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Does a student's college funding source influence their field of study?



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Higher Education has changed dramatically over the past few decades, and debates over college costs have intensified. Examining how college funding is associated with course selection, *Social Forces* Editor Arne L. Kalleberg interviews Natasha Quadlin about [her research](https://academic.oup.com/sf/article/96/1/91/3829205/Funding-Sources-Family-Income-and-Fields-of-Study) (<https://academic.oup.com/sf/article/96/1/91/3829205/Funding-Sources-Family-Income-and-Fields-of-Study>) about the effects of college funding sources.

How do you situate your research in the broader, national conversation about the role or function of a college education? Specifically, do you believe family resources – both throughout the life course and throughout college – contribute to divergent narratives on this issue?

There are two dominant narratives about the function of higher education today. The first posits that college is primarily a place for students to learn critical thinking skills and develop new passions and ideas. The second—which has gained more traction in recent years—contends that college is primarily a form of workforce training, and colleges should play an integral role in helping students find jobs. My research suggests that the extent to which students see college as a place for “critical thinking” or “job training” is largely a function of how they’re paying for college, as well as their socioeconomic background. A logical extension is that this “job training” narrative may be gaining in popularity because the population of college-goers is becoming increasingly diverse. These students (and their families) may attach different job-related expectations to colleges than previous generations of students did.

In addition to students' individual decision-making, what do you think the role of parental or family influence may be in motivating students' choice of majors and course in college?

Parents play an enormous role in a student's major choice. Parents can often steer their children's thinking in terms of the resources (or lack thereof) the family has to support education, and whether the student can expect to receive financial support upon leaving college. Most of the information students have about a major being “practical” or “financially responsible” ultimately comes from their parents or family; whether that information is correct, of course, is a whole separate issue. Depending on the messages a student receives from their parents or guardian, and whether these conversations happen frequently or not at all, can have an enormous effect on a student's choice of major and future career.

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Do you believe that funding sources are an overlooked systemic barrier in the higher education system? Do they contribute to the lack of diversity and underrepresentation of key socioeconomic and minority groups in STEM fields within both academic and professional settings?

Absolutely. Most students have little information about degree options when they choose a major, especially when they are enrolling for the first time. Research has shown some don't consider STEM degrees at all, or they consider them only briefly, because all they know is that STEM majors are “difficult” and they'll have to weed-out classes where they might get bad grades. Research consistently shows that debt is a source of stress in people's lives, and if students have to take out loans to pay for college, they may be wary of taking courses where success is uncertain. This is not to say that these students aren't capable of succeeding in STEM—they absolutely are—but financial limitations may keep some students from taking risks they don't necessarily need to take.

What might the role of colleges and loan/grant providers (both federal and private) be in leveraging their positions to increase students' exposures to more diverse academic disciplines and intellectual pursuits?

Historically, loan providers have been pretty hands-off when it comes to students' academics—and I could see how increased involvement could be problematic! But many colleges can do more to support students who have to incur debt to attend. There needs to be recognition that loans affect students long before they graduate; rather, loans affect many choices students make during college too, including their choice of major. Grant providers might be uniquely positioned to encourage students to do some exploratory course-taking because they hold the purse strings, so to speak. This might be something worth doing, especially if the grant is reserved for low-income or minority students, who might be hesitant to take a broad range of courses.

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You note an interesting puzzle whereby the chances of majoring in STEM fields are mostly unrelated to funding sources. If Grants do not appear to increase the incentive to choose a STEM major, what other sorts of interventions might encourage greater diversity in the STEM fields?

Grants might be more effective if they're specifically geared toward increasing student participation in STEM. Mentoring programs can also be effective if they provide students with personal attention. These programs don't necessarily increase the incentive to major in STEM—because the incentives to major in STEM are already quite high—but they might give students the support they need to take advantage of those incentives.

Some readers might argue that low-income college students faced with post-graduation debt from loans are better off choosing majors in non-STEM applied fields (despite the lower long-term job growth potential) if the alternative option is to graduate with a non-STEM academic major with no clear path to initial employment. How would you respond to those comments?

I'm very sympathetic to arguments about practicality, and I agree with them for the most part. I become more hesitant when I think about students who, for example, majored in business and worked in accounting their whole lives because they were worried about being briefly unemployed after college. I don't think "following your heart" is necessarily a perfect strategy when choosing a major, either, because lacking a clear path to employment is unsettling for many students. A good middle ground might be for students to find a field they're passionate about, and then spend several years exploring career options and building a professional record, especially if a clear pathway to employment hasn't been provided for them.

A version of this post was originally published on the *Social Forces* blog (https://academic.oup.com/sf/pages/blog_college_funding).

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