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Attracting the Missing Students

April 1, 2013 - 3:00am

By [Scott Jaschik](#)

In December, [a study revealed](#) that most low-income, high-achieving high school students aren't applying to a single competitive college. Further, the study found that many colleges are searching for these students at a very small number of high schools (magnet schools and the like) -- and in the process are missing lots of other talent. While high-income, high-achieving students tend to apply to the very top colleges, those with equal academic talent but less money are largely bypassing these institutions, and are instead applying to colleges whose students are less prepared academically, and that have lower graduation rates and lesser academic resources.

The study has gradually received more and more attention, with many educators expressing shock that nothing is being done to attract more of this missing talent to top colleges.

Now a follow-up project has found that relatively inexpensive methods -- studied through pilot programs -- exist that could get many more of these talented, low-income student to apply to, enroll at and succeed at the most competitive colleges. [The new study](#) was released Friday by the Stanford University Institute for Economic Policy Research. The authors are Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University (who co-wrote the December study with Christopher Avery of Harvard University) and Sarah Turner of the University of Virginia.

In the new study, about 40,000 students were tracked, with an emphasis on high-achieving, low-income students who were not enrolled at high schools where many students go on to competitive colleges. In other words, the emphasis was on studying those who are not now going to the best colleges, even though many of them would likely be admitted and would receive significant financial aid (in many cases all-expenses-paid packages).

The students in the test received a series of interventions in the form of various kinds of information believed to be similar to what wealthier students would receive, or to address concerns poor families might have:

- Customized information is provided about colleges' graduation rates, noting the rates at colleges that are "peer colleges" -- meaning the institutions students with such academic preparation typically attend, such as the flagship state university and selective out-of-state colleges. The information shows the students that these more selective colleges generally have higher success rates than do other institutions (those to which these students have been applying).
- Customized information is provided about "net price" compared to "sticker price." For many of these low-income students, the actual cost of attending more selective colleges (which tend to be wealthy institutions with higher sticker prices and more generous aid packages) is less than that of attending less selective colleges.
- Automatic application fee waivers were provided to 171 selective colleges. (While most such colleges already have fee waiver programs with relatively minimal paperwork requirements, some researchers have speculated that any paperwork may be discouraging students from applying for the waivers, and that the expense of applying ends up discouraging students from applying).

The results of these interventions were dramatic:

- Students in the program submitted 19 percent more applications to college, on average, than did comparable students not receiving the interventions. The students in the program were 27 percent more likely to submit five or more applications (in other words, to apply in the way that other top students do).
- The students were significantly more likely to apply to "peer" institutions (meaning those colleges typically applied to by wealthy, well-prepared high schoolers). The students ended up much more likely to apply to colleges with higher SAT averages, that spend more on instruction, and where the graduation rate is higher.
- The students in the program were 31 percent more likely to be admitted to a "peer college." Among students who remembered receiving the various intervention materials, they were 78 percent more likely to be admitted to a peer college.

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...the students were also significantly more likely to enroll at a post-college.

- Once admitted, the students who enroll at the competitive colleges did as well or better than similar students who attended less competitive institutions.

"Using random assignment on thousands of students, we demonstrate that a low-cost, fully scalable intervention can help many high-achieving, low-income students recognize their full array of college options," write Hoxby and Turner in their conclusion.

The interventions described -- when applied to large groups -- end up costing about \$6 per student. The interventions rely on the large dataset available from the National Student Clearinghouse.

Given the success found in this study, the widespread concern among top colleges about their failure to attract more low-income students, and the relatively low cost of the effort, the obvious question is: Why aren't colleges doing this? First, they note that the datasets on which they rely to identify low-income, high achieving students didn't always exist.

But now that they do, they write, it will be necessary for some large educational organization -- they suggest the College Board or ACT as possibilities -- to take this on. The costs are not huge, but are unlikely to make sense to individual colleges, they write.

"[N]o one postsecondary institution would have the incentive to conduct such an intervention since many of the benefits would accrue to other institutions," they write. These benefits (more talented, low-income students going to top colleges) "are largely *public*."

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