

Remarks on Paul Attewell and David E. Lavin, *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?*

By Steven Brint

Dr. Brint wanted me to express his regret that he cannot be with us today. Due to an obligation related to his administrative role in the university, he was on campus yesterday afternoon to give an orientation talk to parents of incoming freshmen. I am Kristopher Proctor. I work with Dr. Brint on *The Colleges and Universities 2000 Project*, and I will be delivering his remarks. The following are Dr. Brint's remarks:

If others on this panel have a similar response to this book, the title of the session could be changed to "Author Meets Enthusiasts." I liked quite a bit about this book, and I have only a few criticisms to make of it.

The book is an impressive achievement both analytically and methodologically. The authors demonstrate a remarkable talent for breaking down complex, interwoven arguments into discrete, testable propositions. Methodologically, I impressed by the work they put into constructing the CUNY database, by the comparisons they offered between their results and national patterns described in NLSY data, and by their systematic comparison of results obtained through standard regression techniques and those obtained through propensity matching techniques designed to minimize problems of selection bias.

In a nutshell one can say that the book is a powerful brief in favor of open access and low or no tuition as policy instruments to expand economic opportunities for

disadvantaged students. Against those who claimed that open admissions would be wasted on ill-prepared students, about half of women who entered CUNY in the early 1970s eventually completed BA degrees. (More than 70 percent obtained at least an associates degree.) Those who completed degrees earned significantly higher incomes, accumulated more assets, had a greater chance of marrying, and demonstrated better parenting skills than those who did not, and they showed a greater capacity to encourage educational achievement in their children. Open access did not wipe out disadvantages due to race or class (or high school record), but it improved the life chances of women from minority as well as those from majority backgrounds, and it narrowed the much larger gaps that would otherwise have existed. Thus, while 60 percent of white women in the CUNY sample eventually attained bachelor's degrees compared to 40 percent of black women, the authors estimate that open admissions more than doubled the proportion of black women who would have attained degrees without it.

As Attewell and Lavin note, much of their work is consistent with the findings of a generation of status attainment research. From this research, we know that higher education tends to improve the life chances of those who attain it, even controlling for background and measured ability. Women's lives and parenting practices are newer areas of inquiry. And, of course, the book appears in a policy environment in which the value of broad access has been questioned explicitly by critics of higher education and implicitly by the ongoing privatization of public university systems. In our topsy-turvy world those admitted to Ivy League colleges increasingly pay little or nothing for their educations, while tuition and fees rise annually in colleges that educate students from disadvantaged families. Attewell and Lavin provide a timely reminder of the positive

social and economic consequences of educational policies that help, rather than hinder, the poor.

Before turning to my criticisms of the book, I would like to underscore and draw out the implications of a few findings that particularly struck me

First, Attewell and Lavin provide strong evidence that time to complete degrees is, in many cases, much longer than conventional 4 and 6 year graduation rates allow, and also vary greatly by ethnicity. In their sample, African American women took on average 10 years to complete and Hispanic women 11 years, compared to six years for whites. Our current measures of retention and college completion have not caught up with this reality. At the same time, chances of completing decrease as one moves into these longer spans. Given the social and economic benefits of higher education, social and institutional policy should be focused on helping students complete within a shorter span. At the same time, older students often bring greater maturity and more commitment to the classroom, and institutions should therefore be investing in ways to support them through centers and activities that meet their needs.

Second, the book makes a powerful case for social policy that not only promotes higher education opportunity for the disadvantaged, but also supports the institution of marriage. Even with the boost that college degrees provide, household income is highly unequally distributed between ethnic groups in both the CUNY and NLSY samples, largely because of differences in marriage and the earning power of two-earner vs. one-earner households. In 2000, 75 percent of CUNY whites but only 40 percent of CUNY African Americans were married, and differences of \$20,000 to \$30,000 in median household income were typical between white and black women at every educational

attainment level. Home ownership and the median values of homes also differed dramatically by marital status at every educational attainment level. In their strong, well grounded support for stable two-parent families, Attewell and Lavin join a growing number of social scientists who argue that ethnic inequalities represent not only the consequences of discrimination, but continuing problems associated with forming stable marriages in economically disadvantaged ethnic groups.

They also demonstrate that failures to form stable marriages have effects on children. Attewell and Lavin write: “Looking only at children who were born into two-parent families, those whose parents remained together throughout a child’s upbringing enjoyed a clear advantage in term of the cognitive environment in the home, in math and reading test scores, and in likelihood of entering college, over otherwise similar children whose parents were separated, divorced, or were widowed. These advantages were associated with the two-parent family structure itself, and are evident even after removing effects of income, parental education and other factors. Both single parenting and disrupted two-parent families have deleterious effects on children’s educational outcomes.”

Third, Attewell and Lavin provide what I believe is the most comprehensive treatment yet of the specific practices of college graduates that benefit their children’s well-being. They document the independent positive impact of the following behaviors associated with women’s higher education attainment: exposure to broadening cultural events, knowledge of children’s friends and their parents, richer cognitive environments in the home, more discussion of educational plans, more numerous organizational involvements, and greater likelihood of attending religious services. They also document

the detrimental consequences of many moves during childhood. They show that women with BA degrees, regardless of their ethnicity, were more likely to have engaged in behaviors that benefited their children.

So, what could possibly be wrong with such a well-designed, carefully researched, deeply interesting, and timely book?

The first problem is the near absence of men in the authors' analytical frame. In one sense Attewell and Lavin's focus on women is justified. They are interested in the consequences of higher education attainment both for women's well-being and for the well-being of their children. Men do play a role in the chapters on children's well being as marital partners and contributors to household resources. But the book is not just about women's and children's well-being. It is also about the consequences of open admissions and no tuition on the life chances of disadvantaged students. Indeed, the first major questions posed by the book concern the consequences of open-access policies. They write: "How well were students who came to college with academic and economic handicaps able to capitalize on educational opportunity? ... How long did it take to climb the various rungs of the educational ladder? And how long did degree completion take for minority students compared to whites?" We cannot fully evaluate open-access policies without knowing about their consequences for men as well as women, and whether these consequences varied both by ethnicity and gender. Of course, no book can do everything, but if the book is really *only* about the consequences of higher education for women and their children, it should steer clear of broader conclusions about open admissions and no tuition that require also a consideration of the trajectories of men. I would note that the national data from NLSY are insufficient to evaluate the role of open

admissions, because they do not reflect the no tuition policies supported by Attewell and Lavin that were also characteristic of the CUNY system in the 1970s.

The second problem is the near absence of academic skills in the authors' analytical frame. Attewell and Lavin assume that students who graduate are academically competent. They state, for example, "If intellectual standards have been debased, and if colleges routinely graduate students who cannot write a coherent sentence...one would expect the value of a degree to be debased." They make these remarks as a way to blunt the criticism of those who think that unqualified students obtained degrees with little value and graduated with substandard skills.

In fact, the existing evidence on academic skills is not as encouraging as this passage suggests. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy suggests that only about one-third of college graduates can differentiate the arguments in two divergent newspaper editorials on the same subject and only about one-third can interpret a graph related age, exercise, and blood pressure. In four-year institutions, average hours spent on out-of-class study have declined from about 25 hours/week in 1960 to about 12 hours/week today. At the University of California, the average amount of reading that students will admit to is no more than half. Moreover, paid employment is likely not the main reason for limited engagement with studies. Instead, studies suggest that students spend much more time socializing than they do working in paid employment or studying. University of California data suggest that first-generation students study more and are more engaged with their studies than second and third-generation college students, but the differences are not profound and absolute levels of engagement are not very impressive for any group.

The weakest chapter in the book, therefore, is the chapter on mass higher education, partly because they do not take the arguments of Randall Collins' and others about the "credential society" seriously enough. It is entirely possible that many students come out of college with limited academic knowledge and skills, and yet have an advantage in the labor market relative to those with lower levels of education. Employers may value non-cognitive attributes associated with college -- such as responsiveness to authority, stick-to-itiveness, and dependability -- even if students have failed to learn to write, analyze, or calculate at a very high level.

The logic of the chapter on mass higher education suggests that mass graduate and professional education would be even better than mass undergraduate education, because it would be beneficial to students' economic opportunities and social attitudes. Undoubtedly, this is true. Already we see that graduate and professional degrees are becoming decisive markers in the labor market. But, as educators, I think many of us would find it legitimately discouraging to contemplate all those graduate students who, like so many of today's undergraduates, are waiting out there under a hypothetical mass graduate education system to text message or watch movies in the back of class rather take notes; to borrow papers from other courses, if possible, to fulfill requirements in courses they consider less important; and to read *some* of the assignment, or perhaps to read *none* of the assignment, if they feel it won't do serious damage to their grades. We can appreciate the social and economic benefits of mass higher education, while being dismayed about the tendencies of the system to lower normative cultural standards.

To be fair, Attewell and Lavin indicate in two paragraphs that they consider academic skills important, but even so their hearts clearly lie elsewhere. One of the most

important reasons for working to strengthen students' commitment to academic skill development is that in a mass system academic skills are, like college degrees, connected to students' life chances. The work of many scholars -- including James Rosenbaum and his colleagues, William Bowen and Derek Bok, and Richard Murnane and his colleagues -- has shown that this is so. The goal of shoring up academic skills, if pursued wisely and together with admissions and tuition policies like those the authors embrace, would not only reinforce the cultural mission of higher education, but lead to further improvement in the life chances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.