

# BROOKINGS

SOCIAL MOBILITY  
— MEMOS —

SERIES: Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity | Number 9 of 10  
Richard V. Reeves and Quentin Karpilow | May 8, 2014 12:10pm

## The College Bottleneck in the American Opportunity Structure



*Note: Part of a two-week series devoted to exploring what we can learn about social mobility from Joseph Fishkin's new book, Bottlenecks.*

Bottlenecks control the flow of future opportunities, according to Fishkin, and they can take the form of developmental opportunities, instrumental goods (like money), or a qualifications. In the U.S. today, one qualification acts a quintessential bottleneck: the college degree.

### **Qualification bottlenecks**

Simply put, qualification bottlenecks are:

“Educational credentials, test scores, and other requirements that one must fulfill in order to pursue some path or range of paths to valued ends.” (Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*, p. 156)

While developmental bottlenecks are concerned with skills-building opportunities, qualification bottlenecks relate to the requirements for pursuing a particular life path.

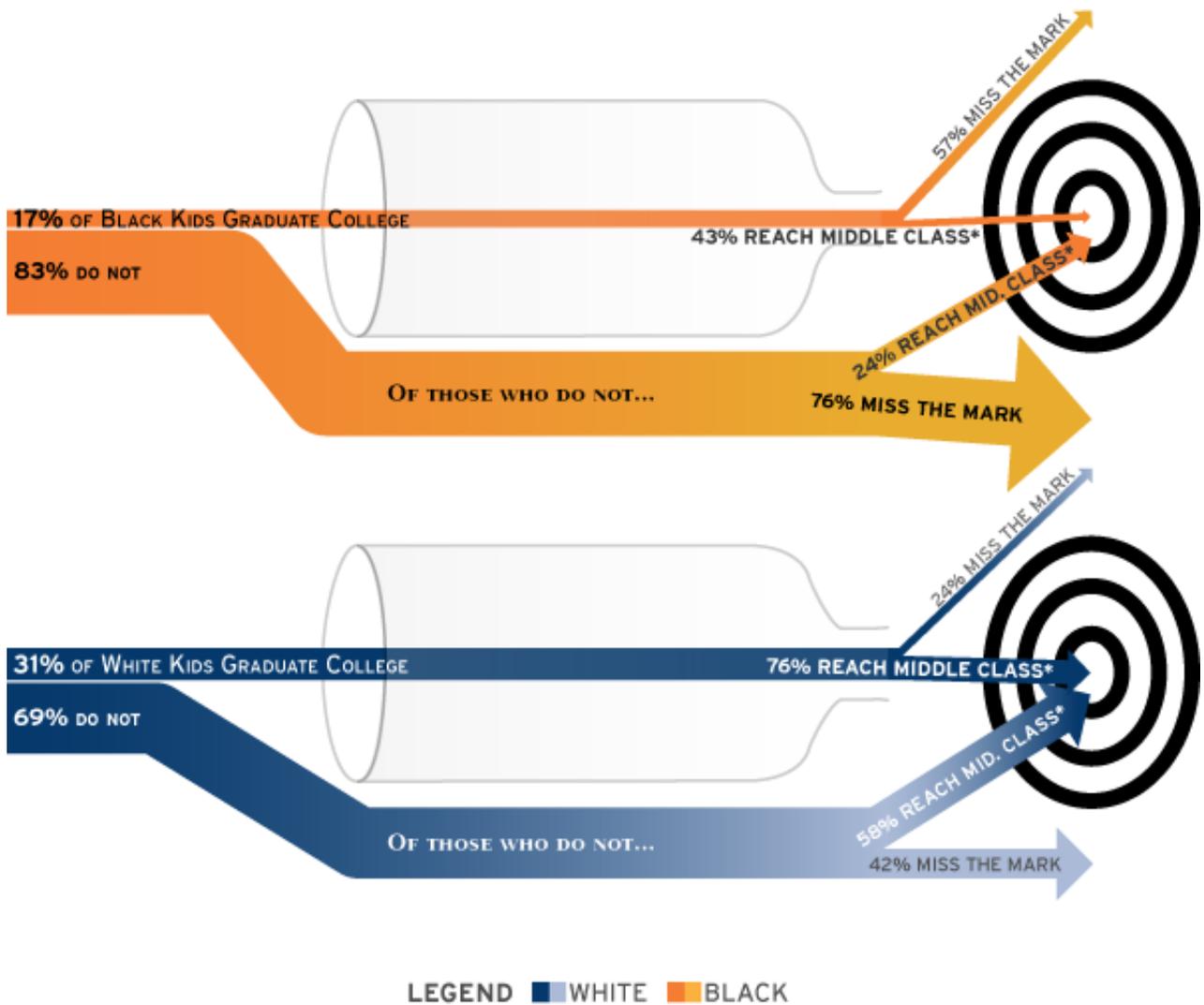
Of course, in many cases, developmental and qualification bottlenecks are interrelated. Scoring well on the SAT is often a pre-requisite for going to an elite college, making it a qualification bottleneck. Elite colleges, however, offer educational and skills-building opportunities that are often hard to find in other post-secondary institutions.

### **The Bottleneck of Race**

Many occupations require a college education, and the economic returns to a BA are, on average, sizeable. It is therefore unsurprising that kids who pass through the college bottleneck are more likely to experience success later on, here shown through our measure of making it to middle class by middle age (i.e., family income at least 300% of the poverty level by age 40), for black and white individuals:

# COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY

## WHO MAKES IT THROUGH THE BOTTLENECK?



\*MIDDLE CLASS BY THE TIME THEY REACH MIDDLE AGE

SOURCE: BROOKINGS CALCULATIONS, DATA FROM THE SOCIAL GENOME MODEL

The importance of the college degree bottleneck is clear, and, by extension, the impact of race gaps on graduation rates is as well. But it is also striking that the black-white gap remains so wide, both for those who do make it through the bottleneck, and those who do not. For instance, 58% of whites who do not make it through the college bottleneck find way *around* it to make it to the middle class, compared to just 1 in 4 of the black non-BA holders.

## Loosening the College Bottleneck

Tackling black-white gaps is very clearly a much deeper challenge than college graduation. But we can certainly loosen the college bottleneck, not just in terms of race but social class, where the gaps are huge, too:

1. *Through* the College Bottleneck: College preparation programs for low-performing students exemplify this “push-through” approach to qualification bottlenecks. Some elite U.S. colleges are outsourcing a small portion their admissions process to the Posse Foundation, which uses nontraditional criteria that emphasize teamwork and leadership experience (as opposed to test scores and GPA) to select applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. *Around* the College Bottleneck, part 1: Community colleges help more students get through the BA bottleneck, by serving as a stepping stone to more selective four-year institutions. But perhaps even more important, they offer more ways around it, by offering a variety of postsecondary educational degrees (associate degrees, technical certifications, etc.) that function as alternatives to the BA.
3. *Around* the College Bottleneck, part 2: Workplace mobility and wider opportunities for career advancement can also circumvent the college bottleneck. Skill-building and mobility don’t have to stop on entry to the labor market. Some companies – like Chipotle –run successful in-house training programs, creating within-firm ladders for upward mobility that do not rely on the BA bottleneck to pre-screen their managers.

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**FredO** • 3 days ago

How about lowering the cost of college ? Eliminating their vast inefficiencies (oceans of vacation and break time, professors who work de minimis schedules, armies of administrators) ? Accrediting Internet resources such as Coursera or EdX ?

Confronting the iron grip of public school teachers, so that young people are college-ready ?

No, of course, we need to throw even more tax dollars down the black hole of education.....

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