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Marriage, college and income inequality

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Quad 136

Marriage, College and Income Inequality

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Marriage, College and Income Inequality



Most discussions of higher education and economic outcomes rightly focus on the importance of human capital investment that results in the economic returns to education. Education typically makes one more productive in the work place (of course it provides other benefits, too) which leads to higher wages and more promotions over a lifetime. But there is another important aspect of education that also impacts economic outcomes.

“Assortative mating” is used to describe mating, or in humans, marriage patterns, that are not random. Individuals often choose partners using characteristics that are not simply random. Beautiful people often choose to mate or marry other beautiful people, and people of similar religious beliefs often choose partners with similar beliefs.

These examples of conscious choices by humans may not have a significant impact on economic outcomes, but if humans engage in assortative mating based on intelligence or educational level (and of course these two are often correlated), it might well affect economic outcomes. A household with two college educated adults is very likely to earn more than a household with one or no college educated adults. The implications for income inequality are obvious if high school educated individuals marry one another and the same pattern occurs with college educated and graduate school educated individuals.

Economists have long been interested in the economic impacts of assortative mating along educational lines and **new research** from economists at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) that looked at U.S. Census Data since 1960, when women began to enter college and the professional world in significant numbers, found that “assortative mating is important for income inequality.” And of course the impacts of these choices move across generations as college educated parents have children who are far more likely to be academically and economically successful.

For those who are interested in more information, the *Atlantic* has a **recent article** exploring the impact of assortative mating on income inequality.

The policy implications for this source of growing income inequality are hard to envision as this outcome is an unintended consequence of investments in human capital that society certainly wants to encourage, but possibilities for new ad campaigns for

colleges and universities are endless:

“Come to Saint John’s University and the College of Saint Benedict for the best in Assortative Mating!”

“Assortative Mating Begins Here: CSB/SJU”

“Come for your Assortative Mate and Stay for the Education: Saint Ben’s and Saint John’s”

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).