THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD: HETEROGENEITY IN THE FORM AND TIMING OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION


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Postsecondary education in the United States has undergone profound changes in recent decades. Reflecting the strong and growing labor market premiums for college degrees, college enrollment rates have risen dramatically. And while racial and socioeconomic gaps have not completely closed, those traditionally left out of higher education—including women, nonwhite, lower-income, and older students—have increased both their enrollment in and completion of college degree programs. Further, the number of institutions has expanded to meet this growing demand. The roughly 21 million college students today attend over 4,500 two-year and four-year, public and private colleges and universities.

At the same time, today's college students travel increasingly heterogeneous pathways through their postsecondary education by delaying the transition from high school to college, enrolling later in life, attending part-time, whether exclusively or intermittently, and enrolling in multiple institutions. This dissertation examines three key dimensions of this heterogeneity. In Chapter 2, I describe trends over the past three and a half decades in older adults' decision to return to school. Changes in rates of enrollment among older adults—particularly in the case of black women—have occurred in the context of rising levels of educational attainment among more traditionally-aged individuals and changes in the labor market that have recast employment as increasingly precarious. Chapter 3 capitalizes on detailed postsecondary transcript data to infer developmental trajectories of students' college credit completion over the first ten years since leaving high school. These trajectories allow us to take more fully into account the timing, sequencing, and duration of students' part- and full-time status as they progress through postsecondary education than prior work on the subject. I then relate students' trajectories to their sociodemographic background and to their likelihood of eventually completing a college degree. Finally, in Chapter 4, I compare the post-schooling wages of students who attended for-profit colleges to those of students who either did not attend college at all or attended public or private, nonprofit colleges.

Taken together, the analyses presented in this dissertation advance our current understanding of the ways in which higher education remains stratified along both its vertical and horizontal dimensions. Despite the expansion of access to higher education, getting in and through degree programs (the vertical dimension), as well as when, how, and where students choose to enroll (the horizontal dimension), continue to be patterned along racial and socioeconomic lines.

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