



PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Maximizing Opportunities
for Youth in Poverty

PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success is a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

Socioeconomic Inequalities in the Postsecondary Enrollment, Employment, and Civic Engagement of California's Youth draws attention to the persistent effects of family income background and parental educational attainment on the opportunities and experiences of young people as they transition into adulthood.

POLICY REPORT

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Socioeconomic Inequalities in the Postsecondary Enrollment, Employment, and Civic Engagement of California's Youth

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In a best case scenario, young adults who are transitioning out of high school face a choice among various postsecondary education and employment options. At the same time, they may have new opportunities to engage with and be a positive influence on their communities. But today's youth are coming of age at a time of significant socioeconomic inequality that may shape their ability to access postsecondary education, obtain meaningful employment, and contribute to the world around them. This may in turn shape their current and future outcomes and well-being.

In recent decades, parental income has played an increasingly important role in determining children's educational attainment and other opportunities (Reardon, 2011). Meanwhile, parents with college degrees tend to be better informed about postsecondary educational options and have significantly more experience and resources to help their children attend college, secure good jobs, and participate in civic affairs (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995). With these socioeconomic inequalities in mind, we draw on the 2011 California Young Adult Study (CYAS) to outline patterns of postsecondary school enrollment, employment, and civic engagement among California's 18- to 26-year-olds. Importantly, we show how these patterns vary by the income and education levels in young adults' families of origin. Together, the findings show the extent to which socioeconomic status continues to shape the work, education, and civic trajectories of a contemporary cohort of California's young adult population and points to important policy implications to address these inequalities.

Socioeconomic Background of California's Young Adults

Young adults with college educated parents tend to also benefit from financial resources. As shown in Figure 1, 31% of California's young adult population have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree and come from a middle- or high-income family background. In contrast, only 4% of young adults in the state have at least one college educated parent and come from a low-income background. Meanwhile, there is less of an income disparity between young adults whose parents are not college educated. One third (33%) of young adults were raised in low-income households by parents without college degrees and almost as many (32%) come from middle/high-income backgrounds and do not have college educated parents.



This policy brief draws from the 2011–2012 California Young Adult Study (CYAS), a mixed-methods investigation of the postsecondary educational,

employment, and civic engagement experiences of California's youth, and a component of the broader PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success project. This brief relies on telephone survey responses from 1,896 young adults who attended school in California before the age of 17 but who were no longer in high school at the time of the survey. We have excluded individuals from the class of 2011, who may not have been old enough to enroll in college by the time they completed the survey. The survey was administered in English and Spanish between April and August of 2011.

Approximately 37% of respondents came from lower-income backgrounds, based on their eligibility for free or reduced lunch or their families' receipt of public assistance while they were in high school. Meanwhile, 35% came from households where at least one parent had obtained a bachelor's degree. When sampling weights are applied in the analysis of cross-sectional survey data, results are representative of the study population. For more information about the CYAS visit <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~vterriq/>.

Throughout the remainder of this brief, we use these characteristics as indicators of socioeconomic background to compare the postsecondary pathways of young adults. Specifically, we compare youth who never went to college (25% of the sample) to those who enrolled in four-year institutions (37%) or only in community colleges (38%). Approximately one fourth of former or current community college students reported enrolling in four-year universities at some point; this group is counted among those who enrolled in four-year institutions.

Parental education levels have strongest effect on four-year college enrollment.

California's young adults enroll in two- and four-year colleges at impressive rates, but unfortunately many do not complete their degrees on time. Approximately three fourths of the California young adults in our sample enrolled in college at some point. But earlier studies have shown that the majority of four-year and community college students do not obtain their intended degrees or certificates in a timely manner (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013; Fain, 2013).¹

Across income levels, young adults with college educated parents are more likely to enroll in four-year colleges. Young adults from middle- and higher-income backgrounds who have at least one parent who has attended college have a 34% probability of enrolling in a California State University (CSU) or similarly ranked four-year institution. The likelihood is 23% for their counterparts from similar income backgrounds with parents who have not obtained a bachelor's degree (Figure 2). Among young adults from low-income backgrounds, this estimate is 24% for those with college educated parents and 13% for those whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree. As found in prior research, family income background does have an effect on enrollment at this level of institutional selectivity, but the effect of parental education is greater (Reardon 2011).

Parental education is especially important to young adults' enrollment in more selective institutions. Compared to young adults with less educated parents, those with college educated parents are three to five times more likely to attend

Figure 1

Socioeconomic Background of Young Adults in California

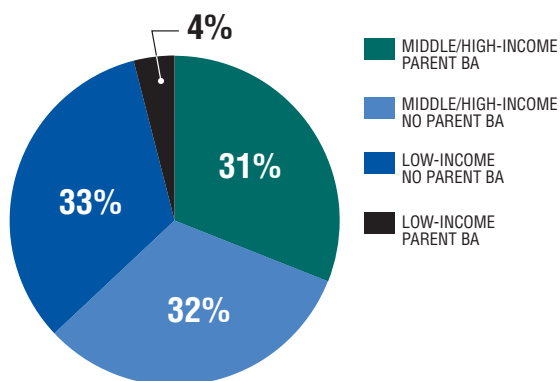
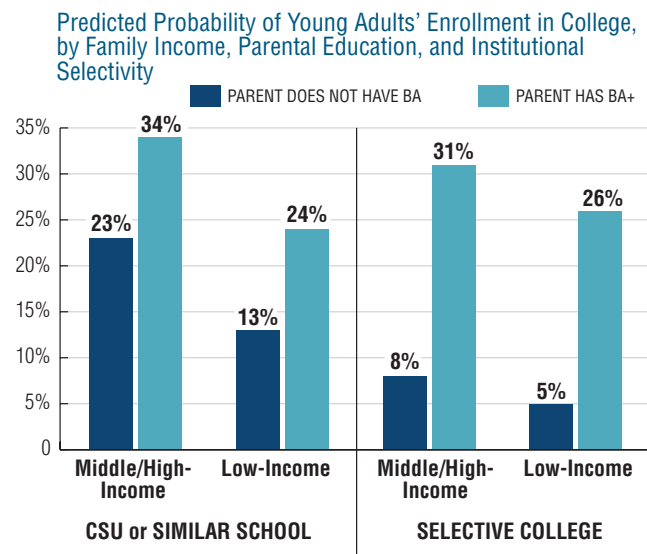


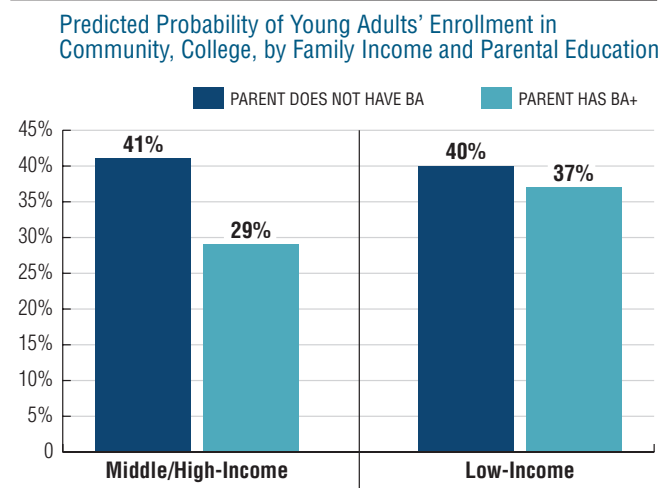
Figure 2



selective and top tier institutions such as those in the University of California system, Ivy League universities, and similarly ranked schools.² For example, while only 5% of low-income young adults without college educated parents are likely to enroll in the University of California or other selective schools, 26% of young adults from similar income backgrounds with at least one college educated parent are likely to do so. Thus, as with less selective four-year institutions, parents' educational attainment appears to have a greater effect than income background on enrollment at top tier institutions.

Parental education is less consequential for enrollment in community colleges than for enrollment in four-year institutions. Community colleges remain relatively accessible to first generation college students. As shown in Figure 3, the predicted probability of ever enrolling in a community college for a middle/higher-income young adult without college educated parents is 41%, compared to 29% for a middle/higher-income young adult who has at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, among low-income youth, there is a small difference (3%) in the likelihood of community college enrollment between those who do and do not have a parent with a bachelor's degree.

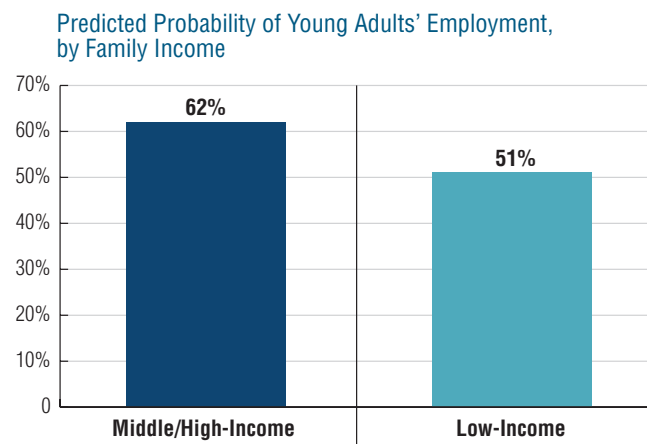
Figure 3



Family income and parental education affect employment patterns, but in different ways.

Low-income young adults are less likely to be employed than higher-income youth. Our data show that regardless of whether they are enrolled in postsecondary education, many young adults also work. However, as illustrated in Figure 4, low-income young adults are less likely to be employed than are higher-income youth (51% and 62%, respectively); these employment rates are not significantly affected by parents' college degree attainment.

Figure 4



Parental education is more important than family income in determining whether a young adult is likely to be disconnected from both school and work. Just over one in seven California young adults (15%) remain both out of work and out of school. After adjusting for differences in family income, young adults with at least one college educated parent have about a 6% probability of being in this situation. As shown in Figure 5, this probability increases

Note: Predicted probabilities control for parental education.

Figure 5

Predicted Probability of Young Adults Being Out of School and Out of Work, by Family Income and Parental Education

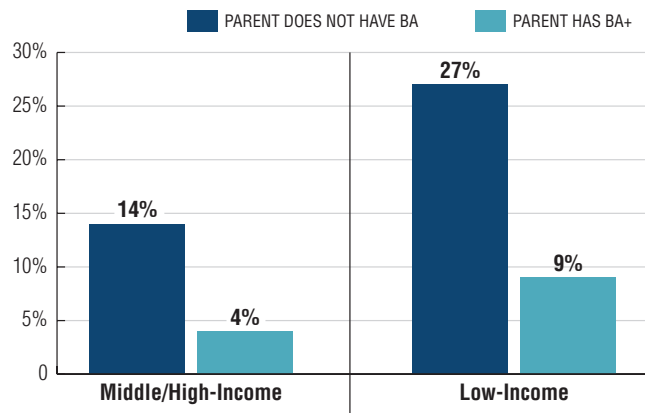


Figure 6

Predicted Probability of Young Adults' Volunteerism, by Family Income and Parental Education

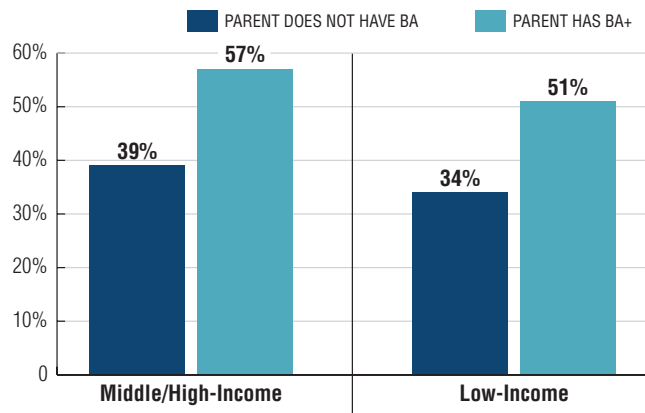
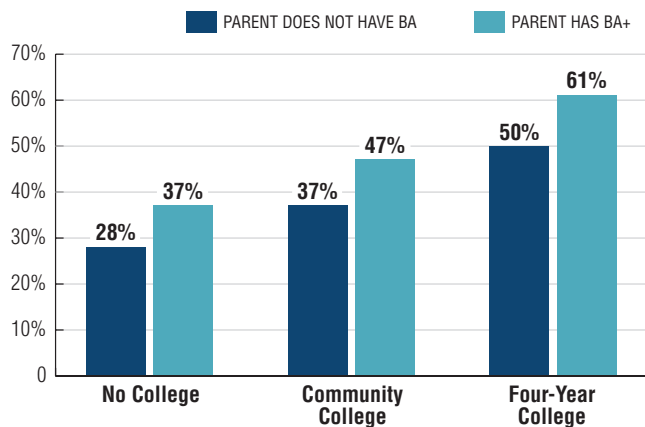


Figure 7

Predicted Probability of Young Adults' Volunteerism, by Family Income and Parental Education



Note: Predicted probabilities adjusted for family income.

dramatically for youth who do not have a college educated parent, however, reaching 14% for those from middle- and higher-income families, and 27% for those from low-income families. It is likely that college educated parents are particularly able to draw on their own schooling, social networks, and financial resources to help ensure that their young adult children further their own education and/or obtain jobs.

Postsecondary education increases civic engagement.

When young people are civically engaged—that is, when they take part in activities that extend beyond self-interest—they are more likely to have a voice in public debates and devote their time to addressing public concerns (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). However, opportunities for civic engagement are not equally available across all population groups.

Youth with college educated parents demonstrate greater civic engagement than youth with less educated parents.

We use volunteering as a key indicator of young adults' civic engagement, and Figure 6 shows that parental postsecondary attainment is more important than young adults' income backgrounds in determining whether they volunteered their time within the last year. More than half of young people with college educated parents (51%–57%), regardless of income background, are likely to have done so.

College and university settings foster civic participation.

Previous research shows that college courses and environments orient students towards civic participation and provide them opportunities to get involved (Hillygus, 2005; Verba et al., 1995). As such, youth who have never enrolled in college have the lowest probability of being civically engaged, while those who at some point enrolled in four-year institutions exhibit the highest probability (Figure 7). More than half of youth who ever enrolled in four-year colleges are expected to volunteer their time, while between 37% and 47% of those enrolled in community colleges are expected to do so. Having a college educated parent increases the predicted probability of participating in volunteer activities by nearly 10% in each category of college enrollment.

In separate analyses (not shown), we also found that college enrollment diminishes or erases socioeconomic differences in young adults' participation in activities that benefit their communities, the degree to which they have shared their perspectives on social or political issues online, and whether they engaged in political protests or rallies.

Summary and Recommendations

This brief sheds light on the extent to which socioeconomic inequities persist in the college enrollment, employment, and civic engagement of a contemporary cohort of young adults in California. In line with earlier research, this research shows that having a college educated parent increases young adults' likelihood of attending a four-year college, decreases their probability of being disconnected from both work and school, and increases the likelihood they will be civically engaged. So while community colleges remain relatively accessible to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, these ongoing disparities contribute to disadvantaged groups' comparatively low levels of enrollment in four-year college institutions, especially in those that are considered top tier.

Young people's engagement with school, work, and the community is of great significance because each provides the experiences they need for their future success and well-being. When they remain disconnected for extended periods of time—especially from employment and postsecondary opportunities—they are at higher risk of future poverty and more likely to rely on public support (US GAO, 2008). And when young adults are not engaged with their communities, they are less likely to have a voice in civic and political affairs (Flanagan & Levine 2010). With these findings in mind, we offer the following recommendations:

- **First generation college students need support as they prepare for, apply to, and persist to degree in four-year universities.** College completion is important to economic success and, as we have seen, to fostering civic engagement. But students who have grown up in lower-income households or whose parents have not attended college are not always able to access postsecondary opportunities to the same degree that their higher-SES counterparts are. Thus, it is clear that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds need

rigorous college preparatory coursework in order to ensure their readiness for high quality postsecondary experiences.³ Additionally, school staff, teachers, and administrators should be educated about the types of information and supports students and their families need concerning postsecondary options and eligibility requirements. And, because college needs to be financially feasible for all students, we propose more transparent financial aid policies and procedures as well as increased funding for scholarships to first generation college students.⁴

- **Expand course offerings and support services for community college students to increase rates of timely college completion and transfer.** Community colleges remain an important postsecondary entry point for students from less privileged backgrounds, but only one in 10 of these students receives their intended degree within the expected time frame. Students need clear information about what courses will allow them to complete their certificates or degrees or to transfer to four-year colleges in a timely manner. Support programs that delineate clear pathways to completion and financial resources that facilitate this process can help ensure that community colleges are not simply entrances to postsecondary education, but are also pathways to postsecondary success.⁵
- **Community-based organizations should target recruitment efforts towards young people who are not in college.** The patterns of inequality in civic engagement tied to parents' educational backgrounds are perhaps not surprising; other studies have shown that college educated parents tend to model civic behaviors for their children (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Verba et al., 1995). In addition, they are likely better able to provide their children with the political exposure, social networks, and financial resources that enable them to participate in civic activities. Such disparities may perpetuate inequalities in how civic institutions and government agencies respond to the needs of working-class and poor populations. Thus, it is imperative that this type of engagement not be confined to the college educated population.

The future of California depends on today's youth. Equalizing opportunities for higher education, employment, and civic engagement will not only benefit young people individually, but will also have positive implications for the state's economy and healthy functioning of its civic and political institutions.

Notes

We would like to thank Karen Jarsky for her helpful assistance.

- 1 For additional detail on the challenges that students face as they seek to complete their college degrees, please see separate PATHWAYS briefs by Feliciano and Ashtiani (2012) and Terriquez and Gurantz (2013), both of which are available at <http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/>.
- 2 Selectivity information is drawn from Barron's (2011) rankings. We include Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly Pomona among the selective colleges.
- 3 For more detail on the importance of rigorous coursework, please see Leticia Oseguera's (2012) PATHWAYS working paper entitled, *Postsecondary Educational Pathways of Low- and Middle/High-Income Youth*, which is available at http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/201205_osegueraWP.pdf.
- 4 For additional information on the financial aspects of postsecondary access, please see Susan Yonezawa's (2013) brief, *Increasing Federal Financial Aid Access for California Community College Students*, which is available at http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/201304_FinancialAidPR.pdf.
- 5 Park, Cervens, Nations, and Nielsen (2013) address this range of issues in their PATHWAYS brief entitled, *What Matters for Community College Success?* This document can be accessed at http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/201302_WhatMattersPR.pdf.

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