model, based on empirical research and existing theory, for understanding what affects educational aspirations.

Much of the literature described in this chapter has its foundations in sociology. Students' educational goals are the function of several elements, including internal psychological processes, social interactions, and structural processes; in this chapter I will focus on the formation and change of aspirations as a result of social interactions and structural processes. The main reason for this emphasis is that the concepts presented can contribute to theoretical advances in the study of educational aspirations and have practical implications for campus programming and institutional policies.

In a review of aspirations studies of the 1960s and 1970s, Pascarella (1984) stated that researchers tend to use methods relying on empirical examinations of aspirations as opposed to theoretical examinations of aspirations. Pascarella developed a model of affective outcomes that posits that individual characteristics and secondary school achievement will have stronger effects on later educational aspirations than institutional environment variables. Pascarella's model has proven useful in understanding the process by which students' aspirations change over time, but there is still a need for understanding the unique processes by which the aspirations of students of color change over time.

The study of aspirations in general can be characterized as lacking in clarity. One key area that researchers have noted as needing greater understanding and theoretical specificity is the formation and maintenance of educational aspirations — particularly in populations who continue to be underrepresented in higher education institutions (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

The aspirations of students of color often do not fall into easily predictable patterns. In several studies, African American students tend to have higher than expected aspirations (Astin, 1990; Hanson, 1994), which some researchers have called "unrealistic," while other researchers have found that high aspirations for African Americans are the mediating factor in whether they attend college (St. John, 1991).

As early as the 1960s, research comparing the college-going behaviors and attainments of African American and White youth discovered significant differences in the aspirations and aspirations-change process between the two racial groups. In some studies, the researchers found that African American youth had lower aspirations than White youth while in others, the aspirations of African American youth were higher than or similar to those of White youth (Portes & Wilson, 1976; St. John, 1991). Regardless of the direction (or lack) of difference in aspirations levels, it has been clear that the variables affecting aspirations can differ in magnitude and direction between the racial groups.

There has been much less research on the aspirations of Latino high school and college students. The educational attainment rates of Latinos are at crisis levels; Latinos (particularly Mexican Americans) have much lower high school completion rates and college-going rates than White students, and tend to be concentrated in two-year institutions.

Researchers have suggested that "increasing minority participation in graduate programs is an important national goal to be realized. . . . It is for the collective benefit of society that the representation of minority group persons among those earning advanced degrees be increased" (National Board on Graduate Education cited in Deskins, Jr., 1994, p. 144). Indeed, a recent study found that the racial representation of physicians affects available health care in poor and minority communities (Komaromy, Grumbach, Drake, Vranizan, Lurie,

Keane, & Bindman, 1996). Therefore, the aspirations and subsequent graduate degree attainments of minority students not only have an impact on individual factors such as income, but also can have an impact on the welfare of entire communities.

This chapter is organized in two parts: the first addresses theoretical foundations relating to the study of aspirations, and the second describes a model of educational aspirations and highlights the empirical studies that relate to aspects of the model.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ASPIRATIONS STUDIES

STATUS ATTAINMENT

Status attainment literature in the field of sociology provides the main foundation for the study of the educational aspirations of high school and college students. Blau and Duncan (1967) developed the first status attainment model, which focused on the occupational attainments of males from White and African American populations. Blau and Duncan's model assumes that ascriptive characteristics (father's education and income) determine the male's occupational attainment. The model is quite parsimonious and is composed of the five following variables: father's educational attainment and father's occupational status, and the respondent's educational attainment and first-job status. The first two are predictors of the latter two, and all four variables are predictors of the respondents' eventual occupational attainment. Educational aspirations were not included in Blau and Duncan's original model, but subsequent status attainment research has developed the model to take aspirations into account.

Many researchers have noted one main weakness in Blau and Duncan's model: the relationships between the variables could not be sufficiently explained (Kerckhoff, 1984; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). The model has been criticized because there seems to be little theoretical support for the concept that fathers' education determines sons' occupational attainments besides a strict notion of social reproduction (that is, people's socioeconomic status is determined by the status of their parents and there is little mobility between generations). In attempting to further enhance Blau and Duncan's model by explaining the processes by which a parent's socioeconomic status can affect the status of the adult child, Sewell, et al. (1969) and others expanded the model to include social psychological variables. In developing this expanded model, called the social psychological model of status attainment, the "Wisconsin model", or a socialization model, it was the position of the



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