

Academic Attrition in Black and White: The Emergence of the Black/White Gap in Timely High School Graduation

INTRODUCTION

The academic attainment gap between black and white students in the United States has received much attention from researchers and policy-makers alike in recent times. Since the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, high school graduation rates have been viewed as a critical measure of the success of a school system, overtaking exam scores as the primary measure of school competence (Swanson 2001). With white students now outdistancing black students in high school graduation rates by approximately 25 percent (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 2004), there is much concern that African-Americans will continue to be disproportionately affected by the social ills against which a high school diploma serves as a degree of insulation, such as low socioeconomic status, high rates of criminality and crime victimization, and lower level of overall physical health. Thus, understanding the academic attainment gap between races is critical to enabling policy-makers to consider ways to close the societal gaps that are partly dependent on academic outcomes.

One major factor in determining whether one ultimately graduates high school is the ability to remain on pace for timely completion. Prior research indicates that students who experience an interruption in timely schooling progress are more likely than those who are progressing at an ideal rate to decide to drop out (Goldschmidt and Wang 1999). Due to this reality, it is important to pay especially close attention to rates of academic attrition.

Because the effect of repeating a grade on likelihood of high school completion endures regardless of timing of the interruption, it is inadequate to limit research solely to interruptions that occur during high school. The purpose of this study, then, is to examine timeliness of progress to graduation for black and white students that spans the length of one's academic career and considers the point(s) at which gaps in on-time progress begin to emerge. Beyond this, our study examines factors that predict racial variance in likelihood of falling off of a timely progress trajectory.

DATA

The data used for this analysis are from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) Children and Young Adult Surveys. These data are collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the U.S. Department of Labor, between the years of 1986 through 2004.

The sample for these surveys is drawn from the children of females who participated in the early waves of the NLSY79. The original survey was a panel survey that included a nationally representative sample of 12,686 male and female participants between the ages of 14 and 21 in December 1978. Beginning in 1986, the Bureau of Labor Statistics began also collecting information on the children of women who were in the original study, with this information being gathered biennially. During the first wave of this new assessment, mothers were asked to answer questions about their children in addition to reporting about themselves. Beginning in 1988, children over the age of 10 were asked to report on themselves, while mothers continued to report on children who were below this minimum age. Children over the age of 15 began taking a survey similar to the original NLSY survey starting in 1994.

The final wave of the survey had a total of 7,567 offspring for whom data were collected, of which 3,229 were under the age of 15 and administered the Child Survey, while the older children received the Young Adult Survey.

METHOD

We will use two types of analysis to examine our research question. First, we will construct an academic career life table for students in our sample in order to analyze attrition rates for black students and white students, accounting for exit from the sample or other causes of decrement. If, as anticipated, we discover differences between whites and blacks in academic attrition, we will then use Cox regression to assess the effects of time-varying and time-invariant factors on racial disparity in likelihood of falling off of a timely progress trajectory.

ANTICIPATED FINDINGS

Since academic attrition is the biggest contributor to failure to earn a high school diploma (Goldschmidt and Wang 1999), and graduation rates so dramatically favor whites over blacks (Leaving 2004), we anticipate that the rates of attrition will be higher for blacks than for whites overall.

Failure to advance through grade levels on time often precedes the decision to withdraw from school, so we predict that the first interruption in an academic career will typically come prior to the point at which withdrawal from school is most prevalent among students. We expect the rate of attrition to differ by race (greater for blacks than for whites), but we expect the timing and direction of changes in attrition rates to be similar between blacks and whites.

Withdrawal from school becomes a legitimate student option during the latter years of high school and is one that is taken due to a variety of school-related (such as poor academic performance) and non-school factors (such as pregnancy). Thus, we anticipate an increase in academic attrition rates among students who reach high school without having otherwise experienced an interruption in their academic trajectories. Academic attrition will, therefore, vary across age cohorts and peak as one approaches graduating age, although there will not be a gradual climb to forewarn of this increase. As with other measures, we expect this to vary by race.