

Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College

reviewed by James C. Hearn — 1997

Title: Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College

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Over the past two decades, many analysts have explored the various influences on high-school graduates' college enrollment behaviors.

Theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the topic have become almost standardized. Most new studies of the topic are either replications of earlier analyses or minor variations on earlier themes. Levine and Nidiffer's *Beating the Odds* brings us something a little different, however. Instead of another multivariate, quantitative exploration of educational attainment patterns in nationally representative survey data for thousands of students, Levine and Nidiffer present us with an interpretive analysis based on interviews with a very small group of respondents. Instead of beginning with a framework based in the familiar status attainment, cultural capital, or human capital theories, these authors construct their interpretations inductively, as they learn from the voices of their respondents. Instead of investigating what separates college attenders from those who choose other options, Levine and Nidiffer focus only on those who actually enter postsecondary institutions. Finally, instead of examining an economically diverse pool of respondents, these authors consider only those they term "the poor": students from backgrounds so impoverished that opportunities for college attendance are severely limited. These are bold choices. Individually and as a whole, they carry significant analytic risks. For those accustomed to other approaches to the topic, however, the book provides some special pleasures.

The book has three parts. The first, "Weighing the Odds," profiles the depressingly familiar odds against students, escaping from poverty and entering postsecondary education. The second, "Beating the Odds," presents the stories of twenty-four students who managed to overcome socioeconomic constraints and attend college. Here, the authors provide detailed excerpts from individual interviews with students. The final section, "Improving the Odds," aims to translate the findings from the two preceding sections into effective prescriptions for policy. The authors stress that student financial aid and special colleges for the disadvantaged (e.g., institutions like Berea College in Kentucky as well as many urban community colleges) are essential elements in achieving equal educational opportunity at the postsecondary level, but argue that these approaches have made little headway in improving attendance rates nationally among students from lower-income families. Instead, Levine and Nidiffer argue for earlier interventions lasting over a longer period, for more comprehensive attention to students' family members and schools, and for the close involvement of individual mentors in students' lives.

As noted above (and as noted by the authors themselves in several places in the text), the research design for the analysis underlying this book is vulnerable to criticism. Methodological purists put little faith in lessons learned from "success stories" because one can always question the validity of those inferences: The absence of "failures" in the sample precludes any real assurance regarding causation. Lacking a parallel sample of unsuccessful individuals, we not only have to discern which characteristics the successes have in common but also how uncommon those characteristics are among the larger population. *Beating the Odds* suggests that mentors are the common factor making a major difference in students' attendance patterns, but we are provided no information on the existence or characteristics of mentors of poor students who did not go on to college. Another vulnerability of the book is its very small, rather unrepresentative sample of twenty-four people. Conclusions are drawn regarding college-going in general on the basis of interviews with twelve youthful students attending an elite university and twelve mainly older students attending a community college. A further weakness of the study lies in its relative inattention to theoretically grounded empirical studies of educational attainment, particularly those in the economic and sociological traditions.

These complaints might be interpreted as an adequate case against research of the kind presented in this volume. Yet the traditional alternative, survey-based causally focused analyses of college attendance patterns, presents problems as well. Such studies tend to be particularly limited by an absence of depth: A question on which comparable data are available for large samples is likely to be one lacking any real richness or openness. *Beating the Odds* has those qualities in abundance. What we lose in methodological rigor we gain in a sense of the unfolding of real human stories laden with ambiguity, contingency, and surprise. What is more, those stories hold together well for the reader familiar with the existing, more quantitatively grounded literature: There is plenty here that meshes with the findings of earlier studies. Confidence in the authors' new findings, inferences, and recommendations therefore does not seem unreasonable.

Indeed, it is hard to mount a very pointed methodological critique in the face of the authors' engaging, sensible, and often impassioned writing. Of special note is the touching preface in which Levine and Nidiffer describe their own experiences as the first members of their families to attend college. In the end, theirs is a useful contribution to the literature. As the authors correctly observe, the gap between the college attendance rates of the rich and the poor has grown since the 1970s, and not solely

because of constraints on student-aid funding. This book provides some new views on the problem and calls cogently for new resolve in addressing it.

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