

**Educational Transitions in the Context of the Life Course:  
Understanding Class Inequality in American Higher Education\***

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## INTRODUCTION

The expansion of higher education over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has provided more opportunities for access, but it has not reduced socioeconomic inequality. Students from less advantaged family backgrounds continue to lag in all areas of higher education, from entry into postsecondary institutions and access to more selective colleges and universities, to degree completion (for recent reviews see Baker and Velez 1996; Gamoran 2001; Walpole 2003). Stratification scholars have proposed several macro-level explanations for these trends, such as a lack of saturation of the upper classes (Raftery and Hout 1993) and limited political mobilization (Karen 1991; Rubinson 1986). More micro-level studies on the other hand have explored how students' skills, knowledge and predispositions, in the form of academic preparation and social and cultural capital, shape educational outcomes. While these micro-level explanations provide a rich account of class differences, they cannot fully explain inequality in higher education.

One of the key limitations of the previous accounts of inequality in higher education is that they focus on the bundle of skills and predispositions that students bring to higher education but fail to consider how schooling fits in the broader context of students' lives. Being a student is a social role, and for students in higher education, that role is often combined with other social roles, such as being a worker, a spouse/partner, or a parent (Pallas 1993). The transition to adulthood has become increasingly "demographically dense" (Rindfuss 1991), with transitions taking place within a short amount of time and often overlapping. Moreover, there is much variability in sequencing and timing of different life course transitions, with a decreasing proportion of individuals following what might be considered the traditional sequence: finishing schooling, getting a full-time job, getting married and having children (e.g., see reviews in O'Rand 2000; Pallas 1993; Shanahan 2000). To the extent that social roles are intertwined, and that their combination varies by social class, considering how students combine schooling with

other life course transitions can provide new insights for understanding inequality in higher education.

Drawing on the life course tradition, I broaden the theoretical lens of the status attainment model, which underlies much of the research on class inequality in educational outcomes. I break with the implicit assumption that schooling precedes other life course transitions and thus that inequality in student outcomes is only a product of interactions with the educational system. Although skills, knowledge, and predispositions embedded in the student role are undeniably important, they are not the sole basis of inequality in educational outcomes. Being a straight A student who performs well on standardized tests and has the “know-how” to navigate the educational system is certainly advantageous in entering and completing higher education. But what if that student is working full-time, or gets married, or has a child? With the prolonged participation in schooling, transitions into adult roles of full-time work, marriage, and parenthood are not unusual occurrences in higher education.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY 1997), I examine social class inequality in two educational transitions: entry into higher education and completion of a bachelor’s degree. Even net of a range of commonly used controls, students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to successfully complete both of these transitions. However, students from less advantaged backgrounds are also more likely to make other life course transitions, including working-full time, getting married/cohabitating, and having children. Do these life course transitions help to explain class inequality in higher education? Making a transition into the adult roles of worker, spouse/partner and parent during high school does not account for class inequality in entry into higher education among high school graduates. However, these transitions, and particularly employment patterns, explain class inequality in bachelor’s degree completion among students who enter higher education.

Thus, while focusing on the student role may be adequate for studying entry into higher education, it is not for understanding inequality in completion. Considering educational transitions as a component of the life course provides an alternative understanding of the patterns of class inequality in higher education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Class Inequality in Higher Education**

Students from less advantaged social class backgrounds face challenges at all educational levels. They are less likely to complete high school, enter higher education or earn bachelor's degrees (for recent reviews see Baker and Velez 1996; Gamoran 2001; Walpole 2003). When they enter higher education, they are less likely to enter four-year or more selective institutions (Astin and Oseguera 2004; Ellwood and Kane 2000; Karen 2002). Moreover, class inequality does not seem to be abating. While the expansion of higher education over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to an overall increase in postsecondary enrollments, disadvantages associated with lower socioeconomic backgrounds have not declined (NCES 1997; Roksa et al. 2007).<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, there is at least some evidence that class inequality may have actually increased in recent decades (e.g., Astin and Oseguera 2004; Ellwood and Kane 2000; Karen 2002).

Since students' educational trajectories are path dependent (e.g., Breen and Jonsson 2000; Kerckhoff 1993; Lucas 2001), inequality in higher education is in part a product of inequalities during earlier educational transitions. Indeed, much research has focused on understanding how differences in academic preparation in K-12 are related to class inequality in higher education. For example, 82 percent of students from families with college educated parents are deemed academically qualified for college. The corresponding percentage for students whose parents did

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<sup>1</sup> These patterns are not unique to the U.S. For patterns in other countries, see Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit, Arum and Gamoran 2007.

not attend college is less than 50 (NCES 1997).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the specific component of academic preparation considered, students from less advantaged family backgrounds fare worse. They are less likely to be enrolled in academic tracks, follow a rigorous high school curriculum, or score well on standardized tests (Adelman 2006; Attewell and Domina 2008; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Kelly 2007; Lucas 1999; NCES 2000; Oakes 1985).

These differences in academic preparation emerge through a combination of economic, social, and cultural forces. Families from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to live in contexts with higher quality schools or send their children to private schools. Previous research has suggested that school resources (e.g., Card and Krueger 1996; Condrón and Roscigno 2003) and private school attendance are related to better educational outcomes (e.g., Bryk, Lee and Holland 1993; Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore 1982; Cookson and Persell 1985). Students from socioeconomically advantaged families are also more likely to attend schools with “college going habitus” (McDonough 1997), which facilitates academic preparation and planning for higher education. Moreover, socioeconomically advantaged families have more social (Coleman 1988) and cultural (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) capital and are thus better able to transmit class advantages to their children. For example, parents from upper class families intervene on behalf of their children in school (e.g., getting them into honors tracks even when their academic performance does not warrant it) and transmit to their children a constellation of attitudes, predispositions, and behaviors that can facilitate educational success (Lareau 1989; 2003).

Although previous research provides a rich account of different factors related to class inequality, it cannot fully explain class gaps in college entry or completion. Qualitative studies describe the association between family background and different dimensions of social and

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<sup>2</sup> Determination of qualification is based on high school GPA, senior class rank, NELS 1992 aptitude test, SAT and ACT scores, and academic coursework.

cultural capital but cannot determine how much those factors contribute to the observed patterns of inequality. Quantitative studies generally report a significant effect of social class even after controlling for a range of relevant factors. Adelman (1999; 2006) for example argued that academic preparation is the single most important factor in determining success in higher education. Given the differences in academic preparation by family background, it may be expected that academic preparation explains class inequality in access and attainment in higher education. However, that is not the case. Controlling for academic preparation decreases but does not eliminate the effects of class background on entry into higher education (Hearn 1991; Karen 2002; Perna and Titus 2004; Roksa et al. 2007) or bachelor's degree completion (Adelman 1999; 2006; Camburn 1990). Even more extensive controls, such as those for social (Sandefur, Meier and Campbell 2006) and cultural capital (Perna 2000; Walpole 2003) do not eliminate the effects of social class.

Given the inability of current approaches to fully account for class inequality in higher education, I propose to shift the analytical lens to consider educational attainment in the context of other life course transitions. Previous research on class inequality has focused on entry into higher education and has relied on findings from the K-12 research. As such, it has not paid adequate attention to the unique aspects of higher education, which is voluntary and much more flexible in terms of attendance patterns. More importantly, this transition occurs later in students' lives and is much more likely to be combined with other life course transitions. Students entering higher education today are rarely only students; they are also often workers, and at times spouses/partners and parents. They thus participate in multiple social roles, navigating the challenges of multiple demands. By focusing on only one dimension of students' experiences – their student role – previous research has not considered how the intersection

between different social roles can illuminate class inequality in higher education. A life course perspective provides an alternative lens for examining class inequality in higher education.

### **Schooling in the Context of the Life Course**

Completing schooling is one of the steps in the transition to adulthood, a step that is becoming increasingly intertwined with other transitions, including work, marriage, and parenthood. A decreasing proportion of individuals follow what is considered the traditional sequence of life course transitions: completing full-time schooling, obtaining a full-time job, getting married, and having children (Modell and Goodman 1990; Shanahan 2000). Indeed, only approximately one quarter of young adults today follow that sequence (Mouw 2005).<sup>3</sup> In recent decades, ordering and timing of transitions has become increasingly variable (Modell 1989; O'Rand 2000) as well as “demographically dense” (Rindfuss 1991), with multiple transitions occurring in a short amount of time. This has led to an increasing overlap in social roles. If combining schooling with work and family roles has consequences for educational attainment, and if transition into those roles varies by social class, considering how schooling is related to other life course transitions can provide an important avenue for understanding class inequality in higher education.

#### *Employment*

Expansion of educational opportunities and a prolonged participation in schooling have contributed to the increasing heterogeneity in the pathways to adulthood (O'Rand 2000). This variability in part reflects the reversibility of some roles, such as schooling and employment. Individuals can alternate between schooling and work as well as combine the two social roles. Due to the weak link between the educational institutions and the labor market in the U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> For estimates on earlier cohorts, see Hogan (1981); Hogan and Mochizuki (1988); Marini (1984).

(Kerckhoff 2000; Kerckhoff 2004), students must construct an “individualized amalgam of school and work” (Mortimer and Kruger 2000). Consequently, there is no clear sequence in work and school trajectories and many young adults participate in the two realms simultaneously (e.g., Cooksey and Rindfuss 2001).

Employment is a common feature of undergraduate students’ lives. Nearly 80 percent of undergraduates work while enrolled in college, dedicating an average of 32 hours per week to the world of work (NCES 2002). This is not simply a reflection of non-traditional-age students (those 25 years or older at the point of entry into higher education) or students attending part-time. Even among students who attend school full-time, over 50 percent are employed and 20 percent work full-time. Moreover, over one-quarter of 18-23 year olds are employed full-time (NCES 2002). Although there are some inconsistencies in the literature, the weight of the evidence suggests that hours spent working, particularly when exceeding a certain threshold, are negatively associated with educational outcomes (for recent reviews see Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Riggert et al. 2006).

Studies of college employment rarely consider variation by social class. However, different patterns of school and work engagement appear to be shaped by family background (Cooksey and Rindfuss 2001; Roksa and Velez 2009 [in press]). Moreover, descriptive information from the 1999-2000 cohort of undergraduates reveals notable differences in employment by family background. Class differences are not apparent in whether students are working or not, but in whether they work full-time or part-time. While 48 percent of students whose parents did not attend college were employed full-time, only 29 percent of students whose parents completed a bachelor’s degree or higher reported this type of extensive commitment to

the labor market (NCES 2002).<sup>4</sup> Other studies, which consider patterns of employment over time, suggest that students from less advantaged family backgrounds are less likely to follow the steady employment pattern (working consistently at low intensity), which is associated with positive educational outcomes (Mortimer 2003; see also Mortimer, Staff and Oesterle 2004; Staff and Mortimer 2007). While understudied, if patterns of student employment vary by social class, they can provide insights into class inequality in higher education.

### *Marriage and Parenthood*

Although marriage and parenthood may be expected to follow completion of education, that is not always the case. The most common deviation from the normative pattern of life course transitions (completing schooling, finding full-time employment, and then marrying and having children) is marrying before completing schooling. This pattern is more pronounced among the highly educated (Hogan 1981; Hogan and Mochizuki 1988; Marini 1984b).<sup>5</sup> The age of marriage and parenthood has risen in recent decades, but so has the proportion of students staying in school longer, creating a growing overlap between educational participation and family formation.

While schooling is often defined as a transitional role (Marini 1984a; Marini 1985) or a role characterized by dependence (Pallas 1993), work and family roles are central to the definition of adulthood (Smelser and Erikson 1980). Previous studies have often argued that the student role is incompatible with adult roles, including being a spouse or a parent (e.g., see discussion in Thornton, Axinn and Teachman 1995). Distinct features of student and marital roles make it difficult to combine the two (Hogan 1978; Marini 1978; Marini 1984a). Similarly,

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<sup>4</sup> Bozick (2007) showed little relationship between class and employment, although the cut-off for high vs. low intensity employment was 20 hours. Class distinctions seem to emerge at more intense levels of employment or when examining patterns over time.

<sup>5</sup> This emerges as the most common deviation in part due to definitions. Previous studies include only full-time employment and schooling in their calculations. However, this approach obscures the point that many students enter schooling on a part-time basis after entering the labor market (see Marini 1987).

the commitment of time and financial resources that comes with parenthood competes with the demands of schooling (Rindfuss, Morgan and Swicegood 1988). Individuals who enter higher education tend to delay marriage and parenting until completion (Guzzo 2006). However, when college entrants have children, that appears to have negative consequences for bachelor's degree attainment (Sibulkin and Butler 2005).

Studies of class inequality in higher education rarely examine students' transitions into family roles. That issue is more likely to emerge in studies of high school completion (e.g., research on patterns and consequences of teenage motherhood) or in research on older adults who enter higher education many years after finishing high school. Evidence regarding the consequences of marriage and children for educational outcomes of non-traditional-age college students is mixed, with some studies showing negative effects (Taniguchi and Kaufman 2005) and others reporting no effects (Jacobs and King 2002). However, non-traditional-age college students are not the only ones juggling competing demands of schooling, marriage and parenthood. One recent study based on the National Education Longitudinal Study, reported that 20 percent of traditional-age higher education entrants are married before or after they enter college and 11 percent have children (Bozick and DeLuca 2005). Although Bozick and DeLuca (2005) show no effects of marriage or parenthood on degree completion, Jacobs and King (2002) indicated that having a child before age 25 has negative consequences. Moreover, latent class analyses reveal that young individuals from well educated families are particularly likely to attain high levels of education and have no children (e.g., Osgood et al. 2005; Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck and Park 2005). Studying transitions into marriage/parenthood may thus provide an important lens for examining inequality in higher education.

Given the interconnectedness of social roles including schooling, work, marriage and parenthood, degree completion is not likely to rest simply on being a good student. Previous

research on degree completion, and particularly research on class inequality in higher education, has tended to focus almost exclusively on academic experiences. Although important, academic experiences point to only one role: student. When that role becomes intertwined with other roles, educational outcomes may become less certain. This may be particularly the case for students from less advantaged family backgrounds. Due to the increasing variability in the transition to adulthood, and class differences in specific transitions, successful completion of higher education may depend in part on whether and how students combine multiple roles in their transition to adulthood.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1997 (NLSY97), a nationally representative sample of individuals born between 1980 and 1984 (ages 12-16 years as of December 31, 1996). The baseline survey was administered in 1997 to 8,984 students in 6,819 households, who were selected using a multi-stage stratified random sampling design. Respondents have been re-interviewed annually, with the latest available follow-up conducted in 2005. In addition to data on students, NLSY97 includes parents' interviews conducted during the baseline survey year. This dataset is particularly conducive to the study of youth transitions as it provides detailed information on both schooling and labor market activities. For more information on NLSY97, see U.S. Department of Labor (2007).

Following Mare (1980; 1981), I examine two educational transitions, each of which is conditional on completing the previous educational level. First, I estimate the likelihood of entry

into higher education, conditional on high school graduation. This model is estimated as a logistic regression:<sup>6</sup>

$$\log\{P_i/(1 - P_i)\} = \alpha + \sum\beta_n\text{SOCIAL CLASS}_{ni} + \sum\beta_n\text{MPW}_{ni} + \sum\beta_n\delta_{ni},$$

where  $P_i$  is the probability of entering higher education, SOCIAL CLASS is a vector of parental education and income, MPW is a vector of transitions into marriage/cohabitation, parenthood and work, and  $\delta_i$  is a vector of control variables. This model is weighted and adjusted for clustering of students within families.

Following, I consider the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion for students who enter higher education. This model is estimated as a discrete time hazard model (Allison 1984; DesJardins 2003; Singer and Willett 2003). Discrete time hazard model is preferred to simple logistic regression due to a large number of right censored cases and the importance of including time-varying covariates in estimation. In order to estimate this model, the data file is organized in a person-month format. The person enters the dataset at the point of entry into higher education, and remains "at risk" until they either experience the event (i.e., they complete a bachelor's degree) or exit the sample. The final dataset includes 4,737 students observed over time to produce 218,568 person-months. Background variables remain constant for each period while variables capturing transitions to adulthood (marriage/cohabitation, children, and work) take on different values in different time periods.

More formally, I am modeling the risk of bachelor's degree completion in each month, called the hazard. This is the conditional probability that an individual would obtain a degree in time period  $j$ , given that she did not do so in an earlier time period and given that she was in the risk set.

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<sup>6</sup> Right censoring is not of great concern in this model as the majority of students enter higher education soon after high school completion. Approximately three-quarters of the sample entered higher education within 6 months of high school graduation and over 90 percent did so within 2 years. Some respondents may enter higher education later in life, but the focus of this paper is on educational transitions of traditional-age students.

$$h(t_{ij}) = \Pr[T_i = j \mid T_i \geq j]$$

where  $T_i = j$  indicates student  $i$ 's outcome in month  $j$ , and the condition  $T_i \geq j$  ensures that an outcome for student  $i$  has not occurred before time period  $j$ . The hazard in this case is the conditional probability that student  $i$  completes a bachelor's degree in month  $j$  given that she did not do so before month  $j$ .

The corresponding estimated discrete time hazard model can be described as follows:

$$\text{logit } h(t_{ij}) = \alpha D_{ij} + \sum \beta_n \text{SOCIAL CLASS}_{nij} + \sum \beta_n \text{MPW}_{nij} + \sum \beta_n \delta_{nij}$$

where  $D_{ij}$  indexes dummy variables for distinct time periods, **SOCIAL CLASS** is a vector of parental education and income, **MPW** is a vector of transitions into marriage/cohabitation, parenthood and work, and  $\delta_{ij}$  is a vector of control variables. Due to a large number of months included in the dataset (up to 100), dummy variables were not included for each time period. Instead, baseline hazard is estimated using a piecewise constant function (Wu 2003). This specification provides a better fit than either linear or polynomial (square and cubic) specification. All models are weighted and adjusted for clustering of students within families.

### **Independent Variables**

The key independent variable of interest is social class, which is measured by parental education and income. Parental education is coded as the highest level completed by either resident parent, and is represented by a series of dummy variables: high school or less (reference), some college, bachelor's degree, and graduate/professional degree. Income reflects

the total household income, and due to the highly skewed distribution is divided into four quartiles, with the lowest quartile serving as a reference.<sup>7</sup>

The focus of this paper is on exploring whether life course transitions help to explain class inequality in higher education. The next set of variables thus captures different roles: marriage/cohabitation, children, and work. For degree completion models, these variables are coded as time varying. For college entry models, they reflect students' status before high school graduation. Family transition roles – marriage/cohabitation and children – are coded as dummy variables indicating whether respondents are married/cohabitating and whether they have any children. Marriage and cohabitation are combined due to the age of the respondents. Cohabitation has been on the rise over time, with the majority of young women and men today spending some time in cohabitating relationships (Scommegna 2002). Individuals in their late teens and early twenties, what Arnett (2004) termed “emerging adults,” are particularly likely to engage in more transitional forms of behaviors. In the sample examined, cohabitation was more prevalent than marriage. Among students who entered college, 4 percent cohabited and 2 percent were married in their first month. Both forms of union formation increased over time: approximately 4 years after college entry, 11 percent of respondents were married and 13 percent were cohabitating. If incompatibility between marriage and school arises due to time and financial constraints, similar constraints may be experienced in cohabitating relationships.

Employment is divided into three categories: low intensity (up to 20 hours per week), moderate intensity (21-35 hours per week), and high intensity (over 35 hours per week), with students who are not working serving as a reference. Although previous studies (e.g., Staff and Mortimer 2007) have used different hour cutoffs for high school vs. college students, I use the

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<sup>7</sup> Using parental wealth as opposed to income produces similar results. However, wealth has not been asked consistently across survey years and has a large number of missing cases (almost 30 percent), making income a variable of choice in the presented models.

same categories because my intention is to examine how adopting an adult role of full-time work (over 35 hours per week) is related to student outcomes. Since simply contrasting full-time and non-full-time work does not accurately capture the role of employment in students' lives, I include additional dummy variables for moderate and low intensity employment. Most financial aid programs restrict student work to 20 hours per week, making that the logical choice for the boundary of low intensity work. For college entry models, work is coded during 12<sup>th</sup> grade and is based only on weeks during the academic year.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these key variables of interest, all models include a range of control variables. I begin with including measures of basic demographic characteristics: gender (dummy variable for male) and race/ethnicity (dummy variables for African American, Hispanic and other racial/ethnic minority groups). In addition to family's socioeconomic standing, previous research has suggested that several other family characteristics are relevant to the study of educational attainment. I control for two aspects of household composition: number of children under 18 in the household and a two-parent household, both of which are coded when students were 16. Finally, previous research has focused in particular on the extent to which students' educational success is related to their academic preparation. All models thus include several measures of academic preparation: test scores, grades, and high school track. Test scores are based on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), which was administered to students between 1997 and 1998.<sup>9</sup> I use the aggregate percentile of the mathematical knowledge, arithmetic reasoning, word knowledge, and paragraph comprehension tests. Grades are based on students' self-reports of their overall grades during high school.<sup>10</sup> I include a dummy variable

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<sup>8</sup> When information on employment is missing in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, information for 11<sup>th</sup> grade is used.

<sup>9</sup> Test scores for a handful of students who graduated before the test was administered are set to missing.

<sup>10</sup> NLSY97 includes a GPA recorded from high school transcripts, but that variable has a large number of missing cases. For example, almost 50% of students are missing the transcript-based GPA for 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

for students who reported earning B's and A's. Moreover, I include a dummy variable indicating whether a student was in an academic track in high school.<sup>11</sup>

Models of bachelor's degree completion include two additional controls: age at entry into higher education and entering a two-year institution. Students who delay entry into higher education seem to have less favorable outcomes (Adelman 2006; Bozick and DeLuca 2005; NCES 2005) as do students who enter two-year institutions (Alfonso 2006; Dougherty 1992; Monk-Turner 1995; Whitaker and Pascarella 1994). Students who enter two-year institutions are not excluded from the models since a substantial proportion of them aspire to earn bachelor's degrees and many indeed transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Moreover, since students starting in two-year institutions are more likely to come from less advantaged family backgrounds, excluding them from analyses would underestimate the role of family background in higher education. Means and standard deviations for control variables are reported in the appendix.

Missing data on family background variables and control variables was dealt with in two steps. First, if the information was missing for a given year, data from the next year was used, not to exceed student's high school graduation (for college entry models) or college entry (for degree completion models). That step substantially reduced the number of missing cases, leaving less than 1 percent of missing cases for parental education and less than 10 percent for parental income, high school track, and grades. Since ASVAB was administered at only one point in time, test scores continued to lack almost 20 percent of the cases. To preserve these

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<sup>11</sup> Grades and track were initially split into three categories, for grades: high (B's and A's), medium (B's and C's), and low (below a C), for track: academic, general and other (mostly vocational). However, there were not enough cases for reliable estimation in the lowest grade or other track categories among college entrants. Thus, for consistency, I included only dummy variables for high grades (B's and A's) and academic track in all analyses. Results for entry into higher education are not substantively altered if a more nuanced measure of grades and track is included.

cases in the models, mean substitution was used: substituting the mean for missing data and including a dummy variable when the substitution is made.<sup>12</sup>

## **RESULTS**

### **Entering Higher Education**

Previous research has often explored the role of high school experiences for college entry. In particular, much research has focused on the importance of academic preparation and differences in academic preparation by social class. However, high school students do not always focus solely on their studies. Many high school students participate in the labor market, and some transition into family roles before graduation. Table 1 reports transitions into work and family roles by family background. A small proportion of high school graduates transition into spouse/partner and parent roles before graduation, although students from less advantaged family backgrounds are much more likely to make those transitions.<sup>13</sup> On average, 5 percent of students have spouse/partner before high school graduation, but this average masks notable differences by social class: 7 percent of students whose parents did not attend college had a spouse/partner while only 1 percent of students whose parents had graduate/professional degrees did so. A similar pattern holds for having children.

[Table 1 about here]

While only a small proportion of high school graduates make the transition to family roles before graduation, the majority (just under 80 percent) participate in the labor market. Fifteen percent of students reported working at high intensity (more than 35 hours per week), and

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<sup>12</sup> Descriptive statistics reported in the paper are based on complete data; mean substitution is used only in regression models.

<sup>13</sup> The percentages are low in part because this analysis is restricted to high school graduates. Some students who make the transition to family roles during high school do not earn their high school diplomas, and thus are not included in the sample.

almost one third reported working at either medium or low intensity. Employment patterns are inversely related to social class background – the more advantaged the family background the less intense the labor market participation. Students across social class backgrounds are similarly distributed in the medium intensity category, but notable differences emerge in low and high intensity categories. While 18 percent of students whose parents did not attend college worked at high intensity, only half as many (9 percent) of students whose parents held graduate/professional degrees did so. The relationship is reversed for low intensity employment.

Given that some high school graduates assume obligations beyond simply being students, how are transitions into marriage/cohabitation, parenthood, and work related to the likelihood of entry into higher education? Moreover, do these transitions to adult roles help to explain social class inequality in access to higher education? The first model in Table 2 includes measures of family background and relevant control variables. Academic preparation (including high school track, grades, and test scores) is crucial for shaping entry into higher education as well as explaining some of the gaps between students from more and less advantaged family backgrounds. Including academic preparation in the model decreases the coefficients for parental education by approximately 30 percent. The reduction is even more pronounced for family income, where coefficients for second and third quartiles are rendered statistically insignificant after controlling for academic preparation.

[Table 2 about here]

However, even after controlling for academic preparation, and other relevant demographic characteristics, family background plays an important role in whether students enter higher education. Students whose parents completed graduate/professional degrees are 2.6 times more likely to enter higher education than those whose parents did not attend college. Even when parents had just some college experience, their children were 56 percent more likely

to enter higher education. Net of parental education, income appears to be less consequential for entry into higher education, although there is a distinct advantage of being in the top income quartile: students in the top income quartile are 64 percent more likely to make the transition into higher education than those in the bottom quartile.

The next two models consider whether these remaining social class differences in access to higher education may be related to family and labor market transitions. Model 2 shows that students who become spouses/partners or parents before high school graduation are significantly less likely to enter higher education. However, social class coefficients remain virtually the same after controlling for these transitions. Participation in the labor market is more common and has the expected relationships to college entry: limited employment during high school has a positive relationship to college entry, moderate employment appears inconsequential, and extensive commitment to the labor market has negative consequences. Net of all the other variables in the model, students who reported working intensely (more than 35 hours per week) during high school were 46 percent less likely to enter higher education. However, as was the case for family transitions, employment patterns during high school do not account for class inequality in college entry.

While marriage/cohabitation, parenthood, and work do not explain class differences in college entry, they may have varying consequences for different groups of students. Students from less advantaged family backgrounds may be more susceptible to the negative consequences associated with those transitions. To consider this possibility, I conducted supplemental analyses testing interaction terms between family background and marriage/cohabitation, parenthood, and work, separately. None of the interactions were statistically significant. Moreover, to consider whether “role overload” (e.g., Marini, Chan and Raymond 1987; Riley, Johnson and Foner 1972) may have consequences for entry into higher education, I estimated models with interactions

between work and family roles. It is possible that the effects of these transitions are not simply additive but that the joint transition into different roles may be particularly consequential.

However, role overload does not appear to be much of a concern for this group of students – interactions between high intensity employment and family roles are not significant. However, there appears to be a trade-off between different commitments: the benefits of working at low intensity are reduced when students are married/cohabitating or have children.

Finding that transitions into spouse/partner, parent, and worker roles do not account for much of the class gap in college entry may arise for at least two reasons. A relatively small proportion of high school graduates made the transition into adult roles. Consequently, a life course perspective may not be as crucial for understanding class inequality in this specific educational transition. Moreover, it is likely that transitioning into adult roles during high school has consequences for high school graduation, and consequently not for college entry, conditional on high school graduation. If students who made transitions into adult roles did not graduate from high school, they would not be included in the sample examined in presented analyses. This would imply that making life course transitions during a specific level of education may be particularly consequential for completing that level, and not as much for making subsequent transitions (conditional on completing that level). The next set of analyses considers this possibility by examining how getting married/partnered, having children, and working during college contribute to class inequality in degree completion.

### **Bachelor's Degree Completion**

Entering higher education is far from a guarantee of degree completion. Many students who enter higher education do not earn degrees within six years (e.g., NCES 2003a; NCES 2003b). Considering traditional-age students, multiple institutions, and longer time frames

improves graduation rates, but even when using more flexible definitions, a substantial proportion of college students leave higher education without a degree in hand (Adelman 2006). Moreover, students from less advantaged family backgrounds are less likely complete educational credentials than their more advantaged counterparts. Do transitions into work and family roles help to account for some of the class inequality in degree completion?

Table 3 describes employment and family formation patterns of college entrants by family background. Only 6 percent of students were married or cohabitating when they entered higher education, but 24 percent made this transition by the 45<sup>th</sup> month after entry.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, three times as many students had children 45 months after entry than when they first entered higher education (13 percent and 4 percent, respectively). Thus, while the majority of students may not enter higher education with family obligations, they increasingly acquire them over time. Differences by family background are particularly notable. Only 2 percent of students whose parents held professional/graduate degrees were married or cohabitating when they entered higher education, but more than 4 times as many students whose parents had no college experience did so (9 percent). Class differences in marriage/cohabitation decrease over time, but they are still notable. Having children also shows large differences by family background, and these differences do not decrease notably over time: a much higher proportion of students from less advantaged family backgrounds have children in all time periods. A similar pattern of class differences is revealed for parental income.

[Table 3 about here]

Students from less educated families are not only more likely to transition into family roles; they are also more likely to participate in the labor market, especially at high intensity

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<sup>14</sup> Month 45 was chosen for illustration because the largest proportion of students graduates in that month, which represents the traditional 4-year graduation time period (i.e., if a student entered in September 2000, May 2004 would be 45 months since enrollment).

(over 35 hours per week). Table 3 reports employment status during the first month after enrollment as well as the cumulative number of months worked in different intensity categories by the 45<sup>th</sup> month of enrollment. Working at high intensity in a given month may be important, but it is likely that working full-time for an extended period of time is more consequential. Indeed, previous studies have shown that specific patterns of employment are related to student success (e.g., Mortimer 2003; Staff and Mortimer 2007). While approximately equal proportions of students report working in low, medium and high categories in their first month, this is not the case for all class groups: students from less advantaged family backgrounds are more likely to work at medium, and especially high intensity. Class differences are even more pronounced when considering cumulative employment in low, medium, and high intensity categories. Students from more educated families spend proportionally more time in low intensity work while those from less educated families spend most of their time in high intensity employment. It is interesting to note that there are no class differences in the middle category – it is thus the trade-off between the low and high intensity employment that distinguishes between students from more and less advantaged family backgrounds. The same pattern, albeit less pronounced, is observed for parental income.

Do these differential patterns of transition into adult roles (full-time work, marriage, and parenthood) help to account for any of the class inequality in degree completion? Discrete time event history models presented in Table 4 address this question. The first model is a baseline model, including measures of family background and other relevant controls. As was the case for entry into higher education, academic preparation plays an important role in explaining class inequality in degree completion. However, even after controlling for academic preparation and a range of demographic characteristics, family background continues to have a statistically significant relationship with the likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree. Students whose

parents held college degrees or higher were slightly over 30 percent more likely to complete bachelor's degrees than students whose parents did not attend college, net of academic preparation and other controls. Similarly, students in the top income quartile were 42 percent more likely to complete their degrees than students in the bottom quartile.

[Table 4 about here]

The next model considers the relationship between family formation and degree completion. Getting married/cohabitating and having children poses challenges for educational attainment: marriage/cohabitation reduces the likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree by almost 30 percent, while having a child reduces it by more than 50 percent. Although significant, family formation variables do not explain the class gap in college completion. Controlling for family formation reduces coefficients for having parents with college and graduate/professional degrees by approximately 15 percent. However, both coefficients remain statistically significant. There is virtually no change in coefficients for parental income quartiles. Family formation thus plays some, but a relatively limited role, in understanding class gaps in degree completion.

Employment patterns, however, are much more consequential for class inequality in higher education. Model 4 suggests that the more months students spend in low intensity employment (20 hours or less), the more likely they are to complete their degrees. Conversely, the more months they spend in high intensity employment (working over 35 hours per week), the less likely they are to complete their degrees. These findings are consistent with the previous research on college employment which reported that intense employment has a negative relationship to persistence and attainment while limited employment has either no or positive relationship to those outcomes (Bozick 2007; NCES 1998; Orszag, Orszag and Whitmore 2001; Staff and Mortimer 2007). Notably, after controlling for employment, the coefficients for

parental education (bachelor's and graduate/professional degrees) are reduced substantially (by 57 and 73 percent respectively) and are no longer statistically significant. The coefficients for income change less after adding employment measures. Nevertheless, the coefficient for the top income quartile is reduced by 20 percent and is no longer statistically significant. The final model, which includes measures of employment and family formation, thus shows no significant effects of class on bachelor's degree attainment.

If one of the main ways in which the spouse/partner, parent, and worker roles are incompatible with the student role is due to time constraints, it may be expected that those roles would not have only an additive effect but that they may interact such that making multiple transitions would be particularly consequential for degree completion. To consider this possibility, I estimated models including interaction terms between work and family roles. As was the case for entry into higher education, the benefits of low intensity employment for degree completion are reduced for individuals who are married/cohabitating. However, in this particular transition, there is also some evidence of "role overload" (e.g., see Marini, Chan and Raymond 1987; Riley, Johnson and Foner 1972): negative effects of high intensity employment are heightened for individuals with children. Joint participation in full-time employment and having children appears to place an extraordinary strain on students, leading to a particularly low likelihood of degree completion.

Finally, while life course transitions, particularly employment, help to account for class inequality in degree completion, there is also a possibility that those transitions are more consequential for less advantaged students. Students from more advantaged backgrounds may be more likely to partner with similarly more advantaged students and/or may have resources to deal with childcare, reducing the strain of multiple roles. However, the findings do not support these expectations. None of the interactions between family background measures and non-

student roles (marriage/cohabitation, children, or work) are statistically significant. The benefits and costs of making transitions into different roles, thus, appear equal across social class groups. The main difference is that students from less advantaged families are more likely to transition into non-student roles, which helps to explain their lower likelihood of success in higher education.

## CONCLUSION

Recent calls for incorporating insights from the life course perspective into research on educational stratification (e.g., Pallas 1993; Pallas 2004; Schneider 2001) have yet to stimulate a new research agenda. Studies of class inequality in higher education continue to rely on the traditional status attainment model, often borrowing concepts from K-12 research and focusing exclusively on the student role. However, there are notable class differences in whether students transition into other social roles, including full-time work, marriage, and parenthood, before and after they enter higher education. Moreover, these transitions, particularly employment patterns, help to account for class inequality in bachelor's degree completion. These findings illuminate the potential for empirical and theoretical developments that can emerge from considering how students combine their studies with other life course transitions.

Although some authors have suggested that the status attainment model reflects the life course perspective (Kerckhoff 1993; Mortimer, Staff and Oesterle 2004), stratification scholars have not dedicated adequate attention to examining relationships between different realms of individual lives. For example, Kerckhoff's *Diverging Pathways* is one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies of class inequality across transitions. While the study makes unprecedented contributions to tracking inequality from early schooling to the point of entry into the labor market, it clearly separates educational from labor market transitions. Kerckhoff

acknowledges (as do other stratification scholars) that educational and labor market roles are intertwined, but still conducts analyses as if there is a clear separation between the two aspects of students' lives. Since Kerckhoff's writing, new datasets and analytical tools have created more opportunities for studying relationships among different social roles. As students stay in school longer, and as their studies become increasingly intertwined with other life course transitions, considering the complexity of students' lives is necessary to preserve the relevance and explanatory power of the status attainment tradition.

Broadening the educational attainment research to include multiple social roles is also crucial for effective policy development. Previous research and policy endeavors have often focused on access to higher education (Goldrick-Rab and Roksa 2008). However, access is far from a guarantee of degree completion. Moreover, as findings of this study indicate, the same factors may not be equally relevant across different educational transitions. Improving academic preparation, particularly of the less socioeconomically advantaged students, will help to reduce some of the class gaps in college entry and completion. However, that is not sufficient for closing the gap in degree completion. College students often transition into other social roles before or during higher education, which can hinder their likelihood of successfully completing bachelor's degrees. More comprehensive policy approaches, which move beyond academic preparation, are required. Whether that means adopting flexible scheduling more widely (i.e., not only at two-year and less selective institutions), providing child care facilities, or changing financial aid policies to allow flexible attendance patterns, effective policies will need to consider how schooling fits into the context of students' lives.

This is important not only for older students, but also for students in their late teens and early twenties. Several recent studies have considered how non-traditional-age students combine schooling with work and family obligations (Bradburn, Moen and Dempster-McClain 1995;

Elman and O'Rand 2007; Jacobs and King 2002; Taniguchi and Kaufman 2005). However, navigating multiple social roles is not only a challenge for non-traditional-age students. The sample in this study included mostly traditional-age students who were on average 19 years old at the point of entry into higher education, and many of these students were juggling multiple life demands on their paths through higher education. A life course perspective thus provides valuable insights, even when studying educational outcomes of “traditional” students.

By relying on NLSY97, this study is situated in a particular time and place. Previous research has reported much variation in the timing and sequencing of life course transitions across different contexts (see reviews in Pallas 1993; Shanahan 2000). When only a small proportion of students entered U.S. higher education, making transitions into marriage, parenthood, or full-time work may have been more consequential. Moreover, the remarkable flexibility of U.S. higher education, which allows breaks in schooling and movement across programs and institutions, may render it particularly conducive to combining multiple social roles. This could imply that students in the U.S. are both more likely to make transitions to adulthood before completing their education, as well as that the consequences of these transitions are less pronounced. If there are consequences for deviating from the normative patterns (Hogan 1980; Hogan 1981; Rindfuss, Swicegood and Rosenfeld 1987), they are likely to be less pronounced in flexible systems where students follow a range of different pathways. Conducting longitudinal and cross-national studies would be particularly beneficial for understanding the extent to which combining multiple social roles has varying consequences across time and place.

Meanwhile, exploring the relationship between family background and life course transitions appears beneficial for studying inequality in U.S. higher education. The journey through higher education is not a straight path, one dedicated only to studying and no other obligations. Students enter higher education today having assumed other roles often associated

with adulthood. In order to understand their outcomes, and particularly class inequality in degree completion, traditional status attainment models need to be supplemented with insights from the life course tradition about the multiplicity and variability of roles assumed by young adults. As Pallas (2004) noted: “A life course perspective implies that educational trajectories ought not be studied in isolation from other social institutions and from other social roles associated with participation in those institution, because such roles are intertwined in complex ways (p. 170).” Heeding this advice would produce a better understanding of the complexity of constraints and choices students face in higher education, which is crucial for developing a compelling explanation of class inequality.

## APPENDIX

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for demographic and academic controls

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	<b>College Entry Model</b>	<b>Degree Completion Model</b>
<b>Demographic and Academic Controls</b>		
Male	0.507 (0.500)	0.467 (0.499)
African American	0.147 (0.354)	0.126 (0.332)
Hispanic	0.119 (0.324)	0.108 (0.309)
Other non-white	0.050 (0.218)	0.059 (0.236)
Two parent household	0.696 (0.460)	0.747 (0.435)
Number of children in the household	2.309 (1.175)	2.255 (1.126)
Test score (percentile)	53.687 28.132	62.033 (25.797)
Earned A's and B's in high school	0.409 (0.494)	0.507 (0.500)
Academic track	0.373 (0.486)	0.471 (0.500)
Entered a two-year institution		0.429 (0.495)
Age at college entry (months)		225.679 (14.316)

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Table 1. Patterns of work, marriage/cohabitation, and parenthood of high school graduates, by family background

	<b>Parental Education</b>			
	High school or less	Some college	Bachelor's degree	Graduate/professional degrees
Married/cohabitating (%)	0.068	0.052	0.025	0.014
Children (%)	0.089	0.048	0.023	0.012
Employment (%)				
Low intensity	0.257	0.324	0.373	0.405
Medium intensity	0.333	0.324	0.281	0.267
High intensity	0.180	0.151	0.131	0.088
	<b>Parental Income</b>			
	First quartile	Second quartile	Third quartile	Fourth quartile
Married/cohabitating (%)	0.088	0.056	0.047	0.023
Children (%)	0.122	0.069	0.041	0.023
Employment (%)				
Low intensity	0.250	0.316	0.324	0.364
Medium intensity	0.288	0.332	0.318	0.308
High intensity	0.181	0.148	0.164	0.120

Table 2. Logistic regression models of entry into higher education

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
<b>Family Background</b>			
<i>Education</i>			
Some college	0.442** (0.080)	0.454** (0.082)	0.441** (0.082)
Bachelor's degree	1.049** (0.122)	1.017** (0.123)	1.002** (0.125)
Graduate/professional degree	1.286** (0.142)	1.273** (0.143)	1.223** (0.143)
<i>Income</i>			
Second quartile	0.047 (0.099)	0.017 (0.101)	0.018 (0.102)
Third quartile	0.172 (0.118)	0.147 (0.120)	0.160 (0.121)
Fourth quartile	0.496** (0.117)	0.463** (0.119)	0.461** (0.120)
<b>Family Formation</b>			
<i>Married/cohabitating</i>		-1.420** (0.202)	-1.300** (0.203)
<i>Child</i>		-0.743** (0.169)	-0.719** (0.170)
<b>Employment</b>			
Low intensity			0.214* (0.101)
Medium intensity			-0.135 (0.098)
High intensity			-0.613** (0.112)
<b>Demographic and Academic Controls</b>			
Male	-0.398** (0.070)	-0.517** (0.072)	-0.459** (0.072)
African American	0.492** (0.099)	0.490** (0.102)	0.463** (0.101)
Hispanic	0.359** (0.103)	0.372** (0.106)	0.353** (0.108)
Other non-white	0.710** (0.194)	0.749** (0.206)	0.723** (0.203)
Two parent household	0.182* (0.083)	0.161 (0.084)	0.153 (0.085)
Number of children in the household	-0.032 (0.029)	-0.020 (0.030)	-0.019 (0.029)
Test score	0.025** (0.002)	0.025** (0.002)	0.025** (0.002)
Earned A's and B's in high school	0.726** (0.080)	0.698** (0.081)	0.687** (0.081)
Academic track	0.960** (0.083)	0.920** (0.084)	0.915** (0.085)
Intercept	-1.454** (0.143)	-1.269** (0.148)	-1.168** (0.163)

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01 (robust standard errors in parentheses).

Note: N=6,833. Dummy variables for missing data are included in the models but not reported. Models are weighted and adjusted for clustering within families.

Table 3. Patterns of work, marriage/cohabitation, and parenthood of college entrants, by family background

	<b>Parental Education</b>			
	High school or less	Some college	Bachelor's degree	Graduate/professional degrees
<b>Married/cohabitating (%)</b>				
Month 1	0.090	0.060	0.048	0.021
Month 45	0.309	0.274	0.205	0.129
<b>Children (%)</b>				
Month 1	0.074	0.042	0.032	0.015
Month 45	0.213	0.156	0.081	0.048
<b>Employment (%)</b>				
Month 1				
Low intensity	0.124	0.174	0.176	0.150
Medium intensity	0.213	0.190	0.136	0.137
High intensity	0.208	0.172	0.128	0.080
<b>Employment (months)</b>				
Cumulative by Month 45				
Low intensity	4.672	6.212	7.725	8.621
Medium intensity	8.804	9.124	8.885	7.707
High intensity	16.716	13.958	10.688	8.957
<b>Parental Income</b>				
	First quartile	Second quartile	Third quartile	Fourth quartile
<b>Married/cohabitating (%)</b>				
Month 1	0.106	0.074	0.049	0.030
Month 45	0.343	0.269	0.227	0.148
<b>Children (%)</b>				
Month 1	0.104	0.047	0.032	0.014
Month 45	0.234	0.156	0.120	0.065
<b>Employment (%)</b>				
Month 1				
Low intensity	0.121	0.159	0.166	0.165
Medium intensity	0.212	0.192	0.173	0.141
High intensity	0.178	0.176	0.151	0.123
<b>Employment (month)</b>				
Cumulative by Month 45				
Low intensity	4.770	6.427	6.582	8.038
Medium intensity	9.043	8.545	9.214	8.071
High intensity	15.738	14.812	12.833	10.521

Table 4. Discrete time event history models of bachelor's degree completion

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
<b>Family Background</b>			
<i>Education</i>			
Some college	0.074 (0.119)	0.069 (0.119)	-0.014 (0.119)
Bachelor's degree	0.277* (0.119)	0.236* (0.119)	0.101 (0.120)
Graduate/professional degree	0.283* (0.122)	0.239* (0.122)	0.064 (0.126)
<i>Income</i>			
Second quartile	0.117 (0.137)	0.108 (0.138)	0.082 (0.136)
Third quartile	0.117 (0.142)	0.086 (0.143)	0.032 (0.146)
Fourth quartile	0.347** (0.133)	0.320* (0.134)	0.255 (0.137)
<b>Family Formation</b>			
<i>Married/cohabitating</i>			
		-0.339** (0.109)	-0.314** (0.119)
<i>Child</i>			
		-0.805** (0.198)	-0.735** (0.202)
<b>Employment (cumulative)</b>			
Low intensity			0.040** (0.005)
Medium intensity			0.009 (0.005)
High intensity			-0.021** (0.004)
<b>Demographic and Academic Controls</b>			
Male	-0.214** (0.075)	-0.279** (0.076)	-0.162* (0.081)
African American	-0.236* (0.120)	-0.205 (0.123)	-0.254 (0.131)
Hispanic	-0.274* (0.135)	-0.248 (0.135)	-0.275 (0.144)
Other non-white	0.132 (0.160)	0.075 (0.164)	0.036 (0.168)
Age at college entry (months)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.005)
Two parent household	0.249* (0.107)	0.248* (0.107)	0.254* (0.107)
Number of children in the household	-0.025 (0.033)	-0.012 (0.033)	-0.034 (0.035)
Test score	0.010** (0.002)	0.010** (0.002)	0.008** (0.002)
Earned A's and B's in high school	0.634** (0.088)	0.591** (0.090)	0.497** (0.091)
Academic track	0.322** (0.079)	0.327** (0.079)	0.298** (0.081)
Entered a two-year institution	-1.362** (0.113)	-1.299** (0.112)	-1.162** (0.112)
Intercept	-6.561** (1.172)	-6.873** (1.185)	-7.317** (1.220)

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01 (robust standard errors in parentheses).

Note: N=218,568 person-months. Dummy variables for time and missing data are included in the models but not reported. Models are weighted and adjusted for clustering within families.