

SECTION I:

**Addressing Class, Gender,  
and Race in Higher Education**

## CHAPTER 4

# The Puzzle and Paradox of Student Mobility in Higher Education

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American students have never attended college in a straightforward and linear fashion. In 1946, fresh out of the Navy, my grandfather began his pursuit of a bachelor's degree in New York City (NYC), at Hunter College's Bronx Lehman campus. After a year he decided to move to the University of Miami for the warmer weather. One year later, he changed again, moving to back to NYC to attend New York University. He went back to care for his mother, who was living alone. Incredibly, he graduated in 1950—right on time.

My grandfather was not an anomaly then, nor would his decisions be considered terribly odd now. Since the time the federal government began keeping track of students changing schools, the number of students attending more than one college has steadily grown. In 1972, nearly half (47.5 percent) of undergraduates attended more than one college; by 1982 it was 51.3 percent, and in 1992 it was 56.5 percent. In fact, nearly one-fifth (18.9 percent) of 1992 high school seniors went on to attend more than two colleges (Adelman, Daniel, & Berkovits, 2003; Adelman, 2004).

Yet throughout its history, American higher education has been a system of individual institutions that pride themselves on being distinctive and innovative, and invest heavily in their own success. The core learning of higher education does not rely on a common curriculum across schools, it is not organized around common timelines, nor does it utilize a common student record system. In this sense, it is rather miraculous that students manage to be mobile at all. Transfer and articulation agreements, designed to facilitate the flow of credits among schools, are a relatively new phenomenon. These agreements have yet to demonstrate their effectiveness on improving student outcomes (Roksa, 2006).

But students continue to move. Should higher education be concerned? How should policymakers and practitioners respond, if at all? As a sociologist, I approach

these questions by first posing an additional one: Does student mobility reflect and/or create inequality? Based on my empirical studies of national longitudinal college transcript data, the answer to this question is “yes.” Student mobility is both a reflection of and a contributor to inequality in American higher education along social class, and to some degree, along racial and gender lines. Student mobility should be treated as a concern and grappled with thoughtfully. In this paper, I briefly review my research on inequality in student mobility and formulate some suggestions for both policy and future research. My goal is to move the discussion of student mobility in higher education away from its current focus on what mobility means for institutional graduation rates to a focus on what mobility means for student outcomes and, in particular, student learning.

## **STRATIFICATION AND STUDENT MOBILITY**

Rigorous study of student mobility requires the use of college transcript data collected for thousands of students across hundreds of schools. Relying on a sample of students who all end up at one institution will produce biased findings (Kearney, Warner, & Kearney, 1995), as will a sample of students from schools only in one region or state (Bach, Banks, Kinnick, Ricks, Stoering, & Walleri, 2000). There are two national datasets created by the National Center for Education Statistics that are particularly useful for this purpose, as they track students from middle or high school until early adulthood, and collect transcripts from all of the schools students attend: High School and Beyond of 1982 (HSB) and the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS).

My research thus far has examined the more contemporary cohort of students found in the NELS data. In particular, I have focused on the group of NELS students who graduated from high school in or around 1992 and began college at a four-year institution prior to the year 2000. Unlike students who start at two-year schools, these students are not required—in order to earn a bachelor’s degree—to be mobile. Thus their mobility presents additional puzzles and challenges.

## **TYPES OF MOBILITY**

There are numerous ways in which students can change schools. Like my grandfather, they can do so fluidly and continuously, simply by leaving one school and then immediately enrolling in another. They can move while taking some time off between attending schools, interrupting their movement. Students can move from one four-year school to another, or they can move from a four-year to a two-year institution. They can combine enrollment options, doing a so-called “reverse transfer” interrupted by a stopout (or discontinuous enrollment). The possibilities are extensive.

Of the 2,135 NELS students who started their postsecondary education at a four-year institution and went on to attend at least one other college, 20 percent also experienced an interruption in their enrollment. I term this pattern “interrupted movement,” and compare it to “fluid movement” across schools (Goldrick-Rab, 2006a). Sixty percent of NELS students who changed schools moved laterally, from one four-year school to another; the other 40 percent made a ‘reverse transfer’ to a two-year institution (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2007).

### Characteristics of Mobile Students

The students engaged in different types of mobility are distinguishable by other characteristics as well. Students who interrupt their movement among schools are more often male, nonwhite, and from the bottom 20 percent of the U.S. socioeconomic status (SES) distribution. They also have lower high school test scores, lower high school grade point averages, and engage in less rigorous high school curricula than students who do not change schools. The relationship between a student’s family socioeconomic status and their propensity for “interrupted movement” is significant, such that students from the bottom 20 percent of the socioeconomic distribution are more than three times more likely to engage in that pattern, compared to students in the top 20 percent. This is true even when controlling for gender, race, and high school preparation (Goldrick-Rab, 2006a).

On the other hand, students engaged in fluid movement are disproportionately female and well-off (in the top 20 percent of the SES distribution). They are average high school students with test scores and high school GPAs in the middle of the distribution who participated in slightly challenging high school courses. Somehow—or for some reason—when they change schools, they manage to do so continuously (Goldrick-Rab, 2006a).

Students who “reverse transfer” from a four-year to a two-year school are more likely to have parents in working-class occupations who did not attend college. Controlling for other ascriptive characteristics and high school background, the odds of reverse transfer are 35 percent higher for first-generation students (compared to students with college-educated parents) (Goldrick-Rab, 2006b).

### CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT MOBILITY

These differences in how students change schools are not benign; instead they result in highly disparate outcomes in terms of degree completion. Students who move to a two-year institution greatly reduce their chances for completing a bachelor’s degree (BA), perhaps because most two-year institutions do not grant four-year degrees. As a result, the probability of completing a bachelor’s degree is 119

percent lower if a student does a reverse transfer, even when controlling for other determinants of completion including: demographic characteristics, high school achievement, degree expectations, selectivity and control of the initial institution attended, timing of college entry, enrollment intensity, and college GPA (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2007).

Moreover, my preliminary analyses also indicate two additional reasons to be concerned with mobility. First, each institutional change a student makes during college appears to be associated with reduced chances for bachelor's degree completion. For example, changing schools between the first and second years of college enrollment reduces the odds of completion of a degree by 49 percent; a change between years two and three reduces completion by 73 percent and; a change between years three and four reduces the odds of completion by 60 percent. These effects are above and beyond the negative impact of taking time off between any of those years of enrollment, even when controlling for a student's college grade point average.

Second, there is some evidence of interaction effects between parental education and institutional change, such that first-generation students incur a greater penalty for their mobility. This means that the effect of mobility seems to be most detrimental precisely for those students most likely to move.

## THE MOBILITY QUANDARY

If changing schools subsequent to starting college reduces the chances for degree completion for the majority of mobile students, why do they do it? Are these irrational decisions made by uninformed actors? Or are we failing to see the *benefits* of student mobility not captured by a focus on degree completion?

My thoughts on this puzzle are informed by two additional findings from my research. First, while family background is a significant predictor of a student's attendance pattern, high school achievement is of greater importance. This could mean that poor students may be more likely to follow disadvantageous pathways, partly because they have less money and less information about how to effectively navigate college, but also because they had lower grades in both high school and college (Goldrick-Rab, 2006b).

Second, college is a path-dependent process. Students who successfully complete their first year of enrollment are more likely than those who do not to go on to a second successful year, and so on. Success begets success, failure begets failure—numerous little decisions begin to add up. Students from low-SES backgrounds are less likely to experience success in college early on and as a result, they quickly end up “off-track,” changing schools, or taking time off. In the end, poor students also have lower completion rates (Goldrick-Rab, 2006c).

So what matters more: the money and resources students bring to college with them, via their parental income, education and occupation; or their past and present academic achievement? Are students changing schools because they are under-resourced, or because they are failing their classes? Are their outcomes smaller because changing schools disrupts college learning in such significant ways, or because students who change schools lose their credits, financial aid, and social support?

These are important questions, and unfortunately we still have far too few answers. Our otherwise rich national surveys include very few questions probing into the causes of student mobility, other than to ask rather simply, "Why did you leave the last school you attended?" Further, the surveys do not include sufficient financial aid data to test the impact of different forms of aid packages on student mobility, or even to examine the loss of aid following or preceding a move. Finally, because they draw on national samples, these surveys do not include sufficient numbers of low-income or minority students, or students from individual states. In addition, the surveys do not allow for deep, contextualized studies. If the federal government were to successfully create a student unit-record system for the entire system of higher education *and* allow non-governmental researchers access to the data, our knowledge about the equity implications of student mobility would greatly improve.

The limited body of qualitative research in this area suffers from small sample sizes and sample bias, but what it does suggest is that mobility is only partially about academics (Bach et al., 2000; Kearney et al., 1995). Students change schools to be closer to home or family, to take a new job, or to start a new life. Major parts of an adult's life course intersect in important ways with a college education, and this needs to be better understood.

In an effort to improve our knowledge base, I am working to identify high schools in one urban area (Chicago) that disproportionately graduate students who go on to be mobile in college. I may begin to observe them while in high school and interview them as they move into and through college. This sort of in-depth longitudinal research is intensive and costly, but fruitful. Perhaps we will learn about the ways in which being able to change institutions helps to keep students enrolled in college at all. Some questions this research will pursue include: If students can no longer afford to attend their first school, and therefore move to another one, are they better off? If the choice is between losing a husband to a work transfer, or staying at the initial college you attended, is it better to move?

## **HELP OR HINDER MOBILITY?**

One of the most vexing questions facing higher education policymakers and practitioners concerned with mobility is whether they should to try to stop

students from changing schools, or whether they should facilitate the process. As my research has shown, my grandfather was unusual—he was a poor kid who changed schools numerous times and still managed to earn a degree in four years, thanks in large part to the G.I. Bill, which gave him financial security throughout his postsecondary education. Few students in his position today manage to make it that far.

Borden (2004) has argued persuasively to institutional administrators that we should do what we can to help, including enhancing articulation agreements and agreeing on common core courses. But the institutional incentives in many ways push in the other direction. An environment of accountability focused on graduation rates serves to reinforce the notion that students belong to institutions and are best retained there. The most elite institutions work very hard to prevent their students from transferring, even if it is in students' best interests. For example, faced with a miserable freshmen year at the College of William and Mary in 1995, I was told by the advisor that transferring simply would not be allowed; indeed, "*No One Has Ever Left William and Mary!*" No fewer than five administrators (and my mother) tried to prevent my departure—albeit to no avail. When I arrived at my destination institution, George Washington University, there was no one to greet me or help me transition into my new environs.

While the average non-selective four-year institution lacks the resources to put forth such a concerted effort to retain students, it still has every incentive *not* to facilitate the easy flow of students across schools. Evidence that students with fewer resources are especially disadvantaged when they move among schools suggests that institutions should be encouraged to make help mobility a more transparent, simpler process.

Perhaps most importantly, the unequal outcomes of student mobility indicate that we must do more to hold institutions accountable for helping all students achieve their goals. Success for some students comes in the form of graduation from the first school they attended right out of high school. But for others, completing a degree may necessarily take time, and changing schools may be evidence of steps in the right direction. Recently, an African American friend reminded me of this when telling his college tale. William's (a pseudonym) story goes something like this:

After barely finishing high school in a poor North Carolina district, William began college at a two-year school with little clue of what to expect. College life stimulated his interest in learning, and he soon realized he had to go elsewhere to get a "real" education—so he moved to a non-selective four-year college in Kansas. After one year he refined his academic interests and realized that the opportunities he desired required attending a major research university. Two transfers later, William found himself enrolled

at Cornell University where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees. William then went on to finish a law degree at Western New England College School of Law, a one-year executive program at Harvard Law, and a second master's degree at Harvard.

Unquestionably an educational and professional success, William needed required courses, as they provided him the opportunity and time to learn as much about himself as about the subjects he studied.

## STEPS TOWARD MOBILITY

The first step for institutions must be to define the goals and outcomes in higher education as broadly as students themselves define them. In addition, success ought to be measured wherever it occurs. For example, we can measure how well institutions facilitate successful mobility by looking at how many students who transfer out eventually graduate at their next institution. Or we could examine many incoming transfer students and their experience with interruption (or no interruption) in their financial aid package.

Second, all schools should create significant institutional capacity to support transfer, so any student wishing to leave campus can do so, but through well-informed decision making. The ability to transfer effectively is currently predicated on a student having the know-how that comes from having college-educated, financially secure parents. This advantage could be ameliorated by an effective advising system.

Third, states should get involved to provide fiscal incentives for both two- and four-year public institutions to engage in this work. Such an approach will encourage schools to help students succeed, wherever and whenever it suits them. In this sense, the focus becomes the student—my father, William, me—and student success.

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