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Intervening with high performing, low-income students changes enrollment patterns, study finds

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on January 5, 2015 - 3:00am

Ever since a 2012 study found that a majority of high-achieving, low-income high school seniors don't apply to a single competitive college, ^[1] educators and policy makers have been debating what to do about "undermatching," as the issue has come to be called.

Some have argued for more attention (and resources) for the institutions that enroll these students in significant numbers, especially community colleges and regional public institutions. But many have looked for ways to attract more of these students to top colleges, which tend to have more generous aid offers and higher graduation rates than less competitive colleges.

Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner have just released evidence that the right interventions (largely providing certain types of information) can in fact alter the choices of these undermatched students. These interventions could send a significant number of low-income, high ability students to the nation's top colleges, they find. At the same time, their study found that many of the undermatched students have incorrect images of liberal arts colleges and, to some extent, flagship universities, that may deter them from enrolling at these institutions.

Hoxby and Turner are economics professors at Stanford University and the University of Virginia, respectively. They presented their findings Sunday at the annual meeting of the American Economic Association. Hoxby was co-author of the 2012 study that set off the undermatching discussion, although Hoxby and Turner don't use the term in their new paper.

In their study, they explore the impact of a series of interventions offered through a program called Expanding College Opportunities, or its acronym ECO. Hoxby and Turner earlier found that these interventions encouraged more high ability, low-income students to apply to more-competitive colleges than they were doing otherwise. Their new finding is that these interventions carry through to actual enrollments. But using interviews with

students about why they didn't apply to certain types of colleges where they had a good chance of being admitted and offered generous aid packages, they found gaps in information about liberal arts colleges in particular that could require further interventions or education campaigns.

The study was based on a national sample of 18,000 high school seniors who had scores in the top decile on the SAT or ACT, had family income in the bottom third for families with high school seniors, and did not enroll at "feeder" high schools (such as magnets) that regularly send many students to top colleges. Those who were not in the control group received personalized information that did not recommend particular colleges, but that told the students and their families about the "net price" they would pay (typically much less than sticker price), the graduation rates at a range of colleges and the educational resources at a range of institutions. Further, the students who were not in the control group received fee waivers to apply to competitive colleges. (Most such colleges let low-income students skip fees, but the waivers were without any paperwork.)

As in an earlier study, Hoxby and Turner found that students who received the full ECO intervention were more likely to apply to more colleges and to "peer" colleges -- those that reflect their academic abilities. In the new study, they found a clear impact on the students' actual enrollment patterns.

Students with the intervention were 46 percent more likely to enroll at "peer" institutions that reflect their abilities. And the institutions they enrolled in had graduation rates that were, on average, 15.1 percent higher than the institutions at which the control group enrolled. Instructional spending was 21.5 percent higher at the institutions at which the students who received the intervention enrolled.

The paper argues that the interventions used directly countered a sense from some low-income students that competitive colleges are either beyond their economic reach, or no different from other colleges that are easier to get into.

But another part of the research project asked students in the study who opted not to apply to certain kinds of colleges why they avoided them. The authors share findings about flagship universities and liberal arts colleges.

Misinformation About Liberal Arts Colleges

At least some of the reasons given about flagship universities are true. Many students said that they wanted to go far from home, or to avoid institutions where many of their fellow students from high school were enrolling -- and indeed for most students their home state flagship would be closer to home than many other institutions.

Other common comments on flagship state universities may be true for some institutions more than others, or for some students at some flagships. For instance, students expressed worries about enrolling at institutions with a heavy emphasis on athletics and/or a "party scene."

While those views may be true of some students' experiences at some flagships, the comments about liberal arts colleges suggest a large disconnect between those institutions and the high ability, low-income students in the study.

Many of the students admitted to not knowing what a liberal arts college is, or their answers suggested that they had the wrong idea. Among the responses quoted in the paper:

“What is a private liberal arts college?”

“I don't know what this is.”

“I don't like learning useless things.”

“I am not liberal.”

And of students who had some sense in their minds (not necessarily correct) of what goes on at liberal arts colleges, many seemed to equate the institutions only with arts/humanities fields, unaware that math and science are very much part of most liberal arts colleges and that one can go to graduate or professional school from liberal arts colleges (and that many boast of very high acceptance rates at such institutions). Here are some of these comments about liberal arts colleges:

“I plan on attending medical school.”

“I plan on grad school later.”

“I don't like art/art related subjects.”

“I'm a math/science guy. I'm not very good at liberal arts.”

“Liberal arts is for people who aren't good at math.”

“Liberal arts colleges typically do not have mathematics majors.”

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