

Executive Summary

Low income students, and students who are the first in their family to complete post-secondary education (first generation), are underrepresented in university. This inequality has implications for economic and social mobility as well as for a wider sense of distributional fairness. Because college¹ 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 pathway is being used, and by whom.

Methodology

Using administrative and survey data from 2007 to 2014, the study tracks 36,054 Seneca College² 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 to university?
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

Student characteristics by socioeconomic status

Student demographics, program of study selection, and academic preparation all differ by parental education and income. Only half of college entrants who were low income with university educated parents reported English as their first language; similarly this group also had lower rates of Canadian citizenship and increased likelihood of being placed below college level English. Regardless of income, students with university- educated parents are more likely to enter more advanced credential, and were more likely to enter technology programs and less likely to enter community service. Additionally, students with university educated parents were more likely to have taken university preparation courses in high school, and to have previously attended university before entering college, regardless of income.

¹ The term "college" used throughout this report refers to Ontario's publically funded college system, consisting of 24 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs).

² Seneca College is one of Ontario's 24 CAATs offering a range of credentials: certificates, diplomas, degrees and graduate certificates. The majority of Seneca's program offerings are 2- and 3- year diplomas.

Plans for university

Overall, 49% of college entrants with university-educated parents planned to attend university after college compared to 43% of students without university-educated parents. However, students from higher income neighbourhoods proved no more likely than their peers to aspire to transfer. Students who were low income but with university educated parents were the most likely to have plans for university. These results held true when controlling for academic and program factors.

Transfer to university

Transfer to university was 3% points higher for college graduates who had a parent with a degree than those who did not, an affect that held when controlling for socio-demographic factors and grades. In contrast to parents' education, this study showed that rates of transfer did not differ by income, with 31% of transfer students versus 32% of non-transfer students came from the lowest neighbourhood terciles. When combined categories of income and education were compared, graduates who were both low income, but had at least one parent with a degree, were 4% points more likely to transfer than the reference group who were both low income and did not have a parent with a degree.

The graduates with the highest grades who aspired to go to university are the most likely students to transfer. Among those who aspired to go to university, having a GPA above 3.5 was associated with a 21% point increase in likelihood of transfer compared to those with a GPA below 3.0. Other factors such as program of study are also important in explaining transfer propensity.

Conclusions/Policy Implications

Overall, this study shows college students with university educated parents are slightly more likely to aspire and to ultimately transfer to university. This is similar to previous research on university attendance for the high school population, however the gap seen in the current study comparing college transfers and non-transfers is much smaller. In contrast to studies on the high school population in which income has a large effect on who attends university, income had little or no effect on whether college graduates transfer in this study. In fact, students who are both low income and have university educated parents are the most likely to aspire and to transfer to university compared to all other combinations of education and income. Income however, plays an indirect effect, in that higher income students are more likely to obtain higher grades and to graduate, which are major factors in transfer.

As the current study focussed on transfer within the college population, it is important to contrast the composition of the college transfer population and the university population. Other comparable data sources indicate that more than half of students at universities in Toronto have a parent with a degree compared with just 31% of Seneca's transfer students (NSSE, institutional data, 2011). Similarly, on a provincial level, only 22% of university students come from the lowest income tercile of the Ontario population, compared with 31% of Seneca's university transfer students (Dooley, Payne & Robb, 2016).

Although the initial decision to attend college or university is influenced by parental education and income, students who attend college initially and then transfer to university differ only slightly from their college peers who do not transfer to university by these socioeconomic characteristics. For college graduates who continue on to university, academic performance, program choice, and aspirations for university at college entry are the key determinants. Within the college population, college performance and aspirations for transfer are more important than sociodemographic factors on transfer rates, indicating this pathway may be more merit- and motivation-based. As well, the preliminary finding that transfer students who are lower income or do not have a university educated parent rely less on their parents and family and rely more on college advising services for information, underscores the role institutions can play. This suggests that facilitating and encouraging college to university transfer, as well

as supporting students academically to ensure they qualify, may be a vehicle to reduce the socioeconomic inequity in university attendance in Ontario.