



A Degree of Choice: Educational Decision-Making after College

Ellen Bryer

Brown University

Maya Kaul

University of Pennsylvania

Despite the growing share of college-educated adults returning to higher education, we know little about how individuals weigh the consequential decision to go to graduate school. In this paper, we ask how individuals decide to pursue a particular graduate program within a field of study. We draw on two independent but complementary interview studies to examine this question across the two most common master's fields of study: business and education. We find that within both fields, students' career values and aspirations guide them toward distinct tiers of educational prestige. In lower-status programs, students enter graduate school to pursue a credential that they hope will promote incremental career advancement. In higher-status programs, students pursue a credential that aligns with their broader professional values. Where students in business foresaw immense potential for career transitions, the occupational status of teaching limits students' aspirations. Our findings illuminate how work experiences, occupational attributes, and institutional status shape the process of educational decision-making.

VERSION: April 2026

Suggested citation: Bryer, Ellen, and Maya Kaul. (2026). A Degree of Choice: Educational Decision-Making after College. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1252). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/xe6h-bx36>

A Degree of Choice: Educational Decision-Making after College

Ellen Bryer
Annenberg Institute
Brown University

Maya Kaul
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Despite the growing share of college-educated adults returning to higher education, we know little about how individuals weigh the consequential decision to go to graduate school. In this paper, we ask how individuals decide to pursue a particular graduate program within a field of study. We draw on two independent but complementary interview studies to examine this question across the two most common master's fields of study: business and education. We find that within both fields, students' career values and aspirations guide them toward distinct tiers of educational prestige. In lower-status programs, students enter graduate school to pursue a credential that they hope will promote incremental career advancement. In higher-status programs, students pursue a credential that aligns with their broader professional values. Where students in business foresaw immense potential for career transitions, the occupational status of teaching limits students' aspirations. Our findings illuminate how work experiences, occupational attributes, and institutional status shape the process of educational decision-making.

Keywords

higher education; fields of study; status; decision-making; graduate education; teacher education

Introduction

Between 2002 and 2021, enrollment in graduate and professional degrees in the US increased by over 45 percent, from 2.2 million to 3.2 million (Kena et al. 2016; NCES 2023a). While much is known about how individual background and economic conditions shape graduate

degree completion, much less is known about how individuals make the decision to attend graduate school (Posselt & Grodsky 2017). Particularly given the precarity in the labor market and growth in student loan debt, individuals' decisions to pursue graduate school may be very consequential for their financial well-being and longer-term professional prospects (Altonji and Zhu 2025; Pyne and Grodsky 2020). Yet, little is known about how prospective graduate students make the decision to enter particular programs or fields, or how graduate students make sense of the potential benefits of their degrees, both monetary and nonpecuniary (Posselt & Grodsky 2017).

Research on undergraduate pathways, an area with a more robustly developed empirical and theoretical base (e.g., Kizilcec et al. 2023), offers some insights into these processes. This literature suggests that the same degrees might mean different things to different people, and college students may interpret the value of their credentials from the lens of their social position and the prestige of their programs (Mullen 2010). In addition to seeking economic benefits, undergraduate students may be motivated by nonpecuniary considerations, drawing on messages they receive from higher education institutions, employers, and their peers (Shimano and Klein-Collins 2024). However, there are important differences between undergraduate and graduate students. Graduate students are older and may be less influenced by their class origins; for example, parental education level is not associated with master's enrollment (Bryer 2025; Glueck 2025). Additionally, graduate degrees are more closely linked with occupational fields of study (Bol et al. 2019; DiPrete et al. 2017), which may allow employers to more directly structure graduate student program choice. Understanding the reasons why students chose to pursue graduate degrees, and how this decision-making varies across field and program prestige,

can therefore contribute critical new understandings to advance studies of graduate education, and higher education more broadly.

We address these gaps by asking: (1) How do individuals navigate and choose among many master's programs in a given field?, and (2) To what extent does the process of program choice vary across fields of study? To address these questions, we draw on interview data collected from individuals pursuing graduate credentials in the two most common master's degree fields. We bring together interview data from two projects with independent but complementary research designs: the first focused on current MBA students and the second focused on students who recently completed graduate programs in teaching. To understand how program prestige shapes graduate choice (Posselt & Grodsky 2017), we studied individuals enrolled in both higher- and lower-status programs in both fields. This dual attention to *field* and *program prestige* offers a valuable lens into how students' educational choices are shaped and constrained by, not only their own individual values, but also the broader structures and status hierarchies of their fields. Together, degrees in business and education account for 40 percent of master's degrees awarded (NCES 2023b), making these fields especially consequential sites for understanding graduate student choice.

Overall, we find that prospective students draw on their career values and work experiences to choose a program that they perceive as conferring valuable skills and status. Within business and teaching, respondents draw on career-linked motivations to pursue identical credentials at different tiers of prestige. We find that respondents in lower-status business and teaching programs seek a more immediate professional outcome (e.g., a promotion, a teaching license). However, we observe greater contrast between business and teaching students in higher-status programs. Whereas the students in higher-status MBA programs envision their degree as a

key that may open doors to an array of restricted, elite fields, such as politics and management consulting, students in the higher-status teaching programs engage in decision-making more similar to those pursuing lower-status programs. While students in teaching value high-quality training, their choices are constrained by practical considerations like cost and proximity. Additionally, there are limited opportunities for professional growth in teaching, particularly as compared to business.

Together, this article contributes to the literature on pathways through higher education by demonstrating how nonpecuniary priorities and occupational or professional alignment can structure students' decision of where to attend graduate school. Our findings show that students interpret the value of ostensibly similar credentials within the same field quite differently, depending on well-recognized markers of program prestige and field-specific constraints on career advancement. In doing so, this study offers critical insights into how individuals make sense of graduate school options, helping fill a critical gap in the literature (Posselt & Grodsky 2017). Contemporary students progress through higher education in non-linear and discontinuous ways (Cottom 2017; Kizilcec et al. 2023). Even at four-year universities, first-time, full-time undergraduates are no longer the majority of college students (NCES 2022). It is increasingly important to understand how educational decision making intersections with work experiences, and how these intersections vary across field and prestige.

Theories of Educational Decision-Making

Postbaccalaureate enrollment has expanded and diversified over the past fifty years (Posselt and Grodsky 2017; Pyne and Grodsky 2020). Today, 14 percent of people—roughly equivalent to the number of adults who drop out of high school—have an advanced degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). At the graduate level, occupations—certainly medical and legal

professions, but also other fields such as teaching and social work—may require specific credentials to enter and advance (Collins, [1979] 2019; Cottom 2017). Horizontal or within-level stratification in higher education, especially in graduate education, means a wide range of variation across programs and perceived institutional quality (Posselt and Grodsky 2017; Torche 2011). The resulting multitude of options, often subtly different from one another, means a proliferation of potential pathways through education for students (Gerber and Cheung 2008). Increasingly, sociologists of education examine adults returning to schooling (Grodsky et al. 2021; Moss-Pech et al. 2021; Shimano and Klein-Collins 2024) and conceptualize the educational system as a diversity of pathways rather than a linear pipeline (Kizilcec et al. 2023). These pathways may vary widely in terms of cost and borrowing, occupational outcomes, institutional prestige, and other considerations. Despite the growth in postbaccalaureate enrollment and widespread student borrowing, important questions remain about how individuals navigate the graduate level of education.

Qualitative research on program and field choice has focused on the elite end of the educational spectrum, and largely for undergraduate education. As educational offerings expand and access to postsecondary education increases, the stakes are higher for upper- and upper-middle-class students to legitimize and reproduce their status through education (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Advantaged young adults have resources in the form of cultural, economic, and social capital to desire and gain admission to as well as to succeed in elite undergraduate educational environments (Mullen 2010). At the graduate level, students' decisions to pursue graduate education in fields like law or business may be couched as preferences, but reflect a deeper investment in the maintenance of class status through education (Schleef 2006). Schleef (2006) demonstrates how upper middle class young adults, with their

parents' encouragement, pursue graduate and professional school as a way to maintain the salary, prestige, and lifestyle associated with the upper middle class. Overall, quantitative research finds that parental education is positively associated with entry into doctoral education, but there is no association with master's education (Bryer 2025; Glueck 2025). Indeed, the association between parents' education and master's enrollment has weakened over time (Glueck 2025). This pattern may hint at specific features of master's education that are important to consider when studying the program selection process: the sheer extent of available educational pathways, the role of employer tuition reimbursement policies, or the pursuit of near-term labor market returns.

In a human capital or rational choice framework, graduate school choice could be understood in terms of a prospective student weighing the potential costs against the potential benefits. On average, graduate education leads to economic returns, but returns vary widely by field of study, institution, and student characteristics, including undergraduate major and counterfactual conditions (Altonji and Zhu 2025; Lovenheim and Smith 2022; Minaya et al. 2024). While it is possible for prospective students to access average costs and average returns for many graduate programs via the College Scorecard, it is difficult for individuals to accurately assess their own likely returns and opportunity costs associated with attending specific graduate programs. In addition, the rational choice perspective cannot account for salient nonpecuniary or qualitative aspects of students' decision making (Shimano and Klein-Collins 2024).

At the graduate level, compared to earlier levels of education, anticipated labor market perceptions of specific programs as well as current and prospective employers may more directly shape educational decision-making (Bol et al. 2019; Bills, Di Stasio, and Gërkhani 2017, DiPrete et al. 2017; Grodsky et al. 2021; Kallio, 1995; Moss-Pech, Lopez, and Michaels 2021). By selecting for certain signals and characteristics, employers are important actors in the

relationship between schooling and status attainment (Bills et al. 2017). For example, in the elite business world, graduates of certain institutions are seen as objectively “smart,” “genius,” “ambitious,” or a cultural fit within elite firms (Ho 2009; Rivera 2015). Elite educational programs arm students with a particular cultural toolkit that prepares them to prefer and subsequently enter into elite professional careers (Binder et al. 2016; Schleef 2006). Students view the choice of a specific institution as a way to access valuable social capital, join influential social spheres, or bolster their own identity. In the new economy, postsecondary education also functions as an arena for working adults to pursue additional training or pursue relevant credentials for a career change (Cottom 2017). Research in education finds that graduate program choice is also patterned by both undergraduate institutional characteristics and logistical concerns, such as residency and financial aid (Kallio, 1995; Krieg et al. 2016; Zhang 2005). At the graduate level, employers’ tuition reimbursement policies could inform individuals’ approach to program selection. Given the multitude of choices and constraints, we lack an understanding of how graduate students outside the most elite institutions approach the program selection process with respect to their occupational futures.

In light of these lingering questions, this paper investigates variation in how individuals select a master’s program in a given field of study. In other words, we investigate what informs individuals’ decisions to pursue identical field-specific graduate credentials from different institutions. Allowing for variation in this process across status of educational institutions and the two most common graduate fields of study, this paper seeks to understand how students navigate a diverse and expanding array of options at the graduate level.

Focal fields: Business and K-12 Teaching

Business and education are the two most common master's degrees in the US; together, they account for 40 percent of master's degrees conferred in 2021-22 (NCES 2023b). The cases of business and K-12 teaching present two occupational fields which vary widely in their occupational prestige, specificity, and licensure requirements (Strober & Tyack, 1980).

Business

The broad field of business encompasses a range of specific occupations, such as managers, analysts, and consultants. Unlike the fields of law and medicine, business occupations do not strictly require educational credentials for licensing. However, educational credentials, especially from particular institutions, are a gateway to enter elite firms (Ho 2009; Rivera 2015). Business schools and the MBA programs within them have well-known prestige hierarchies, which are salient in employers' perception of applicants' credentials (Bills et al. 2017; Rivera 2015). Rivera (2015) shows that some elite professional employers, such as in consulting or corporate law, additionally look for credentials from specific institutions. In a correspondence study, Bennett (2022) found no difference in the rate of positive employer response between job applicants with MBAs from the most common program types (i.e., for-profit, regional, and online) and applicants who only had a bachelor's degree. MBA earnings can vary widely across institutions (Altonji and Zhu 2025; Losee 2021).

K-12 Teaching

Historically, K-12 teaching has been a de-professionalized, lower-status occupation in the US (Goldstein 2015; Mehta 2013b; Strober and Tyack, 1980). Despite decades of reforms aimed at elevating the occupational status of K-12 teaching, the status of teaching is currently at, or below, its lowest levels in at least 50 years (Kraft & Lyon 2024). Unlike more professionalized

occupational fields (Abbott, 1998), teaching does not have consistent pathways, requirements to entry, a set knowledge base, or standards for practice set by practitioners (Goldstein 2015; Lortie, 1975; Mehta 2013a). Within this context, graduate programs in teaching (also referred to as “teacher education programs”) have historically been devalued in the landscape of US higher education (Labaree 2004), and the value of graduate degrees for teachers is a highly-contested topic in the field (e.g., Ladd et al. 2015). On the one hand, some argue that graduate degrees serve as a bureaucratic gatekeeping mechanism, preventing the field from quickly addressing teacher shortages; others argue that the graduate degree training is required to ensure both a high professional standard for the field (Comstock et al. 2025). Only a few states require K-12 teachers to earn a master’s degree to earn their teaching license. In most states, individuals can earn a teaching license through a wide range of pathways, including programs based in non-profits, K-12 school districts, and a growing landscape of for-profit providers. As such, the graduate landscape of teacher education is highly-fragmented and crowded (Cochran-Smith 2023; Wilson & Kelley 2022), and there has been a move away from universities as the central provider of graduate degrees in teaching towards more independent and for-profit providers.

Data and Methods

To address these questions, we combine data from two independent projects to understand how students navigate a diverse and expanding field of graduate options and how their educational choices align with occupational values and socialization. Prior research has brought together independently collected qualitative datasets on similar phenomena to build our understanding of broader social processes (see, for example, Huang and Diaz 2025; Vallas and Christin 2018). While each author’s study has unique aims, they both focus on the process of graduate program choice across institutions of varying prestige. Bridging these studies of

business and teaching, therefore, offers the opportunity to study the more generalized process of educational decision making beyond one particular degree and across tiers of occupational prestige. Figure 1 illustrates how we refer to the relationship between program attributes and status in this paper.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Data collection

The first study is an interview-based study of students ($n=25$) attending business schools in the Northeast US, roughly between Baltimore and Boston. The first author gathered this sample through snowball sampling through personal and academic networks as well as enlisting student representatives at qualifying MBA institutions to share the posting in student channels. After each interview, the first author asked participants to recommend others who may be interested in participating. The semi-structured interview protocol covered respondents' family backgrounds, experience applying to and attending college, experience applying to and selecting a graduate school, experiences paying for higher education, intervening work experience, and future career and family goals.

Informed by prior research on intersections between higher education and elite professional occupations (Losee 2021; Perna 2004; Rivera 2015), the first author sought a diverse sample across gender and institutional prestige. Thus, the sample includes roughly even numbers of men and women. The majority of MBA respondents are White, especially among full-time elite students. The full sample is about one-fifth black and one-quarter Asian-American. The mean age is about 29 years old and all students, except for one who entered an MBA program directly after college, either were currently employed or had been employed after graduating from their undergraduate education.

The participants come from ten different graduate programs. In the analysis, we consider five programs as “higher-status” to refer to programs in the group of business schools that are consistently viewed at the top of a common categorical schema.¹ Less elite business programs, referred to as “lower-status” in this analysis, may be well regarded locally, but do not rank highly or appear at all in national rankings, and are most likely to be part-time or credit-based. The sticker price of an MBA ranges from about \$60,000 for a part-time degree from a less selective private institution to \$225,000 for a two-year degree from an elite business school.

The second study is an interview-based study of students ($n=38$) attending three teacher education programs across the US. The second author recruited a stratified sample of teacher candidates which was demographically representative of teachers in each program. The semi-structured interview protocol covered respondents’ personal and professional backgrounds, their decision-making process in applying to and selecting a graduate program, their professional visions for their work, and their professional identity formation within their graduate programs. The second author intentionally sampled students across three programs that reflect key axes of variation in the field: (1) a private, university-based program, (2) a public, university-based program, and (3) a large, for-profit, online program. In this analysis, we consider the first two university-based programs as “elite” or “higher-status” teaching programs, as they are among those identified in public rankings as top-programs. We consider the for-profit program “lower-status,” because it is not highly-ranked, and students report low public perceptions of the program. This program is also notably structured quite differently. Whereas the first two programs confer master’s degrees alongside teacher certification and are year-long, full-time

¹ There are several prominent ordinal ranking lists for MBA programs, all of which rely on different criteria and change each year. During the interview stage, it became clear that a static categorical ranking system was more salient, especially among the elite respondents. In the categorical schema, there are seven business schools that are consistently viewed at the top, regardless of fluctuations in specific ranking systems.

programs, the for-profit program only offers a pathway to teacher certification and is fully self-paced and asynchronous. The cost of programs also varies based on their status. The “elite” or “higher-status” programs cost between \$30,000 to \$50,000, and the for-profit program charges only \$300 upon enrollment and then charges \$5,000 only if students become employed as a teacher.

Interviews in both studies lasted an average of one hour and were recorded and transcribed. Throughout this paper, both authors use pseudonyms for respondents and employers and do not name the actual program or institution that respondents attend.

Data analysis

To analyze the MBA data, the first author employed abductive analysis, which cultivates “anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, p. 169). To do this, the first author transcribed and wrote an analytic memo after each interview. She first conducted an initial round of structured open coding, drawing on inductive codes derived from the existing theory, and took note of emergent codes, especially as they challenge or complicate existing theory. She then conducted an additional round of focused coding, this time with codes that had to do with the emerging argument (Deterding and Waters 2021; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). She used ATLAS.ti to manage the documents and associated codes.

To analyze the teacher education data, the second author conducted three primary stages of analysis (Miles et al. 2014). First, throughout the data collection process, she wrote analytic memos documenting the emergent themes in the data, and took note of potential codes. Second, she developed an *a priori* coding framework grounded in the theoretical frameworks which guided the broader study. Aligned with this analysis, the *a priori* codes included codes grounded

in previous empirical and theoretical work on teacher professional identity formation (e.g., Ronfeldt 2008). Second, she conducted an initial round of coding on a subset of the data, and documented additional inductive codes. Finally, she leveraged both the *a priori* and inductive codes to code the full dataset. She used *Dedoose* to code each transcribed interview.

Finally, the authors worked together to analyze their data alongside each other. To that end, they first conducted a crosswalk of their initial coding frameworks to identify points of continuity and difference between their analytic process. Drawing on this crosswalk, they mapped key themes across the datasets, focused on students' professional values, their rationales for their program choice, and their descriptions of occupational status and institutional prestige. The authors discussed and wrote memos on emerging themes, tracing patterns within and across each occupation and institutional setting.

Findings

Students' orientations to work and their expectations for their career trajectories shape the tier of programs applied to. We discuss respondents' orientations to employment and the resulting program selection process, comparing the experiences of business and teaching respondents in lower- and then higher- status graduate programs. We find that this relationship between students' values and graduate program choice are similar between lower-status business and teaching programs. On the other hand, we observe more salient occupational differences within high-status programs.

Program selection in lower-status programs

Those who attend programs in less-selective institutions (i.e., part-time MBA students in local institutions and the for-profit teacher education program) pursue clear goals of upward vertical mobility and seek to ensure their future job competitiveness. We observe that students'

desire to credentialize their skills may be a way to manage uncertainty about their own future employability. Individuals select a program, mostly in less prestigious local or online institutions where they can earn a credential that they imagine will be useful for immediate career next steps. MBA students pursued professional development, promotions, and eventual access to management positions while teacher education students pursued licensure and hiring. Students' priorities in program selection reflect their plans to stay with the same employer or within the same career field after graduation. Students' experiences in lower-status programs also suggest that employers often structure students' program selection process through tuition reimbursement benefits.

The next career step

Respondents in less prestigious programs are motivated to pursue graduate education by near-term career goals. Nathan, who is enrolled in an MBA program at a locally recognized institution, described his hope that an MBA would help him secure a promotion:

I felt like I was still primarily sitting in the same area that I was in [my last job]... Like doing kind of the same things. Now obviously I know you always have to start at the bottom to work your way up, but I felt that earning an MBA would kind of accelerate my career and hopefully push me into an associate role perhaps quicker.

Nathan hopes that the MBA means that his next position will be at least a notch above his previous position in the insurance industry. Bela works in the tech industry and runs a small business on the side. She hopes that her MBA will help her to advance vertically when the time comes: "What I'm hoping for, is in the future, when it comes to let's say, like a director level role or a VP level role, people will see that I have an MBA, and that'll be an asset towards some of

those jobs.” While Bela and Nathan perceive the MBA as a path toward advancement, the MBA is not required for advancement in the same way that a teaching credential is.

On the other hand, students who enrolled in the lower-status teacher education program were aware that earning a teaching credential, with the support of the program, would be a prerequisite to their career advancement. The low cost and self-paced, online nature of the lower-status teacher education program particularly appealed to career switchers as the lower-status program offered an affordable route into teaching that would not require them to forgo wages while they completed their training. One student, Bill, decided to become a teacher after a career working in a corporate setting, and noted that his perceived economic returns from the program were a major driver in his decision to enroll:

[This program] had in their policies and procedures that unless you got a job, they did not charge you. They did not charge you until you got the job, so I was like, ‘Even though I didn't have any doubts because the school had already told me they wanted me, I didn't have any doubts that I was going to get a job.’ I like a company that is willing to stand behind their product, their service....That just comes from my 25 years in management.

In addition to the low cost of enrolling in the lower-status program, the flexible, asynchronous format allowed those making a career switch to teaching to stay employed in their previous jobs while completing their degrees. As Tina reflects:

My life is complicated, so I needed a program that could deal with my lifestyle....I've been a non-traditional student probably most of my life. So online classes are more my thing...Having something that was flexible was probably one of the selling places for me to come to this program.

Students who chose to enroll in the lower-status teacher education program were less motivated by the quality or status of the program, and were instead driven by the ease and practicality of enrolling in the for-profit program. For students in teaching, enrolling in the for-profit program primarily served as a pathway to becoming credentialed as full-time teachers in their school districts. Students saw their programs in very functional ways. As one teacher described, she saw the purpose of the for-profit teacher education program primarily as “just a pathway into teaching.”

Employer alignment

In cases where an employer will pay for some or all of a student's degree, employers' tuition reimbursement policies can narrow the scope of the search. For example, some school districts facing teacher shortages partner with the lower-status teacher education program to cover the tuition costs, in order to quickly help fill vacant teaching positions. Lucie recounted that she first learned of her program after receiving promotional materials about the tuition assistance deal: “I started receiving emails from them saying, you know, we're offering this program for free. You know, just submit your application and, you know, we'll see if you qualify.” Similarly, Sally accepted an accounting job at a local liberal arts school with a modest starting salary of \$52,000, but free enrollment in their degree programs. She seized this opportunity to pursue an MBA at the institution: “The reason I applied was because it's a benefit. And I mean, I know I'm going to learn a lot, and it's just going to be something that I'm gonna be able to have on my resume and be one step above other people.”

Because the tuition benefits allow students to earn graduate degrees for free at their institutions, the program selection process for both Lucie and Sally was entirely structured by their employers. However, as evidenced by Sally's salary compared to that of other MBA

respondents, this benefit may be offered in exchange for lower pay. Similarly, many school districts offer teachers a higher salary if they have a graduate degree (i.e., Master's of Education) on top of a teaching credential, so Lucie may have also lost out on potential earnings, and potential for career growth, by not considering other programs.

MBA respondents who accept employers' tuition reimbursement fit into established organizational patterns in terms of program selection. For example, Kayla works for a traditional utility company, which we call EnergyCo. When it came time to decide which of the local programs to attend, Kayla's assessment of the reputations of the different programs was shaped by her coworkers' experiences and perceptions:

It was watching a lot of people that I knew that went there, and their career path... So, EnergyCo has a huge pipeline for a couple of schools... So I spoke to people who went to different colleges, what they were studying, what they were looking for. Quite a few of my mentors went to [the program I chose], probably that made me a little biased there.

Kayla's experience highlights the role of employer networks in making program choice decisions. Whereas MBA students described locally-recognized part-time MBA programs as very legible to their employers, students in the for-profit teacher education program reported that their workplaces had more mixed views on the legitimacy, and ultimately value, of their program. On one end of the spectrum, Malcolm was actively counseled into enrolling into the for-profit teacher education program by his employers:

I took a position at a charter school...and I was there three years learning the ins and outs of teaching. And it was from there that [my school administrators] told me, you know, if I was real serious about education, how about coming back and actually being a teacher

and they were gonna put me through [the for-profit teacher education program] and I just needed to pass the Michigan Teacher Certification test.

On the other end of the spectrum, Ira recalls his principal's skepticism when he first decided to enroll in the for-profit program:

[My principal] was hired at the end of last year and he's been kind of aloof about the [for-profit teacher education] thing. He kind of looked at me like, 'Well I guess we needed somebody to fill the English department. And I guess you're coming in through a back door and I guess, yeah, you've got an interim certificate, whatever that means.'

Despite his principal's initial skepticism, Ira shared that his principal eventually came around to see the value of the for-profit program.

Program selection in higher-status programs

Respondents who choose higher-status institutions pursue a graduate program that aligns with their broader career values and will provide professional socialization. However, we observed much starker differences between business and teaching graduate students in higher-status programs than we did in the lower-status programs. MBA students enroll in higher-status programs seeking to reclaim agency over their career trajectory or pivot to new fields that they perceive to have even greater influence and higher earning potential, seeking membership in an exclusive group. In the relatively lower status occupation of teaching, however, students have less room to progress in their careers. Enrollment in higher-status programs in teaching is more frequently driven by perceived values-alignment with the program, or students' perception of the quality of their program.

MBA Programs

In business, graduate students see elite MBA programs as spaces to pursue additional distinction and membership in an exclusive group. MBA students enrolled in higher-status programs resist being confined to one company or one narrow field, even if it is highly stable or high-paying.

Career pivot. Students who pursue business degrees from top universities view these degrees as potentially transformative or door-opening. After working a high-paying (\$175,000) but demanding job in communications for six years, Franny applied to and was admitted to a full-time elite MBA program in another state. Her MBA internship with a politician, an alumnus of her school, confirmed the value of both her school's network and others' inflated view of her degree:

I think when you have an MBA, and I've experienced that a little bit in my internship this summer, people assume different things about you and your skill set.... Like, I have taken one accounting class...I've never taken econ before this year. But I'm doing economic development. ...I think my ability to do jobs outside of communications has gone up exponentially....My network will make it much easier for me to get into the door for jobs that like I...am not fully technically qualified to do.

Franny is sure that her decision will ultimately grant her access to move into influential roles where people will have confidence in her abilities, even if it is not technically justified. In comparison to the part-time students in non-elite programs who pursue MBAs to demonstrate technical skills and secure promotions, Franny pursues an elite MBA for nonpecuniary reasons (i.e., to gain more status).

Full-time MBA students in selective programs reject the idea of being “stuck” in a given field, but not solely for access to higher incomes. After college, Bailey worked in sales in an educational technology company and was earning \$180,000 per year but describes feeling stuck:

I was like, ‘gosh, I’m 26 like, I don’t want to be in sales forever...I need to really think about what I can do long term.’.... I was looking at other jobs and I was finding that really the only jobs...that I was qualified for were other sales jobs. And I...kind of felt backed into a corner. And all of a sudden I just had this moment of like, ‘yeah, maybe the solution is going back to grad school.’

In contrast to part-time students who see their MBA as professional development or insurance for vertical promotions in their current occupation, Franny and Bailey illustrate how full-time MBAs from selective programs are perceived as a way to change careers to both avoid being stuck and to pursue something more influential.

Employer considerations. Among elite full-time MBA students, employers can still structure the program selection process. Prominent and wealthy firms offer generous tuition repayment benefits that guide employees into the top business schools and back into the firms. However, respondents carefully weighed what this reinforced connection with their employer would mean for their careers. Ted had worked for a prominent investment company, Mutual, for five years, as his first job after military service. Ted understood this point in his career as a crossroads of whether to accept his employer’s tuition assistance and commit to returning for four years, thereby becoming a “Mutual person,” or quit to pursue a full-time degree:

I didn’t want to commit to going back because I’ve only ever been at Mutual. So I’ve been there for five years. And if I went back for four, then I’d be there for nine years. And then at that point, I would be pretty pigeonholed to my options. I will be labeled... as a Mutual

person....that's not a pigeonhole that I wanted to commit myself to at this point in my career. So I wanted to keep my options open.

Respondents who bristle at employer reimbursement arrangements may feel they are losing control of their career trajectory.

Respondents who accept their employers' offers of support with applying to and paying for a top MBA degree understand that they are limiting or postponing their ability to pivot into other fields. Hugo works for a prominent consulting firm, Consult, who will fully fund his degree, compensate him for any internships he does at the company or its associates, and offer \$1,000 toward application expenses.. In line with elite MBA students' emphasis on flexibility and self-determination, Hugo describes his tie to the firm and guarantee of a post-MBA job that pays over \$200,000 annually as a compromise and a delay in the pursuit of a career he sees as more meaningful:

Yeah, I think my career trajectory is going to be weird, because I know, I will go back to Consult but I know, that's not what I want to do long term.....One of the things I've been noodling on is like Asian American community organizing or advocacy. So I can see myself...in state and local government, like working for a state senator or something like that.

Hugo accepts the need to return to Consult but with the promise of a more passion-driven turn in his career sometime in the future, which also happens to be in a highly influential role. He expects a seamless transition to these other domains.

Teacher Education Programs

In teaching, on the other hand, students pursue graduate degrees because they are one pathway to licensure. Whereas students who enrolled in the lower-status teacher education

program chose their programs primarily due to factors like cost and ease, students in higher-status degree programs also considered factors such as perceived program quality and values-alignment. These students committed to full-time programs, which are both more expensive to enroll in and require that they forgo other wages for the year they were in their program.

Students in higher-status teaching programs see their graduate degree program as more than just a technical pathway to get a license, but also as a site of professional socialization.

Quality markers. Students who enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs were largely guided by markers of “program quality.” These students vary in how they assess quality. Some gauge “quality” based on the public prestige of programs. For example, in reflecting on how she selected her teacher education program, Lisa reflects: “a lot of my professors were familiar with [the program] and they told me really good things about it.” In other cases, students enrolled in the higher-status teacher education programs after deferring to public program rankings. As Bob reflects:

I looked at and subscribed to the *US News* [ratings], which I'm not sure if that really matters, but, now looking back on it in hindsight, I wanted to make sure I was going to a school that had some quality—some *quality rating* there. And I didn't really know another way of going about that other than looking at that kind of—I think a little superficial—ranking system.

Program rankings both guide students’ search for programs, as well as their ultimate selection of a high-quality program. Other students rationalize their program choice based on the perceived academic quality of their program. As Aurelia shares: “I wanna be somewhere where I feel really challenged and supported. Clearly I'm a nerd about education....I also wanted to think about the academics too and like the support I'd be getting.” Though they had slightly different sources of

information for how to assess program quality, students like Lisa, Bob, and Aurelia were alike in that they considered a wider range of programs across the county, unlike their peers in lower-status teacher education programs—many of whom enrolled in the first program they had heard of. In this way, their decision-making processes are both more information-rich and complex.

Logistical concerns. To a greater extent than students in business programs, students in higher-status teacher education programs emphasize some of the same logistical factors (e.g., location and cost) in their decision-making process as their peers in lower-status programs. For example, Gina reflects on the tradeoff of being out of the workforce to complete her graduate degree program, and prioritized a program that would provide her a pathway to both her graduate degree and teaching license accordingly:

When I was looking at programs, I was looking for programs that would give me *both* the certification and the master's, because I thought if I'm gonna be out of the workforce for an X period of time, ideally selfishly for me, when I come out, I won't be behind, I guess. Many students prioritized shorter programs, given the trade-off of losing a year in the workforce. This was particularly true for the few students enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs after another career, rather than coming straight from their undergraduate program. For example, Bob notes: "I think my criteria was around like a length of time, so I didn't want to be out of work for too long. And I really...I did wanna be close by." The greater weight that teaching students place on location was partially driven by the fact that they knew that their program choice could shape their future employment opportunities. As Amanda reflects:

I had researched other teacher [education] programs and I figured I wanted to study where I wanted to eventually teach. So that way I could get a feel for the state and the city. And see if that was something that somewhere that I wanted to be.

The occupational differences between teaching and business, especially the more localized nature of the teaching profession, may account for teachers placing a disproportionately greater emphasis on location in their program choice, amongst those in higher-status programs.

Values alignment. Students in higher-status teacher education programs frequently select programs based on their perceived values-alignment with their programs, in a way that is much less common to observe in business. These students internalize the public narrative of teaching as a moral calling, and are motivated to become teachers in order to make a social impact on their communities (Kaul 2025; Santoro 2011). As Tamara captures, “I was looking for a program that felt aligned with my values.” To make those assessments, students in teaching considered how different programs marketed themselves publicly, especially in terms of their program missions. Notably, both of the higher-status teacher education programs in this study had public mission statements grounded in social justice, which informed many students’ decisions to apply, and ultimately enroll, in those programs. For example, Olivia reflects:

[The program] has this huge focus on social justice, which definitely set it apart from other programs I looked at.... It was really like, we are preparing you to be a social justice educator and that's gonna be a part of every single class you take.... It felt like it would really prepare me to connect with my students and to serve my students’ families in a way that other programs wouldn't.

Other students reflected that they chose *not* to apply to other higher-status programs, because of their negative social reputation in their community. As Gina shares:

I didn't apply to USC because I felt like, for a school that is gentrifying downtown Los Angeles, you know, neighboring Skid Row, I felt that there was a huge lack in acknowledgement of, ‘This is where we are at as a university.’

Perceived values-alignment serves as a key screening mechanism for students who enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs, whereas there were more limited cases of students in business being guided by values in their program selection.

Career ceilings. Finally, students in higher-status teacher education programs confront how to use their degree for their upward career mobility, while also facing the professions' limited opportunities for advancement. Whereas business students often did not envision an upper bound to their potential career growth, some students in teaching are already aware of the low occupational status of teaching upon enrolling in their programs, impacting their program selection. For example, Blair reflects on how he weighs his concerns about the low professional status of teaching:

My concern had been, where I come from, it's not seen as a very prestigious career and it's sort of a dead end. There's not a lot of professionalism in the field.... I was worried I would struggle with that as someone who wants to really advance and progress.

Blair's comments reflect his belief that the occupation of teaching may not be able to accommodate his career aspirations. This is not an isolated finding, but rather reflects a long-standing critique of the lack of a professional career ladder in teaching (Lortie, 1975). Similarly, other students in teaching see the only opportunities for professional growth as outside of teaching, with teaching serving as a potential stepping stone in that broader professional career trajectory. For example, Ada reflected that her higher-status teaching degree might allow her to get a counseling certification down the line, or pursue a degree in education policy. Her decision-making was guided by her sense that pursuing a teaching degree first would make it easier for her to return to the same institution for other degrees. Students enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs do think about their potential professional growth opportunities; however,

the low occupational status of teaching limits their perception of growth opportunities *within* the teaching profession. These students still enroll in the higher-status teacher education programs with the hope that the degree might help open doors to other, related career opportunities in parallel professions, such as higher education, education research, policy, or counseling.

Discussion

This paper identifies and describes the granular connections that exist between occupations and educational decision-making. In particular, we examine how young adults navigate and choose among many master's programs in a given field. Across the two largest fields of study, we find that prospective graduate students draw on their career values and experiences to choose a graduate program that they anticipate will confer status and skills that will be valued in the labor market. Although they pursue identical credentials, individuals' approaches to program selection differ across well-recognized tiers of program prestige. "Top" programs are not universally desired by applicants. In lower-status programs, students in both business and teaching enter graduate school to pursue a credential that they hope will help them advance incrementally and be viewed favorably by employers. In higher-status programs, students pursue a credential that aligns with their broader professional values. Students view high-status business credentials as flexible credentials that facilitate mobility into new equally influential fields. Many teaching students who attend higher-status programs see their occupation as a moral calling and attach importance to values-alignment in their decision-making process. Across both fields, employer policies structure the process of graduate program selection.

The differences between these two cases allow us to examine the role of work experiences and field-level differences in educational decision-making. Dominant theories of educational decision-making at the graduate level describe a latent process of considering and

selecting among programs that is consistent across fields of study. In this framework, prospective students, informed by their family and schooling background, develop an aspiration for graduate school, submit applications, and enroll in a program (English and Umbach 2016; Mullen et al. 2003; Perna 2004). However, our findings illustrate that in the two most common graduate fields of study, respondents pursue identical credentials with different, career-linked motivations. Importantly, our respondents are at once students and employees; they make educational decisions, while simultaneously navigating their broader professional values and expectations of the labor market and their occupation. Although prospective students also consider factors such as cost and location, their career values and experiences motivate their pursuit of a credential from a program in a certain tier of institutional prestige. Our findings also suggest that students' educational decisions are also informed by employer policies and expectations as well as broader occupational features. The comparatively low status of the teaching occupation and lack of opportunities for promotions within the teaching occupation put an upper-limit on the aspirations of students in teaching in seeking graduate degrees.

In the current moment of economic uncertainty, it is important to consider how individuals, many of whom are already working, draw on much more information than a simple cost-benefit assessment when making the choice of how to pursue graduate programs. Understanding how prospective graduate students understand the value of their degree could provide key insights to higher education policy and practice. Prospective applicants read the same credential quite differently depending on institutional status, and they anticipate that employers will also share their interpretation. Even full-time students are thinking of themselves in the context of their previous and future employers when they make decisions about where to go to graduate school and how to pay for it. As the landscape of graduate education in the US

continues to evolve, the field would benefit from deeper insights into prospective students' values and the extent to which they are shifting. Given the disparities in access to graduate education (Bryer 2025; Glueck 2025), decomposing these patterns across different student backgrounds could provide critical insight to policy and practice. Questions about the extent to which family background reinforces or shifts students' perspectives about their future careers or their program could be taken up in future research.

Given that we analyze program selection in two fields that represent the two most popular master's degrees, we expect the findings to apply to program selection at the master's level more broadly. For example, the ways that specific employers and contemporary employment dynamics structure the process of program selection are likely transferable across fields of study. However, our studies do not represent the full spectrum of variation within fields of study, occupations, or employers. For example, the extremely high earning potential that students in full-time elite business programs have access to is likely not the case in elite programs in other prominent master's fields (Bannon and Fuller 2021). Future research could study educational decision making in other fields, such as law or medicine, that have high professional status but stronger social closure mechanisms than business.

It is also possible that students' career orientations are reinforced or even shaped by the programs they select into. Existing research finds that institutions imprint on students and play a role in shaping students' outlooks about their future (Binder et al. 2016; Meyer, 1977). While the evidence presented here does not entirely rule this out, especially in interviews of students closer to graduation, this is unlikely to be the primary explanation for the findings. Although our respondents are currently enrolled students, some students had not yet begun their first semester and had limited to no exposure to their future institutional contexts. Research could also continue

to examine the extent to which educational credentials from specific programs or types of institutions are in fact linked with specific employment outcomes (Bennett 2022).

A growing share of the college-educated workforce is considering whether and how to pursue graduate credentials amid a changing economy. Understanding why individuals chose to pursue graduate degrees and what factors drive their decisions could provide deeper insights into the purposes of graduate education more broadly. This paper demonstrates the importance of studying educational decision-making processes, and in particular the ways in which students' calculations and considerations differ across fields and program prestige. Moving beyond a rational choice model, we find that graduate students may seek more than economic returns alone, but also pursue status, a moral purpose, and professional development. Unlike MBA students who may pursue additional credentials to expand their career options, prospective teachers weigh the decision to enter a precarious, relatively low-status occupation. Despite the low pay and status of teaching, we find that students pursue high-status teaching programs driven by their broader professional values. This paper contributes to our understanding of how the status of educational institutions intersects with, and possibly compensates for students' concerns about economic uncertainty. Educational decision-making at the graduate level, in which students are also workers, offers an opportunity to consider the intersections between higher education and occupations, both at the organizational level and in the lives of young adults.

References

- Abbott, Andrew. 2010. *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Altonji, Joseph G., and Zhengren Zhu. 2025. "Returns to Specific Graduate Degrees: Estimates Using Texas Administrative Records." *NBER Working Paper Series*. doi:[10.3386/w33530](https://doi.org/10.3386/w33530).
- Bannon, Lisa, and Andrea Fuller. 2021. "USC Pushed a \$115,000 Online Degree. Graduates Got Low Salaries, Huge Debts." *Wall Street Journal*, November 9.
- Bennett, Christopher T. 2022. "Labor Market Returns to MBAs from Less-Selective Universities: Evidence from a Field Experiment during COVID-19." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. doi:[10.1002/pam.22448](https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22448).
- Bills, David B., Valentina Di Stasio, and Klarita Gërxhani. 2017. "The Demand Side of Hiring: Employers in the Labor Market." *Annual Review of Sociology* 43:291–310.
- Binder, Amy J., Daniel B. Davis, and Nick Bloom. 2016. "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs." *Sociology of Education* 89(20):39.
- Bol, Thijs, Christina Ciocca Eller, Herman G. van de Werfhorst, and Thomas A. DiPrete. 2019. "School-to-Work Linkages, Educational Mismatches, and Labor Market Outcomes." *American Sociological Review* 84(2):275–307. doi:[10.1177/0003122419836081](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419836081).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241–58 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London; Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications.

- Bryer, Ellen. 2025. "The View from the Top: The Relationship Between Parental Education and Graduate Enrollment." *The Journal of Higher Education* 0(0):1–29.
doi:[10.1080/00221546.2025.2450203](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2450203).
- Cochran-Smith, Marilyn. 2023. "What's the 'Problem of Teacher Education' in the 2020s?" *Journal of Teacher Education* 74(2):127–30. doi:[10.1177/00224871231160373](https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871231160373).
- Collins, Randall. [1979] 2019. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. 3rd ed. Columbia University Press.
- Comstock, Meghan, Maya Kaul, Abigail Dym, Youngsun Lee, and Sora Kim. 2025. "Behind the Push for Licensure Reform: How Beliefs About the Teaching Profession Unite and Divide Coalitions." doi:[10.26300/NK71-1487](https://doi.org/10.26300/NK71-1487).
- Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2017. *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of for-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*. New York: The New Press.
- Deterding, Nicole M., and Mary C. Waters. 2021. "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach." *Sociological Methods & Research* 1–32.
doi:[10.1177/0049124118799377](https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124118799377).
- DiPrete, Thomas A., Thijs Bol, Christina Ciocca Eller, and Herman G. van de Werfhorst. 2017. "School-to-Work Linkages in the United States, Germany, and France." *American Journal of Sociology* 122(6):1869–1938. doi:[10.1086/691327](https://doi.org/10.1086/691327).
- English, David, and Paul D. Umbach. 2016. "Graduate School Choice: An Examination of Individual and Institutional Effects." *The Review of Higher Education* 39(2):173–211.
doi:[10.1353/rhe.2016.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2016.0001).

- Gerber, Theodore P., and Sin Yi Cheung. 2008. "Horizontal Stratification in Postsecondary Education: Forms, Explanations, and Implications." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:299–318.
- Glueck, Madeline Brighthouse. 2025. "Beyond a Bachelor's: Stratification in Graduate School Enrollment." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 96.
doi:[10.1016/j.rssm.2025.101019](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2025.101019).
- Goldstein, Dana. 2015. *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Grodsky, Eric, Catherine Doren, Koit Hung, Chandra Muller, and John Robert Warren. 2021. "Continuing Education and Stratification at Midlife." *Sociology of Education* 94(4):341–60. doi:[10.1177/00380407211041776](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407211041776).
- Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Huang, Tiffany J., and Estela B. Diaz. 2025. "Inequality and Moral Meaning-Making in the Admissions Consulting Profession." *Social Problems*. doi:[10.1093/socpro/spaf077](https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf077).
- Kallio, Ruth E. 1995. "Factors Influencing the College Choice Decisions of Graduate Students." *Research in Higher Education* 36(1):109–24. doi:[10.1007/BF02207769](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02207769).
- Kaul, Maya. 2026. "The Logics of Teaching: How Institutionalized Ideas about Teaching Shape Teachers' Professional Identities." *Sociology of Education* 99(1):20–39.
doi:[10.1177/00380407251359628](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407251359628).
- Kena, Grace, William Hussar, Joel McFarland, Cristobal de Brey, Lauren Musu-Gillette, Xiaolei Wang, Jijun Zhang, Amy Rathbun, Sidney Wilkinson-Flicker, Melissa Diliberti, Amy Barner, Farrah Bullock Mann, Erin Dunlop Velez, Thomas Nachazel, Wyatt Smith, and

- Mark Ossolinski. 2016. *The Condition of Education 2016*. NCES 2016–144. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED565888.pdf>.
- Kirksey, Jacob, and Jessica J. Gottlieb. 2024. “Virtual Pathways: Linking Online Alternative Certification Programs to Student Achievement and Teacher Attrition in Texas.” <https://hdl.handle.net/2346/97797>.
- Kizilcec, René F., Rachel B. Baker, Elizabeth Bruch, Kalena E. Cortes, Laura T. Hamilton, David Nathan Lang, Zachary A. Pardos, Marissa E. Thompson, and Mitchell L. Stevens. 2023. “From Pipelines to Pathways in the Study of Academic Progress.” *Science* 380(6643):344–47. doi:[10.1126/science.adg5406](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adg5406).
- Kraft, Matthew A., and Melissa Arnold Lyon. 2024. “The Rise and Fall of the Teaching Profession: Prestige, Interest, Preparation, and Satisfaction Over the Last Half Century.” *American Educational Research Journal* 61(6):1192–1236. doi:[10.3102/00028312241276856](https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312241276856).
- Krieg, John M., Roddy Theobald, and Dan Goldhaber. 2016. “A Foot in the Door: Exploring the Role of Student Teaching Assignments in Teachers’ Initial Job Placements.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 38(2):364–88. doi:[10.3102/0162373716630739](https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716630739).
- Labaree, David F. 2008. *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ladd, Helen F., and Lucy C. Sorensen. 2015. *Do Master’s Degrees Matter? Advanced Degrees, Career Paths, and the Effectiveness of Teachers*. Working Paper 136. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. <https://caldercenter.org/publications/do-masters-degrees-matter-advanced-degrees-career-paths-and-effectiveness-teachers>.

- Lortie, Dan C. 2007. *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Losee, Chad I. 2021. "Access to Graduate School: A Quantitative Study of Interest in Selective Mba Programs." Ed.D., University of Pennsylvania, United States -- Pennsylvania.
- Lovenheim, Michael F., and Jonathan Smith. 2022. "Returns to Different Postsecondary Investments: Institution Type, Academic Programs, and Credentials." *National Bureau of Economic Research*. doi:[10.3386/w29933](https://doi.org/10.3386/w29933).
- Mehta, Jal. 2013. "From Bureaucracy to Profession: Remaking the Educational Sector for the Twenty-First Century." *Harvard Educational Review* 83(3):463–88.
doi:[10.17763/haer.83.3.kr08797621362v05](https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.83.3.kr08797621362v05).
- Mehta, Jal. 2015. *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*. Studies in Postwar American Political Development. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, John W. 1977. "The Effects of Education as an Institution." *American Journal of Sociology* 83(1):55–77.
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña. 2014. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington DC: Sage.
- Minaya, Veronica, Judith Scott-Clayton, and Rachel Yang Zhou. 2024. "Heterogeneity in Labor Market Returns to Master's Degrees: Evidence from Ohio." *Research in Higher Education* 65(5):775–93. doi:[10.1007/s11162-024-09777-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-024-09777-8).

- Moss-Pech, Corey, Steven H. Lopez, and Laurie Michaels. 2021. "Educational Downgrading: Adult Education and Downward Mobility." *Sociology of Education* 94(2):143–58. doi:[10.1177/0038040720982890](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040720982890).
- Mullen, Ann L. 2010. *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mullen, Ann L., Kimberly A. Goyette, and Joseph A. Soares. 2003. "Who Goes to Graduate School? Social and Academic Correlates of Educational Continuation after College." *Sociology of Education* 76(2):143–69. doi:[10.2307/3090274](https://doi.org/10.2307/3090274).
- NCES. 2022. "Measuring 'Traditional' and 'Non-Traditional' Student Success in IPEDS: Data Insights from the IPEDS Outcome Measures (OM) Survey Component." Retrieved March 28, 2026 (<https://nces.ed.gov/learn/blog/measuring-traditional-and-non-traditional-student-success-ipeds-data-insights-ipeds-outcome-measures>).
- NCES. 2023. "Postbaccalaureate Enrollment." U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved March 28, 2026 (<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/chb>).
- Perna, Laura W. 2004. "Understanding the Decision to Enroll in Graduate School: Sex and Racial/Ethnic Group Differences." *The Journal of Higher Education* 75(5):487–527. doi:[10.1353/jhe.2004.0032](https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2004.0032).
- Posselt, Julie R., and Eric Grodsky. 2017. "Graduate Education and Social Stratification." *Annual Review of Sociology* 43(1):353–78. doi:[10.1146/annurev-soc-081715-074324](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081715-074324).
- Pyne, Jaymes, and Eric Grodsky. 2020. "Inequality and Opportunity in a Perfect Storm of Graduate Student Debt." *Sociology of Education* 93(1):20–39. doi:[10.1177/0038040719876245](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040719876245).

- Rivera, Lauren A. 2015. *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ronfeldt, Matthew Stephen. 2008. "Crafting Core Selves during Professional Education." Doctoral dissertation.
- Santoro, Doris A. 2011. "Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work." *American Journal of Education* 118(1):1–23. doi:[10.1086/662010](https://doi.org/10.1086/662010).
- Schleef, Debra J. 2006. *Managing Elites: Professional Socialization in Law and Business Schools*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Shimano, Melanie, and Becky Klein-Collins. 2024. *Multiple Meanings of College: How Adult Learners Make Sense of Postsecondary Education & Why It Matters*. CAEL.
- Strober, Myra H., and David Tyack. 1980. "Why Do Women Teach and Men Manage? A Report on Research on Schools." *Signs* 5(3):494–503.
- Timmermans, Stefan, and Iddo Tavory. 2012. "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis." *Sociological Theory* 30(3):167–86. doi:[10.1177/0735275112457914](https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914).
- Torche, Florencia. 2011. "Is a College Degree Still the Great Equalizer? Intergenerational Mobility across Levels of Schooling in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(3):763–807. doi:[10.1086/661904](https://doi.org/10.1086/661904).
- US Census Bureau. 2023. "Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data." Retrieved March 28, 2026 (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/educational-attainment-data.html>).

- Vallas, Steven P., and Angèle Christin. 2018. "Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to 'Personal Branding' Discourse." *Work and Occupations* 45(1):3–37. doi:[10.1177/0730888417735662](https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888417735662).
- Wilson, Suzanne M., and Shannon L. Kelley. 2022. *Landscape of Teacher Preparation Programs and Teacher Candidates*. National Academy of Education Committee on Evaluating and Improving Teacher Preparation Programs, National Academy of Education. doi:[10.31094/2021/3/4](https://doi.org/10.31094/2021/3/4).
- Zhang, Liang. 2005. "Advance to Graduate Education: The Effect of College Quality and Undergraduate Majors." *Review of Higher Education* 28(3):313–38. doi:[10.1353/rhe.2005.0030](https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2005.0030).

Figures

Figure 1. Variation in graduate program attributes across institutional status

		<u>Fields of Study</u>	
		Teaching	Business
<u>Institutional Status</u>	Higher	Teacher Education <i>Full-time, top-ranked, university-based</i>	MBA <i>Full-time, elite, top-ranked</i>
	Lower	Teacher Education <i>Self-paced, for-profit, online-only</i>	MBA <i>Part-time, local, unranked</i>