In recent decades, a “college for all” ethos has taken root among American youth. From 1980 to 2002, the share of tenth-graders aspiring to graduate with at least a bachelor’s degree rose from 41% to 80%, with the largest increase coming from working-class students. Today, 85% of middle-class students enrol in college within two years of high school graduation, and more than two-thirds of them attain a bachelor’s degree. However, despite their rising aspirations, only 41% of working-class students enrol and less than a third of those graduate with a four-year degree. Furthermore, aspirations persist even when low-income students fail to make progress towards a degree. This puzzle points to an enduring debate about aspirations and social mobility. Do aspirations play a causal role in class reproduction? Or do forces external to individual beliefs – such as lack of knowledge, money, skills, or guidance – render aspirations irrelevant to outcomes? I contend that different meanings ascribed to “college”, and what “college” accomplishes for young adults within their narratives of the self, vary by class and can lead students either towards or away from the risky college pathways that previous literature has shown to reduce enrolment and persistence.

In a forthcoming study, my co-author and I demonstrate that working-class young adults and their parents see college as a route to moral worth and an escape from their current grim reality, what we term “salvation”. They construct narratives of self-worth that hinge on imagining themselves as a college-goer, inadvertently rendering risky college pathways appealing. In contrast, in middle-class families parents assume control and deploy a narrative of insecurity about future downward mobility. Their insistence that the particular college and major chosen by their children serve as a safety net has both instrumental and moral components connecting good parenting to caution and constraint. These narratives of calculating disillusionment serve to protect middle-class children from risky educational decisions but can come at a cost to success and self-realization.


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**Research interests:** organisational and institutional sources of inequality in the new economy; discrimination in education, professional labour markets and entrepreneurship.