

Urbanicity and the College Choice Process: Exploring the Role of Academic Identity

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Abstract

By the end of the 20th century, females were enrolling in undergraduate programs at a higher rate than their male counterparts. This female advantage persists across racial groups and applies to most students living in urban areas. Within the urban context, it is most pronounced among poor Hispanic and Asian students and among working class and elite white students. Because the gender gap in college enrollment is not fully explained by family income, race, and location of residence, this paper suggests the inclusion of academic identity as an explanatory concept. Further, a greater understanding of academic identity holds the key to more effective and powerful partnerships between institutions of higher education and members of the community.

The importance of a postsecondary education is commonly cited as essential to success. Globalization, a knowledge economy, and technological innovation collaborate to raise the demand for an educated populace. The benefits of education are assumed to flow simultaneously to the individual and to the society within which the individual resides. In the 21st century, education is power.

Since education is deemed a cultivator of power and opportunity, many question the equitable nature of postsecondary access. That is, if postsecondary education is so important, do all individuals have an equitable opportunity to pursue an education after high school? This paper seeks to examine the equitability of college opportunity through the lens of gender.

By the end of the 20th century, females in the United States were enrolling in undergraduate programs at a higher rate than their male counterparts (Mortenson 2001). This *female advantage* persists even after controlling for family income, race, and location of residence. Few studies have explored the possible explanations for the gender gap. Indeed, a majority of the college access literature focuses on enrollment variance by race and socioeconomic status.

Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital and Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital are commonly used to explain inequities in postsecondary education. Both theories suggest that a student's environment and the social relationships taken up play a critical role in cultivating non-economic resources. These resources, or capital, can be utilized to achieve desired social ends, just as financial capital purchases desired

products or services. In the case of college access, postsecondary enrollment constitutes the desired social end.

Implicit to Coleman and Bourdieu's theories is a link between a student's identity and social and cultural capital (Tierney 2002). In other words, the same factors that influence the amount and types of capital (in all forms) to which a student has access also influence the construction of a student's identity. Identity is shaped by and shapes one's social and cultural capital.

Without explicitly testing the hypothesis in this paper, I suggest that one's academic identity explains much of the variance in college-going behavior. Inasmuch as gender gaps in enrollment persist, even after controlling for the widely accepted enrollment predictors, the explanation for inequitable opportunity must extend beyond socioeconomic status and academic preparation.

Access to Higher Education

A wealth of research has addressed issues of college access as it relates to racial and ethnic background and to social class. Asian students are the most likely to enroll in postsecondary education, while Black and Hispanic students are less likely to enroll. Additionally, a family's income level and the educational level of a student's parents positively influence the likelihood of college attendance (Paulsen and St. John 2002; Ternezini, Cabrera, and Bernal 2001; St. John 1991).

Place of residence is also identified as a predictor of college going behavior (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine 1995). Smith, et al. (1995) found that rural students were less likely than their suburban counterparts to pursue an education after high school. Today, two primary obstacles are identified with college opportunity: financial access and academic access (St. John 2002; Choy 2002). Since the 1990s, tuition costs have risen dramatically. As tuition costs climbed, need-based grant aid declined and greater proportions of student aid were offered in the form of student loans (College Board 2002). For many low-income students, college is now simply unaffordable (Paulsen and St. John 2002).

Academic preparation stands as another obstacle to college enrollment. Fewer low-income students are college-qualified, in terms of high school curriculum and the taking of college entrance exams (NCES 2000). Even among the college-qualified, however, low-income students are less likely than their more advantaged peers to enroll in college (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2001).

Socioeconomic status is a key predictor of financial and academic access. As such, it explains a substantial amount of the inequity in postsecondary opportunity. Gender differences in college enrollment present a different problem, for which socioeconomic status is less capable of explanation. Notwithstanding similar socioeconomic backgrounds, gender gaps continue to shape postsecondary opportunity. Identifying

the groups of students who experience pronounced gender inequity is paramount to determining an explanation for the enrollment gap.

Data and Methods

The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS 88:2000) is an appropriate data set for this study. It provides a large, nationally representative sample and it provides data on college enrollment, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and the type of community within which the student's high school was located.

In order to evaluate a measure of college-choice, this study analyzes post-secondary education enrollment status at the time of the third student follow-up. The third student follow-up occurred in 1994, approximately two years after most participants had graduated from high school. Specifically, the dependent variable identifies whether a participant was enrolled in a baccalaureate, or four-year degree, program at the time of the third survey follow-up.

The independent variables for this study include race, gender, and location of the participant's high school. Because the actual residential location of the participants is not publicly available, I have used the location of the high school as a proxy for the type of community within which a student lives. The assumption is that public high schools draw students from the surrounding neighborhoods. Since a similar assumption cannot be made for private high school enrollment, all private high school students were deleted from the sample.

In addition to private high school students, public high school students with missing high school location data and students who self-identified as Native American or Alaskan Native were cut from the sample. This latter group was dropped due to small sample size. Combined, these deletions reduced the overall sample from 12,144 to 10,094 cases.

In order to paint a more intuitive picture of how gender, race, community, and family income interact to influence college choice, this paper reports an analysis of frequencies. The focus of this study is on identifying patterns in enrollment, based on the independent variables. A comparison of frequencies is a useful tool for observing variance in the dependent variable at the group level. The author has also run a logit model including multiple levels of interaction terms with similar findings for the main effects and first level interactions.

One limitation to the use of NELS data is that it only samples from a traditional college-age population. Another limitation centers on issues of persistence in post-secondary education. Students who previously had enrolled, but at the time of the third follow-up had stopped-out, would be grouped with students who had never attended a four-year program. Furthermore, students enrolled as of the third follow-up, but who subsequently stopped-out would be grouped with those who ultimately earned a baccalaureate degree.

A final limitation to this study pertains to the aggregation of racial groups. Especially given the interest in identity construction, it would be ideal to divide the Hispanic and Asian students into their actual ethnic groups. Sample size requirements, however, constrain the feasibility of disaggregating.

Findings

A simple comparison of baccalaureate enrollment by gender suggests a *female advantage* in college going, among traditional college-age students (at the time of the 1994 follow-up, 34% of females and 30% of males were enrolled in a four-year degree granting program). But does this advantage apply to all females? A more complex analysis is required to understand the situations for which the female advantage holds.

Subdividing the sample by race produces some discrepancies in the female advantage (see Table 1). For instance, within the Hispanic population a female advantage is nonexistent. At first glance, Hispanics seem to be the only population with gender equity. On the other hand, the most pronounced female advantage, in both relative and absolute terms, occurs among the African-American population. Incidentally, these findings are also consistent with other research that identifies Asian students as the most likely to enroll in a four-year program and Hispanic students as the least likely.

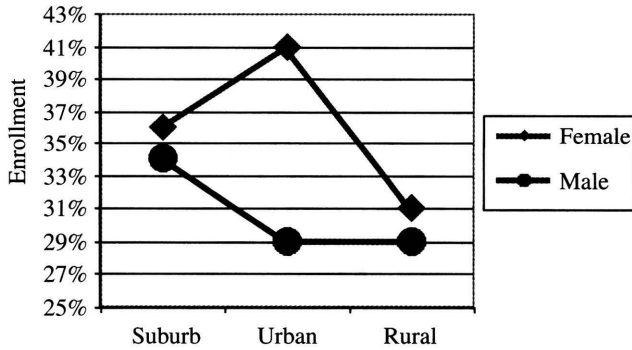
Table 1. Baccalaureate enrollment rates by gender and race. N=10,094

	Female	Male	Gender Gap
White	35%	31%	4%
Black	32%	25%	7%
Hispanic	20%	20%	0%
Asian	56%	50%	6%

While the female advantage generally holds across racial groups, some variation in magnitude between racial groups exists. To better understand how enrollment patterns differ in each racial group, it is useful to include a control for community type. The inclusion of community type produces 24 student categories (the multiplicative interaction of two gender, four racial, and three community types). The most accessible way to view the enrollment impact of these interacting background characteristics is to view each racial group individually.

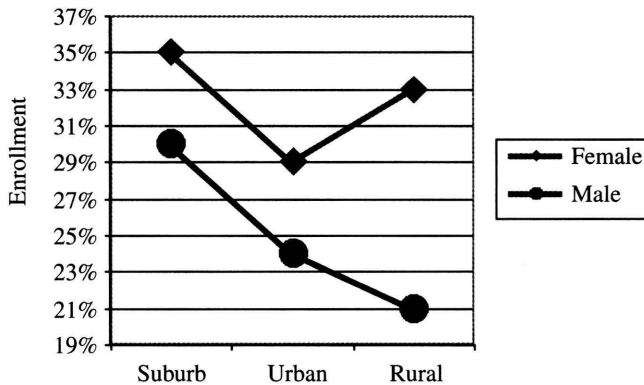
Among the white population, the female advantage holds across community types, but it is not particularly strong in suburban and rural contexts (see Chart 1). For urban students, however, the gender gap is substantial.

Chart 1. White baccalaureate enrollment rates by gender and community type.



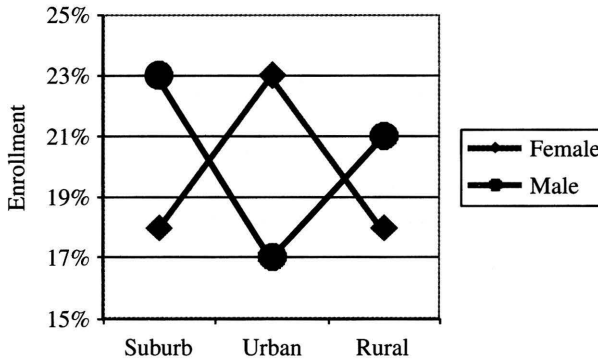
As mentioned previously, the African American population maintains the largest gender gap between male and female enrollment. It is not surprising, therefore, that a sizable female advantage holds across each of the community types (see Chart 2). For blacks, the largest female advantage occurs within rural communities.

Chart 2. Black baccalaureate enrollment rates by gender and community type.



Of the four racial groups included in this study, Hispanics appeared to be the only population that experienced gender equity, as related to college enrollment. With a more refined view, however, gender gaps among Hispanics emerge (see Chart 3). Unlike the white and black populations, a *male advantage* appears in suburban and rural areas. Urban areas, on the other hand, witness a sizable female advantage.

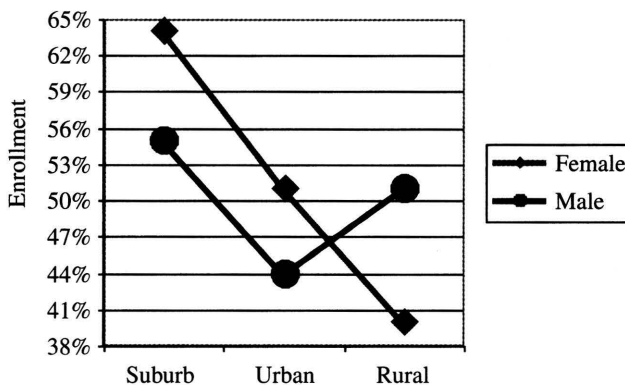
Chart 3. Hispanic baccalaureate enrollment rates by gender and community type.



A majority of the Hispanic population resides in urban communities; indeed, one-quarter live within just 12 city limits (Census 2000). Thus, the Hispanic gender gap within urban communities is of particular interest. The significant female advantage, in urban communities, mirrors that found among white and African-American students.

While both male and female Asian students enroll at the highest rate, compared to other racial groups, the Asian population is not without interesting patterns of gender inequity (see Chart 4). A sizable female advantage holds in suburban and urban contexts, but an apparent male advantage emerges among rural Asians. Given the small sample size of rural Asians, it is premature to suggest the existence of a rural male advantage.

Chart 4. Asian baccalaureate enrollment rates by gender and community type.



Interestingly, a substantial female advantage consistently emerges within all racial groups in the urban context. In other words, the female advantage is generally most pronounced among urban students. To this point, we have yet to include socioeconomic status in the analysis. It is unlikely that family income or parental education level will explain a significant amount of the gender gap in baccalaureate

enrollment; however, inclusion of family income may refine our understanding of where the gender gap is most pronounced.

In order to better understand the urban female advantage, family income was included in the analysis of urban baccalaureate enrollment (see Table 2). The sample sizes for middle and upper-income students of color (family incomes > \$50,000) were too small to include in the analysis. As reported in Table 2, the female advantage is constructed by subtracting the baccalaureate enrollment rate of male respondents from the rate of female respondents. A negative number in Table 2 would signify a male advantage.

Table 2. The urban female advantage (% female enrolled – % male enrolled) by race and family income. Student categories with a sample where n<45 are marked NA.

	< \$25k	\$25k–\$50k	\$50k–\$75k	> \$75k
White	3%	9%	0%	21%
Black	2%	3%	NA	NA
Hispanic	10%	6%	NA	NA
Asian	11%	3%	NA	NA

Of initial interest is that across each of the racial and income groups, a male advantage never emerges. The female advantage, therefore, appears to apply to most types of students living in urban areas (some urban student groups experience relative gender equity). Poor Hispanic and Asian students and working class and elite white students experience the most pronounced female advantage. The interaction of gender, race, community type, and family income level unveils interesting patterns of college enrollment. I have reviewed only the urban context in the body of this article, though it is worth noting some additional findings.

First, a male advantage never emerges within the white population. Conversely, across all three community types, the most pronounced white female advantage exists among the elite students, or those with family incomes above \$75,000. Further research is necessary to identify the postsecondary options available to wealthy white males.

Secondly, poor and working class black students, in the rural context, experience a female advantage of 12% and 22%, respectively (the absolute gender gap). Additionally, for urban and suburban students, the initial indicators are that the female advantage is most pronounced among those with family income greater than \$50,000. Of course these cases represent a very small sample, but this is a potential pattern of interest.

Third, within the Hispanic population, only poor and working class urban students experience a female advantage. All other Hispanic student groups experience a male advantage. This raises an intriguing question about academic identity: why are Hispanic males in suburban and rural communities more likely than their female peers to enroll in a baccalaureate program, yet in the urban context, females are more likely?

Lastly, the male advantage for rural Asian students holds across income levels. Interestingly, the metropolitan female advantage only holds for poor and working class students. Among metropolitan Asian students with family incomes above \$50,000, a male advantage emerges. In other words, the gender gap among metropolitan Asian students is directly tied to family income.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics. Enrolled in a baccalaureate program at the time of the 1994 follow-up. N=10,094

	< \$25,000				\$25,000–\$49,999				\$50,000–\$74,999				≥ \$75,000			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	N	ξ	N	ξ	N	ξ	N	ξ	N	ξ	N	ξ	N	ξ	N	ξ
White																
Urban	125	0.21	154	0.23	189	0.31	260	0.40	60	0.53	71	0.54	35	0.66	44	0.86
Suburban	325	0.18	353	0.21	796	0.31	861	0.33	265	0.47	275	0.48	121	0.67	116	0.74
Rural	488	0.18	602	0.21	659	0.32	730	0.32	128	0.49	131	0.59	36	0.61	50	0.68
Black																
Urban	98	0.18	125	0.20	75	0.29	95	0.33	13	0.23	13	0.69	4	0.75	2	1.00
Suburban	60	0.20	66	0.23	60	0.35	63	0.33	14	0.50	15	0.80	4	0.50	6	0.83
Rural	86	0.19	128	0.30	43	0.14	53	0.36	6	0.67	4	0.75	2	0.50	1	0.00
Hispanic																
Urban	146	0.10	192	0.20	151	0.20	136	0.26	6	0.67	7	0.43	4	0.75	6	0.17
Suburban	80	0.19	115	0.14	97	0.23	116	0.18	19	0.32	22	0.27	6	0.67	8	0.50
Rural	77	0.16	87	0.13	58	0.28	56	0.25	4	0.25	9	0.11	2	0.00	2	1.00
Asian																
Urban	52	0.40	45	0.51	58	0.41	63	0.44	11	0.64	14	0.57	5	0.80	11	0.82
Suburban	33	0.45	38	0.66	85	0.41	83	0.55	23	0.78	37	0.73	24	0.92	27	0.74
Rural	13	0.38	13	0.23	26	0.42	14	0.36	4	0.75	8	0.63	6	1.00	5	0.60

Perhaps surprisingly, the gender gap is not that sizable among poor and working class African Americans. One can cautiously assume the black female advantage is sizable among the more affluent urban students.

In summary, the findings presented here can be annotated into three main observations:

1. From a macro-perspective, the female advantage in traditional-age college enrollment holds across all racial groups, except the Hispanic population for which males and females enroll at the same rate.
2. The most pronounced female advantage occurs in the urban context, even after controlling for family income.
3. Even after controlling for race, community type, and family income, gender gaps in baccalaureate enrollment persist. The gaps are mostly in the form of a female advantage but for some student groups a male advantage emerges.

Discussion and Conclusion

Identifying a female advantage in baccalaureate enrollment is intriguing, but absent greater clarification, it does little to identify where inequitable college opportunity exists. To more fully understand who is underrepresented in college, the analysis requires greater complexity. A majority of studies on college-going suggest race, community type, and family income explain the variance in college enrollment. Indeed, this study confirms the findings of what might be termed the income advantage, the White and Asian advantage, and the suburban advantage. But, notwithstanding the inclusion of these commonly used variables, a gender gap in baccalaureate enrollment persists.

I contend that variance in the construction of academic identity leads to variance in college-going behavior. Gender, race, community type, and family income are all measures of stratification, yet they are also all critical characteristics in the formation of one's identity. The college choice process is considered complex and reflective of one's economic, social, and psychological characteristics (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999).

If we assume the social-psychological perspective that identity is constructed dialogically through relationships, then the types of relationships a student takes up are important to our understanding of college enrollment. One would assume that students who enter different relationships would experience a different construction of academic identity. In other words, it would seem logical for identity formation to be unique to one's background characteristics, including location of residence, socioeconomic status, and race.

On the other hand, those who enter similar relationships would be thought to have similar academic identities. Students of the same racial group, living in similar communities, with similar family incomes engage in many relationships common to the group, yet college enrollment continues to differ between males and females. This begs the question: what about academic identity differs between males and females in such a way that the likelihood of college enrollment is affected?

As the higher education community reaches out to include those students traditionally underrepresented, the following questions may help frame the access conversation: first, how well do we understand the identities of those underrepresented? Do we recognize our role in the construction of their academic identities? Secondly, how do we help them project themselves (identity, culture, and all) into the higher education environment? When we take these questions personally, we must further reflect on how prospective students perceive our own campus culture and identity. We must understand the landscape on both sides of the ravine if we are to build a successful bridge.

As we delve deeper into the relationship between identity and baccalaureate enrollment, it becomes apparent that many patterns of college choice exist. Our ability

to create equitable access to post-secondary education will be accelerated when we ground our efforts in an understanding of student identity. In fact, understanding differences in academic identity construction will guide the formation of partnerships capable of reaching those who have historically been disadvantaged.

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