

Those Who Choose and Those Who Don't: Social Background and College Orientation¹

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Abstract

Empirical research on the decision to attend college is predicated largely on the assumption that students make conscious, utility-maximizing decisions about their educational careers. We suggest that for many students this may not be the case; in fact, we find that a large share of students assume from a young age that they will attend college, exhibiting what we call a college-going *habitus*. Consistent with critical arguments about how social class is reproduced, we find that white, native-born children of college-educated parents are more likely to take college for granted than their less advantaged peers. Students with a college-going *habitus* are more likely than others to apply to a four-year college by spring of their senior year in high school. However, while social origin accounts for some of the association between *habitus* and college application, both advantaged and disadvantaged students appear to benefit from a college-going *habitus*.