



Do college admissions counselors discriminate? Evidence from a correspondence-based field experiment[☆]



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ABSTRACT

I design and implement a correspondence based field experiment to test for race and gender discrimination among college admissions counselors in the student information gathering stage. The experiment uses names to identify student race and gender, and student grade, SAT score, and writing differences to reflect varying levels of applicant quality. I find that counselors do not respond differently by race in most cases, but there are measurable differences in response/non-response and in the type of correspondence sent that favor female students. I also find that the quality of the student induces large differences in the type of response.

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1. Introduction

Stark differences exist in postsecondary school enrollment across gender and race groups. While 66.6% of whites age 18–24 report either having attended, being currently enrolled, or already completed college, only 51.6% of African American young adults report the same. The difference between genders is nearly as stark, with 66.2% of females age 18–24 reporting either having attended, being currently enrolled, or already completed college, and only 54.9% of male young adults reporting the same.¹ College completion rates show an even bigger racial divide,² with 61.5% of first-time postsecondary attending whites completing their de-

gree within 6 years, versus only 39.6% of African Americans.³ The gender divide is considerably more narrow for college completion rates, with 60.6% of female first-time postsecondary attendees finishing a degree within 6 years, versus 55.5% of males.

Explanations for the gender and racial gap in postsecondary enrollment and completion are wide and varied, with possible contributing factors including: pre-existing group characteristic differences (including income, preparation, prior schooling, etc.), application and search differences, institutional experience differences, societal events, social norms, and policy impacts.⁴

the table are taken from the U.S. Department of Education Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Graduation Rates component.

³ Empirical work by Light and Strayer (2002) shows “observationally equivalent” minorities are actually more likely than whites to attend and graduate from college—suggesting that differences in actual attendance and graduation rates reflect unobservable differences in characteristics between groups. Bowen and Bok (1998) present evidence that suggests, among a group of “academically selective” colleges, that African Americans with equivalent SAT scores are as much as three times as likely to gain admission as whites with equivalent scores.

⁴ See Hurtado et al. (1997) for a study using observational data to explore the factors that contribute to differences in college access and choice between whites and minorities. There is a vast literature on the factors that affect college attendance and completion differences between male and female students, examples include avoiding war (Card and Lemieux, 2001), the introduction of the pill (Hock, 2005), abortion reforms (Angrist and Evans, 2000), changing school characteristics such as student-faculty ratios (Bound et al., 2010), a divergence in future aspirations that

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¹ Summary statistics on enrollment, completion, and attendance are reported in Table 33-1 of the National Center for Education Statistics August 2012 report titled, “Higher Education: Gaps in Access and Persistence Study” (Ross et al., 2012). The underlying data for the table are taken from the 2010 American Community Survey.

² Summary statistics on completion rates are reported in Table 42-1 of the National Center for Education Statistics August 2012 report titled, “Higher Education: Gaps in Access and Persistence Study” (Ross et al., 2012). The underlying data for

Hoxby and Avery (2013) show that the college application stage is critical in explaining the observed divergence in where students with similar achievement levels, but different incomes, end up attending college. Holland (2014) reviews the current state of the literature on the differences that exist between whites and minorities in the college search and application process, and highlights the literature's focus on the student-side of the process. Goldin, Katz and Kuziemko (2006) provide an overview of historical gender differences in college attendance and outcomes as well as an investigation into the cause of the gap using observational data across several decades. The literature on the institution-side of the admissions process largely focuses on how affirmative action policies impact admissions, enrollment, and completion differences between races.⁵ A previously unexplored component that may contribute to gender and racial gaps in college attendance and degree completion is the potential for students to face differential treatment in the search and information gathering process.

I examine differential treatment by college admissions counselors according to a student's race, gender, and application quality using a correspondence field experiment. Communication with admission counselors is of particular interest in the college application process as previous work shows that students generally do not apply to enough colleges, tend to under-apply in terms of quality (Avery, Howell & Page, 2014), but respond strongly to small costs in the application process (Smith, Hurwitz & Howell, 2014). Interactions with admissions counselors could introduce small differences in the cost associated with the application process by providing (or not providing) information, easing (or raising) admissions concerns, offering (or withholding) advice on a successful application, or changing the psychological costs of submitting an application (encouraging or discouraging the potential student).

Differential treatment by admissions counselors could change application behavior and thus enrollment behavior as the number of applications a student completes causally affects enrollment (Smith, 2014). Differential treatment of minority students and between genders in the information gathering stage may have a compounding effect on applications and enrollment that ultimately manifest in other disparities. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that counseling interventions influence where prospective college students choose to apply (Avery, 2010), highlighting the importance of positive interventions in the college application process. In addition, any differential treatment found in a simple information-gathering exercise may be representative of a larger problem among admissions counselors that could lead to more severe differences in treatment in the application process.

The two leading explanations on the source of discrimination are that it is based on individual preference (Becker, 1957) or that it is based on statistical differences in-group characteristics (Phelps, 1972). Either explanation could potentially be important in the college admissions setting. Taste-based discrimination may happen in any setting where individuals have some leeway in expressing personal preferences that are not bound by a profit motive- information gathering by students may well be such a case. Statistical discrimination may occur if counselors believe that

one group represents higher quality students on average over another, rather than considering the marginal applicant. Either source of discrimination may be mitigated by motivations at the University level to encourage applications by all students, as lower acceptance rates generally improve institution rankings (and are driven by more applications), but how well this translates to individual counselor motivation is a function of incentives in place at individual institutions.

The correspondence field experiment is set up to examine differential treatment by college admissions counselors at the information gathering stage of a student's application process. To do this, I contact admissions counselors through e-mail, revealing student gender and race through the name associated with the inquiry, and student quality through the text of the correspondence (using SAT score, grade information, and the style of communication). Similar to prominent labor and housing market studies, the names in the study that represent race come from birth certificate data. The experiment itself is a matched-pair experiment, with pairs of correspondence sent to counselors matched by race. Differences in gender and applicant quality are not matched by pair, but instead randomly assigned throughout the subject population.

Analyzing the results of the field experiment for the full sample of 5036 counselors (10,072 e-mails), I find that counselors do not treat potential students differently by race in either the response/non-response decision, or in the content of responses. There are some evidence of differential treatment by race in sub-samples of the data, but these offset in the full sample. I find evidence that counselors favor women over men- both in terms of response/non-response and in how they respond to the correspondence. Counselors are more likely to use a polite greeting and positive language when responding to female names in the experiment than they are when responding to males. Interacting treatment with counselor and institution characteristics, I find that female counselors are more likely to respond to female names, and that African Americans are less likely to receive a response from African American counselors and at higher ranked institutions. I also find large differences in the text of counselor responses to student quality - with counselors favoring higher quality students.

The remainder of the paper begins by outlining the design of the field experiment. The third section of the paper discusses the sample of counselors in the experiment and the data generated through the experiment, while section four presents results. Section five offers robustness checks of the primary results, and the final section of the paper offers concluding comments.

2. Experiment design

The experiment is designed using correspondence between prospective students and university admissions counselors. Correspondence occurs through e-mail and is designed to test if applicant gender, race, or student quality influence *if* and *how* counselors respond to prospective students. Counselors receive race and gender signals through the name associated with a student inquiry. The text of emails, inclusion of grade point and SAT information, and the distribution of SAT and grade information all vary to represent different degrees of student quality.

The design of the experiment is "within subjects" for race of the students, and "between subjects" for the gender and quality of students. This means that each admissions counselor receives two e-mail inquiries, one from an African American, and another from a white prospective student. Inquiries sent to counselors are randomly assigned from the same gender group and quality group. Sending two e-mails per counselor allows for counselor fixed effects in measuring racial discrimination. Randomization across a large number of counselors ensures that gender and quality differences are not correlated with other characteristics of the student

includes graduate school attendance (Fortin et al., 2015), the influence of instructor gender (Hoffmann and Oreopoulos, 2009), less favorable grading of male students linked to non-cognitive skill differences (Cornwell et al., 2013), and the disproportionate return to schooling for women (Dougherty, 2005), for a recent review of this literature see Buchmann et al. (2008).

⁵ See Long (2004), Bertrand et al. (2010), Backes (2012), Hinrichs (2012), and Kapor (2015) for recent studies on how affirmative action and race-blind admissions policies affect college enrollment and degree attainment. Arcidiacono et al. (2015) provide a thorough review of affirmative action policies and the extensive literature examining their impact on a variety of outcomes. See Balafoutas et al. (2016) for an experimental investigation into how affirmative action rules emerge and relate to discrimination.

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