

Barriers to completing high school, attending college diminishing for underrepresented groups: study

Coming from a low-income neighbourhood or a family where neither parent attended postsecondary education are not significant barriers to graduating from high school and attending college. However, they are still strong influences on who attends university, concludes a new report published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

The researchers used a longitudinal data set compiled by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to examine factors that affect high school success and access to postsecondary education — and whether these have changed over time — particularly for students who are at risk of not completing high school and of underrepresentation in college and university. These include students with special needs, some racialized students, those from lower-income families and students whose parents have not attended postsecondary. The study looked at two cohorts of students who went through high school five years apart: the first started Grade 9 in 2005–06 and applied for postsecondary studies in 2009 or 2010; the second started Grade 9 in 2010–11 and submitted postsecondary applications in 2014 or 2015.

According to the report, *High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education*, the proportion of high school students who confirmed an offer of acceptance to an Ontario university rose to 52% among the second cohort of students from 48% in the first, while the proportion of those who confirmed acceptance of an offer to an Ontario college rose to 18% from 14%.

The effect of neighbourhood household income on predicting high school graduation became less important over the time frame of the study. Household income was also not a significant predictor of confirming college acceptance, but it was significant in predicting university acceptance. Similarly, parental postsecondary education was not a significant determinant of either high school graduation or college confirmation, but it was important in predicting university confirmation.

“Wealth and parental PSE, along with the transmission of values or cultural capital that often accompany these, may not be influencing whether students graduate from high school or get into college, but they do still appear to be influencing whether students get into university,” the authors write. The findings offer evidence of a “widening class-based gap” between those who go to university and those who don’t, they add.

While the high school graduation rate rose among students with special education needs as well as those without, the gain was much larger for those without special needs and the gap between the two groups widened significantly between the two cohorts. The pattern is particularly worrying given that there was eight percentage-point increase in the proportion of high school students identified as having a special education need, the authors note. At the postsecondary level, having a special education need had little effect on the odds of a student confirming an offer of acceptance to a college while the odds of confirming acceptance to a university declined.

The study also found evidence that some racialized students have greater odds of confirming an offer of acceptance from a university or college than White students. However, the researchers urged caution on this point, noting that previous studies have demonstrated that the playing field is not equal for all racialized students, particularly Black males who, they write, “must navigate a structural obstacle course to avoid being placed in applied streams and designated with a special education need” while in high school.

Overall, the findings are a mix of good and bad news for students from traditionally disadvantaged groups, the authors conclude. While the significance of structural barriers on high school completion and college attendance have diminished in recent years, important gaps remain at the university level, they say.

The authors note that the TDSB, the largest board in the province, is also one of the most diverse. They caution that the demographics of the TDSB are different from those in the rest of the province, and that a lack of data prevents extrapolating the findings to other jurisdictions.

High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education was written by Karen Robson, Reana Maier, Paul Anisef and Robert S. Brown.