Choice Is Not Always Good:
Reducing the Role of Informational Inequality in Producing and Legitimating Higher Education Inequality

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Abstract

This paper examines how the process of making higher education choices in the United States—whether to enter higher education, attend a particular college, or follow a particular path through college—produces and legitimates social inequality. The paper's central thesis is that a societal regime of many choices—while serving individual freedom and producing social well-being—*produces* societal inequality in a way that obscures that process of social reproduction for virtually all who participate in that choice regime. Students often make choices that do not serve their interests as well as they might wish, particularly if students are faced with many choices and do not have adequate information. The incidence of those suboptimal choices is not random but is socially stratified. It is higher for less advantaged people, and unequal provision of good information plays a crucial role in producing those socially stratified suboptimal choices. Secondly, the provision of many choices *legitimates* social inequality. Seemingly offered many choices in life, both the fortunate and unfortunate in society come to feel that much of the inequality they experience is due to their own actions and therefore is legitimate. The paper concludes by offering various prescriptions for reducing the socially stratifying impacts and ideological consequences of a high-choice regime. It lays out how we could more equally distribute high-quality information, nudge students toward better choice making, reduce the costs to students of suboptimal choices, and mitigate blaming self and others by demystifying the nature of choice. In making these arguments, this paper draws on the research literature in sociology of education, behavioral economics, cognitive psychology, and social psychology of inequality.

Key words: higher education choice, educational inequality, informational inequality, social reproduction, behavioral economics, cognitive psychology, social psychology of inequality

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1. Introduction

Choice is a key part of the culture of the United States. Americans believe deeply in the personal and social usefulness of being able to make many choices (Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Savani & Rattan, 2012; Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011). This shows up in many ways. We can note how frequently people talk about "freedom of choice" or advertisers use it as a theme, as in the slogans "you choose" or "have it your way" (Markus & Schwartz, 2010).

The American emphasis on choice is understandable because choice can drive social efficiency and foster personal expression and happiness. The provision of individual choice allows social arrangements to better take into account the variety of interests in a diverse population. Lack of choice often leaves us unable to pursue our particular "design for living" and makes us less happy and motivated (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000, 2002; Markus & Schwartz, 2010). Choice is an important factor (along with competence and good relationships with others) in building both intrinsic and deeply internalized extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).[1]

Because of the positive impacts of choice, all sorts of efforts have been made to increase how much choice people exercise. For example, in U. S. education, sustained efforts have been made to increase school and college choice, whether by creating many different kinds of schools and colleges, offering a great array of majors and degree programs, allowing many different paths through higher education, and devising many different forms of student financial aid (see Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Dill, 2007; Dynarski, Page, & Scott-Clayton, 2022; Fox & Buchanan, 2017; Hunt, Callender, & Parry, 2017; Riley, 2021; Roksa & Robinson, 2016). Moreover, over the last fifty years, the federal government, private organizations, and newspapers and magazines have moved to "empower" students as educational "consumers" by shifting the recipients of financial aid from colleges to students and by making efforts to create college scorecards and league tables to inform student choice (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Diamond et

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[1] Intrinsic motivation is the pursuit of an activity for the inherent satisfaction the activity itself provides. Deeply internalized extrinsic motivation involves the pursuit of an activity for some separable outcome, where that outcome has come to be valued by the person pursuing of the activity and is not due just to external rewards and sanctions or feelings of shame or guilt (Ryan & Deci, 2000, pp. 71–73).

al., 2014; Dill, 2007; Dougherty, 2013; Espeland & Sauder, 2017; Kelchen, 2016; Kelly & Schneider, 2011).

These efforts have often been undertaken under the banner of the various strands of neoliberalism, whether new public management, performance management in government, or principal-agent theory. Although these strands differ, they converge on the idea that public services can be made more efficient and effective if they are made more subject to market forces by making their clients—such as students—act more like consumers and by offering these new consumers more choices among those public services (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Olssen & Peters, 2005).[2]

However, choice also has a darker side (Botti & Iyengar, 2006; Schwartz, 2014) that I wish to explore in this paper. As I will argue, the provision of large amounts of choice reproduces social inequality, and it does so in two crucial ways. First, the provision of many choices *produces* social inequality. People often make choices that do not serve their interests as well as they might wish, particularly if they are faced with many choices and do not have adequate information. Mistaken choices might not produce social inequality but for the fact that the incidence of those suboptimal choices is not random but is socially stratified. It is higher for less advantaged people than it is for more advantaged people, with societal factors—such as unequal access to information—playing a crucial role in producing those suboptimal choices. Second, the provision of many choices *legitimates* social inequality. The more one thinks in terms of choices, the more one tends to blame the unfortunate for their circumstances. Seemingly offered many choices in life, both the fortunate and unfortunate in society come to feel that the outcomes they experience, for good or ill, are due to their own actions and therefore are legitimate. The end result is that a societal regime of many choices—particularly when high-quality information is not widely and equally distributed—reproduces societal inequality in a way that obscures that process for both the winners and losers in that high-choice regime.

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[2] For critical analyses of neoliberalism, see Ball (2012), Brown (2013), Dougherty & Natow (2020), Harvey (2005), Olssen & Peters (2005), and Slaughter & Rhoades (2004).

To make these arguments, I draw on a variety of social science literatures including sociology of education, behavioral economics, and cognitive and social psychology. The paper focuses on one particularly important realm of choice: education decisions pertaining to whether to enter higher education, which college to attend, what major to choose, and what path to take through college. The reason for focusing on choice making in higher education is that it has come to play a central role in the transmission and legitimation of social inequality (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Brown, 1995; Collins, 1979; Karen & Dougherty, 2005; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005).

2. Choice Produces Inequality: The Case of Higher Education

American higher education offers students a bewildering variety of choices of institutions, programs of study, and means of attending college. The great benefit is that students are offered the opportunity to find a college, major, and attendance modality that suits them. But this proliferation of choices also opens up multiple opportunities to make suboptimal choices, particularly if students have imperfect information on the benefits, costs, and best means of making those choices.

2.1 Types of Choices and Their Benefits and Costs

I will focus here on three particular choices: choice of college, choice of major and program of study, and choice of attendance modality (for example, part-time versus full-time). In each case, I will examine the range of choices, who makes them, and what are the benefits and costs of those different choices.

Choice of college. The U.S. system of higher education is unusual in its size and variety. In 2020-2021, the U.S. boasted 3,931 degree-granting and 1,985 non-degree-granting postsecondary institutions (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2021, Tables 317.10, 317.30). These institutions vary enormously in size, control (public and private), degree level (two-year or four-year), resources, and quality (Brint, 2018; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013; Hunt, Callender, & Parry, 2017).

Which college one chooses matters. The better the match between a student's academic ability and preference for certain college characteristics and the characteristics

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of the college attended, the greater the likelihood of graduation (Howell, Pender, & Kumar, 2016; Rodriguez & Martell, 2016). For example, baccalaureate aspirants who attend community colleges first are more likely to drop out than comparable students first entering four-year colleges and are 15–20% less likely, all other things being equal, to secure a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, 1994; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; and Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). More generally, attending a more selective college is associated with greater likelihood of graduating from college and securing a well-paying job, even after controlling for student characteristics on entry to higher education (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Baker, Klasik, & Reardon, 2018; Black & Smith, 2004; Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2020; Cohodes & Goodman, 2012; Hoekstra, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Smith, Pender, Howell, & Hurwitz, 2012; however, see Dale & Krueger, 2002).

Which students tend to attend colleges that are less selective, have higher dropout rates, and lower income payoffs is not randomly distributed. It is less advantaged students who tend to choose those colleges (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Baker, Klasik, & Reardon, 2018; Karen, 2002). This shows up strikingly in data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009. Among ninth graders in 2009 who entered college by February 2016, only 26% of those who had parents who had a baccalaureate degree or higher entered two-year colleges, but the figure for those with parents who had a high school diploma or less was 56%. Similarly, with regard to race and ethnicity, while 32% of Asian and 35% of White college entrants chose two-year colleges, the figures for Black and Hispanic college entrants were 41% and 59% (Radford, Fritch, Leu, & Duprey, 2018).

Choice of major and programs of study. American higher education also spreads before its students a cornucopia of majors and programs of study. Many subjects that would not even be considered postsecondary material in many countries are, in the United States, offered by colleges (Bailey et al., 2015; Brint, 2002, 2018). These include not just courses but entire programs in, say, ornamental horticulture or event planning or music production.

This inclusiveness has brought great benefits in providing students of varying interests and backgrounds with multiple points of entry into higher education. For example, students who are interested in vocational and technical programs can easily find

a higher education major that will address their interest. But this inclusiveness also carries dangers in that many majors and degree programs have high dropout rates and low job payoffs, and this cannot be easily decoded by students and their parents from the often jazzy titles and glossy publicity of many of these majors (Altonji, Arcidiacono, & Maurel, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 507; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015).

The students more likely to choose majors and programs with poorer retention rates and job payoffs tend to come from less advantaged backgrounds. For example, women and students of color are badly underrepresented in higher paying STEM fields and overrepresented in lesser paying humanities and social science fields (Baker & Orona, 2020; Chamberlain & Jayaraman, 2017; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Mullen & Baker, 2015; however, see Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009, pp. 58–65). And in community colleges, many students choose the A.A. in liberal arts and sciences, which is not aligned with a four-year degree in any particular field and has little labor market value (Fink & Jenkins, 2020).

Patterns of attendance. American higher education is also distinctive in offering students many different modalities of attending college. They can attend full-time or part-time, continuously or discontinuously, face to face or online, one college or multiple colleges. This wealth of attendance options has brought great benefits, making it easier to attend college for students who are older, have children, can take classes only at night, or are place bound (Chen, 2007, pp. iv, 7; see also Averill et al., 2019).

But again there is a cost. Which pattern of attendance students choose has an impact on their success. Those choosing to attend part-time and discontinuously or attend multiple institutions are less likely to complete college (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera, Burkum, LaNasa, & Bibo, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Peter & Cataldi, 2005). Moreover, controlling for student characteristics, students who take courses online have higher dropout rates and tend to learn less than comparable students receiving face-to-face instruction (Bell & Federman, 2013; Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, & Taylor, 2017; Figlio, Rush, & Yin, 2013; Hart, Friedmann, & Hill, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

And as before, we find that the less beneficial modes of attendance are not randomly distributed. They tend to be chosen more often by those less advantaged in

class, race/ethnicity, and gender (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Cabrera et al., 2012; Chen, 2007, pp. iv, 7; Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

2.2 Causes of Suboptimal Choices

Many different factors conspire to produce suboptimal choices in higher education. Certainly, differences in academic preparation and educational expectations play a major role in producing socially stratified choices of college and major (An, 2010; Bailey, Jenkins, Belfield, & Kopko, 2016; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Karen, 2002; Wang, 2013; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015). However, there is also abundant evidence that academic preparation and educational expectations only partially explain why people differ in the higher education choices that they do. For example, many academically prepared students do not choose colleges as selective as they are capable of entering (Bowen et al., 2009; Deutschlander, 2017; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). Using national data, Jonathan Smith and colleagues estimated that 24% of U.S. college entrants *enroll* at a college that is less selective than what they are capable of entering, based on their academic record and how it compared to that of the students who did enroll in those colleges (Smith et al., 2013, pp. 248, 253–254). Meanwhile, Roksa and Deutschlander estimate that 18% of students undermatch in their *applications*, with this undermatching being more common for students who are working-class or of color (Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018, pp. 15–16). Similar findings have been made about academic undermatching in majors, with Black and Hispanic students being underrepresented in STEM fields in comparison with students with Asian and White students with similar test scores and parental socioeconomic status (Porter & Umbach, 2006). The consequence of this undermatching is that such students more often drop out of college and get lower occupational and income returns than they might have otherwise (Cohodes & Goodman, 2014; Hoekstra, 2009; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2013).

Another factor that has a great impact on higher education choices is differences in family economic resources (including financial aid) (Bailey et al., 2016; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Bowen, Kurzweil, Tobin & Pichler, 2005; Callender & Melis, 2022; Devine, 2004; George-Jackson & Gast, 2014; Goldthorpe, 1996; Grodsky & Jackson,

2009; Karen, 2002; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006; Sewell & Hauser, 1975; see also Callender & Melis, 2022; Connor, 2001; Dickinson, 2019). Differences in economic resources have a great direct impact on higher education choices by affecting, for example, ability to pay high tuitions at selective colleges, as well as academic preparation and educational expectations.

While acknowledging the above, I wish to focus here on the impact of unequal access to high-quality information on higher education choices because of its relevance to both the production and legitimation of inequality. Inequality in information access helps *produce* higher educational choices that are quite different across class and racial lines (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Castleman, Schwartz, & Baum, 2015; Deutschlander, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Hossler et al., 1999; Hutchings, 2003; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lareau, 2015; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017; Perna, 2013; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Reay et al., 2005; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Moreover, informational inequality helps l*egitimate* this stratification of educational choices because that informational inequality is less obvious than are differences in economic resources and academic preparation. As I will show below, this allows suboptimal college choices to more readily appear as a result of personal capacity or incapacity rather than of societally produced differences in resources.

As I am developing it here, the concept of informational inequality and its role in the reproduction of inequality draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," that is, knowledge and cultural traits that confer an advantage in education and other processes that involve selection and social stratification. The concept of cultural capital concept can take a number of different forms, but I am emphasizing here that aspect that pertains to knowledge of what traits, performances, and resources are valued in particular settings (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 29).

Key types of information. To make good college choices, students need a lot of high-quality information. For example, the following kinds of information are important to picking colleges, majors, and modes of attendance that will confer the greatest advantage:

The actual characteristics, academic and social demands, and social climates of different colleges, especially ones that are selective and can provide a greater career

boost (Conley, 2007; Deutschlander, 2017; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lareau & Cox, 2011; Martinez-Wenzl & Gándara, 2015; McDonough, 1997; Mullen, 2010; Myers & Myers, 2012; Smith et al., 2012; see also Ball et al., 2002; Davies, 2012; Dickinson, 2019; Hutchings, 2003; Reay et al., 2005; Whitty, Hayton, & Tang, 2015). Not correctly knowing what these characteristics, academic and social demands, and social climates are can negatively affect students in a number of ways. Students who see a greater gap than actually exists between their social background and academic preparation and the social and academic demands of selective institutions may choose to not apply to such institutions, even though they might well succeed there (Mullen, 2010; Reay et al., 2005; Riley, 2021). At the same time, if students overestimate how well they are prepared academically, they may fail to do well at colleges. Many students come into college with a C grade point average from high school, wrongly believing it is sufficient to do college-level work, and then fail to graduate from college (Rosenbaum, 2001, pp. 65–74). One cause of this failure is that students coming in with lower grades are more subject to being thrust into remedial education and failing to advance beyond it (Bailey et al., 2015, pp. 119–129; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010, pp. 160–163). Finally, if less advantaged students do not know the racial, class, and gender climates of particular colleges, they may choose institutions that fail to give them a sense of belonging and make it more likely they will drop out (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Stephens, Fryberg, Marcus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

The real cost of higher education, especially selective colleges: that is, the net price of college after financial aid is taken into consideration (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Grodsky & Jones, 2007 Hahn & Price, 2008; Heller, 2013; Hossler et al., 1999; Hu & Hossler, 2000; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lareau, 2015; Luna de la Rosa, 2006; Ness & Tucker, 2008; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017; O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010; Roderick et al., 2011; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Smith et al., 2012; see also Averill et al., 2019; Callender & Melis, 2022; Connor, 2001; Dickinson, 2019). Misperceptions that higher education is unaffordable (because of low family income and financial aid being perceived as unavailable or inadequate) dissuade many disadvantaged students from applying to colleges, especially selective colleges, and securing the academic preparation and extracurricular involvements that make admission more likely (Kirst & Venezia,

2004; Luna de la Rosa, 2006; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2010; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; St. John, Musoba, Simmons, Chung, Schmit, & Peng, 2004).

The mechanics of the college application system, including the benefits of applying for early decision and applying to multiple colleges as a means of increasing college access in general and access to more selective colleges in particular (Avery & Kane, 2004; Bowen, Kurtzweil, Tobin, & Pichler, 2005; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Karabel, 2005; Karen, 2002; Lareau & Cox, 2011; McDonough, 2004; Sacks, 2007; Smith et al., 2012). Less advantaged students are less aware of or have a poorer understanding of many key elements of the college application process. One result is that they apply much less often for early admissions decision, which confers a significant admission advantage at selective colleges (Bloom, 2007; Sacks, 2007, pp. 148–151).

What kinds of student preparation and qualities are sought by admissions officers at more selective colleges. Students and their parents—especially those from less advantaged backgrounds—often are unaware of what kinds of high school courses and grades colleges look for, what ACT and SAT scores are regarded as competitive, and what kinds of extracurricular activities burnish a college application (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Deutschlander, 2017; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lareau, 2015; Lareau & Cox, 2011; Myers & Myers, 2012; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011; Stevens, 2007; Vargas, 2004; see also Ball et al., 2002; Leathwood & Hutchings, 2003; Smith, Joslin, & Jameson, 2015).

The characteristics of different majors, especially their occupational and income returns and which ones may be a good match academically and socio-culturally for students (Altonji et al., 2016; Carnevale, Strohl, Melton, 2011; Chamberlain & Jayaraman, 2017; Montmarquette, Cannings, & Mahseredjian, 2002; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015; see also Dickinson 2019). For example, students often misestimate the income returns to different fields; this misestimation is more common among less advantaged students, and a significant number of students would have chosen differently had they had the correct information (Altonji et al., 2016, pp. 384–385). And if students misperceive the social climate of different majors, they may pick ones that have a hostile climate for women or students of color, increasing the probability that they

will leave the major and even the college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, pp. 419–420, 424–425).

       The relative benefits and costs of different forms of attendance and instruction, e.g., full-time versus part-time, continuously versus discontinuously, in-person versus. online. While there are benefits to nontraditional forms of attendance and instruction, all other things being equal, students choosing to attend part-time and discontinuously, enroll in multiple institutions, and take courses online are less likely to complete college (Adelman, 1999; Bell & Federman, 2013; Bettinger et al, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2012; Figlio, Rush, & Yin, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hart, Friedmann, & Hill, 2018; Peter & Cataldi, 2005; Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Weiss, Bloom, & Singh, 2022).

       What kinds of courses at community colleges will maximize effective and efficient transfer to universities. Community college students often are poorly informed about what courses are transferable and which ones are not, resulting in not being able to enter the four-year college majors or campuses that they are aiming for or having to take additional courses in the upper division to make up for course credits that were not accepted by the four-year colleges (Bailey et al., 2015, pp. 27–31; Dougherty, 1994; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Schudde, Jabbar, Epstein, & Yucel, 2021; Schudde, Jabbar, & Hartman, 2021).

       Information inequality and its causes. But if information is powerful, it is also socially stratified. Less advantaged students and parents secure less information and poorer information about colleges, majors, and attendance modalities than do more advantaged students (Deutschlander, 2017; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003; Kelly & Schneider, 2011; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lareau, 2015; Lareau & Cox, 2011; Lavecchia, Liu, & Oreopoulos, 2014; Luna de la Rosa, 2006; McDonough, 1997, 2005a, 2005b; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum, 2017; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Velez & Horn, 2018; see also Ball et al., 2002; Hutchings, 2003).

       A leading example of social stratification in information involves college tuition (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017; Velez & Horn, 2018). For example, in the High School Longitudinal Survey of ninth graders nationwide in 2009, 45% of those in the bottom

fifth in socioeconomic status overestimated tuition at a four-year public college in their state by at least a quarter, while the comparable percentage also badly misestimating tuition among those in the top fifth in family socioeconomic status was only 21%. Similarly, the proportion significantly overestimating tuition was 25% and 27% for Asian and White ninth graders but 46% and 37% for their Black and Hispanic counterparts (Velez & Horn, 2018, pp. 5–7).

These differences in amount and quality of information about higher education certainly reflect the varying capacities (tied to education and income) and efforts of parents and students of different classes and races to acquire college information. Lower SES and of color parents are less able to provide good information to their children because they less often have gone to college, have fewer college-educated friends and relatives, and have less ability to pay for private college counselors than do high SES and White parents (Hossler et al., 1999; Lareau, 2015; McDonough, 1997, 2005a, 2005b).

However, institutional discrimination in the allocation of resources also plays a crucial role. Student access to information is powerfully shaped by unequal access to school-provided counseling and by the varying attitudes of counselors to students of different backgrounds.

Inadequate counseling provision. Working-class and minority students in the United States tend to have less access to college counselors while in high school than do more advantaged students (College Board, 2011; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 1997, 2005a; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Liet, 2008). For example, a 2011 survey of U.S. high school counselors by the College Board found that in schools where 75% or more of the students were poor (that is, receiving free or reduced-price school lunch), the average student-to-counselor ratio was 427 to 1, but in schools where 24% or fewer students were on free or reduced school lunch, the comparable figure was 352 to 1. Furthermore, in schools where 75% or more of the students were of minority background, the average student-to-counselor ratio was 429 to 1, but in schools with a minority percentage of 24% or less the comparable figure was 359 to 1 (College Board, 2011, pp. 49–50).

Similar counselor understaffing is found in higher education, particularly in the case of community colleges. They often have relatively few full-time counselors.

Moreover, because so many faculty are part-timers, there is also a dearth of well-informed full-time faculty to provide counseling (Grubb, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, pp. 118–125). The 2011 Survey of Academic Advising by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) found that the median ratio of undergraduate students to full-time professional advisors was 441 to 1 in community colleges but 260 to 1 in public four-year colleges (Carlstrom & Miller, 2013, chap. 6, Table 6.28; see also Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013, p. 104).

Counselor understaffing has many consequences. Counselors in understaffed high schools and colleges tend to start the counseling process later, spend less one-on-one time with students, reach out less often to students and rely more on them initiating personal contact, and provide less information on colleges, particularly more selective colleges (Grubb, 2006; Hill, 2008; Holland, 2015; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Sacks, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

The social class and racial gap in counseling resources is consequential because there is considerable evidence that—net of other influences such as parental education and student academic achievement—degree of interaction with counselors does have a significant impact on how much information high school students acquire and what their subsequent college choices are (Belasco, 2013; Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Hill, 2008; Hurwitz & Howell, 2015; Perna, 2000; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).[3] Moreover, this counselor impact appears to be larger for working-class students and students of color than for their more advantaged counterparts (Belasco, 2013; Hill, 2008; Lareau & Cox, 2011; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013; but see Avery, Castleman, Hurwitz, Long, & Page, 2021; Perna, 2000; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

Bias in counseling. Besides unequal access to counselors, there is also the issue of how counselors approach students differing in social class, race, and gender. There is evidence that high school counselors tend to more often push students toward community colleges if the students are of lower income background (Linnehan, Weer, & Stonely,

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[3] This counselor impact remains significant even after controlling for other sources of information such as parents, teachers, friends, college publications and websites, etc. (Robinson & Roksa, 2016, pp. 860–861).

2011; McDonough, 1997). This overt bias is quite troubling but so are the less overt forms. Counselors tend to focus on students who are seen as more likely to benefit from college advising. In many high schools, college counseling is more available to students in the AP, honors, and college prep tracks than in other tracks, which works to the benefit of more class and race advantaged students who are disproportionately present in these tracks (Perna et al., 2008, p. 134). Moreover, if high schools are understaffed, counselors tend to ration their time by making it students' responsibility to approach them for personal (as versus group) counseling. This tends to disadvantage working-class students and students of color who have less often been brought up with the expectation or habitus that school personnel are there to serve students and therefore will welcome being approached (Holland, 2019, chap. 4; Perna et al., 2008). This hidden bias is exacerbated if high school counselors are being bombarded with requests for personal meetings from advantaged students and parents, who are particularly concerned about access to selective colleges and feel entitled to demand the assistance of school counselors (Holland, 2019, pp. 72, 142–143; Lareau & Calarco, 2012; Lareau & Cox, 2011; Lewis-McCoy, 2014, chap. 4).

3. Choice Legitimates Inequality

Student choices made in a context of unequal information do not just produce class, race, and other inequality. They also legitimate that inequality in two ways. The availability of many choices affects how people judge their own social situation, with those who encounter misfortune often blaming themselves as having made bad choices. And choice proliferation affects how we judge others, leading the fortunate to see the unfortunate as authors of their own fate by making feckless choices.

3.1 Attitudes Toward One's Own Social Situation

American culture puts great emphasis on individualism and self-determination as values and on the importance of internal as versus external factors in personal success (Huber & Form, 1973; Iyengar & Lepper, 2002; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kusserow, 2012; Lamont, 2000; Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sahar, 2014;

Shepelak, 1987).[4] This American emphasis on self-determination makes it likely that those who experience disadvantage will perceive it as the product of their own choices and therefore blame themselves (Della Fave, 1986; Shepelak, 1987; Stephens, Fryberg, & Marcus, 2012; see also Ball, Maguire, Macrae, 2000, pp. 2–4, 145).[5] For example, in Jay MacLeod's pathbreaking study, *Ain't No Making It* (2009), two groups of working-class males—the Hallway Hangers who were mostly White and the Brothers who were Black—identified bad educational choices as a major reason their lives had not turned out as they had hoped (McClelland & Karen, 2009, pp. 447–448, 453). McLeod asked various Hallway Hangers who had fallen into the same low-level working-class jobs as their parents, "Would you do anything different if you could do it over again?" Their answers focused on their bad school choices:[6]

> Boo-Boo: Yeah, lots. Wouldn't screw up in school as bad
> as I did, wouldn't get high with friends as much.
>
> Chris: I dunno, man, wouldn't fuck up in school. I guess I
> shoulda learned to live with their shit….
>
> Frankie: Yeah, definitely. I wouldn't have fucked up as
> much…. Maybe I woulda tried going to school more….
>
> Steve: Yeah, I'd make sure I got more credits my freshman
> year. I only got five fucking credits, man….
>
> Jinx: I'd probably get more interested in school, but it's too
> late now. (McLeod, 2009, pp. 134–135)[7]

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[4] This emphasis on independence and individualism as versus interdependence is more pronounced among upper-class and middle-class than working-class Americans and among Whites than non-Whites (Kusserow, 2012; Lamont, 2000, chap. 1; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012; Markus & Schwartz, 2010).

[5] But there is important variation in this. Disadvantaged African Americans are less likely than similarly placed Whites to attribute their disadvantage to their own actions as versus external forces (Lamont, 2000; McLeod, 2009, chaps. 7, 10, 11; Shepelak, 1987).

[6] This is not to say that other factors were not mentioned as important, such as bad decisions about jobs or romantic partners. But educational choices were given great importance.

[7] The Brothers tended to be more optimistic than the Hallway Hangers, but as they entered middle age their optimism had greatly receded and extensive self-blame was also evident. However, the Brothers tended to be more aware than the Highway Hangers of how their life chances were affected by the decline of industrial jobs, the importance of social capital, and the continued strength of racism (McLeod, 2009, chaps. 7, 10, 11).

The importance given to bad educational choices emerges in other studies as well. This comes out particularly clearly in studies of regret.[8] A group of older adults (mean age 74) who had taken part in Lewis Terman's study of "geniuses" were asked what they would do differently if they could live their lives over again. Of the 740 surveyed, 345 mentioned regrets over actions taken or not taken over the course of their lives (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995, p. 382). Among these choices, those involving education stood out as among the most important. One third of the regrets stated involved higher education, and they often had a strong air of self-blame (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995, p. 382).[9] The regret statements about higher education included that the respondent should have attended college or gotten more education (6%), should have completed college or graduate school (11%), should have studied different subjects/majors (8%), and should have worked harder and not wasted college time (5%) (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995, p. 382).

Similar findings about the ideological impacts of invoking a choice framework emerge in a study of social attitudes among mothers who have left the labor force. When surveyed, women who endorse a choice framework in explaining why they left work are less likely to perceive discrimination and structural barriers to women's advancement in society (Stephens & Levine, 2011, pp. 1232–1233). In addition, in a social experiment involving a mixed-gender group of college undergraduates, those experimentally primed with a choice framework are significantly more likely to state that gender discrimination is nonexistent. An experimental group was primed to think about choice via viewing a poster in the background of the interview room saying "Choosing to Leave: Women's Experiences away from the Workforce," while the control group viewed a neutral poster saying "Women at Home: Experiences away from the Workforce." The study found that the experimental group was significantly more likely to state that gender discrimination is

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[8] A typical definition of regret is: "A comparison-based emotion of self-blame, experienced when people realize or imagine that their present situation would have been better had they decided differently in the past" (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007, p. 4). It should be noted that the issue is not just choice but also making comparisons. One can be happier with one's choices if one is not prone to compare them with the other choices one could have made or that others make. However, high-choice regimes tend to make us more prone to this invidious comparison.

[9] Similarly, a meta-analysis of nine studies found that education is the number one area of regret for Americans, accounting for 32% of all reported regrets (Roese and Summerville, 2005). Moreover, in a population survey (response rate of 20.5%) where respondents volunteered domains rather than being presented with them, education ranked third (along with careers) among expressed regrets, after romance and family (Morrison & Roese, 2011, pp. 578, 580).

nonexistent and that men and women are equal in American society (Stephens & Levine, 2011, p. 1234).

3.2 Attitudes Toward the Misfortunes of Others

The wide provision of choice affects not just attitudes to one's own social circumstances but also to those of others. Recent experiments in social psychology point to how—when subjects are primed to think in terms of choice—they are much more likely to blame disadvantaged people for their situation, believe the rich deserve what they have, and oppose policies to redistribute resources (Cappelen, Fest, Sorensen, & Tungodden, 2013; Savani & Rattan, 2012; Savani et al., 2011; Stephens & Levine, 2011).[10]

In various social experiments, an experimental group was primed to think in terms of choice by such means as being asked to list five choices they had made during different times of day (while the control group just listed five activities) or—watching a video of an actor engaging in series of everyday actions at home—being asked to indicate every time the actor seemingly made a choice. Meanwhile, the control group was just asked to indicate every time the actor touched an object for the first time (Savani & Rattan, 2012; Savani et al., 2011). When primed in these ways to think about choice, experimental-group subjects:

- more often blamed victims when shown vignettes of people in trouble, e.g., having a heart attack, losing a home because of collapse, experiencing a car accident, or suffering physical abuse (Savani et al., 2011, pp. 798–799);

- less often agreed that rich people have become rich due to favorable social conditions (Savani & Rattan, 2012, p. 799);

- more often believed that rich people should be able to keep their wealth (Savani & Rattan, 2012, p. 800);

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[10] It should be noted that these "blame the victim" attitudes have been long present in U.S. society (Espinoza, 2016; Ryan, 1971).

- were less disturbed when given 10 statistics about income inequality (Savani & Rattan, 2012, p. 798).[11]

4. Reducing the Contribution to Social Inequality of Inequality in Higher Education Information

In the following, I focus on equalizing the provision of high-quality information as a key means of reducing the role of higher education choice making in producing and legitimating social inequality. This does not mean that other initiatives—such as providing more and better financial aid, improving academic preparation, bolstering educational expectations, and maintaining affirmative action in admissions—are not important (see Dill, 2022; Dougherty & Callender, 2020; Dynarski, Page, & Scott-Clayton, 2022; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Hurd, 2009; Weiss, Bloom, & Singh, 2022). But those initiatives have already garnered wide publicity, and information provision has not been given as much attention as it deserves, particularly in light of its role not only in producing educational and social inequality but also in legitimating it.

To reduce the role of information inequality in reproducing and legitimating social inequality, we need to think of four strands of change. One strand involves providing high-quality information more equally through improved counseling and other forms of information provision during middle school and high school and higher education. Second, we need to think more structurally, by designing an "architecture of choice" that simplifies choice making and nudges students toward better choices (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz, 2013). However, because students will still make mistakes, we also need to reduce the impacts of suboptimal choices by creating the means to monitor student progress and intervene when students might or actually do go off course. Finally, and most sweepingly, we need to rethink the meaning of choice so that student choosers and their observers less often equate choice with individual self-expression and democracy and are more aware of how choice making is a socially

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[11] There is evidence that this tendency of choice situations to lead to blaming the unfortunate and being unwilling to redistribute resources to them is stronger for those who have right-wing political affiliations (Cappelen, Fest, Sorensen, & Tungodden, 2013, p. 7).

stratified and social stratifying process. Let us explore each of these points in turn.

4.1 More Equal Distribution of High-Quality Information

A range of studies provide powerful guidance on what we can do to provide more and better information on higher education to students of all backgrounds (Avery et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2015; Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest, 2017; Karp et al., 2021; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, 2017; see also Diamond et al., 2014; Reay et al., 2005). To begin, we know that more widely providing high-quality information—particularly to less advantaged students—can have a major impact on student choices. A large number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies have found that hiring more counselors, offering more information about college costs and financial aid, and providing assistance with filling out financial aid forms and college applications can significantly increase applications to colleges overall, applications to more selective colleges in particular, enrollment in higher education, and enrollment in more selective institutions (Avery, 2013; Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013; Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012; Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, & Owen, 2021; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Kelly & Schneider, 2011; Lavecchia et al., 2014; however, see Gurantz et al., 2020). Important as well is that the impact of better information appears to be greater on less advantaged students (Hoxby & Turner, 2013, p. 27; Kelly & Schneider, 2011, p. 14).

I focus below on improving counseling in high school and college because studies have repeatedly found that disadvantaged students are particularly reliant on school sources for information in the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1999; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1996). This is not to disregard the vital role of parents, siblings, and peers (Hossler et al., 1999, pp. 23–25, 40, 62–64; McDonough, 1997, chap. 5; Mullen, 2010, pp. 41–47, 64–65). In fact, as I will point out, improving school-based advising can also help parents, siblings, and peers become more effective advisors.

Improving college counseling in high school. To more equally provide high-quality information in high school, we need to increase the number of high school counselors (particularly in high schools serving less advantaged students), enlist other school personnel to supplement their efforts, expand supplementary outreach programs

(such as the federal TRIO programs and their state and private counterparts), and incentivize colleges to reach out more to high school students (Dynarski et al., 2022; Haskins & Rouse, 2013; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lavecchia et al., 2014; Perna et al., 2008; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). But as we will explore below, it is also important to better train counselors and to restructure the counseling process so that it starts earlier; is more proactive; works closely with parents, siblings, and peers; uses personal contact as well as social media; explicitly builds trust; and incentivizes students to seek counseling.

Increasing the number of college counselors of all types. Given the dearth of college counselors in many high schools, we need to begin by beefing up their numbers. Several studies have demonstrated the impact on higher education access and choice of increasing the number of counselors in American high schools (Belasco, 2013; Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014; Hurwitz & Howell, 2015). For example, in a regression discontinuity analysis, Hurwitz and Howell (2015) find that providing an additional high school counselor per school has a statistically significant association with the percentage of graduating seniors who attend four-year colleges in the year following high school graduation. In a typical high school, an additional high school counselor would be predicted to increase the number of students going to four-year college by 10% (Hurwitz & Howell, 2015). This increase in the number of counselors should be particularly focused on schools serving large numbers of working-class students and students of color, both because they are particularly underserved by counselors and they are more responsive to counseling (Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2011; Hill, 2008; Perna et al., 2008; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013).

But we should not just rely on high school counselors to carry the full load of college counseling. Their efforts should also be supplemented by greater use of supplementary outreach programs and enlisting teachers and staff in high schools (Kirst & Venezia, 2004, pp. 307, 309, 312; Knight & Marciano, 2013). Regarding supplementary outreach programs, it is true that evaluations of the main federal TRIO programs have found mixed results. However, programs such as Talent Search and GEAR Up demonstrate significant results in evaluations (Cahalan, 2013; Haskins & Rouse, 2013; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013; see also Domina, 2009). Moreover, experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations have found significant impacts on enrollment in four-

year colleges and at more selective institutions of other national programs such as College Possible, state programs such as California's Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Texas's GO Centers and Advise Texas, and private programs such as College Forward (Avery, 2013; Barnett et al., 2012; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Castleman, Deutschlander, & Lohman, 2020; Castleman & Goodman, 2018; Cunha, Miller, & Weisburst, 2017; Stephens & Rosenbaum, 2011). Other studies have found significant impacts of outreach programs on enrollments in community colleges and overall rates of college going (Schneider, 2015). Hence, these supplementary outreach programs should remain an important part of the effort to provide more and better information to less advantaged students, particularly those who are less likely to be able or willing to draw on traditional college advising staff in high schools.

Beyond increased deployment of school counselors and supplementary outreach programs, we should also enlist other school personnel, especially teachers but also athletic coaches and other nonteaching staff (Knight & Marciano, 2013; Perna et al., 2008). Studies of the college-going process for students of color find that teachers and athletic coaches play an important role in conveying college information and even helping fill out college and financial aid applications for many students of color (Knight-Diop, 2010; Knight & Marciano, 2013). To support the greater enlistment of teachers, it is important that teacher preservice and in-service education include more information about college admissions and financial aid and advice on how to embed that information in the high school curriculum (Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 306; McDonough, 2005b; Perna et al., 2008)

Finally, higher education institutions also have an important role to play in counseling. Higher education institutions do provide a huge amount of information to prospective applicants, but they still could do a much better job, particularly in communicating their real costs and financial aid policies (Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Yee, Brill, & Tadal, 2011). However, there are many examples of how higher education institutions can improve their efforts. Many universities and community colleges have established notable outreach programs to high schools in their region or state with the aim of informing students, their parents, and school personnel about what college is like and what it takes to succeed (Barnett et al., 2012; Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, & Owen,

2021; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2002; Swail & Perna, 2002; Yonezawa, Jones, & Mehan, 2002).[12] Moreover, many colleges, particularly community colleges, have established dual enrollment programs, allowing high school students to take college courses. When designed well, dual enrollment programs not only provide high school students with college credits but also help them learn more about how colleges work, the academic demands of college courses, and their own capacity to meet those demands, with the result that students more often attend college and graduate from it (Bailey et al., 2015; Edmunds, Unlu, Glennie, & Arshavsky, 2022; Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017; Karp, 2012; Kirst & Venezia, 2004, pp. 311, 314; U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). However, a difficulty with many dual enrollment programs is that they primarily serve White and upper-income students; hence, more effort needs to be made to spread the benefits of these programs to less privileged students (Fink et al., 2022).

But university outreach efforts can be quite useful even if they are not as formalized as college outreach and dual enrollment programs. Studies have found benefits to colleges reaching out to students with better information on financial aid, what college requirements are, and how well students are prepared to meet those requirements (by providing freshman placement results and remediation rates) (Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006; Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, & Owen, 2021; Howell, Kurlaender, & Grodsky, 2010; Ideas42, 2016; Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 312; Kurlaender, 2014; Meyer & Rosinger, 2019; but see Foote, Schulkind, & Shapiro, 2015). For example, the University of Michigan in fall 2015 and 2016 sent personalized mailings to high-achieving, low-income seniors in around 250 randomly chosen Michigan public high schools, their parents, and their school principals, encouraging students to apply to the university and pledging four years of free tuition and fees to those admitted. These students were then compared to similar students in another 250 or so Michigan high schools not receiving the same mailings. An evaluation found a significant difference in college going, with 68% of the experimental group applying to the University of

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[12] While greater college outreach is beneficial, it should also not be regarded uncritically. Many colleges sending out information and appearing at college fairs may have low rates of graduation and otherwise be a poor choice for students (see Holland, 2019, chap. 5).

Michigan and 27% enrolling, as versus 26% and 12% for the control group (Dynarski et al., 2021).

To incentivize these institutional outreach efforts, it would be useful if the United States were to require higher education institutions to issue Access Agreements similar to those required of English higher education institutions. In these agreements, English institutions state their tuition fee levels, specify the amount and kind of institutional financial aid to be offered, describe the outreach and retention activities that will be undertaken and how much will be spent on them, and set performance targets. The Access Agreements are reviewed by the government and made publicly available. They force institutions to make public commitments to outreach and allow monitoring of how well institutions are meeting those commitments (Bowes, Thomas, Peck, Moreton, & Birkin, 2013; Dougherty & Callender, 2020; United Kingdom Office for Fair Access, 2016a, 2016b).

Finally, at the state and national levels, the United States could make a more extensive effort to provide easily accessible and digestible data on institutional characteristics and outcomes (Dougherty & Callender, 2020; Holland, 2019, p. 144; Perna et al., 2008). The U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard (https://collegescorecard.ed.gov) does have useful information but it should be greatly expanded along the lines of the Unistats system in England (https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/tools-and-downloads/unistats).[13] Among other things, the Unistats system requires that each English higher education institution provide a portal to a national site that allows direct comparison among programs (majors) in different institutions on a Key Information Set of data on institutional costs, program characteristics, and student outcomes such as graduation rates, job placement, salaries, and loan default rates. This is more extensive information than that now provided by the U.S. Department of Education (Dougherty & Callender, 2020). Besides providing more data, the federal government could also make it more accessible and digestible. The federal government should actively communicate the College Scorecard data to state and

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[13] There is also question about how effective the College Scorecard is in reaching students, particularly ones from disadvantaged backgrounds, since it relies on student initiative to search for the Scorecard (Meyer & Rosinger, 2019).

local departments of education, high school counselors, and third party organizations and make it easier to customize the data by student income, race, gender, and academic background (Kelchen, 2016).

Better training for counselors. Less advantaged students in particular need good information about college costs and financial aid (because this is one of their major concerns about whether they can go to college), how the college admissions process works, and what are the academic demands and social climates of different kinds of institutions and majors within them. Yet, these are topics that many counselors feel ill-equipped to address (Perna et al., 2008, p. 148). Hence, it is important that preservice and in-service training on college admissions processes and financial aid be provided to counselors by higher education teacher training programs, state education agencies, and school districts (Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 306; Perna et al., 2008).

This need to ensure that counselors are better prepared extends as well to advisors in higher education institutions (Grubb, 2006; Karp et al., 2021, pp. 12, 31, 44; Kezar & Yang, 2011). Those advisors need to be well prepared to provide information about financial aid, access to tutoring and other student support services, college majors, and graduate education. Moreover, as increasing numbers of students of less privileged backgrounds enter higher education, college advisors also need to be well versed in information about how to access income support programs, food and housing assistance, child care, immigration advice, mental health services, and so forth (Brock et al., forthcoming).

Restructuring the counseling process. Beyond more counselors and better-trained counselors, we also need to restructure how counseling is provided. It needs to start earlier and be more proactive. Counselors should actively inform and enlist the efforts of parents, siblings, and peers in more egalitarian and co-constructed ways. Outreach efforts should not just rely on social media and electronic communications but also prioritize high-touch contact, particularly face-to-face and one-on-one. It is important to build interpersonal trust, particularly in working with less advantaged students. Finally, it is important to provide incentives for students and parents to seek out counselors. Let's examine each of these points in turn.

Regarding starting early, it has become clear that students need to begin thinking of college well before their junior and senior years. In fact, many researchers recommend that information efforts start as early as the 8th or 9th grade, if not earlier (Heller, 2013; Hossler et al., 1999, pp. 22–23, 29; Perna, 2013). By that point, many students are already beginning to think of whether or not to go to college. Faulty information may lead them to decide they cannot go to college generally or to selective colleges particularly, and it may lead students to misperceive how to adequately prepare academically and financially for selective colleges. College-going students need to make sure they take the right courses in high school, engage in the right extracurriculars, and begin saving money (Harding, Parker, & Toutkoushian, 2017; Hossler et al., 1999; Knight & Marciano, 2013, chap. 2; McDonough, 1997, p. 105; McDonough, 2005b; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Vargas, 2004).

Regarding being proactive, there is evidence that proactive efforts by counseling staff, reaching out to students rather than waiting for them to make the effort, is important, especially for less advantaged students (Holland, 2019, chap 4; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). Less advantaged students are less likely to have been inculcated by their parents with an expectation that school counselors are there to serve them and will welcome being approached (Holland, 2019, pp. 74–78; Lareau, 2015; Perna et al., 2008, pp. 144–145; Stephens, Fryburg, & Markus, 2012). As a result, absent proactive efforts by counselors, counselors' meeting time will be dominated by more advantaged students, leaving less time and energy for less advantaged students (Holland, 2019, chap. 4; Lewis-McCoy, 2014, chap. 4).

Because parents, siblings, and peers are very important sources of information and support for prospective college students, it is important that counselors, outreach program staff, and others very explicitly work to inform them and enlist their help (Colyar, 2011; Hossler et al., 1999; Knight & Marciano, 2013; McDonough, 2005b; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Tierney & Colyar, 2005; Vargas, 2004). To reach less advantaged parents, concerted efforts need to be made to offer a wide variety of locales and times to meet (accommodating inflexible work schedules) and to draw on parents' cultures in ways that they find meaningful (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). To harness the efforts of peers,

counselors can work with learning centers that offer peer tutoring and counseling (Knight-Diop, 2010; see also Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). However, one of the toughest tasks is devising ways of integrating students across lines of class and race so that less advantaged students can tap the information-rich networks of more advantaged students. This integration is complicated by tracking within schools, which produces intraschool class and race segregation (see Holland, 2019, chap. 3). With less advantaged parents, siblings, and peers, it is important that they be able to join schools in shaping the terms and content of counseling so that it is not informed only by the parochial values and perceptions of White, middle-class counselors (Auerbach, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). One way to do this is by asking parents and students to join a collaborative inquiry with school personnel into the strengths and weaknesses of the current advising structure (see Knight & Marciano, 2013, pp. 95–98; Oakes et al., 2002).

The outreach efforts should prioritize high-touch, personal contact and not rely primarily on social media and electronic communication. To be sure, many recent studies using experimental and quasi-experimental measurement have found that use of social media and electronic communication through email and text messages can be useful in reaching students and informing them about such important steps as applying for financial aid, registering in time for classes, setting aside enough time for study, and accessing tutorial and other help (Castleman et al., 2015; Ideas42, 2016; Karp, 2013; Meyer & Rosinger, 2019).[14] At the same time, evidence is accumulating that outreach programs that are reliant on relatively impersonal means of communication through social media and electronic communication are less effective than programs that involve higher-touch contact, particularly in person, with advisors who are known and trusted (Avery et al., 2021; Bettinger, Castleman, Choe, & Mabel, 2021; Brock, Mateo, & Ray, forthcoming; Castleman et al., 2020; Gurantz et al., 2020; Karp, 2013; Karp et al., 2021, pp. 24–38). The greater impact of in-person advising may reflect a couple of factors. One is that counselors are better able to reach parents and other family members through direct contact rather than through low-touch contacts operating primarily through texts

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[14] The sources cited here are of programs for college students, but they should apply as well to counseling in high school.

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and emails to students, who may disregard those texts and emails or not report them to parents, particularly if they are inundated by texts and emails (see Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018). Another factor is that information is more likely to be heard and acted upon if the source is trusted and regarded as legitimate, with personal contact tending to breed greater trust (Holland, 2015; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). This takes us to the next point.

Building trust. Less advantaged students and parents are more likely to distrust information from counselors, particularly if there is a major difference in their social backgrounds and if parents and students have encountered discriminatory treatment in the past (Holland, 2019, chap. 4; Knight-Diop, 2010; Lareau, 2000; McDonough, 2005b; McDonough, Calderone, & Venegas, 2015; Schneider, Judy, Ebmeyer, & Broda, 2014; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2011; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). This gap in trust can be mitigated if counselors and teachers meet regularly with students and parents; make a concerted effort to understand students' and parents' social milieux and hopes for and views of schooling; draw on students' class, race, and ethnic cultures to make connections to college going; and foster genuine dialogue with students and parents in which students and parents can help shape the counseling program (Auerbach, 2007; Karp et al., 2021; Knight & Marciano, 2013; Oakes et al., 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

At the same time, it would be beneficial to have counselors who often match their students in social class, race, and gender (College Board, 2012, pp. 70, 87; Holland, 2015; Karp et al., 2021, pp. 36, 45). Warrant for this comes from studies finding that students in high school and college perform better when they have instructors of the same race or gender (Dee, 2005; Dynarski et al., 2022, pp. 67–69; Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). For example, analyzing data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, Gershenson et al. find that Black teachers of Black students are significantly more likely to expect them to attain a bachelor's degree than are non-Black teachers. This impact was even more pronounced for Black male students, particularly in math (Gershenson et al., 2016, pp. 219–221).

Incentivizing students to seek counseling. Finally, it is important to provide students and parents with incentives to interact with counselors (Karp et al., 2021, pp.

46–53; St. John et al., 2004). Building more personalized and trusting relationships will certainly provide an incentive for more interaction, but even more can be done. Particularly important are positive incentives. As Karp and her colleagues note about counseling in college, these incentives "might be financial, such as gift cards, book vouchers, transportation passes, parking permits, food, or subsidized childcare. Non-financial incentives might include priority registration, priority meeting times with advisors, or access to additional courses at no cost" (Karp et al., 2021, p. 47). Beyond incentives, it is also important to consider asking students to pledge to seek counseling and to mandate it if they do not do so (St. John et al., 2004).

  Improving counseling in college. Once in college, students still require help in securing the information needed to make better choices concerning which major or program to choose, courses to take, and means to prepare for work or further education (Bailey et al., 2015; Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest, 2018; Holland, 2019, pp. 155–156; Karp et al., 2021; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Kosiewicz, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2015). These information needs are particularly complex for American community college students who intend to transfer to four-year colleges. Due to poor advice, they can make mistakes in major and course choices that can preclude transferring to certain universities or majors or greatly delay their graduation (Dougherty, 1994; Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016).

  At the very least, college students need greater access to advisors, whether full-time advisors or full-time faculty, who can provide advice (Grubb, 2006). There is considerable evidence that greater availability of advisors (allowing lower student-counselor ratios) and consequent greater student utilization of advising can have a significant impact on college retention and academic progress (Jaggars, Fay, & Farakish, 2019, pp. 17–21, 36–38, 51–52; Weiss et al., 2022, pp. 3–4, 15–16, 18). Beyond providing more advisors, it is also important to recruit more advisors who are of color and bilingual (Grubb, 2006; Martinez-Wenzl & Gándara, 2015).

  But as with high school counseling, it is also important to improve how higher education advisors are trained and deployed (Bailey et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2016; Grubb, 2006). In recent years, an articulated set of proposals has appeared—under the

rubric of "guided pathways"—for better providing college students with information. I cover this guided pathways approach in the next section.

Though much can be done to improve information provision, it can go only so far to reduce socially stratified mistaken choices. It is also important to consider how to make choices less numerous and complex to begin with, aiding both students and their advisors. This involves improving the "architecture of choice" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Thaler et al., 2013).

4.2 Reducing Choice Complexity: Improving Choice Architecture

One of the paradoxes of choice is that people typically want more choices, but this can actually make them less able to choose well. Many studies in cognitive psychology and behavioral economics find that people are less able to make a choice if the choice options are numerous or if the attributes of those options vary along multiple dimensions. Faced with this complexity, would-be choosers often end up deferring choice even when not deciding has negative consequences, staying with their current choice even though better options are available, making the choice that involves the least effort, or making haphazard choices (Botti & Iyengar, 2006; Carroll, White, & Pahl, 2011; Castleman, Baum, & Schwartz, 2015; Chernev, Bockeholt, & Goodman, 2015; Diamond et al., 2014; Iyengar, Jiang, & Huberman, 2004; Iyengar & Lepper, 2002; Kahneman, 2011; Riley, 2021; Schwartz, 2000; Scott-Clayton, 2015; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).[15]

Such cases of cognitive overload often crop up in educational decision-making. Studies of student decision-making about college have noted how a greater number and complexity of choice alternatives, particularly in community colleges, undercuts students' ability to make effective choices about which courses to take, financial aid to pursue and accept, and paths to take through higher education (Bailey et al., 2015; Castleman et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2013, 2015).[16]

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[15] For example, as the number of 401k retirement fund options increase, the percentage of employees who opt for one decreases (Botti & Iyengar, 2006). And even when people do make choices in the context of many and complex options, they often make suboptimal choices, focusing on a restricted set of factors and ignoring other potentially important ones (Botti & Iyengar, 2006; Hanoch, Rice, Cummings, & Wood, 2009; Lavecchia et al., 2014; Tanius, Wood, Hanoch, & Rice, 2009). For instance, as the number of 401k options rises, employees allocate a smaller proportion of their 401k contributions to equity funds and instead invest more in lower return money market and bond funds (Botti & Iyengar, 2006).

[16] Similarly, a survey of users of the Unistats college-advising website in England found that users often reported being overwhelmed by too much data (Diamond et al., 2014).

A variety of scholars and policymakers have converged on the idea of consciously reshaping the "architecture of choice" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Thaler et al., 2013) in order to make it easier for students to make college choices that benefit them. In what follows, I lay out key elements of such a revised architecture of choice, focusing on college advising, particularly in community colleges. However, these proposals have considerable applicability to other kinds of colleges and to high schools as well.

Crucial to a revised architecture of choice is simplifying initial choices, providing structures that nudge students toward the right choices, and building in supportive defaults if students fail to make a choice (Bailey et al., 2015; Dynarski et al., 2022; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2015; see also Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Thaler et al., 2013). This advice has been reflected in the various efforts to simplify student aid programs and the process of applying for student aid (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Perna et al., 2008). In addition, elements of a revised architecture of choice can be seen in longstanding efforts to develop articulation agreements and transfer maps to guide community college students who wish to transfer to four-year colleges (Brock et al., forthcoming; Dougherty, 1994, pp. 257–258; Dougherty, 2002, pp. 326–328; Wyner et al., 2016). Finally, this advice has also been enshrined in what has come to be called the "guided pathways" approach to reducing cognitive complexity for students as they make choices within higher education (Bailey et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2016; Chase, Bensimon, & Robinson, 2021; Dougherty et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2017; Jenkins, Lahr, Mazzariello, 2021; see also Bragg, 2013; Karp, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

Simplifying student decision-making: financial aid. The proposals to reduce the complexity in financial aid stem from the fact that the United States has built a highly complex financial aid system that is very hard for students, their parents, and even college advisors to understand (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Dynarski et al., 2022; Perna et al., 2008). The United States has a great variety of grant, loan, and tax-credit programs for financial aid, offered by the federal government, the states, institutions of higher education, and various private entities (Dynarski et al., 2022). Moreover, the application process for federal financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)—though being simplified—is still complex and hard for many to

understand (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Dynarski et al., 2022; Meyer & Rosinger, 2019). Clearly, what is needed is a great simplification in the number and form of grants, loans, and tax credits offered—particularly on the part of the federal government—and continued efforts to simplify even further the process of securing student aid.

Simplifying student decision-making: transfer articulation and pathways. The transfer process from community colleges to four-year colleges is anything but smooth. Many students who wish to transfer fail to do so, end up in institutions and majors they did not aim for, lose credits in the process, or are delayed in achieving baccalaureate degrees (Dougherty, 1994, 2002; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). One way institutions and state higher education agencies have tried to combat these suboptimal outcomes is to simplify the course selection process in community colleges so that would-be transfer students more often take courses that prepare them for upper-level studies and will be given credit by four-year institutions and their departments. Articulation agreements, transfer modules, and major-specific transfer maps have been a favored means of doing so (Brock et al., forthcoming; Dougherty, 2002, pp. 326–328).

Articulation agreements between institutions and more recently between community college and university systems spell out what community college and four-year college courses (typically general education courses) are to be taken as equivalent (Brock et al., forthcoming; Dougherty, 2002, p 326). However, there is mixed evidence on the impact of articulation agreements, with some studies finding a positive impact on baccalaureate graduation (Stern, 2016) and others not finding that articulation agreements increase transfer or baccalaureate graduation (Melguizo et al., 2013; Roksa, 2006, 2009).

A more directive approach is to specify transfer modules, namely specific courses (primarily general education courses but also some lower-division major courses) that if successfully completed by community college students will guarantee them a place at a public four-year university, a major within it, and typically, junior status. Examples are the Ohio Transfer 36 and the California Associate Degree for Transfer, both of which have been found in quasi-experimental studies to be associated with, depending on the study, higher rates of transfer and baccalaureate completion and lower rates of credit loss

(Baker, Friedmann, & Kurlaender, 2023, pp. 20, 32; Boatman & Soliz, 2018; Brock et al., forthcoming).

Finally, major-specific transfer maps spell out what courses and course sequences students need to take in order to be prepared for their intended majors and have their credits accepted. Developed in a collaboration between community college and four-year colleges, these maps provide course recommendations from the first year at the community college all the way to the last year at the four-year college (Wyner et al., 2016, pp. 13–21).

Simplifying student decision-making: guided pathways. The "guided pathways" approach involves simplifying and structurally guiding the number of big choices students make. In the guided pathways approach, students are pushed soon after entering college to develop an educational plan that maps out each step through graduation. This plan is customized for each student based on their prior credits, degree goals, and timeline to completion, and it is ideally stored in the college's student information system, so that it is easily accessible to students, advisors, and faculty. To guide student choice, individual programs of study are bundled into broad "meta-majors" such as health or business that students initially select. These meta-majors are intended both to simplify student decision-making but also to create academic and career communities that can offer peer support, mentoring, and program and job advice. If a student is not yet ready to select a particular program within a meta-major, each meta-major should have a default curriculum that provides exposure to the breadth of the meta-major and lays the basis for later selecting a specific program. Key to all this process is student access to extensive and personalized advising (optimally embedded within each meta-major) that will allow students to clarify and communicate their learning and occupational goals (Bailey et al., 2015, 2016; Community College Research Center, 2021; Dougherty et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2017, 2018, 2021; Jenkins & Wyner, 2022; Klempin, Kalamkarian, Pellegrino, & Barnett, 2019; see also Bragg, 2013; Karp, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, 2017).[17]

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[17] This has been the theory, but many community colleges have not done this in practice. The problem is that it tends to be more easily done in some meta-majors than in others.

The guided pathways approach has great promise but will require further elaboration and testing in order to address the complexities of student choice making (see Baker & Orono, 2020). While some 400 colleges in sixteen states have implemented guided pathways, this approach has been implemented at scale in only a relatively small number of colleges (Jenkins, Brown, Fink, Lahr, & Yanagiura, 2018; Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017; Jenkins, Lahr, & Mazzariello, 2021). However, preliminary evaluations of the guided pathways approach provide encouraging results (Jenkins et al., 2017; Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018). Those preliminary evaluations find, albeit based on descriptive data, that the implementation of guided pathways is associated with subsequent increases in course completions and credit accumulation, college persistence, and two-year completion rates (Jenkins, Brown, Fink, Lahr, & Yanagiura, 2018, pp. 35–39; Jenkins et al., 2018, pp. 7–10). A further evaluation should be released in late summer 2023 by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

The case for guided pathways is strengthened by the very positive results of randomized control trial evaluations of the highly regarded Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program at the community colleges of the City University of New York and a number of community colleges in other states (Strumbos, Linderman, & Hicks, 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). The ASAP program is a comprehensive intervention that involves intensive contact with advisors with small caseloads, as with guided pathways programs. To this, ASAP adds weekly tutoring for students in developmental education and on academic probation, financial aid (tuition waiver, free textbooks, free transit pass), a requirement for full-time attendance, and cohort creation through block scheduling and an ASAP seminar (Strumbos, Linderman, & Hicks, 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). The intervention has attracted great attention because it has shown very striking results in rigorous evaluations. For example, a randomized controlled trial of ASAP participants and nonparticipants at three CUNY community colleges found that at the end of the three-year program ASAP participants graduated at a rate of 40%, while nonparticipants graduated at a rate of only 22%. Six years out, the graduation differential was down to 10%, but was still highly significant statistically (Weiss et al., 2019; see also Strumbos et al., 2018). ASAP derives much of its power from its comprehensive nature,

which goes beyond intensive advising. Still, there is evidence that this intensive advising—which is a key feature ASAP shares with the guided pathways model—is a major part of ASAP's impact. An evaluation of ASAP found that among ASAP participants the number of contacts between students and their ASAP advisors was a key predictor of timely degree completion (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013, pp. 283–285).

4.3 Reducing the Costs of Suboptimal Choices

Students will still make suboptimal choices even when provided with better information in ways that make it more likely that they can effectively use that information. The task then is to be able to quickly spot those mistakes and lessen their harms (Bailey et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; see also Thaler et al., 2013). Two means of doing this harms reduction are the use of electronic tracking of students, coupled with intrusive advising, and the erection of stackable credentials.

Electronically based degree-audit systems can continuously track student progress on their educational plans and provide suggestions on courses to take the following semester that are consonant with those plans. When students reach certain cross points or go off course, a degree-audit system can prompt students and advisors to meet. This can be backed up by not allowing students to register until they have met with their advisors (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2017, 2018; Karp et al., 2021; Klempin et al., 2019; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Wyner et al., 2016).[18]

Furthermore, college credentials can be erected in a stackable form so that if students decide to stop short of their goal, they at least get a credential that has some labor market value and can be applied in time to the next higher degree. Certificates of a year or less, two-year associate degrees, and four-year bachelor's degrees can be organized so that they naturally feed into each other. A student needing to leave higher education early can still exit with a useful credential, and that credential can carry the option of being applied in the future toward a higher-level credential (Bailey & Belfield,

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[18] While the sources cited pertain to electronically based advising in community colleges, much the same could be and is done in high schools (Knight & Marciano, 2013, p. 85).

2017; Daugherty, Kramer, Anderson, & Bozick, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2006, 2017). Although the idea of stackable credentials has great face validity, it should also be noted that preliminary evaluations do not yet indicate that they purchase students any particular advantage (Bailey & Belfield, 2017).

4.4 Reducing Self- and Other Blame by Demystifying the Nature of Choice

The recommendations made above will contribute to reducing the tendency of choice to produce and legitimate inequality. By reducing the number, negative impacts, and social stratification of suboptimal choices, action on those recommendations will reduce the tendency of less advantaged people to make suboptimal choices for which they blame themselves and are blamed by others. But suboptimal choices still will occur, so how do we reduce the tendency to blame oneself and others for mistakes that are still socially induced to a much greater degree than is socially acknowledged or acceptable? This is crucial in order to reduce the tendency of a high-choice social system to legitimate inequality.

Social science research can make a key contribution. By illuminating the socially stratified and stratifying nature of educational choices and the ideological impacts of high-choice regimes, social science research can lessen how people react to suboptimal choices by blaming themselves or others. Instead, their attention can be directed back to how systems of choice and information inequality both produce inequality and obscure how this systemic classism and racism occurs (Lareau, 2011, 2015). This project is in keeping with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "socioanalysis": helping social actors understand how they misrecognize the actual dynamics of social processes and institutions and thus get locked into reproducing patterns of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Swartz, 1997).

5. Summary and Conclusions

This paper draws on research findings in the sociology of education, cognitive and social psychology, and behavioral economics to examine how higher education choice making produces and legitimates social inequality. The paper's central thesis is that a societal regime of many choices—while widely seen as desirable and fair—builds

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on and extends societal disadvantage but in a way that obscures that process to virtually all who participate in that regime. As the paper argues, the provision of many choices *produces* social inequality. People often make suboptimal choices that do not serve their interests as well as they might wish, particularly if they do not have good access to high-quality information. The incidence of those suboptimal choices is not random but is socially stratified. It is higher for less advantaged people, and societal factors—such as the unequal provision of good information—play a crucial role in producing those socially stratified suboptimal choices. Secondly, the provision of many choices *legitimates* social inequality. The more one thinks in terms of choices in the context of an individualistic culture such as that of the United States, the more one tends to blame the unfortunate for their circumstances. Seemingly offered many choices in life, both the fortunate and unfortunate in society come to feel that the outcomes they experience—for good or for ill—are due in great part to their own actions and therefore are legitimate.

The paper explores various means that could be used to reduce the social stratification of educational choice making. One is to provide more and better information in more equal ways through better advising and other means. Another is to create a "choice architecture"—such as the guided pathways reform project in higher education—that simplifies the fateful choices students have to make and structurally nudges students toward making good choices. However, students will still make mistakes, so we should also move to reduce the impacts of bad choices by such means as better tracking of students' progress into and through higher education and, as needed, intervening to help students at a point they are in danger of making a suboptimal choice. Finally, and most sweepingly, we need to demystify the process of choice making so that—even as students continue to be involved in choice making—they are aware that it is distorted by structures of inequality and that they should be slow to blame themselves and others for the social stratification it produces.

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