

**CIRANO note based on a report by Noémi Berlin, Louis Lévy-Garboua, and Claude Montmarquette,  
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The relationship between disparate educational success rates and socio-economic backgrounds is central to any discussion of access to postsecondary studies. Tuition fees are persistently identified as a major limitation to accessibility. The fact is, despite much lower tuition fees in Quebec, for all socio-economic classes the proportion of individuals with no certificate, diploma or degree is higher in Quebec than in Ontario or Canada as a whole.

Several studies have explained university attendance differentials by demonstrating that rich and poor families value the intrinsic value of education, the pay-off to a university education in terms of future income, and tuition levels very differently.

To delve more deeply into this issue of inequality in educational trajectories, we consider variations across individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds in terms of motivation levels and their confidence in a successful outcome.

We postulate that families / students invest in education and must make a series of decisions over the course of their studies, and invoke an experimental economics approach to study all of these questions. Our experiment consists of a series of anagrams that the subjects must solve to earn the right to pursue the experiment, and decision nodes at which they must decide whether or not to continue.

Our experimental design recreates simple situations for proposed values of the model in order to assess

the projected impact of motivation levels on educational choices by socio-economic class.

Even in the context of a controlled experiment like ours, educational inequalities remain a complex subject. However, we are able to demonstrate that—when economic variables are omitted—heterogeneous choices and success rates can be explained by classifying our subjects into groups based on aptitude, motivation, and self-confidence.

Against the backdrop of all these dimensions, each as complex as the next, governmental decision makers must strive to reduce educational inequality. Our study clearly reveals the difficulties with which this task is fraught, and the frequently noted limitations to their interventions. In a word, it is necessary to clearly grasp the distinction between access to education and access to the education system. The media's attention is often on access to the system, in particular in light of rising tuition costs. However, the problem of ensuring that poor families have access to university can be solved with an appropriate system of bursaries, while providing access to an education that will open the doors to university is considerably more complex.

The full study (French only) is available on CIRANO's Website at:

<http://www.cirano.qc.ca/pdf/publication/2012RP-07.pdf>