The Great Equalizer? Race, Educational Attainment, and Success

In the United States, people undeniably emphasize educational attainment as a pathway to personal success. Education is not only a mark of achievement but has been accepted as the gateway *to* achievement, as it is widely known as the "great equalizer."[1] However, recent studies have been revealing evidence that this claim is not true, as social inequalities persist throughout education and into career outcomes.

Social inequalities are complex. Thus, an intersectional framework is necessary for analyzing disparities within educational outcomes. Intersectionality refers to the frame of analysis that examines the intersection of social factors that form a matrix of oppression.[2] This framework allows researchers to see the bigger picture of social inequalities and how they manifest themselves within an individual whose identity is multifaceted.

Recent findings have shown that education itself is not created equal, as the existence of prestigious colleges and their legacy admissions policies exemplify.[3] While education has significant benefits, access to higher education opportunities is also unequal, as underprivileged families often lack the resources and the knowledge to fully invest in their children's education in comparison to families with higher socioeconomic status.[4] While higher education has been proven to have high returns that improve lives, formal education does not teach certain life skills. Rather, this knowledge indicates a privileged upbringing with a plethora of cultural capital, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu to describe the knowledge and skills an individual learns from their habitus.[5] This type of capital affects a person's quality of education and the ability to navigate professional spaces.[6] Thus, it has been concluded that students with more cultural capital have covert advantages over those with less cultural capital,[7] which is one way in which

marginalized communities that receive higher education are still at a disadvantage compared to their privileged peers.

Race is one social factor that impacts career advancement after degree completion. These findings are consistent with research that reveals race's significant effects on occupational prestige. Additionally, research implies that the intersection of race and gender is more impactful for some races than others in determining occupation and professional achievements.[8] This is partly due to discriminatory hiring practices in which Black job candidates receive fewer employer responses, and when they do, they are often for jobs with lower salaries and lower prestige,[9] but it also manifests itself in more covert ways. Evidence has shown that white people tend to have more access to influential social ties that give them advantages and receive more informal support such as money and advice than people of color,[10] which is significant in understanding where job opportunities truly come from. As Steve McDonald, Nan Lin, and Dan Ao concluded, “Gender/race inequality in access to job information is indeed prevalent in the labor market, particularly at the highest level of workplace authority. These findings underscore the utility of examinations of unequal access to job information.”[11] Research conducted on intergenerational mobility among individuals who have gone to college reveals such inconsistencies. While social mobility is substantial among Ph.D. holders, the degree does not erase social inequalities for marginalized groups.[12]

Due to the complexity of social inequality explained above, it was hypothesized that education attainment will positively affect social mobility. That effect will vary among races, but it will have the most significant impact on white individuals.

Data and Methods

This analysis used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the statistical analysis program Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) to examine different social factors. The data used are from 2022. The GSS is a national survey conducted since 1972 designed to provide representative data on those living in the United States. The surveys cover a wide variety of topics, from demographics down to special interests.[13]

This study has one independent variable (DEGREE) and several dependent variables to examine whether and how various social factors, including class, occupational prestige, and income, are affected by educational attainment.

The independent variable (DEGREE) was re-coded into two categories: one for respondents who had a high school diploma or did not graduate high school and the second for respondents who received education beyond high school. This included associate degrees and junior college, bachelor degrees, and graduate-level degrees.

Independent variable:

Table 1= DEGREE (Collapsed)

Year = 2022

Level of Education	Value	N	%
High school degree or less	1	2,013	60.9%
Higher Education (Associate's, Junior College, Bachelor's, Graduate)	2	1,531	39.1%
Total		3,544	100.0%

The variable CLASS was recoded into two categories: lower/working class and middle/upper class. The variable RINCOM16 (respondent's income) was also recoded to measure the respondent's income in relation to the poverty level and the U.S. average income, which was approximately $60,000 in 2022, according to the Social Security Administration.

Table 2 = CLASS (Collapsed)

Year = 2022

Class	Value	N	%
Lower/Working Class	1	1,851	52.8%
Middle/Upper Class	2	1,658	47.2%
Total		3,509	100.0%

Table 3= RINCOM16 (Respondent's Income, Collapsed)

Year =2022

Respondent's Income	Value	N	%
Below Poverty Line: Under $1,000 to $24,999	1	566	30.4%
Below Average Income: $25,000 to $59,000	2	673	32.2%
Above Average Income: $60,000 and up	3	751	37.4%
Total		1,990	100.0%

The variable PRESTG10, a measurement of a respondent's occupational prestige level, was re-coded as "OCCPRESTIGE" to display a condensed variable of low or high level of prestige. Categories were created based on the 2010 Census Occupational Category prestige scores provided in the GSS Codebook. Important to note is that prestige scores vary widely within fields. For example, although they are both in healthcare, a medical technician does not hold the same prestige as a physician. Hence, the categories are labeled from low to high. Occupational prestige is measured from 0 to 100, zero being the lowest and 100 being the highest. Scores were collapsed into three groups, indicating low, medium, or high prestige.

Table 4 = PRESTG10 (OCCPRESTIGE, Collapsed)

Year =2022

Occupational Prestige	Value	N	%
Low (16-39)	1	1,404	42.4%
Medium (40-59)	2	1,223	37.5%
High (60-80)	3	699	19.1%
Total		3,326	100.0%

Race was the primary control variable in comparing how educational attainment effects differ across races. For further analysis, the respondent's sex was added to illuminate the intersection of sex and race. It is important to note that for both control variables, a very limited definition of racial and sex categories was used. The study categorized RACE as White, Black, or Other and recorded SEX as either Female or Male.

Table 5: RACE Year = 2022

Race	Value	N	%
White	1	2,514	74.3%
Black	2	565	13.3%
Other	3	412	12.4%
Total		3,491	100.0%

Table 6: SEX

Year = 2022

Respondent's sex	Value	N	%
Male	1	1,627	48.7%
Female	2	1,897	51.3%
Total		3,524	100.0%

Table 7: Crosstabulation of Class and Degree

Year = 2022

Class	High school or less	Higher Education
Lower/Working Class	63.3%	28.1%
Middle/Upper Class	36.7%	71.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 3,509

P = 0.00

Chisq = 364.83

Table 7 clearly supports the expected impact of education on class. The majority of respondents who did not receive higher education were lower or working class, while the majority of those who went to college or beyond were middle or upper class. This table shows that education made a 35.2 percent difference in determining class for all respondents. This is statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.00.

7a: Class, Degree, and Race

Year = 2022

Race =White

Class Degree	High school or less	Higher Education
Lower/Working Class	63.8%	29.3%
Middle/Upper	36.2%	70.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 2,504
P = 0.00
Chisq = 286.63

Race = Black

High school or less	Higher Education
68.0%	55.9%
32.0%	44.1%
100.0%	100.0%

N= 553
P = 0.13
Chisq = 7.30

Race = Other

High school or less	Higher Education
68.8%	44.6%
31.2%	55.4%
100.0%	100.0%

N=403
P = 0.00
Chisq = 23.34

For white respondents, there is a significant correlation between educational attainment and social class. Of those who earned a high school degree or did not complete high school, 63.8 percent are considered lower or working class, compared to 29.3 percent who received more than a high school education (Junior college, bachelor's, or graduate degree). The remaining 36.2 percent of white respondents who earned a high school degree or did not complete high school are considered middle or upper class, compared to the 70.7 percent remaining respondents who

earned degrees in higher education. These data account for a 34.5 percent difference that education makes in determining class. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 286.63 and a p-value of 0.00.

The relationship between class and degree is not as straightforward for Black respondents. While the majority of those who did not go beyond high school were lower or working class as hypothesized, a majority of those who received higher education (55.9 percent) were still lower or working class, accounting for a 12.1 percent difference that education makes on class. The table is not statistically significant with a chi-square of 7.30 and a p-value of 0.13.

For respondents of other racial groups, there was a relatively strong relationship between degree and class. The majority of those who did not receive beyond a high school education were considered lower or working class and the majority of those who did receive higher education were middle or upper class. However, the split was not as drastic for those who received higher education. For these respondents, degree made a 24.2 percent difference in determining social class. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 23.34 and a p-value of 0.00. As a whole, when comparing educational attainment with a respondent's social class, these data suggest that academic achievement does assist in increasing one's social class yet supports the hypothesis that not all mobility was dispersed equally among the races.

Table 7b: Class, Degree, Race, and Sex

Year = 2022

Sex = MALE

Race =White

Class Degree	High school or less	Higher Education
Lower/Working Class	65.0%	26.0%
Middle/Upper	35.0%	74.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 1,194

P = 0.00

Chisq = 169.57

Race = Black

High school or less	Higher Education
58.9%	47.6%
41.1%	52.4%
100.0%	100.0%

N= 212

P = 0.33

Chisq = 2.30

Race = Other

High school or less	Higher Education
70.8%	47.8%
29.2%	52.2%
100.0%	100.0%

N= 194

P = 0.05

Chisq = 10.65

Table 7c: Class, Degree, Race, and Sex

Year = 2022

Sex = FEMALE

Race =White

Class Degree	High school or less	Higher Education
Lower/Working Class	62.5%	32.2%
Middle/Upper	37.5%	67.8%

Race = Black

High school or less	Higher Education
74.2%	62.2%
25.8%	37.8%

Race = Other

High school or less	Higher Education
67.3%	42.3%
32.7%	57.7%

Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 1,302
P = 0.00
Chisq = 117.76

100.0%	100.0%

N= 338
P = 0.14
Chisq = 4.90

100.0%	100.0%

N=202
P = 0.03
Chisq = 11.72

For white male respondents, education made a difference of 39.0 percent in determining social class, compared to a 30.3 percent difference for white females. For Black respondents, males experienced an average of 11.3 percent difference. Black females experienced an average of a 12.0 percent difference. For male respondents of other races, education made a 23.0 percent difference in determining class, and for female respondents of other races, education made a 25.0 percent difference.

Table 8: Crosstabulation of Income Level and Degree Year = 2022

Income	High school or less	Higher Education
Below the poverty line	40.6%	10.1%
Below average income	34.9%	26.8%
Above average income	24.6%	63.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N= 1,990
P = 0.00
Chisq = 319.41

Table 8 supports the claim that education also assists in increasing income levels. According to the data, most respondents who did not receive higher education have below-

average income or below the poverty line, while the majority of those who went to college or beyond have above-average income. For income, education made an average difference of 25.7 percent for all respondents.

8a: Income Level, Degree, and Race

2022

Race = White

Income level and Degree	High School or Less	Higher Education
Below the Poverty Line	37.6%	14.8%
Below Average Income	38.4%	28.2%
Above Average Income	24.0%	57.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 1,439
P = 0.00
Chisq = 178.57

Race = Black

	High School or Less	Higher Education
	46.4%	19.4%
	31.5%	34.0%
	22.1%	46.6%
	100.0%	100.0%

N = 298
P = 0.01
Chisq = 25.99

Race = Other

	High School or Less	Higher Education
	60.0%	15.2%
	27.6%	19.0%
	12.4%	65.8%
	100.0%	100.0%

N = 237
P = 0.00
Chisq = 77.42

For white respondents whose highest level of education is a high school diploma or less, 37.6 percent fall below the poverty line, compared to 14.8 percent who received higher education. 38.4 percent of those with a high school education or less earn below the average income. In comparison, 28.2 percent of those who received higher education make below the average income. 24.0 percent of the respondents who received a high-school diploma or did not

finish high school make above the average income. In comparison, the majority (57.0 percent) of those who received higher education also have above-average incomes. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 178.57 and a p-value of 0.00.

For Black respondents whose highest level of education is a high school diploma or less, 46.4 percent fall below the federal poverty level. 19.4 percent of Black respondents who received a higher education also fall below the poverty level. 31.5 percent of respondents who received a high school diploma or less make below the average income, compared to 34 percent of those who received higher education. Finally, 22.1 percent of Black respondents who either did not finish high school or did not seek higher education make above the average income, whereas 46.6 percent of respondents who received higher education also make above the average income. Notably, over half (53.4 percent) of Black respondents who received higher education still make below the average income or are below the poverty level. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 25.99 and a p-value of 0.01.

For respondents of other racial groups, 60.0 percent of those who did not finish high school or did not seek higher education after graduation fall below the federal poverty level. 15.2 percent of those who did receive higher education also fall below the poverty line. 27.6 percent of those with a high school education or less make below the average income, as well as 19 percent of those who received higher education. Finally, 12.4 percent of respondents who received a high school diploma or less make above the average income, and 65.8 percent of those who received higher education also make above the average income. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 77.42 and a P-value of 0.00.

8b: Income Level, Degree, Race, and Sex

2022

Sex = MALE

Race = White

Income level and Degree	High School or Less	Higher Education
Below the Poverty Line	27.2%	13.7%
Below Average Income	39.5%	17.1%
Above Average Income	33.4%	69.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 718
P = 0.00
Chisq = 88.83

Race = Black

High School or Less	Higher Education
26.3%	17.5%
35.6%	38.6%
38.1%	43.9%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 125
P = 0.75
Chisq = 1.10

Race = Other

High School or Less	Higher Education
41.6%	7.3%
40.8%	14.6%
17.6%	78.1%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 126
P = 0.00
Chisq = 47.17

8c: Income Level, Degree, Race, and Sex

Year = 2022

Sex = FEMALE

Race = White

Income level and Degree	High School or Less	Higher Education
Below the Poverty Line	52.5%	15.8%
Below Average Income	36.4%	37.7%
Above Average Income	10.7%	46.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 720
P = 0.00
Chisq = 151.08

Race = Black

High School or Less	Higher Education
66.8%	20.7%
27.3%	30.8%
5.9%	48.6%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 173
P = 0.00
Chisq = 51.28

Race = Other

High School or Less	Higher Education
75.0%	26.2%
16.9%	25.1%
8.1%	48.7%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 111
P = 0.00
Chisq = 30.05

For white male respondents, education made an average of 23.9 percent difference in determining income level. For white female respondents, education made an average of 24.6 percent difference. For Black male respondents, education made an average of 17.6 percent difference in determining income, whereas for Black female respondents, education made a 30.76 percent difference. For male respondents of other races, education made an average of 40.3

percent difference in determining income, and for female respondents, it made a 32.53 percent difference.

9: Crosstabulation of Occupational Prestige and Degree

Year = 2022

Prestige score	High school or less	Higher education
Low (16-39)	54.0%	19.3%
Medium (40-59)	38.0%	36.4%
High (60-80)	8.0%	44.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 3,326
P = 0.00
Chisq = 681.53

According to Table 9, education also affects occupational prestige, mainly for those in low-prestige and high-prestige occupations. Of those who did not receive education beyond high school, only 8 percent had high-prestige jobs, versus 44 percent of those who did. This data reveals that education made an average difference of 24.2 percent in determining occupational prestige for all respondents.

9a: Occupational Prestige, Degree, and Race

Year = 2022

Race = White

Occupational Prestige Score	High school or less	Higher Education
Low (16-39)	56.2%	20.6%

Race = Black

High school or less	Higher Education
57.5%	26.7%

Race = Other

High school or less	Higher Education
63.8%	31.6%

Medium (40-59)	37.1%	38.3%		37.7%	45.4%		31.5%	35.1%
High (60-80)	6.7%	41.1%		4.8%	27.9%		4.7%	33.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%

N = 2,387
P = 0.00
Chisq = 523.95

N = 519
P = 0.00
Chisq = 79.15

N = 379
P = 0.00
Chisq = 68.64

Among white respondents, 56.2 percent who received a high school diploma or less had a low prestige score, compared to 20.6 percent of those who received higher education. For white respondents who received a high school diploma or less, 37.1 percent had a medium prestige score, compared to 38.3 percent of those who received higher education. For white respondents who received a high school diploma or less, 6.7 percent had a high prestige score, compared to 41.1 percent of those who received higher education. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 523.95 and a p-value of 0.00.

For Black respondents who received a high school diploma or less, 57.5 percent had a low prestige score, compared to 26.7 percent of those who received higher education. For Black respondents who received a high school diploma or less, 37.7 percent had a medium prestige score, compared to 45.4 percent of those who received higher education. For Black respondents who received a high school diploma or less, 4.8 percent had a high prestige score, compared to 27.9 percent of those who received higher education. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 79.15 and a p-value of 0.00.

For respondents of other racial groups, 63.8 percent of those who did not go beyond a high school education were considered to have a low occupational prestige score, compared to 31.6 percent of those who received higher education. For respondents of other racial groups, 31.5 percent of those who did not go beyond a high school education had a medium occupational prestige score, compared to 35.1 percent of those who received higher education. For respondents of other racial groups, 4.7 percent of those who did not go beyond a high school education had a high occupational prestige score, compared to 33.3 percent of those who received higher education. The table is statistically significant with a chi-square of 68.64 and a p-value of 0.00.

Table 9b: Crosstabulation of Occupational Prestige Score and Degree

Year = 2022

Control: Race and Sex: MALE

Race = White

Occupational Prestige Score	High school or less	Higher Education
Low (16-39)	51.5%	23.2%
Medium (40-59)	40.1%	39.8%
High (60-80)	8.4%	37.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 1.152
P = 0.00
Chisq = 168.69

Race = Black

High school or less	Higher Education
60.5%	28.9%
32.6%	50.6%
6.9%	20.5%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 203
P = 0.01
Chisq = 19.70

Race = Other

High school or less	Higher Education
63.4%	42.5%
29.3%	32.4%
7.3%	25.1%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 188
P = 0.00
Chisq = 13.51

Table 9c: Crosstabulation of Occupational Prestige Score and Degree

Year = 2022

Control: Race and Sex: FEMALE

Race = White

Occupational Prestige Score	High school or less	Higher Education
Low (16-39)	61.7%	18.4%
Medium (40-59)	33.5%	37.0%
High (60-80)	4.8%	44.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

N = 1,230
P = 0.00
Chisq = 348.68

Race = Black

High school or less	Higher Education
55.5%	25.1%
41.2%	41.5%
3.4%	33.4%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 313
P = 0.00
Chisq = 61.05

Race = Other

High school or less	Higher Education
64.0%	19.7%
33.3%	36.1%
2.7%	44.1%
100.0%	100.0%

N = 188
P = 0.00
Chisq = 60.12

For white male respondents, education made an average difference of 19.06 percent in determining occupational prestige and an average of 28.9 percent difference for white female respondents. For Black respondents, males experienced an average difference of 21.06 percent after receiving higher education. In contrast, female respondents showed that education made an average of a 20.23 percent difference in determining occupational prestige. For male respondents of other races, education made an average of a 13.8 percent difference in determining occupational prestige. For females of other races, education made an average of a 29.5 percent difference.

Discussion

The results above illuminate significant findings about educational achievement and social mobility. Across all results, educational attainment and social factors such as class, income, and occupational prestige have a strong positive correlation; educational attainment assists in social mobility. However, when comparing the results between races, it is evident that the degree to which education affects social mobility is inconsistent.

To compare the differences between races, take for example the difference that education makes in determining social class. For white individuals, education made a 34.5 percent difference in determining the social class of the respondent. For Black individuals, there was only a 12.1 percent difference, and as noted previously, over half of the Black respondents who received higher education still make below the average income or are below the poverty level. For those of other racial groups, there was a 24.2 percent difference. Therefore, education serves social mobility 22.4 percent more for white Americans than Black Americans.

The difference education has on income was inconsistent across races as well. For white respondents, education level had an approximately 22 percent difference in improving their income. For Black respondents, there was only an 18 percent difference. Most surprisingly, those of other racial groups had the highest degree of mobility, with an average of a 35.7 percent difference between those without higher education and respondents with junior college, undergraduate, or graduate degrees. This could be due to cultural differences and the various degrees to which people place value on educational achievement.

Lastly, occupational prestige differed between races as well. For white respondents, an advanced degree made an approximately 14.2 percent difference in determining their

occupational prestige, whereas for Black respondents, an advanced degree made a 12.3 percent difference. For those of other racial categories, an advanced degree made an average of a 12.9 percent difference. While these numbers are closer than the differences outlined in class and income results, they are still worth considering because their trend aligns with those of the other two variables.

The addition of sex as a second control variable illuminates the importance of studying the intersection of race and gender. For the crosstabulation of class and education, results showed that white men experienced the most social mobility after receiving higher education. Interestingly, Black men presented the least amount of social mobility, although Black women only had 0.7 percent more of an increase. These findings were not statistically significant.

The results were even more interesting in the crosstabulations for income level and occupational prestige. On average, Black women experienced 13.16 percent more of an increase in income level after receiving higher education than Black men did. Again, the results for Black men were not statistically significant in terms of income level, but future research should still consider the difference.

For occupational prestige, sex made a significant difference for white respondents and respondents of other races. Surprisingly, female respondents showed the most mobility after receiving higher education. Furthermore, for Black respondents, men only experienced approximately 0.83 percent more of a difference than women. These findings are statistically significant.

Due to the inconsistencies in the influence educational attainment has on class, income, and occupational prestige, education cannot be deemed the key to leveling social inequality.

Failing to address contributing factors perpetuates racial injustices. Black respondents showed the least mobility despite having the same levels of education as other races. Due to statistically insignificant results, one cannot draw a clear conclusion concerning the relationship between mobility, education, race, and gender.

Conclusion

The data outlined above demonstrate the important implications that higher education is not the "great equalizer" it is advertised to be. As racial inequality persists throughout and beyond education, it is dangerous to push the notion that education is the ultimate fix. Instead, a more holistic view is necessary for addressing these issues; education should be part of the conversation, as it does evidently assist in social mobility, but it cannot be the panacea to solving racial inequality.

Lack of access to education is a prevalent issue that deserves recognition, but social scientists and policymakers must look beyond this institution to examine the issue in more nuanced ways. Various factors could contribute to the social inequality that persists in American society today. For one, as explained earlier, not all education is created equal; not only does access to education need to be improved, but access to *quality education* is also a big factor.

Cultural factors could also explain the differences in the data. The surprising outcome that degrees have the most significant impact on income for respondents of other racial groups could stem from how different cultures value high-paying jobs; these individuals may have been encouraged to attend college primarily to secure a high-paying job after graduation.

The results of gender as a second control variable complicate previous assumptions about the intersection between race and gender. A more in-depth analysis of each factor could yield more consistent results. However, the data were not statistically significant, so conclusions about

what this could mean should not be drawn. More research is needed to investigate whether Black women indeed experience more social mobility than Black men and why this occurs.

This study does have several limitations. Race and gender as control variables were limited to simplistic definitions of racial and gender categories. In reality, there are more than three racial categories. Only considering “male” and “female” respondents neglects the nuances of gender and does not reveal how queer identities could impact mobility; overall, it fails to recognize the distinction between biological sex and gender.

More research that considers these nuances is necessary. Furthermore, measuring “success” on class, income, and occupational prestige alone is only one frame of reference. A plethora of variables could measure a person's subjective “success,” such as their happiness level, health, relationships, and overall satisfaction in life.

The conclusions of this study are not to undermine the significance that education can have on an individual’s life. From the results, it is clear that education has a dramatic impact on determining a person’s class, income, and occupational prestige; all Americans should be able to invest in higher education. However, focusing solely on furthering education in hopes that all barriers faced by marginalized communities will dissipate, especially Black Americans, would be a gross injustice for those struggling to climb the social ladder. A more comprehensive approach is essential to address poverty and social inequality by looking at how these issues persist across institutions and how systematic oppression manifests itself in more covert ways beyond the attainment of a prestigious college degree. A deeper exploration of all facets of society is necessary to create meaningful change.

ENDNOTES

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