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4/4/19

Acceptance speech for the Elizabeth G. Cohen Distinguished Career in Applied Sociology of Education Award from the American Education Research Association.

In college, I decided that I wanted a career that would maintain my interest and would make a contribution for improving the world. The field of Sociology of Education has met those goals.

It is fascinating and it is important -- it describes how schools prepare the next generation for adulthood. It is also fascinating because it often shows that reality contradicts many of our "common sense" preconceptions.

It is repeatedly surprising to discover that common sense is often wrong, and research has provided me with such surprises many times. In the next few minutes, I would like to share with you what has most fascinated me about how sociology of education research can often surprise us and show that what we consider common sense is often mistaken.

In the 1980s, I studied a residential mobility program in which low income black families in public housing moved to better housing in middle-class suburbs or to urban low-income areas. The study found that the mothers got better jobs and the children got better education and jobs, and they formed friendships with white neighbors.

Instead of assuming that choosing better neighborhoods was just common sense and families could do it on their own, the Chicago program provided strong housing counseling, and suburb movers moved long distances, to much better neighborhoods and much better schools. In contrast, when the federal MTO program tried to replicate my study, they created a stronger study, but a weaker program.

The federal program assumed that choosing better neighborhoods was just common sense, and they provided minimal housing counseling. As a result, families moved short distances near their original housing projects, into high poverty enclaves within low-poverty census tracts, and children attended terrible schools.

While the researchers were puzzled when the outcomes contradicted their hypotheses, Stefanie Deluca and I found that the MTO program refuted the assumption that choosing better neighborhoods and schools is just common sense and automatically happens from individuals' choices. MTO showed that uninformed mobility choices lead to minor moves, which mostly lead to little benefit.

After that, in the 1990s, I planned to study work-bound students—high school seniors who planned not to attend college. Such youth had been identified as the forgotten half, since society ignored their many difficulties. Fortunately, before I gave my survey, I saw

new national data that showed that this group had changed. Students who formerly had "work-bound" plans now had college plans. My goal to study students with "work bound" plans was targeting a vanishing group of youth. I quickly changed my study, and I began studying "college for all."

In the late 1990's, I became interested in CCs because of a graduate student. I don't know if I changed my student's life, but Regina Deil-Amen changed my life.

I began studying CCs with her, because of her interest. Like most people, I thought of CCs as a minor option, sometimes located in a remote corner of a high school. However, they have become a major institution. Enrollment has increased dramatically, and they have created new programs and new degrees. Sociologists have documented these changes, and they have noticed the way these institutions have been transformed.

While parents and educators still have traditional ideas about CC, these institutions have radically changed higher education, and created amazing new opportunities.

Community colleges seem to resemble our commonsense understanding of college, but the reality is quite different. Community college students think they are taking college courses, but most students must take remedial courses, which don't give college credits. Students take a full load of courses, but some courses may not count for their degree program.

Students get college credentials, but some majors have little labor market value. Contrary to our common sense preconceptions, students are getting courses without credits, credits without credentials, and credentials without payoffs. In this new college reality, basic common sense assumptions often don't hold.

Other common sense assumptions don't apply. The following will sound like a laundry list of findings, but what is striking is that they contradict our common sense assumptions, and they are likely to create serious disappointments. Students plan to get four-year BA degrees, which often take over 6 years.

PR campaigns tell students that BA degrees have \$1 million payoffs, but in fact BA earnings vary enormously and 25 percent of BAs earn less than most people with one-year certificates and 25 percent of certificate holders earn more than most BAs.

Reformers seek to avoid stigma by euphemisms, and remedial courses are renamed "developmental education." Though well-intended, such euphemisms prevent students from making realistic college plans. Reformers rightly criticize for-profit colleges, but sociological analyses show how American ideals create overheated ambitions which for-profits easily exploit.

In recent research, Megan Holland showed how one high school creates an "instant decision" college fair, where seniors with no college plans in May attend a college fair where unselective colleges admit them on the spot. Though it seems benign, these colleges have poor completion rates.

Sociology of education offers a powerful vision. While other disciplines blame individuals for bad outcomes, SOE identifies context influences, which can be redesigned by institutions or policies. One of the greatest gratifications of sociological research comes if sociological insights can be used to redesign schools to improve student success.

My research described the problems disadvantaged students have with traditional college procedures, and described colleges that used nontraditional procedures to align standards, structure curriculum pathways, monitor student progress, provide peer cohort supports, and offer short remedial lessons as needed instead of whole remedial courses. Some educators have used my findings to improve the design of community colleges. Harper college created a strong alignment with its feeder high schools.

In 11th grade, students take the college remedial placement exam, and discover skill gaps they can fix in senior year, before they go to college. Similarly, a new college in the CUNY system has created many sociological structural changes modelled on my prior studies. These changes have been easily implemented and have led to much better degree completion successes. Contrary to our usual commonsense assumption that college students should pick their own courses, this community college creates curriculum pathways, which decrease mistakes and increase coherence.

In accepting this award, I am indebted to many people. I've had the great pleasure of working with outstanding students, who have brought their insights and energies to these studies. This career award celebrates projects, improved understanding, and applications of findings, but it also celebrates the many students who worked on these projects and contributed so much, and who are now leading the next generation of scholarship. Without a doubt, my most important contribution to the field is helping to train these smart scholars.

Scholars are often portrayed as "know it alls," but the best sociologists of education realize that there is much that we don't know, and what we know quickly becomes obsolete. We have knowledge about evanescent social realities that are hard-to-see and quickly changing. Our field leads us to ask questions about commonsense reality, to make new discoveries, and even to improve procedures and outcomes. It is endlessly fascinating.

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