

ABSTRACT

The Evolution of Poverty in Higher Education: Material Hardship, Academic Success, and Policy Perspectives

Today's economy increasingly demands a postsecondary education and students from all backgrounds have responded by enrolling in higher education. Yet since 2000, college prices have risen dramatically, the real income of most families has fallen, and the purchasing power of need-based financial aid has declined. To make up for substantial unmet financial need, students often take out loans and work. Additionally, more students report going hungry or homeless so they can pursue their educational goals. Experiences of material hardship —meaning that individuals lack the minimum basic goods necessary for decent human functioning — may inhibit academic success and contribute to the growing college completion gap by family socioeconomic background, but we lack systematic research on the topic. In this interdisciplinary multi-method project, I estimate the prevalence of material hardship and preliminary findings indicate that half of college students experience food and/or housing insecurity. I track how the incidence of these hardships has changed over time, and I investigate the relationship between material hardship and academic achievement and degree attainment using rigorous quasi-experimental methods. Given the low rate of college completion and increased hardship risk among certain groups, I also examine heterogeneity according to income, race/ethnicity, and college institutional sector. Finally, I use critical discourse analysis to explore how key intermediary organizations frame poor college students in policy proposals to reform the higher education system and argue that notions of deservingness drive justifications for resource allocation. K-12 education scholars have long recognized the role of poverty in students' educational experiences and outcomes, but this type of seminal research is missing in higher education. The results of this research will contribute to our understanding of students' experiential challenges during college and inform policy debates about the types of support that might promote academic success among college students struggling to make ends meet.