

Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Growing College Graduation Gap

David Leonhardt MARCH 25, 2018

First, some good news: In recent decades, students from modest backgrounds have flooded onto college campuses. At many high schools where going to college was once exotic, it's now normal. When I visit these high schools, I see college pennants all over the hallways, intended to send a message: *College is for you, too.*

And thank goodness for that message. As regular readers of this column have heard before, college can bring enormous benefits, including less unemployment, higher wages, better long-term health and higher life satisfaction.

Now for the bad news: The college-graduation rate for these poorer students is abysmal. It's abysmal even though many of them are talented teenagers capable of graduating. Yet they often attend colleges with few resources or colleges that simply do a bad job of shepherding students through a course of study.

The result is both counterintuitive and alarming. Even as the college-attendance gap between rich and poor has shrunk, the gap in the number of rich and poor college graduates has grown. That shouldn't be happening.

The chart here — based on a new study in the journal *Demography* — shows how strange a combination this is. Lines that seem as if they should move in tandem don't do so. The surge in poorer students going to college hasn't led to any meaningful change in the number of college graduates from poorer backgrounds. Among children born to low-wealth families in the 1970s, 11.3 percent went on to earn a bachelor's degree. Among the same category of children born in the 1980s, only 11.8 percent did.

The picture is very different for people who grew up in the wealthiest one-fifth of families, according to the study, by Fabian Pfeffer of the University of Michigan. The number going to

college fell slightly over the same time period (which may just be statistical noise, given how high their attendance rates already were). But many more of them emerged with degrees.

This growing gap has big consequences, because the benefits of college come largely from graduating, not merely attending some classes. Graduation allows students to complete a program and be prepared for a job. Graduation has intangible benefits, too.

You can think of college as adulthood's first obstacle course. People who complete it learn how to overcome other obstacles as they go through life. People who don't finish suffer a blow to their confidence. They also typically have to repay college debt without the extra earning power of a degree. It's the worst of both worlds.

If anything, the consequences of failing to complete college seem to be increasing, as the economy becomes ever more technologically advanced. Since 2000, the average inflation-adjusted wage of workers with some college credit but no degree has actually fallen, by 2 percent, according to a recent report by the Economic Policy Institute. The average wage of college graduates is up 6 percent.

There are surely multiple reasons that the college-graduation gap is growing. For one thing, neighborhoods have become more economically segregated, which probably increases gaps in the quality of K-12 schools — and, by extension, academic preparation. Many colleges that serve poor and middle-class students have also suffered cuts in state funding. And tuition has risen.

Whatever the causes, the gap makes the United States a less fair country. Thousands of students who work hard, overcome tough neighborhoods or family situations and do well in school are nonetheless falling by the wayside. They're not failing so much as the rest of society is failing them.

Doing right by them would require a lot of changes, in tax policy, housing policy and other areas. The Trump administration clearly has no interest in these changes. Instead, it's pushing an agenda that will worsen inequality.

But improving college graduation rates does not, for the most part, depend on the federal government. It's an area where people who want to help fix our economy — people in the nonprofit sector, in state and local government and, obviously, on college campuses — can play a meaningful role.

Already, some colleges have started to make impressive changes. Georgia State has raised its six-year graduation rate sharply. A network of 11 universities, including Kansas, Michigan State and the University of California, Riverside, are working together — imagine that — to

share student-success strategies. In New York, community colleges in the CUNY network have created a program that nearly doubled graduation rates.

I'm convinced that the college-graduation problem is one of the big barriers to economic mobility — and yet also one on which we can make real progress. In the coming months, I will be telling some of the unknown success stories in higher education. I'll also look at campuses that should be doing better.

There are few things I find more inspiring than listening to teenagers from difficult backgrounds talk about their future, usually with optimism and ambition. The rest of us owe them a little urgency.

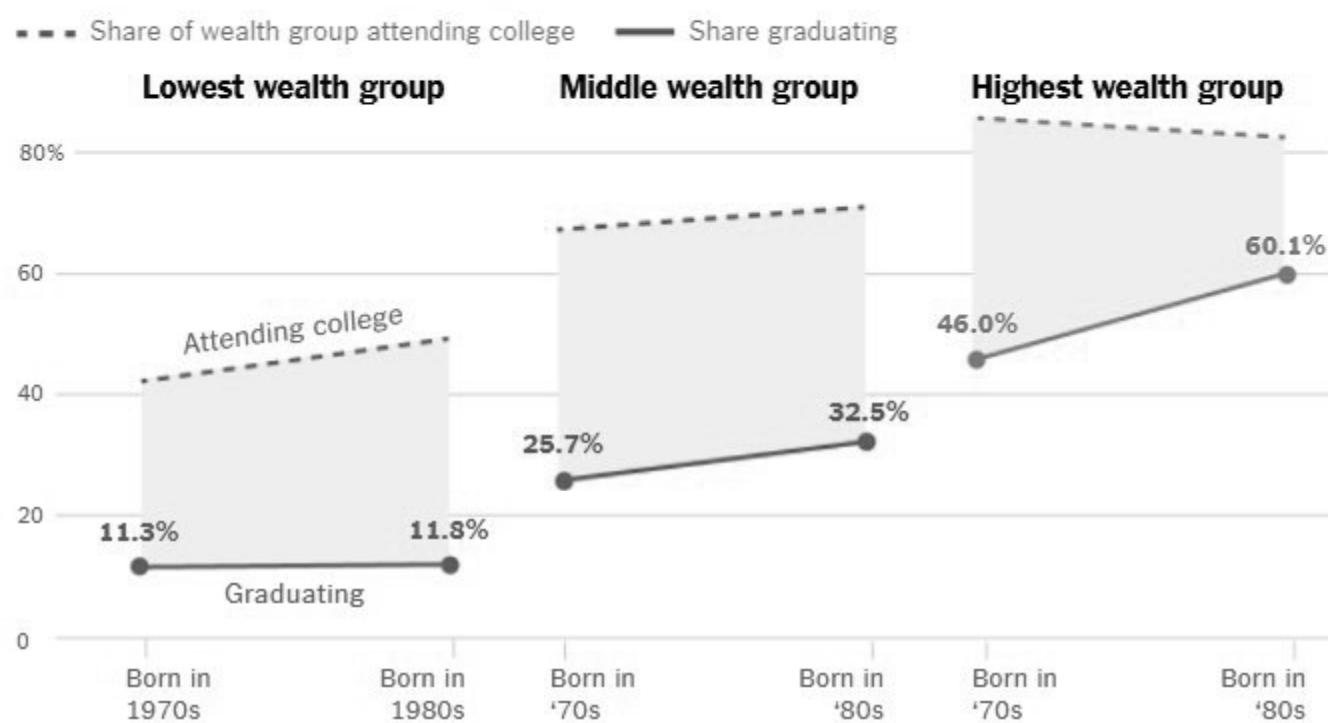
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More Students, and Yet...

For the poorest wealth group, college attendance has risen, but college graduation has not.



Note: Wealth categories are based on a person's parents' wealth when the person was 10-14 years old. Lowest wealth group is the bottom 40 percent of households; middle wealth is the middle 40 percent; upper wealth is the top 20 percent. Educational outcomes are at age 25. Source: Fabian Pfeffer, "Growing Wealth Gaps in Education," the journal *Demography*. | By The New York Times