Who Goes to College and who does not among Low Socioeconomic Status Youth in the U.S. and India?

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Abstract: What factors make a difference in whether low socioeconomic status youth attend college, and how do some youth succeed despite lacking many advantages? In general, in both the U.S. and India youth who benefit from supportive relationships and information on higher education options develop clear aspirations and successfully enroll in higher education. However, India lacks official guidance and information, therefore making youth rely more on their social networks. Youth in both nations would benefit from more effective official guidance, more accessible and ubiquitous information, and a better use of existing networks to disseminate information on higher education opportunities.

Introduction

We raise our youth to believe that with hard work and ability come great opportunities. Yet, across the globe, the past few years have seen the gap between rich and poor widen (OECD 2011). As these inequality measures creep up, families slip into poverty, youth try and fail to gain rewarding employment, and a generation’s dreams turn frustrated. This represents a huge loss, both in terms of human happiness and in potential human capital.

The causes and potential solutions of economic inequality are manifold, but an extensive and growing body of literature cites an accessible, high quality education system as a crucial component to any attempt to improve social and economic equality (Dyer 2008). One of education’s primary goals is giving youth the opportunity to get employment commensurate with their capabilities, regardless of their background. As degrees become
increasingly crucial to securing high paying jobs, smart, motivated youth from every background should be able to attend college, and use this education as a springboard to employment. However, young people from less well off backgrounds are attending university in rates far less than their peers (Goldrick-Rab 2007; Sedwal and Kamat 2008). It seems that for these youth, the road to higher education is decidedly rockier.

This study identifies two nations, the United States and India, disparate in many ways but both plagued by inequality, and explores the stories of its students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Socioeconomic status refers to an individual’s income, education, and occupation level. Low SES youth are youth whose parents earn a low income, do not have a higher education degree, and have lower wage jobs. What struggles do these youth face, and how have some individuals overcome them? What elements of their experience transcend borders? What lessons can policymakers learn from their lives? This paper asks: Among low socioeconomic status youth, who goes to college and who does not?

**Why India and the U.S.?**

At first glance the U.S. and India are vastly different in almost every factor relevant to college access. Their school systems are arranged differently and they have vastly different degrees of education rates in their populations. Differences in development, in the quality of water, electricity, health care, transportation infrastructure, communication, and technology, mean that students in India and the U.S. have very different day-to-day experiences. How do you make comparisons between a student who wakes up and checks
the weather online while eating cereal to one who steps outside to milk the goat and start a fire?

First of all, the U.S. and India do share one characteristic: high degrees of income inequality, meaning that a disproportionate amount of the nation’s wealth and assets go to a small, rich elite. On the Gini Index, a scale that measures inequality in family income in a nation, the U.S. actually has a higher degree of inequality than India. The U.S. falls between Bulgaria and Guyana in the 2011 estimation of income inequality (CIA 2012). India’s more favorable location in the rankings likely reflects a need to update its indicators. While access to education is just a piece of the puzzle that makes up an unequal society, these inequality rankings suggest that both nations’ education pipelines are far from perfect.

Secondly, the evident differences between the two nations offer an opportunity to gauge the impact of overall development on journeys to higher education. If the problems of students in the United States have little in common with those of students in India, then perhaps the best education reform is to encourage the improvement of India’s infrastructure. If low socio-economic status students in the U.S. have significantly less troubled experiences transitioning to higher education, than perhaps India can learn what facets of the U.S. system they should learn from. Alternatively, similarities could shed light on what demons development fails to banish. Similarities could perhaps reveal that low socioeconomic status students are not reaping all the benefits of development in the U.S. If students from both nations are united in their frustrations, then perhaps there are some more universal issues that defy current remedies.
The Importance of Higher Education and Roadblocks for Low SES Youth

In the U.S, the difference a college education makes in terms of earnings is great and growing. A recent study of lifetime earnings by education level estimates that college graduates today will earn 84% more than their peers with only a high school diploma. Even within the same occupation, workers with higher degrees earn more than their less educated coworkers. (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011). Similarly, recent reports suggests that India’s widening income gap partially results from high paying, high credential jobs at the heart of India’s expanding economy. (Income Inequality in India: Pre- and Post-Reform Periods 2010; Mohanty 2006; Sedwal and Kamat 2008) While attending college by no means guarantees a future fruitful career, not attending college effectively bars youth from the most advantageous career tracks.

However, a student’s background and school community may determine whether they will one day reap the benefits of a college degree. Studies across disciplines suggest that lower SES students face challenges that stall their journey out of poverty at every stage. As young children develop, the stresses of growing up in a poor household create long-lasting changes in brain development, leaving low SES children at a disadvantage even before starting school (Nelson 2011; Heckman 2011). Starting as early as Kindergarten, low SES children exhibit more antisocial behavior and poorer attention and academic skills than their higher SES peers, and these disadvantages continue through high school (Duncan 2011a; Farkas 2011). There is less research on the effects of poverty in early childhood development on educational outcomes, but the high rate of poverty and malnutrition among children suggests there is similar reason for concern (Rao 2005).
Poorer families may have less access to credit, preventing direct investment in education, and also “complementary investments,” that would allow the student to get more reward out of education, as Filmer highlights in a 44 country comparison of wealth disparities (Filmer 2005). This includes meeting basic needs so the student can focus on their studies. It also includes inputs that build off of and reinforce an education. Low SES students can’t supplement their education with as many books, computers, summer camps, museum trips, music lessons and travel experiences, as their richer peers, leaving them with less extracurricular experience to draw from as they mature. (Kaushal 2011; Phillips 2011; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Crowley 2006). Couple these disadvantages with the discouraging environment in overburdened schools, dominated by other struggling students, with overworked, constantly changing, teachers in the U.S. and rampant teacher absence in India, and a more complete picture of education for many low SES students emerges (Duncan 2011b; Muralidharan 2012). Low SES students don’t have the strongest educational foundation to build off of when they consider applying and enrolling in college.

While the education system has become much more accessible to all children in India over the past decade, it remains an extremely leaky pipeline to career success. After a widespread campaign to improve primary education, India has reached a point where 97 percent of children 6-14 are enrolled in school (Pratham 2011). However, rates drop off precipitously beyond that point, with a secondary completion rate of only 28 percent. Additionally, the secondary completion rate for the lowest household income quartile drops to six percent (WorldBank 1950-2050). The low number of youth completing secondary schooling reflects discouragements to continuing education beyond just a lack of ability or ambition. While research on education persistence of low SES youth in India is
decidedly more limited than that in the U.S., it remains clear that participation of these youth in higher education is less than ideal.

**What Matters in the Decision of Whether and Where to Attend College?**

Adding up the factors that trouble and detour low SES youth at every stage of their educational journey can be an extremely dispiriting exercise. Yet somehow, some low SES students still succeed in underperforming high schools, and their next major roadblock is choosing, applying, and getting into college. What factors help and hurt low SES students at this crucial gateway to future success? What factors influence whether students attend a two or four year universities? The students who succeed at this level of the education gauntlet do so not on wit alone, but benefit from several other advantages, advantages more widely available to their middle class peers. Research suggests that guidance and encouragement, access to information, and high aspirations, play a large role in determining the likelihood of students attending college.

**Hypotheses**

Low SES students who attend a four-year or two year college benefit from...

A. Supportive relationships with informed individuals: a parent, teacher, guidance counselor, sibling, friend, or other.

B. Better access to information on higher education options: through websites, guidebooks, campus tours, information centers, college fairs or other sources

C. Clearer Aspirations: They have both a strong desire to go to college and a well-developed plan to apply and pay for it.
Supportive Relationships: Guidance, Role Models, and Encouragement

The selection and application process for higher education differs in a few ways between the U.S. and India. While both value high test scores and high school academic performance, American colleges also look at extracurricular activities, essays, and interview questions. However, in both countries, successful navigation of these portals to college requires a certain degree of savvy. Students can turn to a variety of individuals to act as their guides including their parents, other family members, fellow students, high school guidance counselors, and private guidance counselors (Smith and Zhang 2009).

The parents of low SES students are often less able to help their children with higher education, lacking information on the process themselves. Research has shown that across the countries in the OECD, 34 nations representing a variety of education systems, only 20% of young people with parents with a low education background attain a tertiary degree, while 66% of young people with at least one parent with a tertiary degree attain a tertiary degree of their own (OECD 2012). What contributes to this stark divide?

As their children grow up, parents give children their “inner resources.” To succeed in school, children need to be confident and sociable, so they can master complicated material, ask teachers for help, and set and work towards academic goals. These same skills help older youth persevere and successfully navigate the college selection and application process (Hoover-Dempsey, Shenker, and Walker 2010) As economist James Heckman asserts, “We live in a skill based society, where both cognitive and soft skills determine life success.” These skills come from a youth’s home environment, and research suggests that low SES homes don’t foster these skills as well as high SES homes (Heckman 2011).
Facing life after high school, most students rely on the same resource they have turned to at every major life transition: their parents (Smith and Zhang 2009). In a 1981 study, Conklin and Dailey found that more consistent parental educational encouragement in high school, which includes high expectations, frequent discussions, and saving for college, correlates with future college admission, and with enrollment in a four year, instead of two year, program (Conklin and Dailey 1981). Young students turn to their parents for a variety of support, from asking for advice on college selection, to money for tuition.

Low SES students, however, are often less able to rely on their parents as a resource. In high school, low income parents take a less active role in their children’s education, burdened by busy work schedules and not all that confident in their own education (Van Velsor 2007). Low-income parents tend to save less for college, and know less about the costs of college than their more well off peers (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Miller 1997). Many low income parents hope to use financial aid to pay for college, but parents who lack a college degree tend to know less about what financial aid programs exist and how to apply (Olson and Rosenfeld 1984).

While the research is not as detailed in India as the U.S., studies have revealed a clear connection between children’s educational attainment and the SES of their parents. In an examination of who becomes a software professional, an example of a growing, high skill, industry, parent’s, particularly mother’s, education level was found to be the strongest explanatory variable. Interviews with respondents revealed a strong reliance on guidance and high expectations from highly educated parents and their also highly educated social network (Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006).
Given this overall trend, this study explores whether low SES students who go to college have more supportive, informed parents than the norm established by these studies, or if, instead, they have found a way to compensate for this disadvantage.

Siblings and friends are another crucial part of a high school student’s social network. Like parents, friends and siblings establish expectations, through sharing their feelings and plans for the future. These conversations can also be important sources of information (Alvarado and López Turley 2012). The accessibility and trust that marks friendship lends these expectations and information great significance (Hallinan and Williams 1990). Students are more likely to apply to college if there friends are applying as well (Choy 2002).

However, people form friendships around similarities, socioeconomic status included. Youth who grow up without much college encouragement at home then befriend others with a similar background. Conversations in these social groups may skip over higher education issues, instead establishing norms and sharing information about other after high school opportunities (Choi et al. 2008). Do youth who go to college see their friends and siblings as helpful in making after high school plans? Do they have more college oriented friend groups?

The disadvantages of having parents and friends with lower expectations and less information on higher education leaves low SES students in the U.S. relying on high school guidance counselors more than their richer peers (Berkner and Chavez 1997; King 1996). Research suggests that effective guidance provided by high schools could be a key intervention point for encouraging enrollment. Programs that give more information to parents have encouraged parents to keep their sons and daughters enrolled in precollege
track classes and to save money for tuition (Torrez 2004; Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). Another study found that low income students who regularly consult their high school guidance counselors were more likely to attend a four year college than their peers who did not pursue this resource (King 1996). However, many schools in low-income neighborhoods have less well-trained guidance counselors and have higher student to counselor ratios. Time constraints force these guidance counselors to prioritize other tasks over college counseling (Bryan et al. 2011; Plank and Jordan 2001). While the effectiveness of college guidance in U.S schools varies, Indian public schools lack a formal guidance counselor position all together. This study will explore if the youth who succeeded in higher education had better relationships with their guidance counselors, or if they developed strategies to make up for a lack of support from their school.

**Information Sources**

Although students often use the above, relationship-based sources of guidance to gather information, youth with less helpful networks can turn to more official sources of information, including books, websites, information sessions, and college fairs.

However, research suggests that low income students have less access to various information sources than their upper class peers in both nations (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Krishna 2010). In the U.S, low SES youth both access less sources of information and don’t search through them as thoroughly. High SES students rely more on commercial guidebooks, campus visits, admissions officers and alumni, while low SES youth gather information from their guidance counselor and unsolicited college marketing materials, like advertisements and mailings (MacAllum et al. 2007). While the research is decidedly
less for Indian youth, all of these sources of information are less common, and it’s likely that access to them varies along SES lines.

The cost of lower information is less rational decision making, and research suggests that students’ after high school choices are strongly influenced by their preconceptions and emotions (Rosa 2006). For example, cost of college is an extremely important factor in deciding after high school plans, particularly for low SES youth. However, a 2003 study found that among 11th and 12th grade students, 37 percent of students and 28 percent of their parents could not estimate the price of college tuition and fees (Horn 2003). This information gap worsens for low-income students. Many make the decision not to pursue college based on misconceptions, assuming the costs are too high (Rosa 2006).

A look at current research paints a picture of low SES students who can’t turn to their parents, effective guidance counselors, or their peers for support, yet also don’t successfully access or navigate guidebooks or websites. Do the students who do attend four-year university in the U.S break out of this trap and find effective information? Do students cite information and guidance as key ingredients to a successful college transition?

**Clear Aspirations**

Preparing for college is an arduous task. Students need to believe they can successfully complete it, and have a strong interest in college before choosing a precollege tract in high school, saving money, and seeking out the resources discussed above. Indeed, developing aspirations and plans early allows for much better college preparation (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000).
An individual’s aspirations are his or her hopes and desires for the future. In this paper, “clear aspirations” are these same goals accompanied by concrete, multi-step plans to achieve them. In his seminal work on aspirations, Arjun Appardurai asserts that aspirations are social in nature, with a disparity in the “capacity to aspire” between the rich and poor. Both low and high SES individuals have aspirations, but rich individuals, with their greater social, cultural, and economic resources have more experience making them reality, As Appardurai states, “the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation” (Appardurai 2004, p.69).

What the rich and poor aspire to is also likely to be different, once again as a result of communities. Individuals draw examples and role models from their community. As economist Debraj Ray describes, “Looking at the experiences of individuals similar to me is like running an experiment with better controls, and therefore has better content in informing my decisions –and by extension –my aspirations” (Ray 2002 p.2). For example, if many of a student’s peers are going to work in the city, and have some success, they are likely to follow suit. A richer classmate’s choice to go to college might not seem as relevant. In the same way, a community shares information among its members. If this information is incomplete or inaccurate, community members will develop aspirations out of touch with reality. One example of this phenomenon is a low SES youth never pursuing college, assuming she can’t afford it based off an incorrect community conception of financial aid. Additionally, social networks set standards and expectations (Ray 2002). If many of student’s family members and friends have attended college, then the student will feel pressure to pursue that option as well.
Aspirations for higher education therefore stem at least in part from the previous two factors this paper discusses, supportive, college oriented, relationships and access to information on higher education. That high aspirations are a prerequisite to college enrollment seems obvious: in order to go to college you need to want to go to college. However, having high aspirations alone is not enough to get into college. In the U.S., about 90% of high school students expect to attend college. (Goldrick-Rab 2007). Many of these same students do not prepare for college adequately, and end up not attending university, or attending a two-year program. This gap in ambition and accomplishment shows a lesser “capacity to aspire.”

Do students who attend college have more ambitious and clear aspirations? What do they think pushed them to develop aspirations outside of the community norm?

**Justification**

All these trends, at a macro scale, make the challenges facing low SES students trying to decide their life’s trajectory seem insurmountable. Yet, many low SES individuals gain admission to selective universities and pursue successful careers. This issue requires further exploration. Many of these studies rely on older data sets, including the National Education Longitudinal study, which examines the choices of the high school senior class of 1992¹ (National Education Longitudinal Studies 2011). The landscape of college admissions has changed dramatically in the intervening years, with the increase in students attending college, changing admissions criteria, and the use of internet to gather information (Vargas 2004; MacAllum et al. 2007). Additionally, while many studies have compared tertiary

¹ See, for example, Berkner and Chavez, 1997, Plank and Jordan, 2001, and Choy, 2001
education attainment levels between low and high SES youth, or have attempted to capture the typical experience of low SES youth, far fewer make comparisons between only low SES youth. Focusing on just this population allows my study to reveal that the experiences of low SES youth are not monolithic, and the differences in their trajectories could reveal the best points of intervention for ensuring everyone has access to higher education. This study seeks to both update the research of others, and give these issues a more personal edge, gathering information through interviews.

Limitations

This study does not cover every factor that research suggests is significant to determining college access. A student’s home and school location are both significant to student achievement and college access, with students in low-income rural and urban neighborhoods in the U.S. and India having more difficult roads to college (Roscigno 2006; Krishna 2011). In the U.S., race also seems significant to enrolling in higher education, particularly when comparing between four and two year colleges (Noga 2009; Smith 2011; MacAllum et al. 2007). In India, lower caste youth also face hurdles to higher education (Deshpande 2006; Sedwal and Kamat 2008). The gender gap in India in higher education has been narrowing, with women comprising 42% of college enrollments, but women, especially from rural and/or low caste backgrounds are still underrepresented in higher education. Additionally, this study does not take into account the role of individual merit. While merit is certainly an important element in determining who goes to college, there is enough of a gap between low and high SES college enrollment to suggest that more than merit affects college access in both nations (Deshpande 2006; Goldrick-Rab 2007).
Methodology

Every student’s transition from high school to college, or straight into the workforce, is a personal odyssey. High school students don’t make their decisions based on aggregated census data, but on the most micro of levels: the individual. Therefore this study tests its hypotheses through individual interviews with current high school students, current college students, and students who choose not to attend college. These interviews collected their personal narratives, examining to what extent the hypothesized variables played a role in their decision-making, and searched for any salient trends in their stories. Larger studies of more aggregate data can notice correlations between variables, but interviews provide the opportunity to investigate the interaction of various factors affecting youths’ decisions.

The only factor held constant across all students from both nations is low socio-economic status. The youth come from a variety of backgrounds, they are different genders, different races, some are from the city, others from the country-side. Most attended large public schools, some small magnet programs and a few were home schooled. The study cannot claim to isolate and assess the role of all these factors.

This study is not based on matched pairs, between India and the U.S. While the central question, who enrolled in college and who did not, remained the same between nations, the two halves of the study do not bear perfect comparison. Because of the limitations in comparison, factors considered, and the number of interviews, this study is more of exploratory exercise. Nevertheless, this study does identify trends in what young people, all low SES but from a variety of backgrounds, cite as significant to their choices. This information could lay the foundation for future investigations.
Interviewee Selection

In the United States, interviews belong to three categories: young people currently attending a four-year institution, young people attending a two-year institution, and young people who have graduated high school, but have not gone on to a higher education institution. The study defines “young people” as being between the ages of 18 and 26.

Table 1: U.S. Interview Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year Degree Program</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Year Degree Program</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate not Enrolled in a Degree Program</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study recruited interviewees in a four-year degree program through an email solicitation for First Generation college students. For the remaining two categories, interviews took place on a community college campus and at a local bus transit center. The study discerned a youth’s socioeconomic status during the interview, keeping in the analysis those interviewees who either qualified for financial aid or expressed strong concerns about financial restraints on after high school options. This method reflects both the importance of youth’s own perception of their financial status, and the interviewees limited time.

In India, the study drew subjects from communities with literacy rates as low as 26%. Focusing only on youth who had graduated from secondary school would have limited the inquiry to only a handful of students. Attending school beyond 8th grade is not compulsory, and the national secondary school completion rate is a dismaying 27.95%. The transition between 10th grade and 11th grade mirrors that of U.S. students continuing onto college in the U.S in several ways. Students must pass an end of 10th grade exam, must
choose an academic specialization, and often must commute significant distances or live in a dormitory to attend. These final two years of secondary schooling is almost as much of a commitment to education as proceeding onto college in the U.S.

In light of these differences, the breakdown of interviewees differs slightly from the U.S sample. The study surveyed young people who are: “on track,” currently enrolled in 10th to 12th grade; “off track,” have reached at least 10th grade before dropping out, including high school graduates who did not continue on to college; and finally, current college students.

Table 2: Indian Interview Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On Track (10th-12th Grade)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off Track</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews**

The study used semi-structured interviews to capture the important elements of each individual’s schooling decisions. Appendix One lists the interview outlines. The interview formats revolve around the hypotheses, investigating the role of family, school experiences, sources of information, and aspirations in college planning and decision-making.

Through these open-ended interviews, the study gathered a full picture of what students feel might hold them back. Statistics can show a correlation between factors, but I hope to also shed light on how factors interact at the individual level. The stories these students share show ways the journey from high school to college can be made easier for their peers, both in the U.S. and India.
Findings

Traversing rural India, I asked many people, NGO workers, teachers, village elders, parents, why young people struggle to go to school. Across the board, I got the same answer, “The home environment isn’t there.” Home environment seems to serve as an appropriately nebulous phrase for the intertwined factors that determine schooling perseverance. As it turns out, the determinants of higher education are a minefield of lurking variables. Getting a feeling for the struggles of low socioeconomic youth is best achieved by looking at individual’s stories. The following categories are broken up for clarity’s sake, but they remain intertwined.

Supportive Relationships: Sources of Information, Role Models, Support, and Connections

In communities where few people have ventured to University, pursuing higher education can seem a convoluted process with uncertain rewards. Information plays a key role in demystifying the process, making getting a degree at a two or four year college appear a more attainable goal. This study examined the role of two types of information sources: information gained through relationships, and information from more impersonal sources, explored in a later section.

Beyond information, these relationships can provide support and encouragement, expressed through activities as diverse as pep talks, brainstorming sessions, offering transportation to interviews, or offering housing to a student studying away from home. While the road to college can be arduous for low SES students, many individuals in this study had some of the bumps paved by helpful friends and family.
This study measured how many young people from each subdivision benefitted from a variety of relationships. While in both India and the U.S., students on track and enrolled in college did benefit from a slightly higher number of supportive relationships than their peers who did not go to college, 2.5 versus 1.5 in the U.S. and two versus one in India, this distinction is not great nor necessarily relevant. Having many only slightly helpful relationships could be decidedly less useful than one extremely supportive relationship. The discussion in the following sections, discusses both numbers and the potential of each relationship, focusing on their role in the lives of the interviewed young people.

Table 3: U.S. Supportive Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Guidance Counselors</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Siblings/Cousins</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Average number Supportive relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four Year</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Year</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No College</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: India Supportive Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Guidance Counselors</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Siblings/Cousins</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Average number of total supportive relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In College</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Track</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off Track</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 1:** U.S Youth with Supportive Relationships (By Percent)

**Figure 2:** Indian Youth with Supportive Relationships (by Percent)
Teachers

In the U.S., of those enrolled in a four year college program, 8 out of 10 reported having a good relationship with at least one teacher outside of class, often through activities or through the teacher identifying them as a good candidate for college. These teachers pushed students to apply, shared their own college experiences, recommended colleges based on the student’s interest, and would proofread application essays. One student’s teacher bought her a suitcase so she could attend a college invitational weekend. Another student’s teacher used her connections in the universities admission office to arrange an interview, and offered the student a ride. Many students listed teachers as their primary college educated contacts, an important source of information.

Conversely, none of the six youth who did not proceed onto college felt they had any sort of relationship with teachers outside the classroom. For many, teachers “were just there to do their job,” or would offer general advice like “don't go into acting.” This lack of relationship between teachers and students could reflect several situations. Perhaps their teachers have limited time to devote to students in overcrowded schools. Alternatively, perhaps these students didn’t show the same initiative participating in clubs or showing an interest in the class, as many of their peers in two and four year colleges. As one four year college student explained, “If [teachers] could see you cared, they would pay attention to you. One of my teachers would stay for an hour after school, giving advice.”

In general, students at both four and two year universities engaged in a greater number of structured out of class activities, including sports, academic teams, and cultural and religious groups. Those students who took time off or went straight into the workforce after graduation mostly participated in sports, or simply “hung out” after school. These
different experiences are significant for after-high school plans in two ways. First of all, out of class activities can reflect an individual’s motivation and their awareness of the need to build skills for after high school. Secondly, many interviewees cited activities as ways to get to know teachers and other adults, who later offered advice. As one four year college student recalled, “My activities were sort of an extension of what I learned in class...through them I developed a mentoring group of teachers” While the exact reasons for this difference between students in higher education and those who are not is unclear, it still seems that teachers play an important role in many student’s after high-school choices.

Figure 3: U.S Youth with Support from Teacher

In India, for 17 of the 35 young people interviewed, teachers were a very important source of information about higher education possibilities. For many low SES Indian high school students, teachers are one of the few individuals who have graduated college. In the absence of any guidance counselors, they supply students with information about local schools, applications, and scholarship information. As one Indian college student remembered, “I knew had to go to the city to go to college. That was all I knew. I had to
learn from my teacher which schools had which programs, how to apply, about reservations for scheduled tribes”

However, many interviewees cited teachers as being busy, and in a rush to leave. There does not seem to be any set protocol for college advising, and the amount of information and guidance students receive varies greatly with teacher dedication and interest. Teachers are an important, but variable, source of guidance in both the U.S. and India.

![Indian Teacher Support](image)

**Figure 4: Indian Students with Teacher Support**

**Guidance Counselors**

Twenty-one out of 27 interview respondents rated their guidance counselors as not helpful or somewhat helpful in assisting him or her with after high school plans. Almost every respondent described his or her guidance counselors as overworked. These guidance counselors are being busy, frequently transferred between schools and focused on “making sure students graduate high school without getting pregnant or arrested.” Even among those young people who had very helpful relationships with their guidance counselors, many admitted that their counselor prioritized talented and assertive students over less
assertive students. As one four-year college student remarked, “My guidance counselor was great, but she really prioritized. She was too busy to help everyone, so some of my friends slipped through the cracks.” Of the students who rated their guidance counselors very helpful, two of the five were part of special college bridge program or charter schools. There is no marked difference in the percentage of students from each category who formed supportive relationships with guidance counselors, suggesting this relationship does not determine who goes to college and who does not.

Still, the overall high number of not very helpful guidance counselors represents wasted opportunities for better guidance for low SES youth. Effective guidance counselors in this survey were uniquely positioned to suggest schools initially out of student’s comfort zones, to supply a network of contacts in universities, and to help students navigate the various components of the application process. Take for an example, the story of one four-year university, first generation student. Susan’s guidance counselor organized a spring break college tour at a discounted rate, helped her practice her responses to interview questions, forwarded the student’s questions to her network of contacts at universities, and shared information about a government fee waiver program for application and SAT fees. This information let Susan explore a wide variety of school options, well-informed and unfettered by worries about paying for school and applications. While atypical, this story shows the great potential of guidance counselors to make pursuing higher education easier for low SES youth.
Parents

In the U.S, 24 of the 27 interviewees were first generation college students, meaning that neither of the student's parents had obtained a bachelor's degree. Many cited their parent’s lack of experience with college as limiting their ability to help the respondent as he or she tried to make decisions about higher education. Of the 27 students I interviewed, 17 described their parent’s approach to their decisions as encouraging them “to do what made them happy”, leaving the details of planning up to their child. However, while only one out of ten four year college students found their parents to be supportive, five out of eleven two year and three out of six no college youth found their parents to be helpful. The parents of two year and no college youth have experiences more similar to their children’s allowing them to offer more support. For four year students, the gap of experiences grew wide enough that their parents were unable to support them to the same extent.

While parents may not always be the most informative about higher education, they still play a vital role in supporting their children. They can set high expectations, they can check in on how assignments and applications are going, and they can offer their opinions.
As one student at a four-year university recalled “My mom helped me but she didn’t know either, so we researched a lot of it together.” Parents, even those who don’t know much about the higher education process, can be crucial partners in the search for the right opportunity.

A lack of support also proved influential in this study. Youth who did not enroll in college were more likely to experience negative parent support, with three of six youth mentioning parental pressure to get a job out of high school. Across the three groups, six interviewees described their parents discouraging them from applying to university, because they wanted their child to stay closer to home, or to get a job to support the family. Of these six respondents, three did not enroll in any college program. A lack of support can take subtler but equally powerful forms. As one young person not in college shared “I wish my mom had made sure I went to school, had asked if I had done my homework. I thought it was nice she let me do what I wanted, but I just ended up getting left behind.” Over half of the students at a four year school also described their parents taking a hands-off approach to their higher education choices, so this seems a common but not insurmountable, hurdle for low SES youth.
Twelve out of 35 young people in the Indian survey found their parents to be useful sources of information when making decisions about their education. However, only five out of 35 sets of parents had any high school education and only one parent had a college degree. In this survey, parents supplied information they had on a variety of after high school options, of which college was only one. They had very specific advice about local jobs, and some about local colleges, but only vague ideas about education and jobs that are less represented in their community. This vagueness was especially true of parents who were illiterate or had only an elementary education. The five respondents with more educated parents benefitted from their advice, and four of the five were on track or in college. These parents, particularly government employees, were more aware of government scholarships for their caste, or of special training programs, and shared these specific steps with their children.

Despite the information gap, both more and less educated parents play a hugely influential role in their children’s choices, more than in the U.S. Almost every young person in the study cited their parents as an extremely important factor in their choices. In fact,
parents often made those choices for their young people. Time and time again I would hear that “My parents tell me to do as I like in studies” and get no further answer, not unlike the American parents’ directive “do whatever makes you happy.” However, I also spoke with several girls leaving school to get married, a twin in 11th standard whose twin had dropped out in 5th, a young man who dropped out in 10th standard because of “family troubles” yet spoke the best English of all my interviewees, and a girl whose parents had, much to her bitterness, changed her studies from science to arts part way through college, believing it more likely she would get a government service job. When it comes to staying in school, it’s very much of a survival of the fittest environment. If the family doesn’t need extra hands and you pass, you can continue to the next standard, if not, its time to find work. Families with no history of education won’t keep their kids in school unless they see promise amidst the hardship of a nonproductive son or daughter. Parents are more likely to see a point in education if they have some education themselves, if they have a job outside of agriculture, or if they live closer to the city.

While parents in the U.S. also expressed worries, American youth have an easier time overcoming their concerns or lack of support. In India, the importance of parent’s opinion is partially rooted in cultural tradition, and partially a result of parental control of family finances. While scholarships for higher education exist, few respondents knew much about them or thought of relying on them, a big difference between the U.S. and India. While students in the U.S. with parents unconvinced of the merits of a college education could often hope for financial aid or a scholarship, students in India are far more reliant on their parents to pay entirely for tuition, and often transportation and housing.
Figure 7: Indian Youth with Parental Support

**siblings, cousins and friends**

In total a third of the 27 respondents specified older brothers and sisters or cousins as important sources of information. However, youth who went to two year colleges found their siblings the most useful, with five out of eleven citing them as important, as opposed to two out of ten and one out of six. These numbers suggest that youth who go to college don’t necessarily need supportive sibling relationships. However, these low and erratic numbers also may also reflect that many youth do not have older siblings.

Those youth who did have older siblings learned from both the positive and negative experiences of their family members. Four of these nine had older siblings or cousins who had difficult experiences after high school, either going through aimless periods without a job, or dropping out of college. As one two-year college student shared, “I saw my brother graduate high school and struggle to do anything productive, he just
lived at home for awhile until he realized he had to go back to school. I didn’t want to be waiting like him so I’m taking classes here.” Another four year college student saw his older brother start at a two year college before transferring twice, taking a winding road to a degree, and a sister go through a local four year university. “I got to see what they did and the mistakes they made, but we are all the same generation...I saw what mistakes my parents did [sic] with them...every kid was like a stepping stone.” Siblings helped students get the right high school experiences, shared insight from their own application experience, helped negotiate with worried parents, and helped their brothers and sisters with financial aid forms. Of the six youth who did not go to college, only one spoke with an older sibling about her choices. Siblings and cousins can be useful companions on the journey to college for low SES youth, having navigated the process themselves.

Friends, both peers in the same year of high school and those who have graduated, can offer support similar to older siblings and cousins. Almost half of four-year students cited their friends as good sources of information about after high school options, much higher than the one sixth of two year students and youth not enrolled in college. This perhaps reflects that the four-year students took classes and were friends with students also focused on four-year colleges. As one four year student shared, “All of us students who were in AP classes knew each other pretty well, they were great for bouncing ideas around with.” This high school community of high achievers connects students across grade levels, as several students mentioned peers who had graduated. One four year student described Skype conversations with a family friend who was attending a prestigious college and working in the admissions office, “He helped me go over application questions and interview answers. He knew he was one of the few people my family knew in college, so he
helped me out.” Students at two year or not enrolled in college did not seem to have as helpful friend relationships, at least in terms of higher education.

Students across all categories acknowledge the influence of friends on college decisions. When asked what advice they would give high school seniors, 11 out of 27 of all respondents specified either “surround yourself with a friends who have good goals” or “don’t limit yourself to just what your friends are doing.” Indeed, it seems that having friends as the same school is part of what appeals to students at two year programs. Friends form an important part of young people’s support networks, influencing young people’s aspirations and plans for the future

siblings, cousins, and friends play a very similar, important role as information providers in India. Nine out of the 35 interviewees found their cousins or siblings to be valuable sources of information, and twelve out of 35 gathered information from friends. In a country with such a huge change in education rates over the past decade, slightly older members of the young generation are invaluable guides. For example, Amriti, an 11th grader, the second in her rural community to advance that far, relies on her cousin Narai, who was the first. He helps her study, he meets with her teachers in place of her parents, and he hopes to help her get in to the same college with the same scholarship he did. Older siblings who did not attend college can still offer advice and support. Prakash’s older brothers work in the city, and share information they have learned from friends in the city. They are paying for his education, and help explain the process to their parents. Close friends can provide similar support, sharing their experiences and pooling together any information they have learned.
In the same vein, friends and family members can facilitate the abandonment of higher education aspirations. Six students cited siblings, cousins and friends as influencing them away from higher education, and four of these students were off track. Devilal is the son of a government official, who heartily encouraged his son to continue studying, but Devilal found the idea of making money with his friends sorting recycling more appealing. Members of the same generation are powerful sources of information and support, both for and against higher education.

While only cited by four youth, community organizations deserve a brief mention. Community groups, like church youth groups, environmental clubs, and scouting programs offer youth another chance to meet potential role models and sources of information, outside of their school and family. As one two year college student shared “My youth group leader at my church knew so much about college, he was always asking me about my plans and even introduced me to some of his friends were part of [his current colleges] administration.” Some churches and large civic groups offer scholarships to committed members. One two year college student saved up enough Boy Scout scholarships to pay for his first year of community college tuition. Community organizations present another opportunity for low SES youth to make helpful contacts and gain support for their after-high school plans.

In India, this study did not come across any youth who cited involvement in any community organizations. Religious, political, or other civic groups did not seem to play a significant role in the respondent’s choices.

**Official Sources of Information**
Official sources of information, like websites, guidebooks, college tours, or presentations from college officials play a critical role in low SES student’s investigations of after-high school options. They can complement information and advice gained through a relationship, or make up for a lack of knowledgeable personal contacts. As one four year student adroitly summarized “I didn’t know anyone who knew much about college, so I spent a lot of time asking questions to a computer screen.” On average, students who went on to attend four-year schools used 3 official sources of information, as opposed to the two sources two year and no college youth averaged. Given this small difference, quality over quantity seems a relevant aphorism in the context of after high school decisions. The difference in sources between India and the U.S. is more significant. Indian youth benefitted from none of these sources of information.

This section describes how many students found each source useful, before then exploring how the students found it useful. Overwhelmingly, students found the internet to be the most useful resource available to them. The interviewees also found college tours, college information sessions, mailings and advertisements somewhat informative and important to understanding what to consider when searching for a school. Only a few respondents found guidebooks, and career fairs to be useful.
Table 5: U.S Official Sources of Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>Guidebooks</th>
<th>College Fairs</th>
<th>Campus Tours</th>
<th>College Info Sessions</th>
<th>Mailings/Advertisements</th>
<th>Average Number of Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four Year College</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Year College</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No College</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Sources of Information
The use of the internet in college and job searches seems to have become ubiquitous. Every respondent in all categories specified the internet as a hugely important resource. Students at both four and two year colleges explored college admissions sites, online forums, financial aid form support, and websites designed to help students plan for college. The rise of the internet means that students don’t have to rely on just their social networks to get a perception of schools. Visual, easy to navigate websites allow students who can’t afford to travel to a campus to form a better image of potential schools, even those far away. Those youth not enrolled in college also investigated jobs and schools online, but seemed to have a less rich recollection of their explorations.

Four out of nine students at a four year college and two of eleven two year college students found college presentations at their high school or in the community to be informative. Students remembered meeting college representatives and having the opportunity to ask questions one on one, getting a fuller overall picture of the university.

Students in college were more likely to have visited colleges. Indeed, six out of nine four year students, and four out of 11 two year students had done so. Nonetheless, one of the six youth not in college had visited prospective college campuses. Several cited the excitement and inspiration to work harder walking around a college campus sparked within them. For those who would be traveling far from home to attend college, four of the six four year students, visiting campuses made the leaving home more of a tangible reality.

Four students, two in two year universities, and two who did not go on to college cited advertisements as useful sources of information. These ads included billboards,
newspaper ads, and ads on an internet search side bar. Theses ads made them aware of schools, scholarships, and internet sites geared toward helping potential college students. Perhaps for students not as focused on attending school, these easy to stumble upon advertisements gave them an idea of where to start. Similarly, many schools and a few scholarships mail glossy pamphlets to potential students. Only three students, all at four year colleges, recalled getting information from these mailings.

In India, access to information through official sources was almost nonexistent among the young people I interviewed. All the young people I talked to did not have regular access to computers or the internet. Those who applied to college did not have idle time with a computer and internet connection for any college exploration. Most young people in the survey had attended a College and Career day, mandatory in government schools. Teachers gather students and parents, and bring in professionals involved in various career tracks and university representatives. Students choose a career tract of interest and investigate it further. However, students in distant villages barely recall it even when prompted, and those who do recall it don’t cite it as very useful in their decision-making. No one in the survey had seen a college guidebook. Rural students in particular often don’t travel close enough to the city to see billboards and don’t know anyone with a newspaper subscription. This lack of official information leaves students in India reliant on getting information from their social networks, which puts low SES students at a distinct disadvantage.

**Clear Aspirations**

The situation of one’s birth seems to count for quite a lot. The previous sections explored how where a young person goes to school, who they know, and how effectively
they find information all come together, reinforcing each other and sealing his or her fate. However, this study did not find that some youth are doomed to be poor, with poor friends, an unhelpful family, out of school, and feeling left behind, while others are well off, with a supportive family, helpful teachers, ambitious friends, and a bright family. In this study, youth whose backgrounds would suggest every disadvantage still gained admission at four-year schools, while some who were comparatively well off choose not to proceed onward in higher education.

There isn’t one master factor that determines success or failure, but the strength and clarity of a student’s aspirations seems capable of trumping a student's background. Both in the U.S and in India, many opportunities exist for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, from scholarships and financial aid to special college preparatory programs, Yet, many respondents in this study had a difficult time incorporating these opportunities into their future plans, or failed to even make future plans. High aspirations and the perseverance to see them made real allowed some students to successfully pursue higher education.

Table 6: Why Youth Choose their College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Affordability</th>
<th>Academic Programs</th>
<th>Positive Experiences With College Representatives</th>
<th>Close to Home</th>
<th>Friends at Same School</th>
<th>Need to take classes/plan future before transferring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four Year College</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Year College</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The detail of aspirations in high school was perhaps the most striking difference between students in four year programs, two year programs, and those who did not attend college, in both nations. Students in four year programs knew early in high school that they wanted to apply to school, and pursued information on where they wanted to apply and how they would pay for it through whatever means were necessary. Some had supportive families, or a helpful teacher, and others relied entirely on the internet, but this drive to find out as much as possible united all their stories. Take for example, the story of Arjun. Arjun is an exception in his community. Arjun lives in a very rural hamlet. An almost 100
percent tribal area, the number of individuals who passed 10\textsuperscript{th} grade, out of a village of 700, is less than ten. He commutes two hours a day to go to school. He doesn’t mind the hassle, which dissuades many youth, because he believes he can become an engineer. He plans to take a coaching class in the city so his pre-engineering exam, scores will allow him to get a scholarship at a government college.

Arjun’s road won’t be easy. His dreams will take work, time, money and luck. However, with information about the process, some money, and encouragement, he stands a chance to become the first engineer from his rural hamlet. He already serves as a role model for local youth. Across my interviews, those students who had information, on schools, on government schemes, on different careers, and had encouragement, and the drive to use that information to their advantage were the ones who went to college.

Given the difficulty in pursuing higher education for low SES youth, it’s not surprising that college students in the U.S. and India had high and clear aspirations. However, is it a failure to develop these aspirations that holds other youth back? This study measures two parts of aspirations: 1. A desire in high school to go to college and 2. A clear plan of action. Arjun’s example shows both. He knows he wants to go to college, he also knows he wants to go to an engineering school, and needs to prepare for the exam and find a scholarship. This study found these two qualities more lacking in youth at two year colleges and in youth who did not go to college.

In the U.S., all eleven two-year college students wanted to go to college when they were in high school. However, only three felt that they had planned enough in high school, and that they had made the right choice. This doubt is reflected in why youth choose their two year college. Preferences to go to an affordable school, close to home, where students
can prepare to transfer and fulfill those thwarted high school college aspirations show a need to make convenient plans. As one student reflects “It wasn’t what I wanted, but I knew I had to make this choice. I didn’t focus enough in high school, didn’t check financial aid and needed to get my grades up without going far away or paying a lot of money.” The advice of another two year students is: “Don’t be a deer in the headlights, learning new information won’t hurt you. Is it intimidating? Yes, but not learning will hurt you more in the end.” Many students in two year schools feel they didn’t get all the information and take the actions they should have in high school.

A similar failure in planning is evident in how students perceived financial aid. Students at four year schools ascertained, either through someone’s counsel or their own exploration, that they could get generous financial aid packages at large, private colleges. They focused their searches on these schools. Conversely, two year students and youth who did not go to college worried far more about paying for school, selecting two year programs, or going straight into the workforce because of money worries. This is reflected in the discrepancy between the preference for affordability between youth at four year schools and two year schools. Students at four year schools looked at several schools, and often selected the ones with the most generous financial aid package. Students at two year schools did care about affordability, and many restrained their college search close to home, so they could commute. However, these students often did not compare between many schools, did not compare tuition or financial aid packages. Therefore, fewer listed affordability as their primary reason for choosing their two-year school. While gaining admission at schools with generous financial aid programs is not an option for everyone,
this disparity could still suggest that youth who pursue information about paying for college can make choices about higher education more confidently.

**Table 7: Why Youth Chose to not Pursue Higher Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Needed time to Figure out Next Step</th>
<th>Needed to Earn Money</th>
<th>Family Issues</th>
<th>Didn't See Purpose in Continuing School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S No College</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India Off Track</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 10: Why Youth Choose Not to Go To College**

In the U.S. and India, students who did not go onto to any college program also suffered from a failure of planning in high school. Unlike the two year students, many did not want to go onto to college when they were in high school. Three of six youth in the U.S. and five of seven youth in India did not see the point in continuing their education when
they were in high school. They attributed these lower aspirations to a desire to follow friends, make money, or, in India specifically, a family belief in the lack of merit in higher education. Devilal is an example of low aspirations trumping even a comparatively privileged background. While still living in a remote area, his father, against the odds, studied to 10th standard and works a government job. Devilal grew up with his parents encouraging him to study, only to fail out in 10th grade. He dreamed of the same life his friends had, a wife, kids, and quick money in Mumbai. Perhaps other forces were at play, but the fact remains the Devilal had no specific goals, staying in school until it proved more lucrative to leave.

A failure in planning also held youth who did not go to college back in both countries. Four out of six American youth and six out of seven Indian youth expressed regret in their high school plans for their future. In the U.S., youth remembered being caught off guard by the end of high school, and recalled killing time, living at home, looking for whatever work was hiring, following the path that seemed, at the time, the least difficult. Lindsey, a young person who did not go on to college, planned to become a beautician throughout high school, but after high school realized she wasn't able to make the financial commitment for training. She instead got a job at a craft store, and has been working for two years. She feels she has gone off track, and that she hasn't been moving forward in her life. Now, she wants to go back to school and get a job working at a preschool. Reflecting, this detour allowed her to figure out her goals. Still, Lindsey wishes her mom and teachers had been stricter, had made her think about her future earlier.
Youth who did not go to college either did not see college as a desirable goal, or did not actively pursue all the steps needed to follow through on their goal, leaving high school unsure of their direction, working or trying to get back on the education track.

Policy Implications

This study highlighted what forces came together to create a successful transfer to higher education for some youth, and what rerouted some of their peers. Not every young person will or needs to go on to higher education, and for some, the determining factor in their after high school choices may have been their aptitude for and interest in education. However, there are youth somewhere in the middle, who are interested in higher education, but feel overwhelmed by the idea of applying to college, or aren’t sure what they want for their future. These youth could develop the necessary tenacity to pursue higher education, like their successful peers, if something sparks their interest. With these youth in mind, I would broadly suggest improving the quality of in school guidance, making information easily accessible and ubiquitous, and making existing social networks more supportive of higher education in both the U.S. and India.

Improving the Quality of In School Guidance

There is a disparity in the amount of higher education information available in the social networks of high and low SES youth. In both the U.S. and India, youth needed to reach outside their family and friend circles to get guidance about higher education. Yet even amongst low SES youth, the helpfulness of these sources, especially guidance counselors, varied greatly. The few youth who benefitted from helpful guidance counselors
showed the potential of the position in the lives in low SES youth. Many more youth expressed a desire for more guidance, revealing the need for guidance counselors.

This variability in the quality of guidance counselors does not necessarily reflect widespread ineptitude or apathy among the guidance counselors of the U.S. but instead the overwhelming nature of their job. Guidance counselors in high schools across the nation are charged with helping students through academic, emotional, and mental issues in addition to providing advice for student’s plans after high school. Many high schools, especially in low income neighborhoods, could benefit from more guidance counselors, allowing each guidance counselor to check in on their assigned students, or perhaps a specific counselor for after high school plans, for one of more high schools.

In India, there is no official guidance counselor position. While this would represent a huge government investment, the need for some sort of official guidance is great. Today, information about careers and higher education is passed along informally, leaving many low SES students uninformed. Interventions at the public school level could include creating a guidance position, or training existing teachers to provide some education and career guidance, requiring them to stay after school twice a month or so to answer questions and give advice. Guidance centers that could serve students from several villages or neighborhoods present another option, one that would allow support from the non-profit sector and private sector.

**Make Information Accessible and Ubiquitous**

In both the U.S. and India, many students expressed feeling confused and worried when looking into after high school opportunities. Those who had graduated and had left education or gone to two year schools also expressed regret that they hadn’t looked into
schools, scholarships, and financial aid earlier. There will always be students who seek out information, no matter the difficulty, and students who will ignore every billboard, announcement and meeting. However, there is a middle group who would listen if forced too. Providing information about college early and often could spark a desire to find out more.

The U.S already has a vast and vibrant college information system. Students remembered using websites like College Board’s online, personalized programs BigFuture and YouCanGo, and College Foundation of North Carolina’s online education portal. These sites and others like them address student concerns and provide answers and examples, a sort of virtual guidance counselor. Those who did not go to college, and those who went to four year schools also used the internet, but they did not have as detailed searches, or admit they started too late. What these students need is a helpful reminder to use these resources early and often. These reminders can take the form of meetings throughout high school, posters in high school hallways, billboards, or advertisements on Facebook or the Google sidebar.

Once again, in India, sources of information are extremely lacking. While the U.S. example shows the huge potential of the internet in supporting student’s choices about higher education, it will be several years until internet access across India becomes comparable to the U.S. In addition to spreading access to the internet through schools or community centers, and creating useful online guides on education and career tracks, any attempt to spread information should also use more accessible technology. Creating up to date print guidebooks and distributing them throughout secondary schools is one option.
Additionally, many of the respondents in this survey had access to cell phones and texting. Text message list serves present one possible information avenue.

**Capitalize on Existing Social Networks**

While not the most helpful for higher education, low SES youth still belong to powerful social networks. From young men who followed brothers to work in the city in India to aunts who shared information on job opportunities in the U.S., low SES youth still learn about opportunities from their friends and family. How can these social networks be capitalized on to share information about higher education as well?

We have already explored how committed teachers and guidance counselors can supplement youth’s social network. However, student alumni networks are another school connection youth could draw on. If high schools maintained contact with their graduates, particularly at schools where few students go on to four year schools, these young alumni could share their experiences with current students. This could be through visiting their former high schools when home on break, or through one on one talks through video chatting or email. In India, students can build relationships with alumni through texting as well as high school visits.

Additionally, several youth in the U.S. mentioned involvement with organizations outside of schools, including church youth groups, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and other civic groups. These were opportunities for youth to meet mentors outside of their home and school communities, and several reported getting advice and support from these individuals. While these groups don’t have exact comparisons in India, perhaps religious and political organizations that attract youth could add a higher education and career
component to their activities. Any initiative to spread information about higher education could build off these already existing networks.

**Paving the Road to Higher Education**

The road to higher education is not smooth for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the U.S. and India. While the landscape of college access in each nation is different, many of the roadblocks are the same. Low SES youth don’t have knowledgeable contacts to give them support and guidance, have a hard time accessing information, and follow the example of their family members and peers, entering the work force or perhaps a two year college. U.S. students certainly benefit from living in a more developed nation, with guidance counselors, internet access, and more information sources on college programs and financial aid. Yet, development doesn’t correct for more universal issues associated with low SES. Partially as a result of social networks and information access, youth from low SES backgrounds develop lower and less detailed aspirations for their future.

The students who go to college are those who break away from the status quo. They have strong aspirations, often fostered by unique individuals in their social network, and these students seek out the necessary information beyond their social groups to make college a reality. Students who do not go to college don’t pursue information outside their social groups, and did not think much about their future until after high school.

The phrase “a rising tide lifts all boats” describes rising rates of economic development benefitting all citizens in a nation. However, this aphorism has recently fallen
out of favor, as it became clear that this tide of change doesn’t always trickle down to the worst off communities. Increasing rates of higher education attainment in these communities could end this stagnation. The stories of successful youth in this study show it’s possible. Encouraging more youth to follow in their footsteps is crucial. The “capacity to aspire,” Arun Appadurai tells us, is a skill that gets better with practice. Could this be true at the community level as well? The success of some can spark a desire for success in others, a rising tide of aspirations. As one college student reflected “You know, I didn’t have anyone who had gone to college when I was in high school, I guess I’m that person now.” Providing better guidance, information, and support is not just an investment in an individual, but in a community, in drops that could someday add up to a much larger wave.
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Appendix One
North Carolina Interviews
Students at Two and Four Year Universities

1. School Experiences:
   a. What sort of activities are/were you involved in outside of class? (Sports, band, drama, yearbook or newspaper, model U.N., debate, service clubs, hobby clubs vocational club, etc)
   b. How were your teachers? Did you ever talk to your teachers outside of class? Were they interested in your plans after graduation?
   c. How was your guidance counselor? What did they do to help you decide your plans after graduation?
   d. How would you rate your school's guidance and support for deciding plans after high school? What did they do well? and what could they do better?

2. Sources of Information
   a. Who did you ask for help when you were studying for a test, or working on a difficult assignment?
   b. Who did you ask for help when planning your future? Who is the most helpful, and how are they helpful?
   c. Where did you get information about different university options? What was most helpful?
   d. Have you used any college guidebooks?
   e. Have you attended a college fair? Did you find it helpful?
   f. A career fair? Did you find it helpful?
   g. How have you used/did you use the internet in your search for colleges, scholarships, financial aid information, or post graduation job opportunities?
   h. Did you use a book or take a class on SAT prep?
   i. Did you look into financial aid or scholarships?

3. Connections
a. Who do you know who has gone to college? Parents, aunts, uncles cousins, brothers, classmates?
b. Do these individuals offer you any advice?
c. Do you know anyone who lives in any of the areas you are considering for university?
d. Do you know anyone who has or currently is attending colleges you are considering?

4. Family Background:
   a. How do your parents feel about your education? What are their hopes for you? What are they worried about?
   b. What role did you parents play in your after high school plans?
   c. How much of a role did your family finances play in decisions about your future?

5. Aspirations
   a. What do you hope to do for a living one day? Why?
   b. What steps are involved in achieving this dream? (classes in high school, SAT, applications, financial aid college courses?)
   c. What factors mattered most when choosing your College?
      - (academic programs, post graduation job options, friends attending same school, proximity to home, affordability, scholarships, financial aid? Etc.?)

Conclusion
   d. If you could change anything about the college application process, what would you change? What parts are confusing?
   e. What advice would give a senior at your high school?
   f. Anything else you would like to add? Who else should I talk to?

Young People Who did Not Go to College

1. School Experiences:
   a. What sort of activities are/were you involved in outside of class? (Sports, band, drama, yearbook or newspaper, model U.N., debate, service clubs, hobby clubs vocational club, etc)
   b. How were your teachers? Did you ever talk to your teachers outside of class? Were they interested in your plans after graduation?
   c. How was your guidance counselor? What did they do to help you decide your plans after graduation?
   d. How would you rate your school’s guidance and support for deciding plans after high school? What did they do well? and what could they do better?

2. Sources of Information
   a. Who did you ask for help when planning your future? Who is the most helpful, and how are they helpful?
b. Where did you get information about different university options? What was most helpful?
c. Have you used any college guidebooks?
d. Have you attended a college fair? Did you find it helpful?
e. A career fair? Did you find it helpful? College visits?
f. How have you used/did you use the internet in your search for colleges, scholarships, financial aid information, or post graduation job opportunities?
g. Did you use a book or take a class on SAT prep?
h. Did you look into financial aid or scholarships?

3. Connections
   a. Who do you know who has gone to college? Parents, aunts, uncles cousins, brothers, classmates?
   b. Did you know anyone in your current career track?
   c. Do these individuals offer you any advice?

4. Family Background:
   a. How do your parents feel about your what you should do after high school? What are their hopes for you? What are they worried about?

5. Aspirations
   a. What factors mattered most when choosing what to do after HS?
   b. What would have had to be different for you to continue your education?
   c. What do you see yourself doing two years from now? Five?
   d. What advice would you give to a senior in high school now?
   e. If you could change one thing about the process what would you do?

India Interviews
Interview Questionnaire - India

1. General Background: Name, Gender, Age, Caste, level of education achieved, occupation, village, family assets (housing materials, number of rooms, fans, motorbikes, radios, T.Vs)

2. Family Background:
   a. How much education did your father receive? Your mother?
   b. What does your father do for a living? Your mother? How does your family earn money?
   c. How many brothers and sisters do you have? How many older, how many younger? What are they doing now (in school, working, working at home?)
   d. How do your parents feel about your education? What are their hopes for you? What are they worried about?

3. School Experiences:
   a. Where did you go to primary school, middle, secondary, senior secondary?
   b. What subject did you choose in 10th standard? Why?
   c. Do you find the teachers helpful?
   d. How many students from your school proceed on to college?
4. Remoteness:
   a. How far are the schools you have attended from your house?
   b. How long does it take you reach school?
   c. How do you get there?
   d. Does anyone else in your village/neighborhood go with you?
   e. Do you parent’s worry about you traveling to and from school?
   f. Does your family receive a newspaper?
   g. How often have you traveled to the closest town? To the city?

5. Sources of Information
   a. Who do you ask for help if you are studying for a test, or working on a difficult assignment?
   b. Who do you ask for help when choosing you subject of study?
   c. Where do you/did you get information about different university options?
   d. Do you plan to/did you secure financial aid or a scholarship?
   e. Are you getting/did you get tutored for any subject? Any coaching for pre-college exams?
   f. How often do you or your parents read a newspaper?
   g. Have you used the internet? For what purpose? How did you access it?
   h. Have you attended a college fair? Did you find it helpful?
   i. A career fair? Did you find it helpful?

6. Connections
   a. Who do you know who has attended University? Parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, classmates?
   b. Do these individuals offer you any advice?
   c. Do you know anyone who lives in Udaipur, Salumbhar?
   d. Do you know anyone involved in the village government body? Anyone who works for the government?

7. Aspirations
   a. What do you hope to do for a living one day? Why?
   b. What do your parents hope you do for a living?
   c. What steps are involved in achieving this dream (courses of study in Secondary School, tests, applications, college courses?)

8. For students who did not graduate Secondary School or proceed to College
   a. Why did you leave the school system?
   b. What would have had to be different for you to continue your education?