

Explanations for patterns of social inequality are only as strong as the mechanisms of educational attainment on which they depend. Educational attainment creates and then uniquely signals many of the skills and habits that determine styles of life and economic well-being. Educational credentials and the social connections they embody facilitate the allocation of individuals to alternative occupational and labor market positions. No convincing alternative model of intergenerational mobility can be fashioned without incorporating these mechanisms.

Shifting from one depiction of the structure of inequality to another does not relieve the burden of having to account for differences in educational attainment. Class schemas, prestige hierarchies, and labor market structures are similarly incomprehensible without an explanation of how the distribution of educational attainment emerges. Even explanations for patterns of alternative inequality are crucially reliant on foundational models of educational processes. The extent of racial and gender discrimination in the labor market, for example, cannot be assessed without taking a position on how and why individuals accumulate alternative educational credentials and attainments.

This justification for rigorous modeling of educational attainment, which generations of social stratification researchers and sociologists of education have relied, is even more compelling now. Over the past three decades, the evolution of postindustrial society has increased the stakes of comprehensively modeling patterns of educational attainment, as these patterns more strongly predict economic well-being.¹ Between 1979 and 1999, the real wages of high school graduates decreased by 8.9 percent, whereas the real wages of college graduates and advanced degree graduates increased

Unfortunately, it is also becoming clear that current models of educational attainment are insufficiently complete. Consider the capacity to examine the consequences of the growth in labor market inequality for patterns of educational attainment. Over the same time period, policies designed to increase college enrollments have changed only modestly. From a variety of theoretical perspectives, it can be argued that increases in labor market inequality should have variable effects on different groups of prospective college students. The increasing incentives for obtaining college degrees should prompt more students to enter college, but the rate of increase in college enrollments should differ by social background. One would expect the increase to be less pronounced for prospective students from relatively disadvantaged social origins, for these students' relative access to liquid funds to finance college education has declined as inequality has grown.²

Explanatory models of educational attainment in the social sciences are unable to determine whether this prediction is accurate, to say nothing of the underlying mechanism that supposedly generates it. None of the established models, I will argue in this book, can be used to determine whether students' beliefs about their future prospects are responsive to changes in incentives, and, if so, how changes in beliefs affect the long sequence of commitment decisions that determine a student's final level of educational attainment. The main goal of this book is to develop the foundation for a more complete and better model of educational attainment, one that can generate more consistently complete explanations by specifying and modeling the belief-mechanisms that have been assumed away in the past.

Before proceeding to development of the model, in this introductory chapter I present the basic facts on college entry and college completion in the United States. I then demarcate the limits of current knowledge and develop two sets of reasons why the social sciences need a new and better model of educational attainment—to resolve empirical puzzles and to improve policy development and evaluation. I then discuss why sociology as a discipline is well prepared to produce and embrace a new model, and

who goes to college, and who graduates. Table 1.1 presents the country and graduation patterns of the high school classes of 1982 and 1990 of 1990 and 2000, respectively. The findings are based on parallel analyses of the two most widely used national surveys sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, the *High School & Beyond Survey (HS&B)* and the *National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS)* (U.S. Department of Education 1995, 2002).

In the first column of each panel, the college entry patterns of high school graduates are presented separately for the four largest racial/ethnic groups in the two surveys. For example, for white students of the class of 1982, 53.84 percent of students entered college within one year of graduating from high school, 18.10 percent entered college more than one year after graduating from high school, and the remaining 28.07 percent never entered college (as of 1990, the final year of the measurement window).

In the second column of each panel, bachelor's degree attainment patterns are then tabulated, conditional on the timing of college entry. For white students, 35.79 percent of those who entered college within one year of high school graduation then obtained a bachelor's degree within five years. An additional 16.60 percent obtained a bachelor's degree in more than five years, and the remaining 47.60 percent never obtained a bachelor's degree (again, as of 1990, the final year of the measurement window).

Although there are many patterns within Table 1.1, focus first on the findings common to all groups. Among those students who enter college, many students do not obtain a bachelor's degree. Some of these students enter two-year colleges and never transfer to four-year colleges. Others simply drop out of college after one or more years. Some work part time, obtaining only a few college credits per year, making steady but slow progress toward the credentials they hope to secure at some point in adulthood.⁴

Aside from this pattern, which demonstrates clearly that college entry does not on its own guarantee college graduation, the table shows important racial and ethnic differences in college entry and graduation patterns.