

Attending a more selective college doesn't mean a better chance of graduating, study says

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Larkmead School. Credit: CC-BY-SA-2.5,2.0,1.0

It is commonly argued that students should attend the most academically selective college possible, since, among other reasons, highly selective institutions graduate students at higher rates. However, is it the institutions themselves that succeed in getting students through to degree completion, or is degree completion merely a result of the quality of the students entering the institutions?

New research published today in the *American Educational Research Journal (AERJ)*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational

Research Association (AERA), found that attending a more selective college, as measured by average SAT score, does not make much of a difference for a student's chance of graduating with a bachelor's degree, once individual and other institutional factors are taken into account.

"College Selectivity and Degree Completion," by Scott Heil of the City University of New York (CUNY), Liza Reisel of the Institute for Social Research in Oslo, and Paul Attewell of the CUNY Graduate Center, is the first study on this topic to use nationally representative data and to account for the higher [graduation rates](#) of highly selective institutions in terms of their ability to attract and enroll higher achieving [students](#).

Researchers analyzed data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, both maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics. The sample was limited to first-time undergraduate students at 420 four-year public and nonprofit private institutions, slightly more than half of which were public colleges.

Evidence that academic selectivity raises the graduation rate of students who would otherwise have a lower chance of graduating within six years of enrolling was found to be weak at best. While the effect of moving from a lower- to a middle-tier school or from a middle- to an upper-tier school was found to be positive, it was so small as to be barely measurable. The findings held true for all students, regardless of whether they appeared likely or unlikely to attend selective schools, as predicted by student background characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and pre-college test scores.

"Merely attending a more selective college does not make much of a difference for a given student's chance of graduating, if all else remains the same," said co-author Paul Attewell. "Our findings call into question the argument that a given student should always prefer the most

academically selective school to which she can gain admission."

"Our findings also lend no support to the claim that 'overmatch' lowers students' likelihood of graduating," Attewell said. ("Overmatching" occurs when a student is admitted to a college where he or she has lower-than-average academic credentials.)

"Our results indicate that it's important not to overemphasize the idea that academically selective institutions, as measured by admissions test scores, somehow have a 'secret sauce' that gets students to graduate disproportionately relative to their background characteristics," said Attewell.

Rather than focusing on a college's average SAT score, Attewell said, prospective students should give weight to other factors associated with student persistence and degree attainment, such as proximity to family and social supports, favorable student aid, the availability of programs and faculty of interest, and other personal preferences.

The only institutional factor found to influence graduation rates was tuition. For every additional \$1,000 of tuition charged, graduation chances increased by a fraction of a percent. While researchers did not explore the mechanisms underlying the tuition finding, they suggested that higher tuition may (1) indicate better college resources to provide more extensive student counseling and advisement, and (2) encourage students to graduate because of the large financial investment they and their families have made.

According to Attewell, differences in graduation rates between selective and nonselective colleges have been used as evidence that nonselective, and often more affordable, colleges are underperforming, of lower quality, and failing to live up to standards set by more selective colleges.

"Our research reinforces the understanding that institutions with low-income students, who begin college less academically prepared, have lower graduation rates," said Attewell. "Policymakers should be careful not to give colleges incentives for not serving the most disadvantaged students, by overemphasizing graduation rates as a performance measure."

More information: www.aera.net/LinkClick.aspx?li...ortalid=38&mid=31021

Provided by American Educational Research Association

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