

What We're Learning: Who Works for Degrees? *A Data Update from the Wisconsin HOPE Lab*

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Given the high price of higher education, today, going to college often also involves going to work. Between the early 1970s and 2000s, the proportion of 18 to 22 year old high school graduates going to college increased from 31 to 55 percent. At the same time, the proportion combining school and work more than doubled (from 12 to 28 percent).¹ To what extent does the confluence of these trends – of increasing access and increasing employment – amplify inequality? While first-generation students – first in their family to attend college—are increasingly prevalent, are they more likely to have to work for pay in order to participate in higher education?

We address these questions using two nationally representative samples of respondents who completed high school and transitioned into higher education in the early 1980s and early 2000s: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1979 (NLSY79) and 1997 (NLSY97).² We examine the patterns of school and work engagement of more than 10,000 high school graduates (including GED completers) for six years and focus on differences among students depending on their parents' highest level of education: high school or less, some college, college degree, and graduate or professional degree.

We identify four types of young adults:

- Working young adults experience direct and permanent labor market entry, without many interruptions
- Students go straight into college with few interruptions and barely work during college

¹ Scott-Clayton, J. (2007). What Explains Rising Labor Supply Among U.S. Undergraduates, 1970-2003? Unpublished manuscript. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

² For information on NLSY97 see: <https://www.nlsinfo.org/content/cohorts/nlsy97> and NLSY79: <https://www.nlsinfo.org/content/cohorts/nlsy79>

- Working students experience frequent changes and parallel participation in work and education
- Low Activity young adults have at most short spells of work or college and are usually unemployed and not in school

The number of working students increases over time, irrespective of parental education. For example, among 1979 high school graduates, 12% of those whose parents did not attend college became working students, and this rose to 21% in the 1997 cohort. For those whose parents held graduate or professional degrees, the rate was 36% in 1979, increasing to 49% in 1997.

Among young adults enrolled in higher education, increasing proportions combined school with work. While 37 percent of first-generation students were able to focus on their studies without working in the 1979 cohort, only 18 percent were able to do so in the 1997 cohort. Among students whose parents completed college, 52 percent were able to focus on their studies in the 1979 cohort and only 24 were able to do so in the 1997 cohort.

The extent to which students work does appear to have changed somewhat over time: for the 1979 cohort, there was little evidence that parental education affected how many hours students worked, especially for those attending bachelors-degree granting institutions full-time. But for the 1997, there are clear distinctions among students attending bachelors-degree granting institutions full-time, such that students whose parents completed graduate or professional degrees worked almost 2.5 hours less than first-generation students.

In summary, working while enrolled in school is much more the norm today than it once was. Students from all family backgrounds are more likely to spend time in the labor market. But because the proportion of students working increased over time for students, irrespective of parental education, inequality in this dimension did not change. On the other hand, there are growing disparities in how many hours students work, especially among those who attend bachelors-degree granting institutions full-time.

One reason for these trends may be the growing burden presented by high college prices. Reducing the price of college can lessen students' dependence on the labor market. A recent experimental study of financial aid for low-income students shows that increasing financial aid can reduce both students' participation in the labor market as well as the number of hours worked.³ Extending this research to understand how college costs and financial aid affect students' participation in the labor market across the socioeconomic spectrum is a crucial next step.⁴

The findings discussed in this brief are based on: Felix Weiss and Josipa Roksa. 2016. "New Dimensions of Educational Inequality: Changing Patterns of Combining School and Work in the U.S. Over Time." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 44, 44-53.

³ Broton, Katherine, and Sara Goldrick-Rab. [Forthcoming]. "Working for College: The Causal Impact of Financial Grants on Undergraduate Employment." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

⁴ For a descriptive discussion, with particular attention to non-traditional age students, see: Fitzpatrick, Maria D., and Sarah E. Turner. 2007. "Blurring the Boundary: Changes in Collegiate Participation and the Transition to Adulthood." Pp. 107-137 in *The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood*, edited by Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Elena Rouse. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.