The simultaneous impact of the Great Recession and a national focus on improving postsecondary access and persistence present both challenges and opportunities for the field of higher education. In this context, questions of how colleges and universities can better support low-income youth are increasingly at the forefront of research and educational reform agendas.

The spotlight on higher education places researchers at an important crossroads—we need to assess not only what we know about low-income college students but also where our information gaps lie. Currently, we know that low-income students tend to enter and complete college in much smaller numbers than their middle- and high-income peers (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2012; Oseguera, 2012) and only 11% of low-income students earn a postsecondary degree by the age of 26 (Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2010). Historically underserved populations such as low-income Black, Latino and Native American students are less likely to earn degrees than their White and Asian/Pacific Islander peers (IHEP, 2011). Low-income students are also more likely to attend under-resourced, overburdened community colleges (Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Oseguera, 2012). But apart from these types of descriptive statistics, what research is being conducted on low-income college students? And specifically, how does the higher education field prioritize this research?

In this brief, we examine several broad research trends that occur in five key peer-reviewed higher education journals over a 20-year period (1989–2008). In particular, we ask:

1. How many articles were published that examine low-income youth in the context of postsecondary education?
2. Were the data on low-income youth collected and analyzed via quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches?
3. In what types of colleges and universities have low-income youth predominantly been studied?

Exploring these research trends allows us to better understand how the field has conceptualized the problems of college entry, persistence, and completion for low-income students. From this understanding, we can formulate research agendas for the future that will be relevant and informative to initiatives aimed at improving college opportunities for low-income youth. More precisely, we can develop a deeper understanding of how higher education can promote equitable outcomes.

Uncovering Trends in Research

Peer-reviewed journals were chosen as the focus of our analysis because they represent the current thinking and debates within scholarly research (Silverman, 1987). These publications are an integral part of scholarly dissemination; the occurrence of a research topic within a journal often indicates how the research community understands the topic and whether it deems the topic significant (Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). Therefore, a content analysis of academic journals can provide documentation of research trends over time (Graham, 1992).
Journal Selection and Analysis

We examined articles published in five widely referenced peer-reviewed journals during the years 1989 to 2008. Selecting a 20-year period for the content analysis allowed us to identify changes over time and to determine whether the coverage of low-income students in postsecondary education has increased. Although we do not claim that our sample of journals represents the entirety of the field, we do believe that together these publications provide a useful barometer of general trends.

We first selected three of the most widely referenced journals in the field of higher education: The Journal of Higher Education (JHE), Research in Higher Education (ResHE), and The Review of Higher Education (RevHE). Each has high visibility and impact on research in postsecondary education and each covers a broad range of topics. In addition to journals focused specifically on higher education, we also included two general education journals with specific disciplinary foci: Anthropology and Education Quarterly (AEQ) and Sociology of Education (SOE). These two journals were chosen because of their interdisciplinary nature, coverage of students’ experiences across and within different types of educational institutions (i.e., both K–12 and postsecondary education), and their tendency to publish a variety of methods.

In our review of each journal, we focused on empirical studies and excluded literature reviews, policy analyses, and editorials. Within the remaining body of work, we used two primary criteria to identify articles focused on low-income students in postsecondary education. First, low-income students were either the central subject of the research or were analyzed in comparison to other groups. Because of the variation in how scholars operationalize low socioeconomic status, we allowed for a range of quantitative and qualitative criteria to define the construct. For example, we included studies on students who attended schools where the majority of students received free/reduced lunch, participated in programs aimed at low-income youth, or received needs-based financial aid, as well as those where data such as parental income, educational attainment or other family level characteristics were analyzed to produce a low-income variable. However, to ensure consistency, only articles that explicitly described how low-income status was defined or accounted for within the study were included in our analysis.

Second, articles had to analyze the postsecondary pathways of low-income students, defined broadly to include any college-going outcomes, trajectories, or experiences. For example, we included articles that examined low-income high school students’ college aspirations, as well as those that analyzed low-income community college students’ pathways to four-year universities. In general, articles that covered topics on college choice, access, persistence/retention, and completion were included.

To conduct the content analysis, we first read the titles and abstracts of all of the empirical articles published in the journals between 1989 and 2008 to determine if low-income students and postsecondary participation were discussed. If these issues were discussed in an article, we then scanned the methods and findings sections to determine if the specific criteria described above were addressed. Coding was conducted through an iterative process. For each article that met all of these criteria, we created a record to indicate the methodology employed in the study and the institutional context of the research. These records were then tallied to reveal the trends that are described in the remainder of this brief. For each journal, at least two coders were assigned to review the articles, enabling us to cross-check for consistency and to develop refined coding categories.

Trend 1
Attention to Low-Income Students is Limited, but Increasing

In the 20-year period from 1989 to 2008, the five journals contained a total of 2,479 articles. Of these, 6% (144) were empirical studies that examined low-income students’ postsecondary pathways (see Figure 1). Interestingly, Sociology of Education (SOE) contained more articles on low-income students’ experiences in higher education than the Journal of Higher Education (JHE) and Research in Higher Education (ResHE), and was on par with The Review of Higher Education (RevHE). This is of particular note because SOE includes research on K–12 schooling as
well as higher education, whereas JHE, ResHE, and RevHE focus solely on postsecondary research.

Our content analysis revealed a recent increase in the coverage of low-income students in postsecondary education. More precisely, when we examine the contents of these publications in five-year increments, we see that JHE and AEQ remained relatively consistent with the extent of their coverage of low-income students in higher education across the 20-year period (see Figure 2). At the same time, however, there was increasing coverage of the topic in the other three journals (RevHE, SOE, ResHE). While some of this increase could be attributed to researchers including more demographic data of study participants, it is nevertheless noteworthy because it reflects greater attention to the importance of those characteristics.

While we know that college completion can be a problem for students in poverty, our analysis suggests that it is not a prevalent focus for higher education researchers. The lack of attention to the experiences of low-income college students is troubling, especially considering how closely higher education is associated with social and economic mobility. As pointed out in a recent literature review on sociological research in higher education, there are many more studies on the daily experiences of students in K–12 schooling than in postsecondary contexts (Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008). The underdevelopment of such research leaves the field with an incomplete understanding of how higher education affects students’ daily lives—especially low-income students.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge here that these five journals do not represent the entirety of scholarship on students’ experiences in postsecondary education. Indeed, there are many other journals with more specific foci, from higher education administration to the experiences
of students of color, where researchers may be publishing their work on low-income students. Nevertheless, the limited presence of this work in these five widely circulated, well-respected publications is a useful indicator of the lack of centrality of the subject of low-income students in higher education.

We need more research that can help us better understand the impact of social class on postsecondary educational experiences. Likewise, we need to afford this work the attention it deserves. We need to know more about low-income students’ college perceptions, experiences, and interactions, and how our postsecondary institutions are serving and meeting the needs of these students. If this research remains absent from the most visible journals in the field, our knowledge will remain limited, at best.

**Trend 2**

**Our Understanding of Low-Income College Students is Primarily Quantitative**

Across these five journals, data on the postsecondary experiences of low-income students have been overwhelmingly collected and analyzed via quantitative methods—84% of the 144 articles on low-income college students described quantitative studies (see Figure 3). The predominance of this approach existed in four of the five journals over the twenty-year period. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* was the only exception, undoubtedly because methods in anthropological studies are typically qualitative. Likewise, mixed-methods studies were almost non-existent in our analysis, again appearing most often in *AEQ*, but even then very infrequently. Notably, our findings about the dominance of quantitative methods in this area of higher education research are echoed in the field at large (Melguizo, 2011; Perna & Thomas, 2006).

This methodological trend is problematic because it may mean that certain research questions that would be better addressed through qualitative or mixed-methods approaches remain unasked; alternatively, these questions may be explored via approaches that do not reveal the most useful answers. Studies designed to shed light on how our educational institutions shape the experiences of low-income students would be greatly enriched by the inclusion of more ethnographic and mixed-methods techniques (Patton, 2001; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Firestone, 1987).

Questions regarding students’ daily lives are very difficult to answer through standardized surveys, which do not always reveal the subtle variations in experiences or allow for deviations from expected responses. Qualitative methods are useful for uncovering processes and mechanisms that mediate student experiences because of their emphasis on participants’ situated interpretations and actions.

**Figure 3**

**Methodology of Articles on Low-Income Students in Postsecondary Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journals</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RevHE</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ResHE</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHE</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOE</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEQ</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By interviewing students and observing them in institutional spaces, such as the financial aid office or a remedial education classroom, researchers can glean a fuller portrait of how social interactions and structures may mediate their decision-making.

Without the increased prominence of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches, the field will lack rich details about important factors such as learning and instruction, student and faculty/staff interactions, college navigation, and the organizational arrangements of postsecondary environments. Studies that examine students’ perceptions, interactions, and development during their postsecondary experiences are likely to require not only interviews but also observations and prolonged engagement in the field.

**Trend 3**

**Institutions that Predominantly Serve Low-Income College Students are Under-Researched**

An important component of understanding postsecondary pathways is recognition of the various sectors of higher education that serve as important entry points for low-income students. In our analysis, we documented the institutional contexts in which published empirical studies were conducted. In the twenty-year period covered in our analysis (1989–2008), we found that the published research on low-income students predominately focused on four-year public and private not-for-profit institutions—nearly one third (31%) of the articles focused on this institutional type (see Figure 4). Roughly one in five of the studies (19%) examined students’ experiences in K-12 schooling, whether with respect to their college aspirations, academic preparation, or college choice while in high school. Fewer studies concentrated solely on community colleges (7%), or proprietary colleges (1%).

Interestingly, many of the studies (30%) examined students’ trajectories through multiple schooling institutions; for example, from high school to college or from community college to a four-year institution. And finally, some studies (13%) analyzed low-income college students but did not specify the specific college context where the research took place. This last finding is particularly surprising, given the importance of institutional type to many factors of the college experience.

Some of the studies that examined trajectories through multiple institutions included low-income students in community colleges and proprietary schools. Nevertheless, these college contexts deserve more focused attention. Considering that community colleges serve 35% of all postsecondary education students (Provasnik & Planty, 2008) and enroll 52% of first-year, low-income college students (IHEP, 2011), we need to be more explicit in our discussions of the student populations these colleges serve. It is not
sufficient to examine them only in the context of their connections to other institutional types. Likewise, proprietary colleges are becoming more popular and often offer enrollment packages designed to recruit low-income students (IHEP, 2011). Thus, both of these institutional types—and, more specifically, the different pathways and goals they offer—need to be more central in our understandings and discussions of postsecondary education.

Implications

Overall, these three broad trends suggest that more research is needed to better understand low-income students’ experiences in higher education. Within the five journals examined, research in this area is included and is increasing, but still remains somewhat limited. As a result, our knowledge about this growing group of students remains incomplete. As increasing numbers of students grow up with limited material resources, their experiences in preparing for and attending college will become even more relevant to the field as a whole. This is a topic that deserves greater attention in comprehensive peer-reviewed journals so that it will remain within the purview of all higher education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

We also argue for increasing methodological diversity in higher education research. More qualitative research, in particular, is needed on low-income students’ experiences in college. Currently our knowledge in this area comes mostly from large surveys and datasets. While these types of data shed a great deal of light on national trends and provide broad outlines of students’ experiences, they leave the field with little knowledge about the nuances of students’ daily lives, the factors that shape their decision-making, and relevant local practices. Research that privileges the student voice can provide critical insights into how institutions and policies might better serve low-income students.

Finally, we argue that research on low-income students in four-year colleges and universities must continue, but we also need more research on community colleges and proprietary schools. A narrow focus on four-year institutions creates a tendency in research and policy arenas to discuss this pathway as the “traditional,” “normal,” or “correct” one, further marginalizing alternate routes. This narrow scope may also lead to a limited theoretical understanding of how persistence and academic success are shaped by institutional contexts. Theories that move beyond individual models of attainment and that challenge deficit framing of students are desperately needed. Further exploration into the impact of institutional context is critical to this endeavor.

Future Analysis

This brief provides a summary of three broad trends in key peer-reviewed journals. It reveals a great deal about how the research on low-income college students is framed, but it also leaves several topics unexplored. Future content analyses can shed additional light on the current state of research on low-income students as they prepare for and pursue postsecondary pathways. In particular, it will be important to address the following questions:

• How is low-income status defined and measured in current research? How do these measurements affect the way we examine and analyze low-income students’ postsecondary experiences?

• How are the topics of gender and race/ethnicity covered in relation to socioeconomic status?

• Which quantitative datasets are most commonly analyzed? And, how might reliance on these datasets shape our understanding of low-income college students?

• What theories are being used to understand low-income students/youth and their participation in higher education? What theories are needed to help us foreground socioeconomic status and its relationship to postsecondary success?

• What solutions and policy levers have been proposed in relation to low-income students in postsecondary education? What are their underlying assumptions and how do these shape reform implementation?

• Are studies of low-income students in higher education covered to a greater degree or framed differently in other peer-reviewed journals?

With answers to these questions we can gain greater insight into students who grow up with limited financial resources and better understand how
our own work does or does not shed light on their experiences. In turn, these insights will allow us to further develop a robust research agenda focused on improving low-income student success in college.

Notes
1 We thank Kelly Nielsen, Maria Malagon, and Maritza Del Razo for their research assistance throughout the journal scan process. Additionally, we thank Karen Jarsky, Amanda Datnow, and Daniel G. Solorzano for their helpful review comments.

2 Thomson Reuters Journal Citation Reports produces an impact factor for journals, which indicates the average frequency in which published articles are referenced or cited in scholarly work within a specific year or period. The impact factor provides one method for comparative ranking and a journal's “impact” or research publication. In the field of education, high “impact journals” generally have an impact factor greater than 1.0. In 2009, the Review of Higher Education received an Impact Factor of 1.545. In 2010, Research in Higher Education had an Impact Factor of 1.221, The Journal of Higher Education had an 1.157, Anthropology and Education Quarterly had an Impact Factor of 0.841, and Sociology of Education with an Impact Factor of 1.344. For more information on how impact factors are tallied and utilized see: http://thomsonreuters.com/products_services/science/free/essays/impact_factor/.

References


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PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success is a five-year set of mixed-methods studies focused on maximizing opportunities for low-income youth to earn higher education credentials.

The aims of the project are to advance research on poverty; produce useful tools that improve educational opportunities; and shape the U.S. policy agenda on the relationships between poverty and education.

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