The leveling power of a college degree for first-generation college students: Disparities across institution and major

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A college degree is widely thought to level the playing field for students from different social origins. We extend this research to understand if a college degree is associated with equal earnings between first- and continuing-generation graduates, that is, if there is evidence of a generational wage gap. We also ask if the generational wage gap varies across institutional selectivity and major, and to what extent institutions, majors, and other factors explain the overall wage gap for men and women. Using data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, we show that, ten years after completing college, a generational wage gap exists among first- and continuing-generation men. For men, wage gaps vary by institution and major and relate to cultural fit; the overall wage gap is primarily explained by the uneven returns first- and continuing-generation men receive for shared educational experiences. For women, there is no evidence of an overall generational wage gap or institutional or major-specific wage gaps.