

## Summary

This policy brief shows that inequalities in college enrollment start early in the process. Race- and income-based gaps in 10 key steps to enrollment (e.g., academic qualifications and SAT or ACT taking) lead to inequitable outcomes. This work has three key take-aways. First, gaps calculated using the *V*-statistic method differ from gaps calculated using the traditional binary approach, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the size of gaps. Second, gaps in academic qualifications are large and similar in size to gaps in college application, admission, and enrollment. Finally, gaps in academic qualifications and taking the SAT or ACT are the strongest predictors of gaps in the selectivity of eventual enrollment. Policymakers and practitioners interested in closing college enrollment gaps ought to identify interventions that specifically aim to address gaps early in the process.

## Author Biographies

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## Race and Income Gaps in Academic Qualifications and SAT/ACT Taking Shape Inequalities in College Enrollment

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Students must first complete a number of steps in order to enroll in college. Equity-minded policymakers may be interested in knowing how gaps in the “pathway to college” feed into enrollment inequalities. This information can be important for pinpointing which steps in the process are worth targeting in order to create more equitable outcomes. Common methods for establishing gaps in the college enrollment process (e.g., black-white gap), however, are insufficient to explain how gaps in these steps lead to inequitable outcomes.

### Steps in College Enrollment

- 9th Grade Expectations
- 11th Grade Expectations
- Academic Qualifications
- College Search Activities
- Took the SAT or ACT
- Selectivity of College Application
- Selectivity of College Admission
- Filed FAFSA Application
- High School Graduation
- Selectivity of College Enrollment

### Methodology Matters

Studies on the pathway to college typically measure differences between groups in a binary fashion. For example, they may calculate the black-white gap in college enrollment by asking—yes or no—whether a student has enrolled in college. However, this ignores nuances in the enrollment process like whether students attend 2- or 4-year institutions or the selectivity of the universities those students enroll in. Methods like the *V*-statistic, however, allow researchers to examine the pathway to college sensitive to these sorts of qualitative differences. We used this method to examine race- and income-based gaps in the pathway to college and to determine how gaps in early steps feed into gaps in later steps. We suggest that these gaps lead to unequal enrollment outcomes for non-white and lower-income students.

An illustration of how different measures lead to different conclusions about gaps in the pathway to college is available below. The second column presents the gap if educational expectations between groups are binary—whether a student plans to earn a bachelor’s degree or a higher degree. With this definition, the black-white gap is -4 percentage points, which means that black students are less likely to expect a B.A. than white students. However, if we use the more nuanced *V*-statistic, the pattern changes: black students have a small advantage in educational expectations (0.02 standard deviations) over white students. Although white students expect a B.A. at a higher rate than black students, when considering the full range of education students expect to attain, black students aim slightly higher than white students.

## Source

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## Further Reading

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## Race Based Gaps in Educational Expectations

Comparison	Binary gap (%)	V-statistic gap (SD)
Black-white	-4	0.02
Hispanic-white	-12	-0.26
Asian-white	4	0.24

Binary and V-statistic gaps often follow similar patterns. However, they are also not perfectly correlated, as the black-white example shows.

The V-statistic enables us to thoroughly examine qualitative features of the pathway to college by moving away from the simple yes-no binary. Using this measure, we can calculate gaps in the steps to college enrollment across steps, groups, and states. Results show gaps in the selectivity of enrollment are largest, followed by gaps in academic qualifications, the selectivity of where students are admitted, and the selectivity of where students apply. However, gaps in academic qualifications are similar to gaps in application, admission, and enrollment, suggesting test scores, grades, and courses taken in high school are key to understanding inequalities in later postsecondary outcomes.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

Reducing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stratification in higher education access requires that policymakers pay attention to early steps in the pathway to college, specifically gaps in academic qualifications and taking the SAT or ACT. College enrollment is a long, drawn out process. Policies and interventions that address early steps in the postsecondary pathway and strive to achieve equity through group-specific targeting may have long-term effects, reducing gaps in later steps and eventual enrollment.

1. *State and federal policymakers should consider policies that address inequalities in academic qualifications and taking the SAT/ACT.*

Many state and federal policies try to increase college enrollment by providing financial aid or guaranteeing admission to students who graduate in the top percentiles of their high school class. These policies address steps relatively late in the college enrollment process. Other policies focus on earlier steps in the postsecondary pathway like high school course-taking requirements or mandating SAT or ACT testing for all students. These policies can be inexpensive (Bettinger et al. 2012; Klasik 2013; Pallais 2015) and may have long-lasting effects by raising educational expectations and academic preparation or putting college-bound students on more equal footing.

2. *Policymakers should consider targeted interventions and interventions with disproportionate effects for marginalized populations.*

State and federal policies designed to increase the rigor of high school coursework or SAT or ACT taking may increase college preparation or enrollment at the aggregate level (Hurwitz et al. 2014; Hyman 2017; Klasik 2013) but do little to reduce gaps between privileged and marginalized populations. If a policy's positive effect is driven by increasing achievement or attainment among society's most advantaged, gaps may be exacerbated (Dynarski 2000). Raising the bar for everyone is not sufficient for educational equity—policymakers must instead find ways to level the playing field. This may entail designing interventions that target racial and ethnic minorities and students from low-income families or identifying universal interventions that demonstrate disproportionately positive effects for these groups.