

Executive Summary

Low income students, and students who are the first in their family to attend postsecondary education, are underrepresented in university. This inequality has implications for economic and social mobility as well as for a wider sense of distributional fairness. Because college tends to be accessed more equitably, it has been suggested that college to university transfer pathways can help to provide university access to underrepresented groups. Using data from a large Toronto college, we compare college students' university aspirations at entry, graduation rates, and transfer outcomes across socioeconomic status (SES) groups to better understand how the college to university transfer mechanism is being used, and by whom.

Methodology

Using administrative and survey data at a large Toronto college from 2007 to 2014, the study tracks 36,054 college entrants from high school until six months after college graduation. Students are classified by neighbourhood income and parental education status, with 34% of entering students classified as low income, and 61.4% of students classified as first generation (neither parent has a university degree). A total of 7,638 students who graduated during the same seven-year period responded to the Graduate Satisfaction Survey (76% response rate). Of these graduates, 1,106 indicated that they had transferred to university six months after graduating from college.

Research questions include the following:

1. How do background characteristics in the college sample differ by income and parental education and what is the role of these factors in influencing a student's aspirations for transfer?
2. What is the role of parental education and neighbourhood income in influencing transfer to university?
3. For those who do transfer to university, do transfer information sources differ across first generation and income groups?

Key Findings

Overall, 49% of non-first generation students aspired to transfer compared to 43% of those who were first generation. Students from high income neighbourhoods proved no more likely than their peers to aspire to transfer. Regression findings confirm that those who have a parent with a degree are 6% more likely to aspire to transfer compared to first generation students (all else equal). This effect is concentrated among students who lived in low income neighbourhoods. The differences in aspirations are important because when controlling for academic and program factors (areas that in themselves have substantial SES gradients), students with more highly educated parents were still more likely to aspire to go to university.

An income gradient is observed in academic performance in college as well as in persistence to graduation, with higher income students performing better on both metrics. The same gradient is not observed across parental education groups. Because of the possibility of transfer prior to program completion, it is unknown if the increased attrition observed among low income students can be attributed to students dropping out.

Actual transfer to university is a pathway frequented more often by non-first generation college graduates, as they had transfer rates that were about 3 percentage points higher than their first

generation peers. First generation students who did aspire to university were also somewhat less effective in converting those aspirations into reality. When controlling for available socio-demographic factors and grades, first generation students are still 3% more likely to transfer to university than their non-first generation peers.

College course grades appear to explain much of the differences observed from the point of graduation to that of transfer. Among those who aspired to go to university, having a GPA above 3.5 (or 3.0-3.49) was associated with a 21% (or 18%) increase in likelihood of transfer compared to those with a GPA below 3.0. The graduates with the highest grades who aspired to go to university are the most likely students to transfer. Other factors like college program choice are also important in explaining transfer propensity.

Of the population of college graduates who eventually transferred, 31% are from low income neighbourhoods and 68% are from families where neither parent holds a university degree. Even though these two underrepresented groups did not have higher propensities to transfer than their peers, it is possible that a larger share of these students are entering university by way of college transfer compared to the share entering university directly from high school. Future work that directly compares a university population to a group of college-to-university transfer students will determine whether these pathways are working to improve access.

Student advising services are important for first generation and low income students. Preliminary findings indicate that college advising services may have a special role to play in facilitating university transfer for these underrepresented groups as they are far more likely to use them than their peers.

Conclusions/ Policy Implications

First generation students prove less likely to aspire to transfer upon college entry, and also transfer less than their peers upon graduation. However, the inclination for transfer is concentrated among low income students, indicating that cost concerns may be driving some of the use of college as a vehicle for transfer. Overall, transfer to University may be equity enhancing, but this work was unable to prove that result as we cannot compare transfer students in our college sample to the typical university population. An important take away from this work is that aspirations for transfer are an incredibly important determinant of eventual transfer, and those with a parental degree are most likely to exhibit these aspirations. Fortunately, this is an area that can be influenced by teachers, councilors, professors and parents to ensure that qualified and interested students feel inclined and able to attend university.