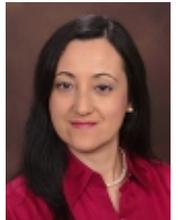


## Educational access takes much more than studying harder, poor youth say

*Increasingly concerned about poor college entry rates of high school students from low income backgrounds, policymakers have introduced programs aimed at increasing students' motivation and decision making skills. Through classroom visits and interviews with over 170 high school students, [Stephanie Drotos](#) and [Sebnem Cilesiz](#) find that students from low income households face unique challenges to enrolling in college, such as a lack of family support and information about college in general. These challenges often require additional efforts, such as holding one or more part-time job, which in turn means greater time pressure on students. The researchers argue that interventions which focus on 'hard work' as a path out of poverty, but ignore the challenges faced by students from low income backgrounds, are unlikely to be successful.*



In order to help economically disadvantaged students successfully enroll in post-secondary education, numerous course-based interventions have emerged across American high schools. Students are instructed to “pull oneself up by the bootstraps” in order to “make it” in the US. The courses assume that increased motivation and better decision-making skills will lead students to a college degree and a path out of poverty. [Recent research](#) conducted in high schools with high rates of poverty in the US has shown that assumptions built into the lessons may do more harm than good.

Our research revealed the complex system of formidable challenges that students from high poverty backgrounds face. These barriers tend to be overlooked during these courses. A college readiness intervention adopted by six schools within two public school districts in a Midwestern metropolitan area was studied over the course of a year. The schools suffered from poverty-related issues, with 53 percent to 95 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch on the basis of their household income, low daily attendance rates, low graduation rates, and low ratings on school report cards (on the basis of students' test scores). Through classroom visits and interviews with over 170 high school juniors and seniors enrolled in the program, we investigated the students' perspectives of the intervention as well as what it takes to successfully enroll in college.



The findings were alarming, if not surprising: students from high poverty high schools face unique challenges which middle class students are less likely to encounter. Increased motivation and better decision-making are not enough to surmount such daunting obstacles. Successful college enrollment necessitated additional efforts and resources not required by well-heeled students, which are summarized under six themes: money, time, information, courage, the ability to make sacrifices, and the ability to take risks.

## **Money**

Not only is college in America becoming ever more costly, with [typical 4 year college costs](#) of over \$20,000 a year we found that graduating successfully from high school was expensive for the poor students. Many worked in part-time jobs in order to save for college. However, before putting money into savings, they had immediate high school expenses to address first. Most could not rely on their parents to pay their high school fees. Participating in prom, field trips, and buying shoes and other clothes was onerous for them. As one explained, “I know I need to get a second job. I work . . . nights. I need another job—one [to pay] for school and one for college.”

## **Time**

The need for money compelled most students to hold one or more part-time job, which left limited time for studying. One student described her schedule, juggling school, a job, and athletics. “I do my schoolwork at school because I work when I’m not here and play volleyball. I do homework during lunch and during the period I am an aid for the security office.” Multiple school changes due to relocations were also common. This caused students to lose time as they had to adjust to a new school, teachers, and curriculum. A student shared that her GPA had been good until she started moving. “I really only had 2 weeks of my freshman year; I moved so much.”

## **Information**

Students from low income families are more likely to be potential first-generation college graduates. They are unlikely to have college educated family members whom they could access for information about colleges, majors, or financial aid. Students in the study were unfamiliar with the college admissions timeline, types of financial aid available, or career requirements; they were likely to miss college application deadlines or turn in incomplete packages due to lack of information. They described college as a “completely different situation” and were apprehensive about being thrust into a classroom environment with those who they perceived to be different from them.

## **Courage, sacrifices, and risks**

In light of constraints of money, time and information, the students needed courage, and the ability and willingness to make sacrifices and take risks. Not all were able to deliver in these areas. Students who must take care of other family members are unable to direct limited resources toward their own college attendance. Some families may even view their child’s post-secondary pursuits as selfish. Not only do students need the ability to redirect these limited resources, they must at times also overcome unsupportive attitudes from family members. They need to take the social risk of entering an unfamiliar setting where they may not fit in and be lonely as well as socially and culturally distancing themselves from their families of origin.

In addition to emotional challenges, attending college is financially risky for these students because they face severe consequences if they fail. [Low-income, first-generation students who drop out of college typically owe between \\$6000 to \\$16,000](#). These students must repay their loans without the payoff of higher earnings afforded by earning a college degree. Nor are they likely to have family resources which can help bail them out.

In the face of such systemic challenges, interventions based solely on psychological theory neglect to acknowledge [the importance of valued cultural and social capital](#) for a successful transition from high school to college. Accumulating this cultural capital, i.e., a college degree, requires that students have access to social capital, or networks of college-educated others with whom they have built trusting relationships as well as economic capital to invest in higher education. Access to social capital, from within one’s family, community, or school, greatly facilitates enrollment and persistence in higher education.

Teaching that the “skill” to work hard and be disciplined and “will” to pursue higher education are all that are needed in order to rise out of poverty, implies that students themselves are solely responsible for their academic outcomes. Students in America do have some control over their future; however, a failure to acknowledge the structural constraints implies that failure to achieve rests on the student whereas larger societal and economic factors are even more influential. This may lead to educational policies which address student psychology in lieu of providing support to help students mitigate structural constraints limiting their educational opportunities.

*This article is based on the paper, ‘[Shoes, Dues, and Other Barriers to College Attainment: Perspectives of Students Attending High Poverty High Schools](#)’ in *Education and Urban Society*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Dr. Stephanie Drotos recently completed a two-year fellowship funded by the State Department’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. During her assignment in Kosovo, Dr. Drotos assisted with the development and implementation of Kosovo’s English Teacher Professional Development Program and provided support to [KETNET](#), the Kosovo/a English Teachers’ Network. She has a PhD in Educational Leadership from the Ohio State University and has taught in public schools and colleges in the US and abroad for over 15 years. Her research interests include educational policy and international development. She is currently teaching Developmental English at Eastern Gateway Community College in Ohio.



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