2018

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Sociological Perspectives
2018, Vol. 61(4) 553–572

DOI: 10.1177/0731121418777237
journals.sagepub.com/home/spx
SAGE

All Talk and No Action? Racial Differences in College Behaviors and Attendance

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Abstract

According to the influential "oppositional culture" account, we should expect black students as a group to be less likely to engage in school than their white counterparts because they are more likely to believe and act in opposition to academics. In contrast to this prediction, qualitative and quantitative researchers have almost uniformly deduced that black students hold similar or higher educational values, attitudes, and expectations as compared with whites. I pull from the rich literature on racial differences in educational attitudes and expectations to posit that instead of black students shirking education, black students are actually more likely to act in favor of education, and that this might help explain their higher net rates of college attendance as indicated in prior research. Using the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS), I find that black students' higher rates of engagement in college-going behaviors mediate the relationship between race and college attendance so that race is no longer a significant predictor of attendance. Implications for how these results can address racial disparities in college attendance are discussed.

Keywords

college attendance, college-going behaviors, racial differences in education, oppositional culture

In an effort to explain black-white gaps in academic achievement, the oppositional culture thesis posits that "a minority group's historical relationship to the dominant group plays an important role in shaping group members' beliefs about how schooling will pay off" (Downey 2008:109). According to this theory, structural racism has created differential opportunities and rewards to education and the labor market, and blacks as a group have responded by developing distinct behaviors for themselves in opposition to a system for whites, a system that values education. Rather than buying into a system that works against them and fearing being labeled as "acting white" by their black peers, black students lower their educational effort, reject schooling, and shun a school-based identity (Downey 2008; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Matthew 2011; Ogbu 1978).

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Authors of some research and opinion articles have agreed with Ogbu and Fordham's ideas as an explanation for black-white gaps in schooling (Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga 2002; Fryer and Torelli 2010; Layton 2015; McWhorter 2014, 2016; Ogunyemi 2017). However, numerous studies by quantitative and qualitative researchers alike have found little support for the idea that black students as a whole value education less than white students, or are penalized by their black peers for putting forth effort in academics (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter 2007; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Harris 2011; Harris and Robinson 2007; Matthew 2011; Tyson 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). In fact, research shows that black students are more likely to believe they will enter into and complete a college degree than similar white students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Harris 2011), and that all students lose interest in school over time, regardless of race and with little consequence to academic achievement (Harris 2011; Tyson 2011).

This research has shown that black students have similar or stronger pro-education attitudes and higher expectations regarding educational attainment, discrediting the idea that they have as a group uniquely developed an oppositional view toward school (see Downey 2008 for a review). Previous research has also shown that black students are more likely to engage in certain pro-education behaviors, make high school educational transitions, and activate cultural capital for educational advancement than are similar white students (Buchmann, Condron, and Roscigno 2010; Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Hurtado et al. 1997; Merolla 2013; Merolla and Jackson 2014). This line of research provides further evidence against using oppositional culture to describe black students as a group or to describe their educational trajectories.

Knowing black students have similar or higher rates of pro-education attitudes, expectations, and behaviors than white students can be useful when used to understand racial differences in educational attainment. Do these pro-school expectations and behaviors pay off via higher rates of college attendance? Previous research suggests that black students are more likely to attend college than whites when academic performance and socioeconomic status are held constant (Alexander, Holupka, and Pallas 1987; Bennett and Lutz 2009; Bennett and Xie 2003; Black and Sufi 2002; Cameron and Heckman 2001; Hauser 1993; Kane and Spizman 1994; Merolla 2013; Merolla and Jackson 2014). Might black students' pro-education expectations and behaviors help explain this advantage in college attendance?

In this study, I explore black-white differences in college-going behaviors, such as taking the SAT and applying to college, and how these behaviors predict racial differences in college going. These behaviors are concrete actualized versions of student educational attitudes and expectations, and are a strong indication of whether the student intends to follow through on their expectations of educational success (Grodsky 2007; Morgan 2005). By including these behaviors in models predicting college attendance, I can connect black students' pro-education expectations and behaviors to educational attainment and the pro-active role black students play in their own educational success.

College-going Behaviors

Previous research, in response to studies and opinion articles regarding oppositional culture and the idea of "acting white," has revealed that black students have higher educational aspirations, expectations, and values than do similar white students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Harris 2006). These pro-school attitudes and expectations suggest that black students may be more likely to engage in college-going behaviors and to attend college. However, expectations of college attainment do not always mean that students will take the steps to apply and attend college. Including the intermediary step of obtaining information and applying to college is necessary when specifying college attendance models (Morgan 2005).

There are certain college-going behaviors that indicate actual intent to enroll and are necessary steps to continue education after high school. For instance, completing the SAT or ACT

shows the initiative a student takes in achieving their goal of going to college because of the time it takes to prepare for and complete the tests (Grodsky 2007). Taking the SAT or ACT is also an important behavior to include in this study because taking one of these college standardized tests is generally a prerequisite for entry into most four-year colleges (Hawkins and Clinedinst 2006; Morse 2008). This behavior is available to all students regardless of ability, race, or income (as those on free and reduced lunch can receive a waiver for the test fee). In addition, unlike other potential college-going behaviors, such as taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Mathews 2016), taking the SAT or ACT is available to any student regardless of school attended.[1] Exploring racial differences in engaging in this positive college-going behavior may help elucidate the relationship between student agency and college attendance.

Another college-going behavior included in this study is whether the student contacted school sources of support regarding college information, such as teachers, counselors, coaches, college representatives, or friends. In addition to parents, these significant others are often the most educated and/or influential people in the student's life. It is not a requirement of college attendance to talk to a teacher or a counselor, yet it shows that the student took the prospect of college seriously enough to consult others for information that could be helpful in applying to college.

Another indicator of engagement in college-going behaviors that could increase the student's chances of attending college is the number of colleges they applied to (Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). Students are not required to apply to more than one college, but the more they apply to, the greater their chances of being admitted. More applications also increase their chances of receiving financial aid, especially for the second and third applications (Smith 2014). If a student is taking the time to fill out more than one application, he or she is willing to take the extra time to increase his or her chances of being admitted to college, indicating the extra effort and motivation toward college attendance.

Number of colleges applied to could be a double-edged sword in that both students who believe their chances of being accepted into any college are low may apply to many colleges to increase their choice set, and students who are trying to get into selective colleges may apply to many colleges, as their chances are slimmer due to the selectivity of the colleges. One way to address this limitation is to look at the type of schools to which the student is applying. Two-year colleges require some sort of application despite open enrollment (Pannoni 2015), but these applications differ from four-year college applications with requirements that may increase with selectivity of the school. A four-year college application includes at the very least the actual application form, a high school transcript, and SAT or ACT test scores. Some colleges also require one or more essays or recommendation letters, adding to the burden of applying for those not academically ready to apply. As upward of 18 percent of very qualified students do not apply to four-year colleges (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001), it is not a given that a student will apply to a college that matches their academic performance or chances of acceptance.

There are other possible behaviors that could be beneficial for students in the college admissions process but may not be driven by college intentions. For instance, research suggests that participating in extracurricular activities positively affects cognitive and noncognitive skills that are important for academic attainment (Covay and Carbonaro 2010; Lleras 2008). However, it is possible students participate in these sports and activities just because they enjoy them, with no intention to use them to increase their chances of being admitted into college. Thus, they are not included as strictly college-going behaviors in this study.

Measures of academic performance such as grades, test scores, and course-taking sequences are also not included as college-going behaviors. These performance measures are certainly markers of students' efforts. However, they are also correlated with differential opportunities to learn, stereotype threat, potentially biased judgments of teachers, and different types of bias within standardized tests, making it difficult to separate student intent from these obstacles (Downey and Pribesh 2004; Jencks 1998; Mangino 2013). This study targets behaviors that (1)

do not require extensive assistance from others to complete (although assistance may change the *quality* of the behavior's product), (2) are available to any student regardless of where they live, (3) are available to any student regardless of how early or late they decide to act on college, and (4) are not heavily based on their socioeconomic status or opportunities to learn provided by schools. Although such behaviors are not a perfect litmus of a student's intentions to attend college, and although they may be affected by social class and school contexts (for which I control), they supplement the rich literature that exists on racial differences in attitudes, values, and expectations.[2]

By focusing on these behaviors, I can determine whether students' expectations are all talk or are actual plans for their future. Although behaviors such as applying to college and taking the SAT or ACT are requirements of most postsecondary institutions (Hawkins and Clinedinst 2006; Morse 2008), not every student who wants to go to college completes these steps. Separating aspirations and expectations of attending college with actual behaviors to achieve that end is important to study. Furthermore, it is not clear what the role *race* plays in predicting engagement in these behaviors and how racial differences in these behaviors affects eventual attendance. Despite a narrowing of the gap in recent years, white students still outpace black students in college attendance (Casselman 2014; National Center for Education Statistics 2016). Much of this gap is attributable to factors that are strongly correlated with socioeconomic disparities between blacks and whites, as black students overwhelmingly come from lower-income households and have parents who are less likely to have any college experience (Hauser 1993). However, when socioeconomic status and academic performance are held constant, black high school graduates are actually *more* likely to attend college (Alexander et al. 1987; Bennett and Lutz 2009; Bennett and Xie 2003; Black and Sufi 2002; Cameron and Heckman 2001; Hauser 1993; Kane and Spizman 1994; Merolla 2013; Merolla and Jackson 2014). These articles have utilized different datasets with different methods to find that to varying degrees, black students attend college at higher rates than similar white students, but with little explanation why.

This Study

To understand why black students attend college at a higher rate than do similar white students (termed the *net black advantage* in college enrollment by Bennett and Xie 2003), I connect research regarding racial differences in educational expectations, college-going behaviors, and college attendance. Specifically, in this study I explore racial differences in college-going behaviors and their role in predicting racial differences in college attendance. Students may act in ways that signify a commitment to enrolling in college, and propensity to take these actions may vary by race. A clearer understanding of the link between college expectations, behaviors, and attendance may help explain these racial differences and showcase the role students play in their educational attainment.

My research questions are as follows:

Research Questions 1: Do black students engage in college-going behaviors more than white students?
Research Questions 2: Does black students' engagement in college-going behaviors mediate racial differences in college attendance?

This second question is important to address because by identifying these racial differences in college-going behaviors prior to college acceptance and attendance, I can partially trace these positive outcomes to the steps that black students take to attain higher levels of education, further verifying a pro-education attitude.

Data and Method

Data

The dataset used to study these questions is the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS). ELS researchers gathered data from a nationally representative sample of students who were sophomores in high school in 2002. Three time points in two-year increments of ELS student data were included: the initial baseline (sophomore year), two years following (senior year), and two years post high school (Ingels et al. 2007). There were 16,200 respondents available for this study.[3] I restricted the sample to include only non-Hispanic white adolescents and non-Hispanic black adolescents, leaving 11,200 potential respondents.[4] Cases were also dropped if the respondent was missing information on the college-going behaviors of interest (1,430), college attendance (3,030), and high school graduation (110), leaving 6,630 respondents in the study. The data are weighted by the base-year and second follow-up panel weight provided by ELS (F2BYWT).[5]

Independent Variables

A number of independent variables were included in the models to control for variation across the students themselves and the high schools they attended, and were nested in a chronological way (see Table 1 for further details). There is an unadjusted model that includes only race as a comparison for the rest of the models. *Demographic* information was culled from the 10th-grade student and parent questionnaires and included in Model 1. Gender is included as it is a strong predictor of college attendance (DiPrete and Buchmann 2006). Two measures of social background were included as well: parental income (logged) and parental education (the highest level of education completed by either parent, in years). Each of these variables is well known to affect college attendance (Charles, Roscigno, and Torres 2007).

School variables measured in the 10th grade were added in Model 2 and include school type (public, Catholic, or other private), percentage of students at the school on free or reduced lunch, and percentage of minority students in the school. These variables control for the school context, which has strong direct effects on college attendance (Morgan 2005).

Student *academic performance* is measured with the student's ninth-grade GPA (grade point average), and with a standardized *t*-score composite of ELS-generated reading and math tests taken in the 10th grade. Both variables are included in Model 3. A student's academic performance has a direct influence on the student's own expectations, the expectations and aspirations of others, and on the propensity of going to college (Morgan 2005), and thus, GPA and test scores are important precursors to all of the dependent variables of interest. The type of high school program or "track" each student was enrolled in is also included in Model 3. These programs included college preparatory, vocational, or general tracks. High school tracking, even in its current decentralized form, has been found to significantly affect achievement (Hallinan 1988; Lucas 1999). Although this is a self-report measure, it could reveal attitudes or perceived opportunities at the school that affect the student's future (Berends, Lucas, and Peñaloza 2008).

Two *educational expectation* variables are included as controls in Model 4. A variable measuring the educational expectations of the student in 10th grade is included in the model, consistent with previous research regarding the role of expectations and college going (Bozick et al. 2010). The question asked, "As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?" A categorical variable was created from this question indicating whether (1) the student expected to receive less than a bachelor's degree (omitted), (2) they expected a bachelor's degree or more, or (3) the student indicated they did not know. Rather than code indecision regarding college attendance as missing, I included it in the model as it could contain important information regarding a student's lack of attention to the question of college, or lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in this area.

Table 1. Description of Variables Used in Current Study.

Variable	Description	Model No.
Behaviors		
Student took SAT/ACT	1 = Took SAT/ACT, 0 = Did not take SAT/ACT (cross-referenced with College Board and ACT records)	~
Contacted school sources about college	1 = Student contacted a teacher, counselor, coach, friend, or college representative for college entrance information by senior year, 0 = Did not go to any of these sources	~
Number of college applications completed	# = Number of applications they completed, 0 = Did not apply	~
Level of college student applied to	3 = Highest level of college applied to was a highly selective college, 2 = Highest level of college applied to was any other four-year college, 1 = Highest level of college they applied to was any two-year or less college, 0 = The student did not apply to college	~
College attendance		
Ever attended any college	1 = Student attended any type of college by the second follow-up of ELS; 0 = Student did not attend any type of college by this time	~
Independent variables		
Black	1 = Black, non-Hispanic, 0 = White, non-Hispanic	Unadjusted
Female	1 = Female, 0 = Male	Model 1
Parent education	Higher of the two parents' education, measured in years (parent reported)	Model 1
Logged parental income	Total family income (parent reported); midpoints of categories were chosen and then logged	Model 1
School type	1 = Public School, 2 = Catholic School, 3 = Other Private School	Model 2
Urbanicity	1 = Urban, 2 = Suburban, 3 = Rural	Model 2
Percentage of high school on free/reduced lunch	Percentage of current 10th-grade students who receive free or reduced-priced lunch at the school, divided by 10 (administrator reported)	Model 2
Percentage of high school who are minority students	Percentage minority students in the school in 2001-2002, divided by 10 (Common Core of Data)	Model 2
High school program/ track type	1 = General, 2 = College Prep, 3 = Vocational (student reported)	Model 3
Standardized test score	Composite of ELS reading and math test scores at 10th grade	Model 3
Grade Point Average (GPA)	Ninth grade GPA (transcript)	Model 3
Student's education expectation	Student's expectation of bachelor's degree; 0 = < BA, 1 = BA or higher, 2 = I don't know (student reported)	Model 4
Parental education expectation	Parent's expectation of bachelor's degree for child; 1 = BA or higher, 0 = < BA (parent reported)	Model 4

Note. ELS = Education Longitudinal Study of 2002.

The student expectation variable is supplemented with the parent's educational expectations for their student. This is measured as a binary variable indicating whether the parent taking the survey believes the student will complete at least a bachelor's degree or not. This variable was self-reported by the parent who completed the survey when the child was in 10th grade (65

percent of parents who completed the survey were biological mothers). Parental expectation of educational attainment is a strong and consistent predictor of college attendance in past literature as it captures the values and support systems in the home that surround education (Cheng and Starks 2002; Hossler and Stage 1992).

Dependent Variables

College-going behaviors are the actions that students take to prepare for college and are variables that signal attempts by students to make them more prepared for college. Different positive college-going behaviors in which students can engage to increase their potential to go to college were included in this study. These behaviors are typically performed senior year, and are an expressed action toward college enrollment. These behaviors are directly related to the pursuit of college and the college application process. Further description of the behaviors these variables describe can be found in the literature review above.

The first variable is a binary variable indicating whether the student completed a SAT or ACT test. This is a composite variable from two years after the student's original high school graduation date. Student's responses to whether they took the SAT or ACT were confirmed with the College Board (makers of the SAT) and the ACT. About 5 percent of the sample indicated they took the test but had no confirmation from the College Board or the ACT. These students were included in the sample. Robustness checks that drop them find there is no substantive change in the results.

The next behavior measures whether the student contacted school sources of support regarding college information, such as teachers, counselors, coaches, college representatives, or friends.[6] This variable has the limitation of being self-reported by the student and is, thus, subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. However, it is the best measure ELS has in terms of students' information seeking behavior regarding college.

I also include two separate variables measuring application sending behavior. The first variable measures the number of college applications sent.[7] Because this variable includes applications to open enrollment colleges where the stakes are low, I code an additional categorical variable that equals 3 if the highest level of school they applied to was a highly selective college, 2 for any other four-year college, 1 if the highest level of college they applied to was any two-year or less college, or 0 if the student did not apply to college at all. Selectivity is determined according to the Carnegie selectivity measure, which classifies schools as highly selective when the 25th percentile scores of entering freshmen on the SAT or ACT correspond to the ACT-equivalent score of greater than 21 (Ingels et al. 2007). This coding allows me to see racial differences in college application behavior across college level and type, and compares the multiple options students have when attending a college or university (Charles et al. 2007).[8]

In addition to acting as dependent variables for my analyses, I use these college-going behaviors as independent variables when predicting attendance in any college to establish their importance to the college-going process. This *college attendance* variable is coded as 1 if the student attended any type of college since high school completion/exit by the second follow-up of the survey, or 0 if not.

Missing Data

As with any longitudinal survey, a number of cases had missing data on one or multiple variables. To handle missing data, I take two main approaches. First, measures of gender and race missing in the base survey were coded with information from the first follow-up measures on these questions. Second, I conduct imputation using iterative-chained equations, separately by racial group. The use of multiple imputations is preferred over the default of listwise deletion (where all cases

missing on at least one variable are dropped) as it maintains considerable amounts of data that would otherwise be lost (Allison 2001).

Analytic Strategy and Results

The analyses proceed in two steps. To answer the first research question regarding whether black students engage in college-going behaviors more than similar whites, I use logistic, negative binomial, and multinomial regression (respective to the dependent variable) to analyze whether race was associated with college-going behaviors after controlling for family background and demographics, school characteristics, student academic performance, and student and parent educational expectations. I then calculate the predicted probabilities of engaging in each behavior by race averaged across the values of the control variables in each model. In the tables, I report the difference between black and white students on these predicted probabilities (the average marginal black-white differences), and discuss some of the adjusted predicted probabilities within the text (Williams 2012). Average marginal differences describe how changes in the variable of interest (race, in this case) affect changes in the outcome, holding all else constant (Long and Freese 2014). Average marginal differences are preferable to reporting regression coefficients because they are comparable across different regression methods. Also, logistic regression coefficients in particular are sensitive to omitted variables, unlike in linear regression, and will change with the addition of a variable to the model regardless of whether the new variable is an accurate predictor of the outcome variable. Average marginal differences are not affected by unobserved heterogeneity and can be compared across models (Mood 2010; Williams 2012).

To answer the second research question regarding whether black students' engagement in college-going behaviors mediates racial differences in college attendance, I conduct a logistic regression predicting college attendance by the age of 20. These models include the same models from the behavior regressions (family background and demographics, school characteristics, student academic performance, and student and parent educational expectations), with the addition of Model 5, which includes college-going behaviors. Again, I report the average marginal black-white differences (averaged across the values of the control variables) instead of regression coefficients for ease of analysis, though full regressions are available on request. This analysis will answer whether these college-going behaviors lead to differential college attendance by race.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of the weighted sample of the variables in this analysis are presented in Table 2. The sample in this study mirrors that of previous studies—the black students tend to be from families with lower levels of education and income, and are more likely to be in public and urban schools. They are also highly concentrated in schools with high proportions of minority students and students on free and reduced lunch.

Descriptive statistics for the college-going behaviors show that black students are less likely than white students to take the SAT/ACT (0.731 vs. 0.803). However, black students are more likely to contact a school source about college (0.891 vs. 0.874) and more likely to apply to more colleges (2.713 college applications vs. 2.249). Regarding highest level of college applied to, white students are more likely to submit to a selective four-year college than black students (0.362 vs. 0.254), but black students are more likely to apply to a nonselective four-year college as their highest level college (0.452 vs. 0.320) or to any four-year college, with the cumulative proportion applying to any four-year college being 0.706 for black students versus 0.682 for white students. Thus, even before controls are added, with the exception of taking the SAT/ACT, black students are engaging in college-going behaviors more than white students.[9] This does not

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics by Race.

Variable	Black sample	White sample
Female	0.531 (0.497)	0.513 (0.500)
Years of highest parent education	14.406 (2.242)	14.926 (2.395)
Parental logged income	10.219 (1.252)	10.987 (0.742)
School sector = Public	0.966 (0.182)	0.891 (0.312)
School sector = Catholic	0.025 (0.157)	0.064 (0.245)
School sector = Other private	0.009 (0.095)	0.045 (0.208)
Urbanicity = Urban	0.448 (0.496)	0.196 (0.397)
Urbanicity = Suburban	0.437 (0.495)	0.549 (0.498)
Urbanicity = Rural	0.115 (0.318)	0.255 (0.436)
High school program = General	0.337 (0.471)	0.337 (0.473)
High school program = College prep	0.537 (0.497)	0.582 (0.493)
High school program = Vocational	0.125 (0.330)	0.081 (0.273)
Percentage of school on free/reduced lunch	38.688 (27.105)	18.064 (17.166)
Minority student population percentage	61.230 (27.962)	18.300 (18.490)
Standardized test score	45.763 (8.239)	54.545 (8.870)
GPA	2.479 (0.690)	3.019 (0.704)
Expects to complete BA = No	0.146 (0.352)	0.118 (0.322)
Expects to complete BA = Yes	0.778 (0.414)	0.802 (0.399)
Expects to complete BA = I don't know	0.076 (0.265)	0.081 (0.272)
Parents expect child to complete BA	0.814 (0.388)	0.776 (0.417)
Took the SAT or ACT	0.731 (0.442)	0.803 (0.398)
Contacted school sources about college	0.891 (0.311)	0.874 (0.332)
Number of colleges applied to	2.713 (2.169)	2.249 (1.984)
Highest level of college applied to = No college	0.138 (0.344)	0.130 (0.337)
Highest level of college applied to = Two-year college	0.156 (0.362)	0.188 (0.391)
Highest level of college applied to = Nonselective four-year college	0.452 (0.496)	0.320 (0.467)
Highest level of college applied to = Selective four-year college	0.254 (0.434)	0.362 (0.481)
Attended any college	0.780 (0.413)	0.837 (0.370)
	N = 1,010	*N* = 5,610

Source. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002.
Note. Data are weighted. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Observations are rounded to the nearest 10.

lead to obvious returns for this overall group, though, as white students are more likely to attend college by the age of 20 than black students (0.837 vs. 0.780).

Racial Differences in College-going Behaviors

To capture racial differences in college-going behaviors when comparing black students with similar white students (for the first research question), I estimate the appropriate regression for each of the college-going behavioral dependent variables. Displayed in Table 3 (taking the SAT/ACT, contacting a school source about college, and number of college applications) and Table 4 (highest college type applied to) are the average marginal black-white differences for race, considering the controls in the respective models (the full regressions are available on request). These effects represent the black-white difference in the predicted probabilities that students will engage in that behavior (Williams 2012). If the number is positive, then black students are more

Table 3. Average Marginal Black-White Differences in Predicting College-going Behaviors.

Model	Took the SAT/ACT[a]	Contacted school sources about college[a]	Number of college applications[b]
Unadjusted (black)	−0.072***	0.017	0.187***
	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.032)
Model 1 (black + demographic variables)	0.009	0.048***	0.364***
	(0.017)	(0.011)	(0.034)
Model 2 (Model 1 + school variables)	0.003	0.046**	0.310***
	(0.022)	(0.015)	(0.041)
Model 3 (Model 2 + academic performance variables)	0.086***	0.063***	0.479***
	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.040)
Model 4 (Model 3 + educational expectation variables)	0.056**	0.043**	0.424***
	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.040)

Source. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002; see Table 2 for unweighted sample sizes.
Note. Data are weighted. Numbers presented are the average marginal differences between black and white students when predicting college-going behaviors after regression. Positive cells indicate where black students are more likely to engage in that behavior over similar white students under that model. Standard errors of the average marginal effects are in parentheses.
[a]Logistic regression.
[b]Negative binomial regression.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests for the null hypothesis that difference = 0).

Table 4. Average Marginal Black-White Differences in Predicting College Application Sending Behavior.

Model	Type of college application: None	Type of college application: Two-year	Type of college application: Less or nonselective four-year	Type of college application: Highly selective four-year
Unadjusted (black)	0.008	−0.031*	0.131***	−0.108***
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Model 1 (Black + demographic variables)	−0.042**	−0.064***	0.119***	−0.014
	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Model 2 (Model 1 + school variables)	−0.031	−0.065***	0.118***	−0.022
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.027)	(0.025)
Model 3 (Model 2 + academic performance variables)	−0.071***	−0.108***	0.073**	0.106***
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.026)	(0.025)
Model 4 (Model 3 + educational expectation variables)	−0.052***	−0.093***	0.056*	0.089***
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.026)	(0.024)

Source. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002; see Table 2 for unweighted sample sizes.
Note. Multinomial regression of one variable with four outcomes. Data are weighted. Numbers presented are the average marginal differences between black and white students when predicting college-going behaviors after regression. Positive cells indicate where black students are more likely to engage in that behavior over similar white students under that model. Standard errors of the average marginal effects are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests for the null hypothesis that difference = 0).

likely to engage in the behavior. If it is negative, then white students are more likely to engage in the behavior.

In the unadjusted model in Table 3, the black-white differences in predicted probabilities of engaging in taking the SAT/ACT indicate a white advantage—white students overall are more

likely to take the SAT or ACT with an 80.2 percent chance versus black students with a 73.1 percent chance (for a difference of −0.072, $p < .001$, as reported in Table 3). However, this difference is no longer significant when demographic variables are added in Model 1, nor with the addition of the school-level variables in Model 2. When academic performance variables are added in Model 3, there is a small but statistically significant advantage for blacks, so that black students are more likely to take the SAT/ACT than white students (0.086, $p < .001$). This advantage remains, though lessens, in Model 4 with the addition of the educational expectation variables. In Model 4, black students are predicted to have an 83.5 percent chance of taking the SAT or ACT versus white students who are predicted to have a 77.9 percent chance (0.056, $p < .01$). Thus, black students with similar academic performance as white students are more likely to take the SAT or ACT. Educational expectations slightly mediate that relationship, closing the gap somewhat between black and white students.

For the second binary variable, contacting school sources about college, black students are just as likely to engage in this behavior as white students in the unadjusted model (0.017), with black students having an 89.1 percent chance and white students having an 87.4 percent chance. But when demographic variables are added in Model 2, black students have a small but significant advantage over white students (0.048, $p < .001$), which grows and declines with the addition of the academic performance (Model 3) and educational expectation variables (Model 4). In Model 4, black students have a 91.1 percent chance of engaging in this behavior, while white students have an 86.8 percent chance (for a difference of 0.043, $p < .01$). The Model 3 and 4 results suggest that black students again have a statistically significant advantage in contacting school sources about college more than similar whites. This advantage is partially explained by controlling for academics and expectations, but not completely.

In the last column of Table 3, which presents results of a negative binomial regression predicting number of college applications submitted, in each model, black students are predicted to send more applications than white students, with this advantage growing to 0.424 ($p < .001$) applications in the last model with all covariates. Black students are applying to more colleges than white students even before controls are added, and this advantage only grows when they are compared with similar white students.

However, the type of colleges students apply to should also be taken into consideration as the number of applications does not separate selective from nonselective college applications. In Table 4, I present the average marginal black-white differences in predicting college application sending behavior. When presenting the average marginal differences in predicting a categorical outcome, results are interpreted in a similar way as logistic regression—the cells represent the difference between how black and white students are predicted to engage in that behavior. However, the cells should be interpreted in conjunction with the other outcomes as the probability of sending an application will equal 1 across the four options. For instance, the unadjusted model predicting black-white differences in college application sending behavior are presented in the first row. In this model, black students are just as likely to not apply to any college as white students (0.008), are less likely to apply to a two-year college as their highest application (−0.031, $p < .05$), are more likely than white students to apply to a nonselective four-year college (0.131, $p < .001$), and are less likely to apply to a selective four-year college (−0.108, $p < .001$).

These results change when controls are added to the regression. With the addition of the demographic variables in Model 1, black students are just as likely to apply to a selective four-year college as white students (−0.014). This pattern continues through Model 2. These results change, though, in Model 3 with the addition of the academic performance variables so that black students now have a statistically significant advantage over white students in applying to selective colleges (0.106, $p < .001$). This relationship is slightly mediated but still strong with the addition of the education expectation variables in Model 4 (0.089, $p < .001$). In other words,

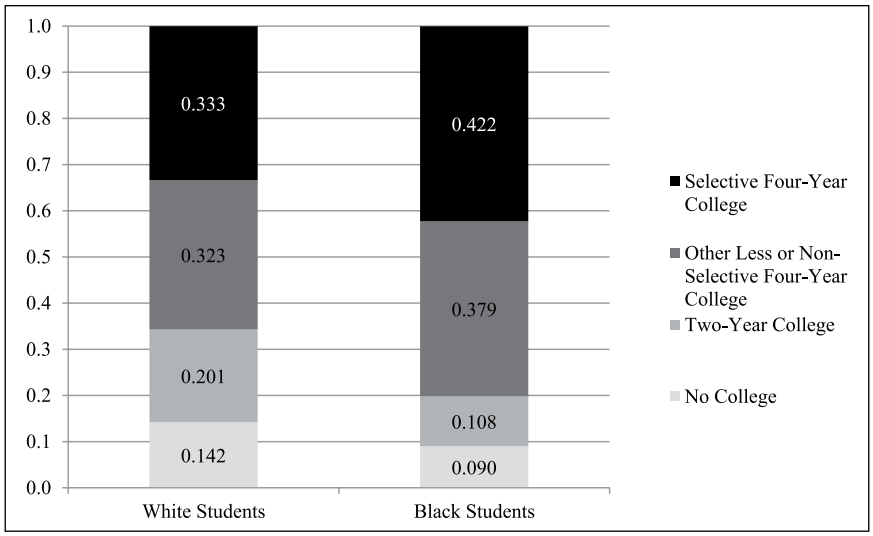

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of black-white engagement in highest college type application, by race, Model 4.

black students are predicted to have a 42.2 percent chance of applying to a selective college, versus a 33.3 percent chance for whites, in the final model.

Understanding the analysis of college application sending behavior may be better illustrated in Figure 1. This figure illustrates that the predicted probability of where students send their college applications to equals 1. The figure shows that black students have a greater probability of applying to a selective four-year college than similar white students (0.422 vs. 0.333), and are more likely to apply to any type of four-year college than similar white students (0.802 vs. 0.657), when both types are totaled. Simultaneously, black students are less likely to apply to a two-year college or to no college at all than are similar white students (0.090 vs. 0.142 for no college applications). These results are in line with the previous findings showing that black students are more likely to engage in positive college-going behaviors than are similar white students.

Therefore, I find that black high school students are significantly more likely to engage in positive college-going behaviors than similar white students across the behaviors measured. Much of the advantage white students have over black students in the unadjusted models is due to the higher socioeconomic status of those students. Once this status is controlled, the size of the black advantage varies by behavior but strongly suggests that black students are taking advantage of multiple college-going behaviors to increase their chances of being accepted to college, more so than similar white students.[10] These results are consistent with previous research regarding racial differences in educational attitudes and expectations—black students are following up their generally higher educational attitudes and expectations with higher rates of these college-going behaviors than white students. But do racial differences in these behaviors also help explain racial differences in college attendance? I explore that next.

College-going Behaviors and College Attendance

The second research question asked whether black students' engagement in these positive college-going behaviors mediated racial differences in college attendance. If so, these results will provide more support for previous research on the pro-school attitudes of black students by

Table 5. Average Marginal Black-White Differences in Predicting Any College Attendance.

Model	Attended any college
Unadjusted (black)	−0.057***
	(0.016)
Model 1 (black + demographic variables)	0.018
	(0.015)
Model 2 (Model 1 + school variables)	0.009
	(0.020)
Model 3 (Model 2 + academic performance variables)	0.067***
	(0.015)
Model 4 (Model 3 + educational expectation variables)	0.043*
	(0.017)
Model 5 (Model 4 + college-going behaviors)	0.001
	(0.016)

Source. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002; see Table 2 for unweighted sample sizes.
Note. Data are unweighted. Numbers presented are the average marginal differences between black and white students when predicting college attendance after regression. Positive cells indicate where black students are more likely to attend college over similar white students under that model. Standard errors of the average marginal effects are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests for the null hypothesis that difference = 0).

showing that their actions match their attitudes and expectations based on higher college attendance compared with similar whites.

Table 5 presents the average marginal differences between black and white students in college attendance. In the unadjusted model, black students are less likely to attend college than white students (−0.057, $p < .001$). With the addition of the demographic variables in Model 1 and the school variables in Model 2, there is no significant difference between the two groups. However, with the addition of the academic performance variables in Model 3, black students now have a statistically significant advantage over similar white students in going to college (0.067, $p < .001$). This advantage is attenuated with the addition of the educational expectation variables in Model 4 but is still significant (0.043, $p < .05$). For Model 4, black students are predicted to have an 86.2 percent chance of going to college versus an 81.9 percent chance for whites.

In Model 5 with the addition of the college-going behaviors, black and white students are just as likely to attend college (with a predicted chance of 82.9 and 82.8 percent, respectively, for an insignificant difference of .001 as shown in Table 5). This result answers the second research question—black students' higher engagement in positive college-going behaviors partially explains their higher college attendance rates.[11]

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the influential "oppositional culture" account, we should expect black students as a group to be less likely to engage in school than their white counterparts because they are more likely to believe and act in opposition to academics for fear of being accused of "acting white" (Farkas et al. 2002; Fryer and Torelli 2010; Layton 2015; McWhorter 2014, 2016; Ogunyemi 2017). In contrast to this prediction, qualitative and quantitative researchers have almost uniformly deduced that black students hold similar or higher educational values, attitudes, and expectations as compared with white students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter 2007; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Harris 2011; Harris and Robinson 2007; Matthew 2011; Tyson 2011; Tyson et al. 2005).

I pull from this rich literature on racial differences in educational expectations to posit that instead of black students shirking education, black students are actually more likely to pursue it when they can, and that this might help explain their higher rates of college attendance indicated in prior research (Alexander et al. 1987; Bennett and Lutz 2009; Bennett and Xie 2003; Black and Sufi 2002; Cameron and Heckman 2001; Hauser 1993; Kane and Spizman 1994; Merolla 2013; Merolla and Jackson 2014). Using the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, I find that black students' higher rates of engagement in college-going behaviors mediate the relationship between race and college attendance so that race is no longer a significant predictor of attendance.

More specifically, I find that black students confirm the positive educational beliefs they espouse in other research with positive action toward college attendance. Black students in this study were statistically and substantively more likely than similar white students to engage in positive college-going behaviors such as taking the SAT or ACT, contacting school sources about college, and applying to college. In some cases, similar or higher rates of black student engagement in these behaviors arose before parental socioeconomic variables, school quality, and academic performance were considered. Indeed, when only gender, parental education, and parental income were considered (and, thus, prior to including academic performance and school variables), black students were just as likely or more likely to engage in all of the positive behaviors than similar white students.

These results suggest that not just the highest achieving black students or those with the most school resources are taking advantage of these behaviors. These results are also in line with other research that shows black students are more likely to engage in college entrance test preparations and high school educational transitions than are similar white students (Alon 2010; Buchmann et al. 2010; Grodsky 2010; Merolla 2013). This study also shows that these behaviors explain variation in college attendance. The effect of race is reduced to nonsignificance with the addition of the college-going behaviors so that black and white students were found to attend college at about the same rate. Race was no longer a significant predictor of college attendance with the addition of the behaviors.

The next question to ask is why black students engage in these college-going behaviors more and why they attend college more than similar white students. There is still racial differences to explain when predicting engagement with college-going behaviors. Previous research has indicated that black students understand the importance of academic achievement for their futures yet believe that structural barriers impede them more than whites (Matthew 2011; Perry 2003). Perhaps black students' higher engagement in these behaviors is a sign that they are being more strategic by attempting to counteract this disadvantage (Buchmann et al. 2010; Hurtado et al. 1997). Understanding the obstacles that are unique to them as African Americans, are they likely to respond to structural disadvantage with more effort?

Some research has suggested that just the presence of affirmative action policies, especially at selective colleges, actually raises the educational expectations of black high school students (Alon 2010; Brown and Hirschman 2006) and, thus, increases their propensity to engage in college-going behaviors. Previous research has also suggested that black students may respond differently to expected labor market returns when attending college (Bennett and Xie 2003; Black and Sufi 2002). It may be that black students are more sensitive to local unemployment levels, wages, or returns to education than white students. Future research I am conducting includes determining these mechanisms and how they might explain why black students engage in college-going behaviors more than white students.

There are some limitations to this research. The college-going behaviors used in this study do not completely encompass every effort a student must make to get into college. Thus, it is possible that black students are engaging in these one-off behaviors but are not engaging in more time-consuming efforts such as difficult course sequences or AP classes. However, these time-consuming behaviors and others like them are tied to opportunities to learn and the process of

schooling, neither of which is devoid of racial discrimination that hampers black student outcomes. At least for some of these long-term behaviors, research by Cook and Ludwig (1998) and Diamond and Huguley (2014) conclude that black students do not engage in them less than white students.

It is possible that the measures from this study are subject to recall or positivity bias. However, this is less of a problem with these measures because, (1) two different college application behaviors were included to ensure different information was analyzed, (2) the SAT/ACT measure was verified by the College Board and ACT organizations, and (3) while values, attitudes, and expectations might be difficult to assess and self-report, answering yes/no on whether they applied to a college or took the SAT or ACT is fairly straightforward. Overall, the strength in using these behaviors lies in their ability to measure whether students mean what they say when they say they want to or expect to succeed in high school and go to college.

Implications

The college admissions process is a complicated and unstandardized multistep process. If students do not at least apply to a college, they will not have access to information on academic fit or financial aid offers from colleges as this information is only sent after they apply (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001; Stephan and Rosenbaum 2013). Yet there are students who do not complete these steps despite high educational expectations, partially due to a myriad of obstacles in the college application process such as lack of college knowledge or poor or nonexistent college counseling (Avery, Kane, and Hoxby 2004; Blake 2016; Holland 2015). Even students who are academically ready to go to college may not apply or enroll and, therefore, will not go to college or may undermatch at a community college (Hoxby and Avery 2012). Isolating factors that determine college attendance, such as positive college-going behaviors, will help us determine how to increase the overall college attendance of all students, especially black students, and enhance their occupational potential.

This study also informs the way high schools and school counselors can approach college counseling. The more counselors and teachers can help students complete each step, the closer students are to college attendance and completion, black or white. College-going behaviors are relatively inexpensive and easy to influence or "nudge." They can have substantial positive impacts on college going (Avery et al. 2004; Castleman 2013; Dynarski 2015). This is especially true for low-income and minority students who are sensitive to small price changes (Smith, Hurwitz, and Howell 2015). While taking the SAT or ACT does not guarantee a good score, and applying to college does not guarantee acceptance or eventual graduation, students also cannot be admitted to college if they do not try. And while a net black advantage in college attendance assumes that black and white students have similar backgrounds and academic abilities—which is a big assumption (Merolla 2013)—efforts toward increasing clearly quantifiable and concrete behaviors to ensure energy and resources are properly invested are always warranted.

Prior to this study, there has not been a comprehensive assessment of racial differences in college-going behaviors using nationally representative data, or using data that were not censored by an endogenous sequence of behaviors (cf. Klasik 2011). This study contributes to the literature by establishing how important these behaviors are to the college-going process (Morgan 2005). This study also highlights how there is a consistent racial pattern across a variety of college-going behaviors, showing that black students engage in all of these behaviors more than similar white students, as opposed to what oppositional culture theory would suggest.

In this study, I connected black students' higher educational expectations with their higher rates of college-going behaviors and higher rates of college attendance when compared with similar white students. Studies such as this one highlight areas where black students excel at the same rate or more than white students, pushing back against an ideology that students of color

suffer from cultural deficiencies (Lewis 2013). Using oppositional culture to explain black-white differences in educational achievement and attainment prevents society from addressing structural impediments to black student success. Instead, we need more research such as this one that focuses on how these students expend effort overcoming structural disadvantage and how we can dismantle policies that prevent them from succeeding (Lewis 2013).

Author's Note

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Summer Meeting of the Research Committee on Social Stratification and Mobility (RC28) of the International Sociological Association in Bern, Switzerland.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks William Carbonaro, Amy Langenkamp, Rob Warren, Richard Williams, Maliq Matthew, Megan Andrew, Megan Austin, Jordan Conwell, Tobias Blake, Barbara O'Brien, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments. All errors are the author's.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The student's actual performance on the test is not measured in this study as it is not a behavior but an indicator of academic performance and socioeconomic status.
2. I do use grade-point average (GPA) and standardized test scores as controls of academic performance so that comparisons between black and white students can take into account school performance.
3. Per National Center for Education Statistics policies, observations are rounded to the nearest 10.
4. Previous iterations of this study included Hispanic students. However, as their educational experiences vary by culture, immigration status, and language (the latter two generally not of issue for most black or white students), their results will be explored in a separate study.
5. Analyses were also conducted without weighting the data, as unweighted regressions can be preferred in certain regressions when the weights are solely a function of the independent variables, such as race in this case (ELS oversampled blacks), and can provide more efficient estimates and more reliable standard errors (Winship and Radbill 1994). Results were not notably different.
6. In analyses not shown, I also included whether the student contacted family sources about college, and whether they consulted books or the Internet about college. Results were similar to those found for contacting school sources and were thus removed from the study for brevity.
7. While in today's college application landscape, students can easily apply to multiple colleges through the Common Application, in 2004–2005, it was much less prevalent in higher education. Compared with the 767 colleges listed on the Common Application website as of this writing (The Common Application 2018), only 239 had joined by the end of 2004 when these students were applying (Hoover 2013a), with some public universities only joining in 2001 (Hoover 2013b).
8. Early versions of this study included whether students participated in college preparation programs. However, students were asked about participation in college preparation programs only in sophomore year when some students are not yet thinking about college, and thus participation rates were low. Students were asked a question in senior year regarding college programs for disadvantaged students such as "Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Gear Up." These programs are geared toward low-income students who are disproportionately black. Although I did find that black participation rates in these programs were significantly higher than white participation, I excluded them from the final analyses because of this one-sided nature.

9. A helpful reviewer suggested there may be concern that the behavioral variables are indistinguishable and redundant with each other. One way this could harm these analyses is if the covariates suggest multicollinearity. To check for this, I examine the tolerance of each independent variable using the user-written command c*ollin* in Stata. I find that the tolerance level for all the covariates is under Allison's (1998) suggestion of 0.40, signifying multicollinearity is not a problem for establishing point estimates of behaviors, or more importantly, racial differences in engaging in behaviors and college attendance.
10. One reader suggested that black students are more likely to drop out of high school than are white students, so those that stay in high school are exceptional and are driving the results. However, I left dropouts in the sample, only dropping them if they were missing on the dependent variables or high school graduation.
11. There may be concern that the behaviors are redundant with college attendance itself. This may especially be true of two of the behaviors: number of college applications and type of highest college application. In results not shown, I run the final model not only with both variables but also dropping one or the other, and find that racial differences in college attendance are essentially the same across the three specifications.

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