



# The Labor Market Returns to “Some” College: Ambiguous Credentials and Inequality in Early Careers

by Prof. Christina Ciocca Eller  
Assistant Professor  
Sociology and Social Studies  
Harvard University



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While nearly 40% of entrants into bachelor’s degree (BA)-granting colleges in the United States do not earn BAs within six years—yielding 2 million people considered “dropouts” each year—limited research examines the labor market returns to unfinished BAs. To what extent, and for whom, might earning some BA college yield labor market advantages? Drawing on theories of signaling and credentialism, we propose that unfinished BAs serve as “ambiguous credentials” in the labor market, where their value varies substantially based on clearer markers of potential worker productivity such as sub-baccalaureate degree attainment, college selectivity, and both social and cultural capital. We test our hypothesis using restricted-access data drawn from ELS:2002, investigating the payoffs to some BA college in early career wages and occupational prestige. We find that those with some BA college do not experience a wage advantage over those with no BA college during the early career period, but they do achieve an advantage in occupational prestige. In addition, the prestige advantage varies by prior attendance at associate’s degree (AA)-granting colleges and AA attainment, net of entry into BA colleges, and is concentrated among those who attend selective or very selective colleges. Further analyses reveal more granular explanatory mechanisms, including the number of health-related college credits received, attendance at a mobility-enhancing college (net of selectivity), and the maintenance of social ties to those with above-average social class origins. We conclude that the results provide support for the ambiguous credentials hypothesis and discuss the implications for labor market inequality.

Christina Ciocca Eller is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Social Studies. She received her Ph.D. in 2019 from Columbia University as well as graduate degrees in Women’s Studies and Management Research from the University of Oxford through the Timothy S. Healy Scholarship.

Ciocca Eller's research draws on quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the role of organizations in shaping the opportunities and outcomes available to individuals. Her primary case, reflected in her dissertation research, is the U.S. higher education sector. This dissertation work, “Organization Effects on Bachelor’s Degree Completion for the New Majority,” brings together key ideas from the stratification and organizations literatures to study the interactions between students and colleges. Specifically, she uses longitudinal data from both administrative records and a yearlong interview study of students attending a large, urban, public university system in the U.S. to quantify “college effects,” or the independent impact of colleges on student outcomes, as well as the individual and organizational forces that explain those effects.