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High-school seniors' college enrollment goals: Costs and benefits of ambitious expectations



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ABSTRACT

High school students with high long-term educational expectations attain higher levels of education than those with lower expectations. Less studied is the role of students' short-term college enrollment expectations for the year after high school graduation. The purpose of the current study was to examine the costs and benefits of ambitious short-term expectations and the impact of falling short of these expectations on mental health, motivation, and educational outcomes. Over 1000 youth with expectations to attend college were surveyed during their senior year of high school, one year later, and four years later. Participants who did not achieve their short-term expectations had lower educational attainment four years later but were not less satisfied with their educational progress. The negative consequences of falling short of one's expectations were restricted to individuals with less ambitious short-term expectations. Thus, the benefits of ambitious short-term expectations for youth may outweigh the costs.

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Post-secondary educational attainment is associated with a host of positive adult outcomes including career success and earnings, good physical health, and emotional well-being (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002; Ross & Reskin, 1992). Young adults who earn at least a bachelor's degree (B.A.) can expect greater median earnings and a lower rate of unemployment across the lifespan. For example, in 2012, young adults age 25–34 with a bachelor's degree earned more than twice as much per year as those who did not graduate from high school (\$46,900 vs. \$22,900), 36% more than those who graduated from high school (\$30,000), and 24% more than those who earned an associate's degree (A.A.; \$35,700; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). These differences accumulate over the lifetime, leading individuals with higher educational attainment to have significantly higher lifetime earnings.

As a result of the myriad benefits of post-secondary educational attainment, it is not surprising that most adolescents in high school aspire to earn at least a bachelor's degree (Uno, Mortimer, Kim, & Vuolo, 2010). This collective mentality, coined “college-for-all” by Rosenbaum (2001), is so widespread in the U.S. that even youth with less-than-optimal educational

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performance, resources, and opportunities have high educational expectations. In an analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), Berkner and Chavez (1997) found that 97% of high school seniors expected to obtain some type of post-secondary education “at some point.” For the year immediately following high school graduation, 79% of youth expected to enroll in post-secondary education.

A substantial body of literature has demonstrated the importance of youths' high long-term educational expectations and aspirations for post-secondary enrollment (Eccles, Vida, & Barber, 2004; Hearn, 1991; Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara Barry, & Haskins, 2010; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007; Trusty, 1998) and educational attainment (e.g., Feliciano, 2006; Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Morgan, 2005; Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006). Educational expectations refer to the highest level of education an individual expects to attain (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Kiuru, Aunola, Vuori, & Nurmi, 2007).

While the benefits of high long-term educational expectations for youth are well-established and robust, the benefits of short-term educational expectations are less studied. It is important to note that college enrollment expectations for the year after high school graduation may or may not be as ambitious as long-term expectations. Youth's short-term expectations may be less lofty and more variable because they are anchored in what is realistic in the present and near future. As a result of their time-limitedness, short-term expectations have a higher risk of failure and may lead to undesirable consequences such as negative affect, a loss of self-esteem, or a delay or ending of post-secondary education. Thus, it is unclear if it is as beneficial for youth to have ambitious short-term educational expectations, given a higher risk of failure and possible negative consequences.

Short-term educational expectations may serve as the foundation for long-term expectations. In this case, it might be especially beneficial for youth to have ambitious short-term expectations accompanied by similarly ambitious long-term expectations. It may be detrimental if youths' short-term expectations are not as ambitious as their long-term expectations because short-term expectations may undermine long-term expectations in the long run. Hence, choosing the right level of short-term expectations may present a challenge to youth when attempting to regulate educational goals.

Costs and benefits of ambitious expectations

High educational expectations are an important source of motivation for youth, particularly when obstacles arise or when other factors, such as lack of resources, threaten goal attainment (Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012). High expectations reflect optimism and ambitiousness, two constructs which, in their own right, have been shown to promote perseverance when encountering difficulties. Optimistic biases, in particular, have been linked to higher levels of educational attainment, subjective well-being, and general health (Bandura, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Freund & Baltes, 1998).

However, high educational expectations *per se* are not always beneficial (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). Cultural values (e.g., “The American Dream”) and societal institutions (e.g., a multi-tier school system) influence the impact of ambitiousness on educational outcomes. For example, Heckhausen and Chang (2009) investigated the impact of ambitious long-term expectations among youth in two countries with different educational systems: Germany and the United States. In Germany, youth are channeled into different career trajectories early on through vocational training and apprenticeships, with little opportunity for later switching. In the U.S., even youth who perform poorly in high school have the opportunity to obtain post-secondary education. In the German system, aspirations are most effective when they are calibrated to academic performance and resources (Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002). Heckhausen and Chang (2009) found that in the U.S., ambitious expectations, regardless of performance or resources, are most effective in producing high educational attainment. Thus, the benefits of high expectations depend on cultural value systems and the societally institutionalized opportunities and constraints in the individual's environment.

Educational expectations in youth from diverse backgrounds

Falling short of one's expectations or educational “underachievement,” particularly in the short-term, is a somewhat common occurrence for youth (Uno et al., 2010). In Berkner and Chavez's study (1997), nearly one-fifth (18%) of youth with post-secondary expectations did not achieve them in the year after high school graduation. The long-term consequences of falling short of one's educational expectations, such as discontentment, depressive affect, or lower levels of satisfaction with life, have not been clearly demonstrated by researchers. Certainly, if youth experience repeated failure, prolonged negative feedback, or diminished opportunities to achieve a goal, “holding onto” aspirations can produce negative educational and career outcomes (Uno et al., 2010). The term “educational floundering” is used to describe the phenomenon of prolonged post-secondary education without earning a college degree (Vuolo et al., 2012). In the latter case, the individual would be better off disengaging from the original educational goal and substituting more realistic goals (Heckhausen et al., 2010; Vuolo et al., 2012).

In the U.S., educational expectations, college enrollment, and educational attainment are clearly linked to socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Mello, 2009). A meta-analysis by Sirin (2005) including over 101,000 students from 74 independent samples reported a medium to large positive correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. The relationship between family socioeconomic status and academic achievement is commonly referred to as the *socioeconomic gap* or *socioeconomic gradient* because the gap gradually increases across lower to higher socioeconomic statuses (Willms, 2002, 2003). Moreover, this relationship is stronger among White students than students of other ethnicities (Sirin, 2005).

Although ethnicity is associated with socioeconomic status, ethnic differences in college expectations, enrollment, and attainment usually persist after controlling for socioeconomic status (e.g., [Kao & Tienda, 1998](#); [Solorzano, 1992](#)). However, a more recent study by [Harris \(2006\)](#) found that the educational expectations of White and Black youth were not statistically different after controlling for socioeconomic status. In terms of attainment, [Jencks and Phillips \(1998\)](#) found that after controlling for socioeconomic status and academic achievement, Black youth were more likely to complete college than White youth.

The U.S. Department of Education (2013) has consistently found that Asian American and White youth enroll in college and attain educational degrees in greater proportions than Latino and Black youth. Among youth who graduated from high school in 2013, 80.1% of Asian American youth and 68.8% of White youth enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared to 59.8% of Latino youth and 56.7% of Black youth. These ethnic differences in enrollment become even more pronounced at college graduation, leading to a substantial and growing achievement gap between Asian American and White youth on the one hand and Latino and Black youth on the other hand. Between 1990 and 2013, the Black–White achievement gap among those with bachelor's degrees increased from 13 to 20 percentage points, while the Latino–White achievement gap increased from 18 to 25 percentage points ([U.S. Department of Education, 2014](#)).

Despite clear ethnic differences in college enrollment and educational attainment, there is less consistency for research on the ambitiousness of diverse youth's educational expectations. Among White, Black, Latino, and Asian American youth, the latter report the highest educational aspirations ([Mau, 1995](#); [Mau & Bikos, 2000](#)). Yet, a number of studies have shown that Black youth also report high educational expectations compared to their peers of other ethnicities ([Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006](#); [Fuligni, 2007](#); [Kao & Tienda, 1998](#); [Mello, 2009](#)). The contrast between Black students' positive attitudes towards school and education but lower academic performance and attainment has been called the “attitude–achievement paradox” ([Mickelson, 1990](#)). This paradox may be due, in part, to Black students' high educational expectations despite having fewer resources in the schools they attend and a relative lack of positive role models for higher education ([Ainsworth, 2002](#); [Condrón & Roscigno, 2003](#)). However, it is important to note that not all researchers agree that Black youth have higher educational expectations. [Dai \(1996\)](#) found that among high school seniors, Black youth had lower educational aspirations than White youth.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Latino and Native-American youth have the lowest and least stable educational aspirations of all ethnic groups ([Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006](#); [Kao & Tienda, 1998](#); [Mau, 1995](#); [Mau & Bikos, 2000](#); [Mello, 2009](#)). [Mau and Bikos \(2000\)](#) reported that male Latinos, in particular, had consistently lower educational aspirations than other ethnic and gender groups. Contrary to these findings, [Mello \(2009\)](#) found that Latino youths' educational aspirations were second highest to Black youths', followed by Asian American and White youths', respectively. Mello's findings may be atypical because they only examined students with average academic achievement and excluded those who did not complete high school. Inclusion of these individuals, who are more likely to be Black or Latino, may lower the overall educational expectations of these groups.

What happens if one falls short of one's expectations?

One of the reasons it is difficult to make generalizations about the impact of falling short of educational expectations is that responses to failure vary and are highly dependent on attributions ([Weiner, 1985](#)). For some young people, failure might damage their self-concept, feelings of self-worth, and sense of competence. Individuals who attribute failure to uncontrollable rather than controllable causes are more likely to experience negative affect such as anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. For example, in a study by [Lecci, Okun, and Karoly \(1994\)](#), disappointment or regret stemming from unfulfilled educational goals was associated with depressive symptoms.

In part due to the possible negative consequences of falling short of one's expectations, some educators have argued for a more realistic matching or congruence of expectations with academic preparation, performance, and abilities ([Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000](#)). In line with this reasoning, researchers (e.g., [Dai, 1996](#); [Mahoney & Merritt, 1993](#); [Valadez, 1998](#)) have cautioned against promoting high expectations in adolescents when there is a significant mismatch between academic performance, resources, and students' expectations.

Other researchers have argued in favor of fostering ambitious expectations. For example, even if youth fall short of their expectations, they have considerable control over their lives – more control than other age groups – as well as several viable alternatives to pursue if they do not attain their goal ([Heckhausen et al., 2010](#)). Rather than ruminate on not attaining the goal, youth are likely to continue pursuing other goals, such as alternative educational goals or career and family goals. Several researchers (e.g., [Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995](#); [Heckhausen et al., 2010](#); [Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003](#)) have shown that individuals use a variety of compensatory strategies to reduce possible negative consequences after failure or when goals become temporarily unavailable. For example, individuals downwardly adjust goals to focus on those which are more attainable, use self-protective strategies to maintain self-esteem, or disengage from the goal altogether. These strategies allow the individual to protect existing motivational resources and re-engage with new and more attainable goals.

[Reynolds and Baird \(2010\)](#) provide further support that youth do not experience long-term negative consequences from falling short of their immediate educational goals. Using large, national datasets to analyze adolescents' post-secondary educational expectations, the authors concluded that unrealized expectations were inconsequential for mental health, at least in terms of depressive symptoms. They suggested that youth are highly resilient to unexpected events, and that when sudden changes occur, they focus on the positive aspects of their future rather than the negative implications of falling short

of their expectations. Similar to Heckhausen et al. (2010), Reynolds and Baird proposed that youth disengage from unrealized expectations and strive for new, more attainable goals.

Rationale for the present study

The current study examined the relationship between short-term educational expectations and educational attainment among youth transitioning from high school to post-secondary education in a large, ethnically diverse U.S. urban metropolitan area. By investigating the role of short-term expectations, the current study expands the educational expectation literature to include the benefits and costs of ambitious college enrollment expectations in the year after high school graduation.

For the purpose of this study, two-year college enrollment expectations were considered less ambitious than four-year college enrollment expectations. Consistent with the need for further research in this area (Mello, 2009), each hypothesis examined ethnic, SES-related, and gender differences in outcomes, as well as gender-by-ethnicity interactions.

The aims of the current study were threefold.

First, the current study investigated the antecedents of falling short of one's short-term educational expectations for the year after high school graduation.

Hypothesis 1. We expected that having high long-term educational expectations during the senior year of high school (i.e., Year 1) would protect against falling short of one's short-term college enrollment expectations in the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2), after controlling for demographic variables, parent's educational attainment, and high school GPA.

Second, the current study examined the benefits and costs of ambitious short-term educational expectations for long-term educational attainment, with particular attention to youth who did not attain their short-term expectations.

Hypothesis 2. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that ambitious short-term enrollment expectations during the senior year of high school (i.e., Year 1) would be associated with greater educational attainment four years later (i.e., Year 5) than less ambitious short-term expectations, even in the context of failing to attain these expectations. Thus, when comparing youth who successfully attained less-ambitious short-term expectations with those who failed to meet more ambitious short-term expectations, we expected the latter group to have higher levels of educational attainment.

The third aim of the study was to investigate the short- and long-term consequences of falling short of one's college enrollment expectations on mental health, motivation, and educational outcomes.

Hypothesis 3a. In the short-term (i.e., one year after high school graduation; Year 2), we expected that students who did not attain their short-term expectations would have poorer mental health (i.e., depressive symptomatology), lowered educational motivation, and lowered long-term educational expectations than students who attained their short-term expectations.

Hypothesis 3b. In the long-term (i.e., four years after high school graduation; Year 5), we expected that youth who fell short of their short-term college enrollment expectations would use compensatory strategies (downwardly adjusted long-term expectations and downwardly adjusted recall of high school long-term educational expectations) more often than those who attained their short-term expectations. Because of these hypothesized relationships, having failed to attain one's short-term educational expectations should not be associated with less satisfaction with educational progress four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5).

Method

Participants and procedure

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger longitudinal study on youth transitioning to post-secondary education or the workplace (see Chang, Chen, Greenberger, Dooley, & Heckhausen, 2006; Chung, Chen, Greenberger, & Heckhausen, 2009). High school seniors from four southern California high schools were selected in order to obtain a multi-ethnic, working- and middle-class sample. Research staff visited the classrooms of high school seniors the week before data collection to introduce the forthcoming research study and to indicate that students under the age of 18 would need to obtain parental consent to participate in the study. A week later, 81% of students who attended class that day and had the requisite consent form filled out a confidential questionnaire during a regular class period and were entered in a drawing to win a gift certificate (2 per class, with amounts ranging from \$10 to \$20 and one \$100 certificate drawn for the entire school at the end of the day). The remaining students either declined to participate or did not submit parental consent forms. Of the 1183 participants in the larger study, 86% ($n = 1017$) expected to attend a two-year or four-year college in the year after high school graduation and comprised the sample for the current study (i.e., Year 1).

In the spring of the following year (i.e., one year after high school graduation or Year 2), questionnaires were mailed to the original sample for a second wave of assessment. Nearly two-thirds of the original sample (66%; $n = 666$) responded and

received a \$40 check for participating. Those youth who did not participate (32%; $n = 330$) either were never located, did not mail back the questionnaire, or were unable to participate due to military service or a physical disability. Only 2% ($n = 21$) explicitly declined to participate.

Four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5), research assistants contacted the original participants by telephone. Of those contacted ($n = 476$), 42 (9%) declined to participate in a telephone interview. A total of 434 (43%) of the original participants (i.e., students at the end of their senior year) completed the assessment in Year 5, of whom 360 (83%) were return participants from Year 2. Participants were compensated with entry into multiple raffles for a then popular MP3 player.

As is common in longitudinal research with adolescents and young adults (e.g., Dmitrieva, Steinberg, & Belsky, 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006), youths' patterns of participation reflected a positive selection effect. Compared to study drop-outs, participants who continued in the study had higher grades, higher parental education, and higher short- and long-term educational expectations (see Table 1). In addition, participants who completed both the Year 2 and Year 5 follow-up surveys were more likely to have achieved their short-term enrollment expectations, compared to those who dropped out between Year 2 and Year 5.

High school seniors in the final sample were ethnically diverse: 30.7% ($n = 312$) Latino, 21.0% ($n = 214$) White, 19.4% ($n = 197$) Asian American, 11.9% ($n = 121$) Black, and 16.2% ($n = 165$) other or mixed ethnicity. Eight individuals declined to state their ethnicity. The sample was 54% ($n = 549$) female. Most participants were 17–18 years old when first surveyed ($M = 17.7$; $SD = 0.6$). Four years after high school graduation, 12.4% of participants ($n = 54$) were not enrolled nor had earned a degree; 5.1% ($n = 22$) had earned an A.A. degree; 25.6% ($n = 111$) were still pursuing an A.A. degree; 19.6% ($n = 85$) had earned a B.A.; and 37.3% ($n = 162$) were still pursuing a B.A.

Measures

Education-promoting variables

Grades. Senior year grades were self-reported on a seven-point scale: 1 = mostly D's and F's, 2 = mostly C's and lower grades, 3 = mostly C's, 4 = half B's and half C's, 5 = mostly B's, 6 = half A's and half B's, and 7 = mostly A's.

Parental education. Participants were asked to specify the educational attainment of the parent with the most education. Participants responded on a five-point scale from 1 = less than high school to 5 = graduate degree (e.g., M.A., Ph.D., J.D.).

Short-term college enrollment expectations. During their senior year (i.e., Year 1), participants indicated what they thought they would be doing the year after high-school graduation. Participants were asked, "What do you think you are going to do next year?" Because the sample only included participants who expected to attend college in the following year, responses were dichotomized into expectations for attendance at a two-year college (coded as 0) and expectations for attendance at a four-year college (coded as 1). For the purpose of this study, expectations for attendance at a two-year college were considered less ambitious than expectations for attendance at a four-year college.

Long-term educational expectations. During their senior year (i.e., Year 1), participants indicated the level of education they realistically thought they would eventually attain. Participants were asked, "Realistically, what is the highest level of education that you think you will finish?" Participants responded on a four-point scale: 1 = high school degree, 2 = two-year college or vocational/technical school, 3 = four-year college, and 4 = graduate school (e.g., M.A., Ph.D., J.D., etc.).

Outcome measures

Falling short of one's short-term college enrollment expectations. One year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2), participants were asked if they were currently enrolled in college, and if so, if they were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college. Responses were compared to short-term college enrollment expectations obtained the previous year. Falling short of one's

Table 1
Differences in year 1 characteristics for participants retained at year 2 or year 5 vs. drop-outs.

| Variables | Completed Year 2 ($N = 666$) | | Drop-outs Year 2 ($N = 351$) | | Completed Year 2 and 5 ($N = 360$) | | Drop-outs Year 5 ($N = 306$) | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|--|---------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| | <i>M</i> | (<i>SD</i>) | <i>M</i> | (<i>SD</i>) | <i>M</i> | (<i>SD</i>) | <i>M</i> | (<i>SD</i>) |
| Grades | 5.24 | (1.44)*** | 4.64 | (1.44) | 5.42 | (1.36)** | 5.04 | (1.50) |
| Long-term expectations | 3.29 | (0.63)** | 3.18 | (0.67) | 3.36 | (0.60)** | 3.21 | (0.66) |
| Parental education | 3.32 | (1.25)** | 3.08 | (1.29) | 3.44 | (1.27)** | 3.17 | (1.21) |
| Short-term expectations for four-year college enrollment (%) | 48.2%** | — | 39.3% | — | 53.3%** | — | 42.2% | — |
| Failure to achieve short-term enrollment expectations ^a (%) | — | — | — | — | 8.3%** | — | 15.0% | — |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

^a Measured in year 2.

short-term expectations was defined as: (1) not being enrolled in either a two-year or four-year college, or (2) for those who expected to attend a four-year college, being enrolled in a two-year college.

Educational motivation. Educational motivation was assessed in Year 2. Motivation was assessed with three subscales of the Optimization in Primary and Secondary Control (OPS) scale, with items relevant to the domain of education (Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002). The selective primary control subscale (four items; $\alpha = .69$) and the compensatory primary control subscale (two items; $\alpha = .68$) measured behavioral resources in goal attainment, such as the investment of time and energy, and asking others for assistance when needed. Sample items were: “I will work hard to get a good education” and “If I have difficulties with my schoolwork I will get help from others.” The selective secondary control subscale (four items; $\alpha = .67$) measured additional motivational resources in goal attainment, particularly when difficulties arose. A sample item was: “I often tell myself that I will be successful in reaching my educational goals.” Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert response scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and averaged to create a mean score. The internal consistency of the 10-item scale was $\alpha = .82$.

Mental health. Depressive symptomatology was used to assess mental health and was measured in Year 1 and Year 2. The 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies–Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1991) asks participants to rate the frequency of symptoms experienced within the past week. In the current study, participants were asked to rate symptoms experienced in the past month, using a scale that ranged from 0 = *rarely or none of the time* to 3 = *all of the time*. A sample item was: “I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.” The items were averaged to create a mean score ($\alpha = .89$ at Year 1 and Year 2).

Educational attainment. Four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5), participants indicated their current enrollment status and degrees earned since high school graduation. Responses were coded as follows: 0 = *not enrolled*, 1 = *enrolled in a two-year college*, 2 = *graduated from a two-year college*, 3 = *enrolled in a four-year college*, 4 = *graduated from a four-year college*. Due to the small number of participants who graduated from a two-year college without continuing on to a four-year college ($n = 22$), these participants were grouped with those still enrolled in a two-year college to increase power in subsequent analyses.

Recall of educational expectations. Two potential compensatory mechanisms were assessed: 1) Participants' revised long-term educational expectations and 2) Participants' recall of high school long-term expectations. The use of biased recall of educational expectations, or remembering educational expectations as lower than they actually were, may serve as an attempt to minimize the negative consequences of failure for participants who fell short of their college enrollment expectations. Four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5), participants were asked to recall the long-term educational expectations they held during their senior year of high school. Participants responded on a four-point scale from 1 = *high school degree* to 4 = *graduate degree (e.g., M.A., Ph.D., J.D.)*.

Satisfaction with educational progress. Also in Year 5, participants were asked “How satisfied are you with your progress towards your educational goals?” Responses ranged from 1 = *very dissatisfied* to 4 = *very satisfied*.

Data analytic plan

Prior to analyzing the study hypotheses, means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among key study variables were examined. To examine the antecedents of falling short of one's short-term expectations (Hypothesis 1), a logistic regression was run in which failure to attain one's short-term college enrollment goals in Year 2 was regressed on demographic and Year 1 education-promoting variables (i.e., parental education, high school grades, and long-term expectations). To examine the costs and benefits of ambitious educational expectations (Hypothesis 2), a partial proportional logistic regression was run in which educational attainment in Year 5 was regressed on Year 1 demographic and education-promoting variables, and the variable assessing failure to attain one's short-term expectations in Year 2. Next, a series of multiple regressions were run to examine the consequences of falling short of one's short-term expectations on mental health, motivation, and expectations in Year 2 and Year 5 (Hypotheses 3a and 3b). Last, satisfaction with educational progress in Year 5 was regressed on Year 1 demographic variables, long-term expectations measured in Year 1, having failed to attain short-term educational expectations in Year 2, and educational attainment in Year 5.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Gender and ethnic differences in educational expectations

As determined by a chi-squared test, males and females had similar short-term educational expectations during their senior year of high school. For long-term educational expectations both during high school and one-year after high school graduation, an independent samples *t*-test determined that females ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.62$ and $M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.69$) had

significantly higher expectations than males ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.65$ and $M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(957.02) = -5.09$, $p < .001$. However, four years after high school graduation, males and females reported similar long-term expectations.

There were significant differences in short-term enrollment expectations by ethnicity, $\chi^2(4, N = 1009) = 37.30$, $p < .001$. Compared to other ethnic groups, Asian Americans were the least likely to report a two-year college short-term expectation (39.1%, $N = 77$) and the most likely to report a four-year college short-term expectation (60.9%, $N = 120$). Latinos were the least likely to report a four-year college expectation (33.7%, $N = 105$) and the most likely to report a two-year college expectation (66.3%, $N = 207$).

Ethnic differences in long-term expectations were assessed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), however, two of the three time points violated the assumption of homogeneity of variances. For these time points, the Welch statistic was used instead of the F statistic as a robust test of the equality of means. All three time points revealed significant ethnic differences in long-term expectations: senior year of high school [Welch(4429.41) = 8.26, $p < .001$], one year after high school graduation [Welch(4275.44) = 5.35, $p < .001$], and four years after high school graduation [$F(4,426) = 4.51$, $p = .001$]. Games-Howell post hoc analyses found that during the senior year of high school, there were significant differences between Latinos ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.66$) and all other ethnic groups: Asian Americans ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.61$), Whites ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.61$), Blacks ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.61$), and the “other” category ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.66$). Latinos had the lowest college enrollment expectations. The results were similar at one year after high school graduation, except that the difference between Latino and Black youth was no longer significant. Four years after high school graduation, post hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated that there were significant differences between Latinos ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.77$) and Asian Americans and “other” ethnicities ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.62$ and $M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.59$), respectively. Thus, Latinos consistently reported the lowest long-term educational expectations of all ethnic groups, even four years after high school graduation.

Males and females were significantly different in their likelihood of falling short of their college enrollment expectations, $\chi^2(1, N = 661) = 4.18$, $p = .04$. Males were more likely to fall short of their short-term expectations compared to females (14.4% vs. 9.3% respectively). Moreover, falling short of short-term expectations differed by ethnicity, $\chi^2(4, N = 663) = 11.65$, $p = .02$. Black (18.3%, $N = 13$) and Latino (15.5%, $N = 28$) youth were more likely to fail to achieve their expectations than Asian American (5.5%, $N = 8$), White (10.1%, $N = 16$), and “other” ethnicity (10.3%, $N = 11$) youth.

Gender and ethnic differences in educational attainment

Chi-square tests revealed significant gender and ethnic differences in long-term educational attainment. Females were more likely to have reached higher levels of education than males, and were more likely to be enrolled in college four years after high school graduation, $\chi^2(3, N = 432) = 12.82$, $p = .005$. For example, 60 (25.5%) females had graduated from a four-year college compared to 25 (12.7%) males. Similarly, there were significant ethnic differences in educational attainment four years after high school graduation, $\chi^2(12, N = 433) = 49.91$, $p < .001$. Latino youth constituted the highest percentage of youth not enrolled in college (21.3%, $N = 26$) and enrolled in a two-year college (44.3%, $N = 54$). At the same time, Latinos were the lowest percentage enrolled in (25.4%, $N = 31$) and graduated from (9.0%, $N = 11$) a four-year university. Black youth had a similarly low percentage that had graduated from a four-year university (10.5%, $N = 4$), but a much higher percentage still enrolled in a four-year university (47.4%, $N = 18$).

Bivariate correlations and means

As seen in Table 2, grades, short-term college enrollment expectations, long-term expectations, and parental education were positively associated with one another. Long-term expectations were positively correlated with education-related motivation in Year 2. Youth who failed to achieve their college enrollment expectations one year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) had, on average, lower grades in high school, lower long-term expectations, parents with lower levels of education, and lower education-related motivation in Year 2.

Antecedents of failure to attain short-term expectations (hypothesis 1)

Although the majority of participants successfully attained their short-term college enrollment expectations for the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2), 11.4% ($n = 76$) of participants did not achieve these expectations. A logistic

Table 2

Intercorrelations among, and means and standard deviations of year 1 study variables and year 2 failed college enrollment plans.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Mean (SD) |
|--|-------------------|--------|---------|--------|--------|---|-------------|
| 1. Grades | – | | | | | | 5.03 (1.47) |
| 2. Short-term college enrollment expectations ^a | 0.33** | – | | | | | 0.45 (0.50) |
| 3. Long-term educational expectations | 0.29** | 0.32** | – | | | | 3.26 (0.65) |
| 4. Parental education | 0.19** | 0.15** | 0.21** | – | | | 3.24 (1.27) |
| 5. Education-related motivation ^b | 0.07 [†] | 0.01 | 0.14** | –0.01 | – | | 4.28 (0.52) |
| 6. Failed college enrollment expectations ^{b,c} | –0.18** | 0.07 | –0.15** | –0.10* | –0.10* | – | 0.11 (0.32) |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [†] $p < .10$.

^a Two-year college = 0, Four-year college = 1.

^b Measured in year 2.

^c Failed expectations = 1.

Table 3
Logistic regression odds ratios of failed college enrollment expectations^a (N = 614).

| Variables | OR | 95% CI |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| <i>Demographics</i> | | |
| Gender ^b | 2.61 | 0.76–9.02 |
| Ethnicity ^c | | |
| Latino | 2.00 | 0.55–7.31 |
| Asian | 1.58 | 0.40–6.30 |
| Black | 7.96** | 2.11–30.07 |
| Other | 3.06 | 0.78–12.03 |
| Gender × ethnicity | | |
| Female × Latino | 0.35 | 0.74–1.68 |
| Female × Asian | 0.19 [†] | 0.27–1.30 |
| Female × Black | 0.07** | 0.01–0.44 |
| Female × other | 0.18 [†] | 0.03–1.06 |
| <i>Education-promoting variables</i> | | |
| Parental education | 0.88 | 0.68–1.14 |
| Grades | 0.78* | 0.65–0.95 |
| Long-term educational expectations | 0.62* | 0.40–0.97 |
| Intercept | 1.52 | – |
| –2Log likelihood ^d | | 380.88 |
| LR χ^2 | | 42.38*** |
| df | | 12 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [†] $p < .10$. OR = odds ratio. CI = confidence interval.

^a Failed expectations = 1.

^b Male = 0, female = 1.

^c Comparison group: White.

^d –2Log likelihood is equal to the Deviance, a goodness-of-fit statistic.

regression revealed that grades and participants' long-term expectations during the senior year of high school both increased the likelihood of attaining college enrollment expectations one year after high school graduation (see Table 3). Compared to the reference group (i.e., White youth), Black youth were significantly less likely to attain their short-term college enrollment expectations. In addition, there was a significant ethnicity-by-gender interaction such that Black males were the most likely to fall short of short-term college enrollment expectations.

Benefits and costs of ambitious short-term expectations (hypothesis 2)

A partial proportional logistic model examined the relationship between falling short of one's college enrollment expectations in Year 2 and educational attainment in Year 5 (see Table 4).¹ The association between short-term college enrollment expectations and educational attainment varied. Youth with ambitious (i.e., four-year college) short-term enrollment expectations in high school were more likely to have attained one of the three highest levels of education (graduated with a B.A., enrolled in four-year college, and enrolled/graduated from a two-year college) than to be at the lowest level of educational attainment (i.e., not enrolled in college). In addition, ambitious college enrollment expectations in Year 1 of the study were strongly associated with having graduated from a four-year college or being enrolled in a four-year college in Year 5 rather than being enrolled or having graduated from a two-year college, or not being enrolled in college. Last, ambitious college enrollment expectations increased the likelihood of having graduated from a four-year college vs. being in one of the three lower categories of educational attainment.

As expected, not attaining short-term college enrollment expectations in the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) was associated with significantly lower levels of educational attainment four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5). Also as anticipated, falling short of ambitious short-term expectations in Year 2 (i.e., expecting to enroll in a four-year college in the year after high school graduation, but falling short of this expectation) was significantly associated with higher levels of educational attainment in Year 5 compared to successfully completing less ambitious short-term expectations (i.e., successfully enrolling in a two-year college).

¹ Generally, to predict ordinal outcomes (i.e., with non-interval, but ranked values), an ordinal logistic regression provides accurate estimates of the influence of predictors on the outcome of interest. An ordinal logistic regression assumes that the coefficients that describe the relationship between, for example, the lowest vs. all higher categories of the response variable are the same as those that describe the relationship between the lowest two categories and all higher categories, etc. This is called the "proportional odds assumption" or the "parallel regression assumption." However, in the current study, the relation of short-term college enrollment expectations failed to meet the proportional odds assumption, $\chi^2(2) = 18.08, p < .01$. Therefore, we used a partial proportional logistic model, which combines ordinal and multinomial logistic techniques and provides relatively parsimonious yet accurate estimates of the relationship between predictors and outcome variables when some, but not all, variables fail to meet the proportional odds assumption (Williams, 2006).

Table 4
Partial proportional logistic regression of educational attainment and failed college enrollment expectations (N = 336).

| Study variable | OR | 95% CI |
|--|----------|------------|
| Intercept (logit 1) | 0.68 | 0.12–3.84 |
| Intercept (logit 2) | 0.04 | 0.01–0.25 |
| Intercept (logit 3) | 0.01 | 0.01–0.05 |
| Gender ^a | 2.00 | 0.89–4.52 |
| Ethnicity ^b | | |
| Latino | 0.85 | 0.31–2.31 |
| Asian | 0.98 | 0.41–2.31 |
| Black | 0.79 | 0.23–2.73 |
| Other | 2.22 | 0.78–6.27 |
| Gender × ethnicity | | |
| Female × Latino | 0.53 | 0.15–1.88 |
| Female × Asian | 0.77 | 0.23–2.55 |
| Female × Black | 0.47 | 0.09–2.43 |
| Female × other | 0.61 | 0.16–2.31 |
| Grades | 1.24* | 1.03–1.49 |
| Long-term educational expectations | 1.32 | 0.87–1.98 |
| Parental education | 1.11 | 0.90–1.37 |
| Failed college enrollment expectations ^c | 0.23*** | 0.11–0.50 |
| Logit 1: not enrolled vs. (graduated 4-year, enrolled 4-year, and enrolled/graduated 2-year) | | |
| Short-term educational expectations ^d | 2.46* | 1.03–5.89 |
| Logit 2: (graduated 4-year and enrolled 4-year) vs. (enrolled/graduated 2-year and not enrolled) | | |
| Short-term educational expectations ^d | 12.76*** | 6.83–23.84 |
| Logit 3: graduated 4-year vs. (enrolled 4-year, enrolled/graduated 2-year and not enrolled) | | |
| Short-term educational expectations ^d | 4.31*** | 2.18–8.53 |
| –2Log likelihood ^e | | 696.32 |
| LR χ^2 | | 167.73*** |
| df | | 16 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. OR = odds ratio. CI = confidence interval.

^a Male = 0, female = 1.

^b Comparison group: White.

^c Failed expectations = 1.

^d Ambitious expectations = 1.

^e –2Log likelihood is equal to the Deviance, a goodness-of-fit statistic.

Consequences of failure to attain short-term educational expectations (*hypothesis 3*)

Depressive symptomatology

A linear regression was conducted to assess the mental health consequences of falling short of one's college enrollment expectations. Baseline (Year 1) depressive symptomatology ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < .001$) was the only predictor significantly associated with depressive symptomatology at Year 2. Falling short of one's short-term expectations in the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) was not associated with poorer mental health in Year 2, at least in terms of depressive symptomatology. The model accounted for 27.7% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in depressive symptoms at Year 2. Four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5), only depressive symptoms at Year 2 ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$) were significantly associated with current depressive symptoms. This model accounted for significantly less variance than the previous model (adjusted $R^2 = 9.5\%$).

Education-related motivation

A second linear regression assessed the relationship between falling short of one's short-term expectations and education-related motivation one year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2). Long-term expectations in high school were significantly associated with education-related motivation in Year 2 ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = .002$). Most important, not attaining one's short-term expectations was associated with significantly lower levels of education-related motivation in Year 2 ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = .028$). Compared to the reference group (i.e., White youth), Black youth ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = .030$) had significantly lower levels of education-related motivation. This model accounted for 5.8% of the variance in motivation at Year 2.

Revised long-term educational expectations

An additional linear regression assessed the relationship between not having attained one's short-term expectations during the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) and long-term expectations reported in Year 2. Long-term expectations reported in Year 1 positively predicted Year 2 long-term expectations ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < .001$). In addition, failure to attain

Table 5
Predictors of satisfaction with educational progress (N = 344).

| | Model 1 | | |
|---|----------|------------------|---------|
| | <i>b</i> | <i>SE (b)</i> | β |
| Gender ^a | −0.09 | 0.13 | −0.07 |
| Ethnicity ^b | | | |
| Latino | −0.20 | 0.14 | −0.13 |
| Asian | −0.35** | 0.13 | −0.24 |
| Black | −0.20 | 0.19 | −0.09 |
| Other | −0.25 | 0.16 | −0.15 |
| Gender × ethnicity | | | |
| Female × Latino | −0.08 | 0.19 | −0.05 |
| Female × Asian | 0.14 | 0.18 | 0.08 |
| Female × Black | 0.07 | 0.25 | 0.03 |
| Female × other | 0.16 | 0.21 | 0.08 |
| Long-term educational expectations | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.03 |
| Educational attainment ^c | | | |
| Not enrolled | −0.61*** | 0.12 | −0.30 |
| Enrolled/graduated two-year | −0.17* | 0.08 | −0.12 |
| Graduated four-year | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.02 |
| Failed college enrollment expectations ^d | 0.10 | 0.12 | 0.04 |
| Intercept | 3.69** | 0.23 | — |
| <i>F(df,df)</i> | | 3.778(14,337)*** | |
| <i>R</i> ² _{adjusted} | | 0.10 | |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

^a Male = 0, female = 1.

^b Comparison group: White.

^c Relative to those enrolled in a four-year college.

^d Failed expectations = 1.

one's short-term expectations was associated with significantly lower long-term expectations in Year 2 ($\beta = -0.11, p = .002$). Participants downwardly adjusted their long-term expectations after falling short of college enrollment expectations in the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2). This model explained 31.0% of the variance in revised long-term expectations. Interestingly, when assessing long-term expectations four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5), falling short of short-term expectations was no longer significantly associated with lowered expectations. However, Year 2 expectations ($\beta = 0.47, p < .001$) and high school grades ($\beta = 0.14, p = .005$) were significant predictors of Year 5 long-term expectations. This model explained 26.5% of the variance in revised long-term expectations.

Recall of high school expectations

A linear regression assessed the relationship between not having attained short-term enrollment expectations in Year 2 and recall of high school expectations in Year 5. Long-term educational expectations during high school (i.e., Year 1) predicted recall of those expectations four years later (i.e., Year 5; $\beta = 0.36, p < .001$). Students with higher parental education ($\beta = 0.14, p = .027$) recalled higher Year 1 expectations four years later than students with lower parental education. Contrary to our hypothesis, falling short of one's college enrollment expectations during the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) was not associated with the recall of lower high school expectations four years later (i.e., Year 5). Students who failed to achieve their short-term educational expectations were not more likely to recall their expectations as lower than those who attained their expectations. This model explained 21.8% of the variance in recalled high school expectations.

Satisfaction with educational progress

Last, a linear regression examined the relationship between falling short of one's college enrollment expectations for the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) and satisfaction with educational progress four years after graduation (i.e., Year 5). Compared to White youth, Asian American youth were significantly less satisfied with their educational progress four years after high school graduation.

Compared to being enrolled in a four-year college, not being enrolled in any college and being enrolled or having graduated from a two-year college were associated with lowered satisfaction with educational progress in Year 5 (see Table 5). There were no differences in satisfaction with educational progress among students still enrolled in a four-year college and those who had graduated from a four-year college. Falling short of one's college enrollment expectations in the year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2) was not associated with less satisfaction with educational progress four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5).

Discussion

It is well established that long-term educational expectations help students attain higher levels of education during their lifetime (e.g., Trusty, 1998). The current study supports this finding for high school seniors four years after graduation. In

addition, high school students' long-term expectations may protect against falling short of expectations in the short-term (i.e., one year after high school graduation).

One of the goals of the current study was to investigate the role of short-term educational expectations in predicting long-term educational attainment. Similar to research on the beneficial effects of long-term educational expectations, we found that short-term expectations confer positive benefits to youth and are important predictors of educational attainment in their own right, that is, over and above the effects of long-term educational expectations.

An additional aim was to investigate the potentially negative consequences of falling short of educational expectations. The most notable negative consequence in the current study was lower educational attainment four years after high school graduation (i.e., Year 5). Moreover, compared to youth who attained their short-term expectations, participants who fell short of their expectations experienced lower education-related motivation and downwardly adjusted long-term expectations one year after high school graduation (i.e., Year 2).

Although some negative consequences were apparent, it was not the case that falling short of expectations had more costs than benefits. For example, one year and four years after high school graduation, participants who fell short of their expectations for college enrollment did not have increased depressive symptomatology. Furthermore, the negative consequences for educational attainment were restricted to individuals who had less ambitious short-term expectations (i.e., expected to enroll in a two-year college) rather than more ambitious expectations (i.e., expected to enroll in a four-year college).

Thus, for high school seniors, having ambitious short-term expectations – even if one fails to achieve them – led to higher educational attainment than having less ambitious short-term expectations. These findings are consistent with Reynolds and Baird's (2007) research on the beneficial effects of ambitious goal setting. The authors found that eight years after high school graduation, participants who had ambitious goals to earn a college degree but failed had better psychological outcomes (i.e., greater self-esteem and sense of mastery) than participants with no plans to attend college.

Several factors may underlie the lack of a relationship between falling short of one's short-term educational expectations and negative short- or long-term outcomes. Future studies should include questions to determine the rationale behind students' educational expectations. For example, within the multi-tier California educational system, the community college is the most cost-efficient post-secondary institution. It is not uncommon for high school graduates with good grades to attend a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution for financial reasons. In this case, financially strategic students with a strong academic background who choose to attend a two-year institution may be more likely to realize their long-term expectations than students who do not have the minimum academic requirements to attend a four-year institution. Thus, if a less ambitious choice is made because of financial reasons, it may not be as detrimental as other reasons for making a less ambitious choice.

As hypothesized, we did not find an association between failing to attain one's short-term college enrollment expectations and later satisfaction with educational progress. This finding is consistent with the possibility that compensatory efforts minimize the effects of failure on self-esteem and well-being (Heckhausen et al., 2010). However, the results did not fully support this hypothesis. Not attaining one's short-term expectations was associated with lower (downwardly-adjusted) expectations one, but not four, years after high school graduation. In addition, it was not associated with downwardly-biased recall of expectations four years after high school graduation. It is possible that lowered expectations and biased recall are more likely to occur close in time to the unmet expectation, rather than years later. Unfortunately, recall of high school expectations was not measured one year after high school graduation. It is also possible that participants used additional compensatory strategies that were not assessed in this study.

Numerous researchers have called for further research on the educational expectations and attainment of ethnic minority groups (Hackett, Lent, & Greenhaus, 1991; Hanson, 1994; Mello, 2009; Richardson, 1993). The participants in the current study attended high school in one of the largest and most ethnically diverse metropolitan areas in the U.S.: Los Angeles, California. Ethnic minority groups are increasing in all states, but they have already become the majority ethnicity in California. Thus, it is important to develop a clearer picture of the ambitiousness of educational expectations and their implications among diverse groups.

In the literature, Latino youth typically have lower educational expectations than other ethnic groups, while Black youth typically have high, or at least comparable, educational expectations than other groups (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Mau, 1995; Mau & Bikos, 2000). Our findings were somewhat consistent with previous research. Compared to other ethnic groups, Latino youth had substantially lower short- and long-term educational expectations. However, Black youth did not have more ambitious short- or long-term expectations than White or Asian American youth. Consistent with previous studies, Black youth were more likely than other groups to fall short of their short-term college expectations, especially if they were male. Traditionally underrepresented students in academia, such as Latino and Black youth, enroll in college and attain college degrees at much lower rates than White or Asian American youth (Fuligni & Hardway, 2004; Tinto, 1993). In our descriptive statistics, four years after high school graduation, Latino youth were particularly concentrated in the "not enrolled in college" group and the "two-year college" group. However, when examining educational attainment in hypothesis 2 and controlling for several variables, we did not find ethnic differences in overall attainment.

Our findings were consistent with gender differences in educational expectations and attainment in the literature (e.g., Mau & Bikos, 2000). Four years after high school graduation, females attained higher education levels than males and were more likely to be enrolled in college. Related to this finding, males were more likely to fall short of their short-term educational expectations. Although females started off having higher long-term educational expectations than males, the groups had similar expectations four years after high school graduation.

An important point to bear in mind when discussing the results of the current study is that it was conducted in California, which has a streamlined and facilitative plan for transferring from a two-year to a four-year college ([California State Department of Education, 1960](#)). The Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) program offers California community college students who meet eligibility requirements (such as the completion of a certain number of units and a minimum GPA) guaranteed admission to a University of California or California State University school. Thus, it is possible for students with high long-term educational expectations but poor or mixed high school grades to achieve four-year college degrees. For this reason, the findings of the present study may only be generalizable to post-secondary educational systems that have built-in structural support and opportunities for advancement. In particular, the educational systems of other countries vary substantially. In these countries, the costs and benefits of ambitious educational expectations depend on the degree of accessibility and mobility between educational tiers. [Heckhausen and Chang's \(2009\)](#) cross-cultural study on the benefits of ambitious goal-setting is a reminder of the influence of environmental affordances and constraints on educational attainment.

It is also important to note that the sample was a selective group of young people who were in their senior year of high school. Because we were interested in the ambitiousness of college enrollment goals, our sample did not include individuals who did not have plans to attend college or those who had previously dropped out of school. For some analyses, our focus on the benefits and costs of failing ambitious short-term educational expectations further restricted our sample. Although our sample's failure rate for college enrollment goals in the year after higher school graduation was similar to other researchers (e.g., [Berkner & Chavez, 1997](#)), we recognize the limitations of a small sample size. Future studies may utilize a nationwide dataset to ensure an adequate sample of youth who failed to complete college enrollment goals.

Another limitation of the study is that we focused on participants who had college enrollment goals for the year directly after high school graduation. Some students, especially students from low socioeconomic statuses, may have envisioned different academic paths than the one specified in this study. For example, youth may have the long-term expectation to obtain a bachelor's degree, but may choose to work for a year or more before entering college. Although the study did not include this group, it is hypothesized that these students, overall, would obtain less education than those who began college immediately after high school, especially if they were from a lower socioeconomic status group ([Parker, Thoemmes, Duineveld, & Salmela-Aro, 2015](#)).

The measure of short-term educational expectations used in this study was categorical (i.e., plans to attend a two-year vs. four-year institution). As a result, the variability in the sample and analyses were limited. Future studies should ask participants to specify the institution they plan to attend so further differentiation in ambitiousness of expectations can be made. For example, four-year institutions vary widely. One of the largest distinctions in California is that between California State Universities and University of California schools, the latter of which focus more heavily on research and are more prestigious. A more complete representation of the ambitiousness of youth's short-term educational expectations would include the institution's ranking within the respective school types (two-year vs. four-year).

Finally, the participants who completed the follow-up survey at Year 5 differed from the original sample on key study variables. Participants who continued in the study had higher grades, higher parental education, higher short- and long-term educational expectations, and were more likely to achieve their short-term expectations than youth who ceased to participate in the study. These characteristics may be associated with increased educational attainment compared to study drop-outs, creating an optimistic interpretation of the results.

Future studies should directly investigate the relationship between short- and long-term educational expectations, their congruence, and its impact on educational attainment and well-being. For example, youth may have ambitious long-term expectations (i.e., graduating with a B.A.) but less ambitious short-term expectations (i.e., enrolling in a two-year college). This pattern may be associated with lower educational attainment than having high short- and long-term expectations.

The results of this study have implications for a variety of individuals who advise high school students, including parents, teachers, educational counselors, and other important adults. Practitioners at the high school level disagree about the impact of ambitious educational expectations on student outcomes. Some counselors encourage and support the development of high educational expectations among students despite incongruence with current school performance, while others encourage students to adjust their aspirations to reflect academic performance and indicators of success, such as feedback from teachers or standardized test scores ([Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000](#)). Accordingly, several researchers (e.g., [Dai, 1996](#); [Mahoney & Merritt, 1993](#); [Valadez, 1998](#)) have cautioned against promoting high educational expectations when realistic information about college is not readily available or when there is a significant mismatch between academic performance and educational expectations. From previous research, we know that Black youth are most likely to experience this mismatch. As a result, counselors may be disproportionately discouraging high educational expectations among Black youth, or other traditionally underrepresented groups in academia, such as Latinos. By promoting and supporting high educational expectations among all students when opportunities are available and costs for failure are low, underrepresented and low-income students may attain greater education in the long-term, even if they are less likely to realize their expectations in the short-term.

In conclusion, youth's educational expectations are important for their eventual educational attainment. Previous research has made a strong case for ambitious long-term expectations. Similarly, ambitious short-term expectations also confer positive benefits to youth. Moreover, short-term setbacks are not necessarily detrimental to ultimate educational attainment. Youth who initially fall short of their college enrollment goals, but who have high short- and long-term educational expectations, have more favorable educational outcomes than youth with lower expectations. All in all, in a supportive educational context with opportunities for advancement to higher levels of education, the benefits of ambitious short-term

expectations outweigh the costs associated with falling short of those expectations, particularly in terms of educational attainment.

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