Inter-College Stratification: The Case of Male College Graduates in Japan

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This paper explores the extent to which career stratification of male college graduates is determined by their university affiliation. It argues that the popular rankings of universities may reflect specific employment practices that systematically privilege the graduates of certain universities over those of others. Such practices include the restrictive recruitment of new graduates and stratified career lines for the college-educated, white-collar workers within the employing organizations. This study divides colleges into two groups, based on the chances for initial placement in the higher managerial career track. Using data from a 1975 national survey of Japanese men, it investigates the variations in income attainment, positional achievement, and relevant attitudinal characteristics of the two groups of college graduates. The results tend to support the stratification thesis, although the differences between the two groups are less dramatic than popular perceptions would lead us to believe.

It is often argued in Japan that a college degree per se is not as meaningful for one's future achievements as a degree from a certain class of universities. This "degree-ocracy," as it is dubbed, is presumed to be a major cause of the unusually high competitive pressures exerted upon high school (and even middle and elementary school) pupils. These ever escalating pressures, in turn, are sometimes alleged to lie at the root of various social problems, such as increasing juvenile delinquency, school violence, and teenage suicides. Particularly relevant here is the presence of a large number of students who, failing to pass the entrance examination for a prestigious university, often spend as much as three years studying to retake the examination rather than entering a less prestigious university. Since most of these "ronin" students (named after the "masterless samurai") attend expensive private schools devoted to improving their examination scores, there must be a widespread feeling and calculation that such extra tuition pays off in the long run.

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The argument that differences among colleges, notably quality differences, affect the socioeconomic attainments of the graduates is a familiar one (Collins, 1971; Milner, 1972). The question of "college effects" has received the attention of social stratification researchers because of their hypothesized role in generating variation in socioeconomic attainments, or at least in mediating the effects of family background and ability factors on later achievements. Alwin (1974, 1976), among others, provides an analysis of the independent effects of college differences. Working with a recursive path-analytic model, Alwin estimates the strength of the college effects net of precollegiate differences in ability, academic performance, family background, and motivation-related factors. Observing that college differences have some independent effects on achievements but that the effects are rather small (with a possible exception for earnings attainment), Alwin concludes that "a somewhat more skeptical view of the importance of college differences" is necessary (Alwin, 1976:370).

While Alwin's caution is well taken, this article explores the question of "college effects" in a non-American setting with a more theoretical approach. The stratificational effect of college difference may be significantly greater in Japan than in the United States. Moreover, even if this is not the case, it still seems fruitful to investigate the actual sociological components of the "college effect." If the latter is treated as a residual category, as in Alwin, possible specific mechanisms working behind it may be left unclarified. Focusing on the recruitment and career development practices of Japanese employers in Japan, we seek to draw attention to one such substantive mechanism that may generate "college effects." We first examine a possible social source for qualitative differences among college graduates, focusing on selective recruitment and stratified career lines in Japanese organizations. Based on this discussion of the Japanese personnel system, we specify a tentative dichotomization of colleges. Then we proceed to an analysis of some aspects of the inter-college stratification of graduates, making comparisons among three groups—high school graduates and two groups of college graduates—in terms of their incomes, positions in organizations, and attitudinal outlooks concerning class identification and social mobility.

AN INTUITIVE ACCOUNT OF STRATIFICATION

We begin with popular conceptions of the inter-college stratification of graduates in Japan. These common beliefs can be summarized

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1 Alwin (1974:210) refers in passing to socialization and certification effects as possible sources, but proceeds with a statistical definition of college effects as being equal to what remains of the effects of college variable after precollegiate individual characteristics are taken into account.