




Higher Education and Economic Mobility: Who Punches Above Their Weight?

Isabella L. Roman¹ · William C. Wood¹ · Scott Niederjohn² 

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Colleges and universities take pride in their mobility success stories, but beyond the stories, which ones actually move their students up the economic ladder? In a time of increased attention to inequality, the question takes on added importance. It is unsurprising that underprivileged graduates of highly selective universities move up. This article asks: What schools promote economic mobility beyond what might be expected? As will be shown, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) over-perform and there are significant regional variations in mobility. These conclusions are based on data from a fortuitous 2017 study that was featured in the *New York Times* (Chetty et al., NBER Working Paper 23618, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23618>), combined with commonly collected data from the institutions.

Any one measure of mobility can provide surprises. For example, Princeton University moved 66 percent of its enrolled poor students (those from the lowest fifth of the income distribution) to the top fifth (Chetty et al., NBER Working Paper 23618, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23618>). Yet in a typical year, 66 percent is only about 19 Princeton graduates rising from the lowest quintile to the top. More impressive is the City College of New York (CCNY), which in a typical year graduates 150 students who make it from the bottom to the top quintile. Numbers like these are why CCNY is ranked first nationally in that widely cited 2017 study (Chetty et al., NBER Working Paper 23618, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23618>).

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✉ Scott Niederjohn
scottniederjohn@gmail.com

¹ College of Business, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA

² Center for Free Enterprise, Concordia University, Mequon, WI 53097, USA

This paper investigates which colleges and universities punch above their weight by achieving high economic mobility given their available resources. A data set was assembled by manually scraping the *New York Times* data (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/>) combined with Money magazine data (<https://money.com/2019-best-colleges-value-united-states/>) and statistics submitted by universities to the U.S. Department of Education (<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>). The data set included varied measures of mobility and important school characteristics such as median Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, the student-faculty ratio, comprehensive cost of attendance, percentage of students receiving grants, average student debt, total enrollment, and applicant rejection rate (descriptive statistics in Online Supplemental Appendix Table 1). The data set centers on 2017, a year of relative pre-pandemic stability, before large numbers of schools made standardized test scores optional. Online Supplemental Appendix Table 2 describes regression equations with three mobility measures as a function of school characteristics. The residuals of these equations are used to re-rank all 561 schools in the study (Online Supplemental Appendix Table 3).

The first mobility measure was the percentage of lowest-income-quintile students who made it to the top quintile, following what was then known as the Equality of Opportunity Project (2017), since renamed Opportunity Insights (<https://opportunityinsights.org/>). The top ten residuals in Online Supplemental Appendix Table 2's first equation (showing greater mobility correcting for available resources) are a very different list from the usual elite top ten in academic rankings. Highest of all was the City University of New York (CUNY) Bernard M. Baruch College, with 8.6 percent more graduates than predicted (the residual mobility rate) rising from the lowest income quintile to the highest by age 34. Other CCNY campuses also reached the top ten, with the following rankings and residual mobility rates: CCNY (#3, 7.8 percent), CUNY Hunter College (#7, 4.4 percent) and CUNY Lehman College (#9, 4.0 percent). Other top ten schools in the ranking, with residual percentages, were the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences (#2, 8.1 percent), State University of New York (SUNY)-Stony Brook (#4, 6.2 percent), New Jersey Institute of Technology (#5, 5.0 percent), California State-Los Angeles (#6, 4.9 percent), Mount St. Mary's (#8, 4.2 percent) and St. John's University of New York (#10, 4.0 percent).

The Equality of Opportunity Project also calculated the percentages of lowest-income-quintile students rising to the top 1 percent. Schools were also ranked using the residuals of this measure in Online Supplemental Appendix Table 3. Topping the list were the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences and Claremont McKenna College, both with 0.9 percent of graduates more than predicted making it to the top 1 percent (the residual upper-tail mobility percentage). Rounding out the top five in this measure with rank and residual upper-tail mobility percentage were Maine Maritime Academy (#3, 0.6 percent), and SUNY Maritime College and CCNY-Bernard Baruch (both tied for #4, 0.5 percent). As before, the 1 percent winners in mobility are not the usually cited elites.

Rising to the top 1 percent of the income distribution is rare, but a large number of college graduates can out-earn their home household. The variable that equals early-career income minus the income of the household of origin is ordinarily negative,

but can be positive for especially successful graduates. Rankings for the residuals of this variable are also included in Online Supplemental Appendix Table 3 as residual family income differential rank.

For all the mobility residuals, differences were calculated across categories of colleges. Specific types of institutions were contrasted with the rest of the sample; for example, HBCU's as opposed to all others. The findings are as follows (Online Supplemental Appendix Table 4). The HBCU's excelled at mobility, with highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) differentials in mobility residual and a striking +\$8,265 residual in graduates' income differential ($p < 0.001$). Private versus public comparisons yielded very small differences. Highly selective public institutions (such as the University of Wisconsin and the University of California at Berkeley) slightly outperformed other schools in residual mobility probability ($p = 0.056$). Regionally, northeastern institutions outperformed all other institutions in mobility ($p < 0.001$) and had a +\$5,130 residual in graduates' income differentials ($p < 0.001$). Southern ($p < 0.01$) and midwestern ($p < 0.001$) institutions underperformed in mobility probabilities.

This study finds large differences in the efficiency of generating mobility outcomes. These differences suggest, but do not prove, that major improvements in mobility are possible across colleges and universities.

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