

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Computers & Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/compedu

Without a map: College access and the online practices of youth from low-income communities

Michael Geoffrey Brown ^{a,*}, Donghee Y. Wohn ^b, Nicole Ellison ^c

^a 610 E. University Avenue, School of Education- University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA

^b 5112 GTC, New Jersey Institute of Technology, University Heights Newark, NJ, 07102, USA

^c 4419 North Quard, School of Information- University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 June 2015

Received in revised form 25 September 2015

Accepted 2 October 2015

Available online 9 October 2015

Keywords:

Computer mediated communication

Lifelong learning

Media in education

Secondary education

ABSTRACT

In the United States, low and high-income young people currently have unequal access to information about higher education. Low-income prospective college students, for example, are less likely to have informational resources in their immediate families, requiring that they rely on information from other sources. We report on interview data collected in two high schools, one in a rural/suburban school district ($N = 43$), the other in an urban district ($N = 25$), which offer insight into how high school students from low-income communities use the Internet to learn about college. We observe that students are capable of accessing a great diversity of information about college online, but run into challenges when trying to interpret that information. We introduce the term “knowledgeable translators” to capture the important role played by contacts with specialized knowledge about post-secondary institutions who help students evaluate and contextualize college information via online and offline channels.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Higher education comes with a variety of costs as well as benefits for individuals and society (Perna, 2006a). However, these benefits are not evenly distributed across all sectors of society (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010, pp. 71–183). In fact, evidence suggests that disparities in college access have only become more pronounced over time (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011), particularly among different socio-economic classes. One of the frequent sources of inequality in college access that scholars identify is limited access to information about college (Perna & Kurban, 2013).

For students, the college choice process is shaped by their access to informational resources as well as their strategies for making sense of the information they uncover as they explore their post-secondary options. A number of studies have demonstrated the detrimental effect of limited access to information about college on the college selection process of prospective low-income and first generation students (e.g., Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Hoxby & Turner, 2013, pp. 12–14; Ra, 2011). Lee, Maldonado, and Rhoades (2006) argue, for example, that contemporary models of college choice reflect the fact that “information about higher education is unequally distributed” (p. 550). Students, when making decisions about college, are never in a position to act on perfect information, but rather on information that is immediately available (Perna, 2006b, pp.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mbrowng@umich.edu (M.G. Brown), donghee.y.wohn@njit.edu (D.Y. Wohn).

99–157). These decisions are rational because they are based on the information at hand (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005), but they may not allow students to capitalize on potential opportunities.

Access to new social media platforms and online information might address some of the existing disparities in access to information about college, providing students with a potentially unbounded source of information about college life, costs, and application requirements. Prior research has found that having access to informational support via social media is correlated with college aspirations for first generation students, perhaps because they have less informational support in their immediate families (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). We know very little, however, about how underrepresented youth like low-income and first generation students are able to access, make sense of, and apply college-related information they access via social media and other online resources. For this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with low-income high school students in rural and urban Michigan ($N = 68$) in order to examine the online skills, strategies, and resources students use as they explore their post-secondary futures.

2. Challenges in college choice

Possessing knowledge of college life, costs, and application requirements is essential for making the transition to college (Conley & Seburn, 2014), but there are multiple challenges that a student must overcome to first obtain and then understand information about college. The information seeking processes of adolescents are, in general, wrought with uncertainty, confusion, and frustration (Kuhlthau, 1993). Several factors can contribute to this problem, including lack of targeted information, social circumstances that impede access, information overload, and affective factors like uncertainty and confusion, which can affect relevance judgments about information as much as one's cognitive skill level (Kuhlthau, 1993).

2.1. Sources of college information

Traditionally, institutions have used viewbook-style brochures to appeal to prospective students and provide introductory information about campus life (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). In addition to printed materials like brochures, students are increasingly accessing informational resources through the web. The National Research Center for College and University Admissions reports that 82% of students used institutional websites to get information about college, and half of respondents said that the information they found informed their decision-making (Noel-Levitz, 2014).

College websites, however, can be a confusing source of information for the prospective student. While most institutions make their marketing materials widely *available* online, whether this information is easily *understandable* for a young person unfamiliar with higher education contexts is unclear. College websites are notable for their similarity to one another, making it difficult to distinguish between them (Saichae, 2011). Additionally, the majority of sites focus on similar types of information: institutional mission, teaching and learning environments, and campus life (Saichae & Morphew, 2014).

These websites also cater to multiple audiences, such as current students, faculty, staff, and alumni – not just prospective students. The multiple audiences and goals these sites have to support may explain in part the perceived lack of relevant information specifically targeting prospective students (Schneider & Bruton, 2004). So despite the fact that institutions make information publicly available through a variety of channels, this information may not address the salient needs of students and, in some cases, may actually generate more confusion than clarity (Hartley & Morphew, 2008).

One way to mitigate issues associated with exposure to decontextualized information about college may be via *tailored* information. Recent evidence suggests that exposure to customized information might improve the likelihood that low-income students will pursue post-secondary education. In one study, low-income students and their families were provided with three different informational interventions about college costs while having their taxes prepared. Students who received the information that was specifically tailored to them through direct consultation with an accountant about the potential costs of college were significantly more likely to enroll in post-secondary institutions than students who received no intervention (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2009; Bettinger Long, Oreopolulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). Similarly, low-income high school students in an urban school district who were shown a video about the potential economic benefits of a college education reported greater intention to enroll than students who did not view the informational video (Oreopoulos & Dunn, 2013). High achieving, low-income students who received tailored admissions information were also more likely to apply to selective institutions than students with similar backgrounds who did not receive personalized informational packages (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Tailored informational interventions might help students make rationalized decisions about their post-secondary futures.

2.2. Social factors

As researchers argue, individual, family, and community factors can shape how students acquire college knowledge, and may support or deter acquisition (Ra, 2011). The lack of supportive resources that help students develop college knowledge may perpetuate the existing divide in college access. For example, a significant number of gifted and talented first generation students are likely to choose to attend more expensive, less selective institutions because of decisions they make based on inaccurate assessments of their prospects (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). This is a particularly salient issue for young people from low-income communities or those who will be the first generation to attend college, as they are less likely to have information resources available in their families.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/348219>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/348219>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)