



Stay late or start early? Experimental evidence on the benefits of college matriculation support from high schools versus colleges



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ABSTRACT

The summer melt and academic mismatch literatures have focused largely on college-ready, *low-income* students. Yet, a broader population of students may also benefit from additional support in formulating and realizing their college plans. We investigate the impact of a unique high school–university partnership to support college-intending students to follow through on their college plans. Specifically, we facilitated a collaborative effort between the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) and the University of New Mexico (UNM), and randomly assigned 1602 APS graduates admitted to UNM across three experimental conditions: (1) outreach from an APS-based counselor; (2) outreach from a UNM-based counselor; or (3) the control group. Among Hispanic males, who are underrepresented at UNM compared to their APS graduating class, summer outreach improved timely postsecondary matriculation, with suggestive evidence that college-based outreach may be particularly effective. This finding is consistent with the social-psychological literature showing that increasing students' sense of belonging at college can improve enrollment outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Though the economic and non-pecuniary benefits of postsecondary education continue to grow, disparities in college access and success by family income, race/ethnicity, and gender have only widened over time (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). Responding to these inequalities has emerged as a top policy priority, as evidenced by the White House Summits on Expanding College Opportunity in January and December 2014. Within this context, recent research has focused on the role of information and access to college advising in whether academically-ready students successfully matriculate at

colleges and universities that are well-matched to their abilities (Bettinger, Long, Oreopolous, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012; Castleman, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2014a; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Scott-Clayton, 2015). For instance, a substantial share of academically-prepared, college-intending high school graduates succumb to “summer melt” and fail to enroll anywhere in the year following high school, or do not attend the quality of institution (measured, for instance, by median SAT scores or graduation rates) at which they have the academic credentials to be admitted (Castleman & Page, 2014a, 2014b; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). Relatedly, providing students with personalized information about college and financial aid and/or the offer of additional college advising can generate substantial improvements in college access and persistence, at a low cost per student served (Castleman & Page, 2015; Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014; Hoxby & Turner, 2013).

To date, the summer melt and academic mismatch literatures have focused largely on college-ready students from

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low-income backgrounds. Yet, college-ready students from other populations underrepresented in higher education may also struggle both to formulate and to follow through on their college intentions and may therefore benefit from additional information and personalized support to define and realize these goals. As informed by the social psychology literature, students of color may be hindered in formulating and realizing well-aligned postsecondary plans due to a diminished sense of belonging at postsecondary institutions. Rather, these students may perceive colleges and universities to be primarily the domain of affluent, white students (Walton & Cohen, 2007). They may also be concerned that they would need to downplay their group identity in order to succeed in college (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). If this lack of belonging stands as a barrier, students may be well served by colleges and universities extending a more “welcoming hand” to recent high school graduates as they make the transition to postsecondary education.

We unite these research strands by investigating the impact of a unique high school–university partnership designed to support under-represented, college-intending students to follow through on their college intentions. In summer 2012, we facilitated a collaborative effort between the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) and the University of New Mexico (UNM), the higher education institution attended by the vast majority of APS graduates who continue on to a four-year college or university. We randomly assigned the 1602 APS graduates who reported plans to enroll in UNM the following fall to one of three experimental groups: (1) outreach from a high school counselor stationed at an APS high school, (2) outreach from a high school counselor stationed on the UNM campus, or (3) to a control group. This experimental design allowed us to assess whether students are more responsive to the offer of outreach and support with the transition from high school to college when it comes from the college or from the high school.

As preview, we observe substantial variation in the impact of the summer outreach on students’ initial college enrollment outcomes. Among students from demographic groups which are well-represented on the UNM campus – white students and female students – outreach and the offer of summer assistance have no effect on timely enrollment. Regardless of outreach, over 90% of APS students from these groups matriculated to college successfully in the year following high school.

In contrast, the rate of summer melt for Latino males exceeds 15% in the control group. This sub-group makes up 26% of all APS high school graduates but only 18% of APS graduates admitted to UNM and only 13% of the UNM population.¹ This disproportionate rate of summer melt is consistent with broader trends revealing that Latino males are substantially underrepresented in higher education relative to their Latina and white peers (Castellanos, Gloria, & Kamimura, 2006; Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Cabrera, 2008; Lee & Rawls, 2010; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008). Encouragingly, we observe that for Latino males summer outreach was effective at improving

timely postsecondary enrollment. Further, we observe suggestive evidence that outreach from the college side was particularly effective, generating a more than 10 percentage point increase in fall matriculation. This latter finding is consistent with social psychological theory that proactive efforts to increase students’ sense of belonging at a college or university should generate positive impacts on their enrollment decisions (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

We organize the remainder of the paper as follows. In Section 2, we review the economics and psychology literature relevant to interventions aimed at improving postsecondary access and success. In Section 3, we describe our research design, including the site, data and sample; the design of the intervention; and the process of and timeline for randomization. In Section 4, we present our results. In Section 5, we conclude with a discussion of these findings and their implications for policy, practice, and further research.

2. Literature review

Academically prepared students stand to realize large economic returns to college (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Goldin & Katz, 2008). These returns are particularly pronounced if students attend selective institutions, and should substantially exceed the cost of college net of financial aid (Dale & Krueger, 2014; Long, 2010). Traditional human capital models suggest that, given these large returns relative to the net costs of college, students should choose higher education over alternative postsecondary options, such as direct entry into the labor market, particularly as wages for high school diploma holders continue to decline (Becker, 1964; Goldin & Katz, 2008). Yet, as many as half of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not apply to academically-rigorous institutions to which, based on their credentials, they would have a good chance of being admitted (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). This is especially true for African American and Hispanic students who also often lack access to social networks and adequate college counseling to support and provide valuable information to navigate the complex college admissions and financial aid process (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2009). Further, even among students who have been accepted to college, in many cases applied for financial aid, and chosen where to enroll as of high school graduation, 10–20% fail to matriculate anywhere in the year following high school (Castleman & Page, 2014a).

There are various reasons why even academically-accomplished students who have been admitted to college may nonetheless fail to successfully matriculate. Students may be unaware of important stages in or hindered by the complexity of the financial aid process. For instance, a substantial share of students who have applied for financial aid are required by the United States Department of Education to verify the income or asset information they provided on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Further, students from lower-income families who might be most challenged by the verification process are flagged for verification at higher than average rates (Castleman & Page, 2014a). In addition, the channels through which students are notified about FAFSA verification may not effectively reach them

¹ For more information on the demographic composition of the UNM student body, see: <http://oia.unm.edu/documents/enrollment-reports/fall-2013-official-enrollment-report.pdf>.

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