

College cuts odds for marriage among disadvantaged

January 25 2012, By Ted Boscia

(PhysOrg.com) -- For those with few social advantages, college is a prime pathway to financial stability, but it also unexpectedly lowers their odds of ever marrying, according to an analysis by Cornell sociologist Kelly Musick in the February issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family (74:1).

The findings suggest that social and cultural factors, not just income, are central to [marriage](#) decisions. Men and women from the least advantaged backgrounds who attend college appear to be caught between social worlds -- reluctant to "marry down" to partners with less education and unable to "marry up" to those from more privileged upbringings. Lower marriage chances appear to stem from men's and women's mismatched social origins and [educational attainment](#) -- a phenomenon Musick and co-authors refer to as "marriage market mismatch."

"College students are becoming more diverse in their social backgrounds, but they nonetheless remain a socio-economically select group -- particularly at elite universities like Cornell," said Musick, associate professor of policy analysis and management in the College of [Human Ecology](#). "It may be difficult for students from less privileged backgrounds to navigate [social relationships](#) on campus, and these difficulties may affect what students ultimately gain from the college experience."

Musick hoped the findings could raise awareness of potential social barriers faced by first-generation college students, which could be

keeping them from participating fully in the academic and social opportunities colleges have to offer.

For the study, Musick and sociologists at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) estimated the propensity of men's and women's college attendance based on family income, [parental education](#) and other indicators of [social background](#) and early academic achievement. They then grouped their subjects into social strata based on these propensity scores and compared marriage chances of college- and non-college-goers within each stratum. Estimates were based on a sample of about 3,200 Americans from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, followed from adolescence into adulthood.

They found that [college attendance](#) negatively affected marriage chances for the least advantaged individuals -- lessening men's and women's odds by 38 percent and 22 percent, respectively. By comparison, among those in the highest social stratum, men who attend college increase their marrying chances by 31 percent and women by 8 percent.

Musick said that past studies have shown "[college](#) is the great equalizer" in the labor market, dampening social class differences. But the same can't be said for the marriage market.

"This research demonstrates the importance of differentiating between social background and educational achievement," she said. "Educational achievement may go far in reducing income differences between men and women from different social backgrounds, but social and cultural distinctions may persist in social and family relationships."

Provided by Cornell University

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