# The True Measure of Higher Education: Making of a Higher Education Social Mobility Index

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# About the Carnegie Classifications White Papers

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered in February 2022 to reimagine the future of the Carnegie Classifications. As part of this collaboration, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ACE are working to develop new and refined versions of the classifications that better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education.

An aspect of this work involves learning from experts about key topics that can inform future methodological and data decisions. The Carnegie Classifications White Papers series aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and research about the impact of the historic Basic Classification, areas of consideration for a new Social and Economic Mobility Classification, and the role of classification systems. The analyses and takeaways from these papers provide guidance for potential updates. All released white papers can be found at **carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu**.

Reimagining the Carnegie Classifications is made possible by a cohort of funders that are dedicated to utilizing the classifications to help postsecondary education advance students' social and economic mobility through learner-centered outcomes. Partners include ECMC Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Imaginable Futures, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Mellon Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and Strada Education Foundation, as well as a donor who wishes to remain anonymous.




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## Introduction

For centuries, the purpose of education has been debated. In both Western and Eastern philosophies, the purpose of education to promote or influence the *eudaimonia*, the flourishing of the human condition, is a point of discussion. Given both Eastern and Western systems have created educational institutions that seek to develop a citizenry that is self-actualized, enlightened, or has reached a state of *Nibanna*, free from the dis-ease of lack of education, there has been an ongoing debate as to what elements are required to attain this purpose. The many schools of thought around what constitutes the "right" curricula have yielded a 21st century American educational system that is a blend of human-centeredness in the explicit and implicit curricula and the hard skills provided for vocational acuity.

The shift from "education for education's sake" to defining the value of education by its ability to influence national economic competitiveness through workforce development, employability, or individual income growth has been part of that debate. As a result, the questions around the central functionality of higher education have shifted from the humanistic educational approach. To this extent, contemporary scholars have begun discussing alternative success measures for institutions of higher education, including measures that go beyond the traditional indicators of graduation rates, graduate employment rates, advanced degree attainment rates, and income.

In these discussions, the purpose of higher education to influence the *eudaimonia* of its graduates through its impact on social mobility has emerged. But to capture, measure, and then assess the effectiveness of this impact is complex. Social mobility as a concept is operationalized by its horizontal, vertical, upward, intragenerational, intergenerational, downward, and multidirectional movement. However, nearly all contemporary analyses of the concept are grounded in empirical economic measures that are limited in capturing the noneconomic components of social mobility.

This paper seeks to present the origins of the empirical measures of social mobility; the theoretical frames of social mobility through its connection to economics, comparative conceptualization of social benefit, and economic mobility; and the scholastic optimism that has emerged in the development of a *new nature* of higher education to provide cross-cultural interactions that enrich the human capital of attendees.

## Social Mobility and Improvement of Human Lives

Social mobility as a measure of transformation (and, more specifically, improvement) is well grounded in the literature. Originally presented by Sorokin (1927), the concept of social mobility seeks to describe how individuals move in "social spaces." His concept presents the idea that there exists a social stratification that is economically influenced in cultures and societies. The social stratification is also contextualized by the country, region, and even the city or town. At the time of his work, there was pushback from the academic community (Joslyn 1927), identifying that while his work presents a number of original ideas, its conflation of economic stratification and social stratification is problematic. His work was further challenged to address how occupational stratification influenced his premise on mobility, particularly between what was classified as "low-grade" and "high-grade intelligence" required in positions or occupations like unskilled manual labor vs. executive-level leadership. An argument that rang true in 1927—as it does today—is the implication for scarcity of unskilled manual labor: there is nothing to economically prevent persons in this labor pool from being as socially esteemed or financially compensated as business executives were there to be a profound labor shortage (Joslyn 1927).

This has been visible in the health care field during the COVID-19 global pandemic, where travel nurse weekly pay has risen 100 percent from pre- to post-pandemic (Mensik 2022). Aside from how Sorokin's seminal writing helps to guide the research about social mobility, his analysis also empirically identifies inherited factors that include occupational and economic status. These two factors connect to the improvement of human lives; for example, in theory, one's economic status can provide a spillover benefit to individuals and community around them.

Historically, social mobility has been operationalized by its horizontal, vertical, upward, intragenerational, intergenerational, downward, and multidirectional movement (Sorokin 1927). As Sorokin presents, there scarcely exists a society in which an individual cannot vertically ascend through either economic, political, or occupational means. Additionally—and evidenced in American class structures—there "has never existed a society in which vertical social mobility has been absolutely free" or without challenge (Sorokin 1927).

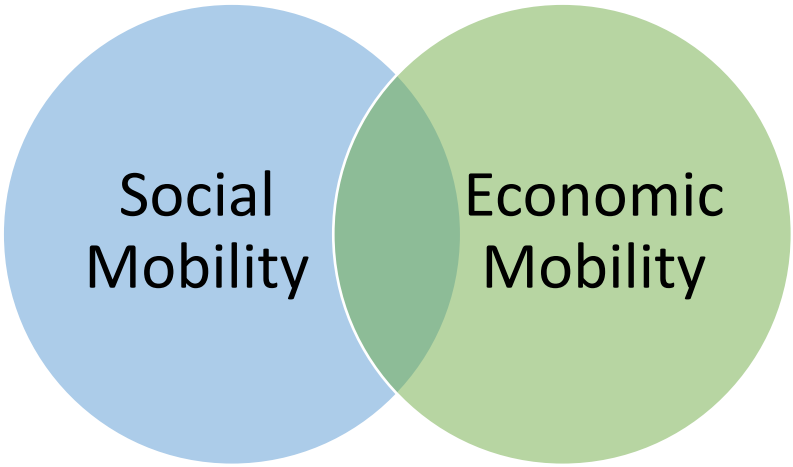
In the same lens, Fields presents six concepts or approaches to defining and measuring social mobility: origin-independence, positional movement, share movement, income flux, directional income movement, and mobility-as-equalizer (Fields 2019). Fields's six concepts each allow varying lines of inquiry. For example, the origin-independence approach to social mobility defines social mobility in terms of one's "final income [being] statistically independent of the initial income" (Fields 2019, 5). Mobility conceptualized through positional movement, share movement, income flux, and directional income movement perspectives implies there is a change, and measures through these lenses seek to define how much movement exists. For example, positional movement measurements are expressed in quintiles or deciles; share movement measures are expressed in more absolutes—whether one's income does or does not change; income flux is a non-directional measure, as it examines the magnitude of change; and directional income measures the extent to which one's income rises or falls. Each of these lenses is empirical in nature and solely leverages measures of numerical changes. The concept of mobility-as-equalizer examines "whether and to what extent the income changes that take place makes the distribution of longer-term incomes more equal relative to a reference distribution or to reference distributions of income" (Fields 2019, 8).

A number of organizations have operationalized social mobility in the context of higher education. Researchers' approaches often blend income or other economic measures, but social and economic mobility blends the idea of income—or economic measures—with the social aspects otherwise generally operationalized. In general, the concept frames what has been operationalized as moving one's class or social status. Because traditional approaches of social mobility are often conflated with economic mobility, higher education outcome measures are often deeply grounded in economic-oriented metrics.

For example, the *U.S. News & World Report*'s social mobility methodology in 2023 captured how well schools graduate Pell grant recipients (Morse and Brooks 2023). The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce calculates a return on investment based on net price of attendance and post-attendance earnings. This approach to social mobility supports the concept of higher education being a source of economic advancement (particularly when college debt accumulation is lower). In their work, Chetty, Friedman, et al. examine the correlation of job growth and long-term outcomes for children. Their model identifies that conditions that promote upward economic mobility are different from those that strengthen the labor market's productivity (Chetty et al. 2018). Lastly, the Economic Mobility Index uses institutional and post-attendance earnings data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the College Scorecard to determine how well colleges meet the needs of low-income students in terms of financial assistance, net price of attendance, earnings, and time to pay down college attendance costs (Itzkowitz 2022).

The ways in which social mobility is currently operationalized are often grounded in empirical economic measures that are limited in capturing the noneconomic components of social mobility. The difficulty in the exclusively economic-based approach is the inability to account for nuances of systemic "-isms" plaguing American culture in education, economics, and politics that serve as hindrances to the citizenry's ability to self-actualize or reach a state of *Nibanna* without adversity. A more inclusive conceptualization of social and economic mobility is required (see figure 1), where a blended operational definition emerges.

Figure 1. Theoretical blended definition




A focus on social and economic mobility seeks to draw attention to the manner by which mobility is influenced by and/or connected to institutional efforts. The national discussion has extolled decades' worth of work to make higher education more accessible to marginalized groups; however, those conversations traditionally happen in context of the typical hegemonic measures of capitalistic success. For nearly 20 years, there has been discussion of the role of higher education in the social mobility of students (Haveman and Smeeding 2006), which is often evaluated through economic measures. For example, collegiate degree recipients earn nearly double what non-collegiate degree recipients earn (Haveman and Smeeding 2006). At present, there is increasing discussion regarding how institutions are functionally contributing to the social benefit of their students and surrounding communities and emergent discussion on quantifying the broader social benefits of higher education. While social benefits are highly contextualized, a general belief is that they include a more democratic and healthier society in which there is a fuller participation of all members.

## Social Benefit Measures

Given the complexities of measuring social and economic mobility in a higher education context, social benefit may be a productive approach to assessing how higher education institutions positively affect society. In the classical theory around labor value, Adam Smith articulated the value of a product being based on the value of labor to produce it but not the measure of the product's impact. The increasing trend in American higher education has been to commoditize students and graduates (Patnaik 2019; Anderson 2005). This dehumanization minimizes an institution's efforts to capture their impact in a eudaemonic frame.

For example, the traditional higher education effectiveness measurement systems like *U.S. News & World Report*, *Money's Best Colleges*, *Washington Monthly*, and *Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education* include graduation rates, institutional research expenditures, loan repayment and default rates, and degree completion metrics. The College Scorecard system includes outcomes related to earnings, graduation rates, and student loans. In all sets of measures, there is an apparent absence of metrics that can capture the social benefit and impact of the graduates.

*Washington Monthly*'s ranking system includes a Community and National Services category, which tracks the number of graduates participating in Peace Corps, the number of students in ROTC, and the amount of work-study funding expended on institutional community service. This is one of the few national rankings that attempts to measure impact or outcomes other than through economics and academic performances. This is an important shift in assessing colleges because of the potential multicollinearity between occupational stratification and measures of economic mobility.

Decades ago, researchers identified the social benefit of education as contributing to a better way to care for ourselves and the communities around us (Behrman and Stacey 1997). The two components of personal (private) benefit and external (public) benefit combine to create social benefit, and while institutions flourished in capturing the personal benefits of higher education (i.e., job/career attainment, income) they have been less consistent in the public benefits (Riddell 2005).

For example, the number of degree recipients who enter professions that contribute to others' health, well-being, safety, or general *eudaimonia* are not easily captured. The social impact from inflow of graduates to the communities from which they came before their collegiate experience is not readily captured either. Both are potentially as important for institutions and society at large as knowing the median income of their graduates a decade after graduation.

## Limitations and Optimism

Although assessing economic mobility is less complicated than social mobility, given the abundance of data available to assess this concept, data limitations around social mobility components like social benefit or social impact are still prevalent. Currently available national datasets have limited data and lack resources to collect new institutional datasets at under-resourced institutions, making expanded data collection unlikely. But the conterminous nature of social and economic mobility as concepts by which institutions of higher education can be assessed provide more optimism than fear of limitations.

## Need for Social Mobility Assessment in a More Contextually Appropriate Model

The most significantly optimistic facet to social mobility is its humanism. Economic mobility measures independently fail to capture the intersectionality of college enrollment, major declaration, and occupation selection from a contextualized lens of components of culture like geography, gender, race or ethnicity, or exceptionalities. A need for more contextualized measures exists, and through the inclusivity of a consensus decision-making process, we can be optimistic that deeper understanding of those contextual components will emerge in a framework. For example, having a deeper understanding of how geography influences class structures and drives the distortion of occupational values will lend itself to development of a more equitable framework for social mobility assessment.

A more humanistic belief is that a framework could value the social benefit of "helping professions" or those that contribute to broader segments of most communities like education and teaching, health care, or social work professions. To capture institutions' ability to contribute to these fields is also to understand why students who may come from historically marginalized and under-resourced rural and urban communities select these professions at these specific institutions. This level of contextualization for a framework that seeks to assess social mobility inherently values the humanistic elements not solely captured in economic mobility measures.

This would be significantly useful for minority serving institutions whose students may emigrate from less-resourced communities, select majors or degree programs in helping professions, and then return to their under-resourced communities to provide their professional contributions. Unlike other possibly larger communities, their return to their communities could provide a meaningful increase in the population of that helping profession.

For communities like Tribal communities, where Native-serving or Tribal colleges contribute to the professional and collegiate degree attainment of Indigenous people, the return of professionally trained individuals to the community is often driven by a desire to help the community rather than economic gains (Huffman 2011). There is also a significant benefit to the Tribal community or reservation when they gain a member who is able to serve the needs of the community while also indirectly serving as a role model to others considering college enrollment. This type of socially beneficial ripple effect for degree attainment is more than economic, but such impact measures are largely anecdotal. There could be potential for federal benchmarking to capture these sociological impacts of colleges and universities.

## Conclusion

Increased attention to social and economic mobility will alter expectations of institutions to support efforts to enact stronger student-centered practices. As the nation with the largest number of accredited institutions and third highest population of college enrolled students (UNESCO 2020), a transition in how institutions assess their impact through social and economic mobility has the potential to evolve the national policy ecosystem.

The present paper has examined the current approaches of social mobility, discussed their relationships to economic mobility, and described social impact and benefits. This has exposed the significant theoretical and measurement gaps in mobility assessment. To fill the gaps in a manner that is equitable to those for whom new frameworks would impact requires thoughtful assessment of what, how, and why certain standards should be captured, measured, and assessed.

Given the complexities of social mobility as multidirectional and the American operationalization of class, there is a significant need to contextualize mobility measures with the humanistic intersectionality of society. Traditional theoretical frames of social mobility through economic connectedness have limited the ability to measure social benefits and the subsequent impact of higher education in people's lives. The scholastic optimism that has emerged in the development of a new nature of higher education is inclusive to the role of contextualized measures and has the potential to create a more equity-driven and student-centered classification system for the country.

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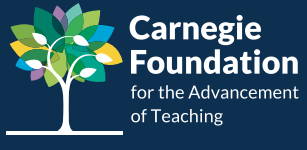
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