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Abstract Title Page

Title:

The SOURCE Demonstration Project: Helping Disadvantaged High School Students Enroll in College

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Abstract Body

Background/context:

Research has shown that nationally, academically qualified, low-income students tend not to enroll in four-year colleges for reasons *other than* a lack of qualifications. An analysis of publicly available Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) data on college-going revealed that, throughout the 1990s, fewer than 20 percent of graduating LAUSD seniors enrolled in a four-year public college in California, even though between 40 and 50 percent were academically eligible for admission to either the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) systems (Saunders-Newton and Rasmussen 2000). Fewer than half of LAUSD seniors eligible for admission actually enrolled in California public universities. This proportion falls to less than one-third for African-American and Latino students in the district. Given that the majority of students in the district come from low-income families, these data indicate that a lack of resources and guidance, rather than a lack of motivation or ability, inhibited student understanding and successful completion of the college application process.

Existing research has had limited success in identifying the *precise* factors that explain differences in college entry between high-income and low-income youth with similar academic records. The most extensively tested hypothesis is that college tuition costs have increasingly become a key enrollment barrier. At the same time, several studies examining the impact of the expansion of federal means-tested financial aid programs have found no evidence of increased college enrollment by low-income youth. One explanation offered for this paradox is that lower-income students and their parents may not be fully informed about the cost of college and their eligibility for financial aid. A second related explanation is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have difficulty completing the sequential steps required to complete the college and financial aid application processes.

The lack of information about college costs and financial aid availability coupled with the potential impact of aid availability on college enrollment among low-income students suggest that a program that provides students and their families with accurate information about college costs, along with assistance in identifying and applying for financial aid, has the potential to make a significant difference on college application and enrollment for low-income students.

The SOURCE Program, upon which this paper is based, thus focused primarily on the high-school-to-college transition. The evaluation of SOURCE investigated whether an intervention less intensive and less expensive than such programs as Talent Search and Upward Bound can achieve statistically significant impacts on college-going and thus allow available resources to be used to assist a much larger group of students.

Purpose/objective/research question/focus of study:

The primary research question for this project was whether a streamlined, relatively inexpensive, counseling-based program that assists low-income high school students with the college and financial application processes can significantly increase college enrollment rates. The intervention was designed to test the hypothesis that lack of information is a primary barrier to successful college application and enrollment among low-income high school students. The specific research questions included:

- Are low-income students more likely to register for and take the SAT if counseled on

how and when to register and prepare for the test?

- Are low-income students more likely to apply for college if they receive regular counseling and advice on how to navigate the application process? Are they more likely to apply to a larger number of colleges? To higher quality colleges?
- Are low-income students more likely to submit a completed FAFSA if instructed on how to complete and when to submit it?
- Are college-eligible low-income students more likely to enroll in a post-secondary program directly after high school if given regular advice and guidance on how to complete all of the aspects of the college application process?
- Are college-eligible low-income students more likely to receive financial aid if given regular advice and guidance on how to complete the college and financial aid application process? Are they eligible to receive financial aid? How much financial aid do they receive?
- Are college-eligible low-income students more likely to complete college credits if given regular advice and guidance on how to complete all of the aspects of the college application process? How many credits do they complete?

Setting:

The EdBoost Education Corporation, a nonprofit education organization located in West Los Angeles, CA, developed and implemented an intervention entitled SOURCE (Student Outreach for College Enrollment). The SOURCE program provided advice, counseling, and oversight to 1000 high school students enrolled in LAUSD high schools.

Prior to program implementation, Berkeley Policy Associates (BPA) designed a random-assignment implementation and outcomes study of SOURCE, in order to document all program components and determine impact. BPA participated in student recruitment; randomly assigned students to the treatment and control conditions; collected and analyzed program implementation data; and then collected and analyzed outcomes data program conclusion and one-year post-program completion.

Population/Participants/Subjects:

The SOURCE program recruited 3000 high school students and LAUSD verified that 2500 were program eligible, i.e., were high school juniors, with a GPA of 2.5 or higher, enrolled in an LAUSD school, and had course-taking patterns that would allow them to meet CSU enrollment criteria.

After randomly selecting a sub-sample of control group students to replace program group students whom advisors were unable to contact, the final sample consisted of 2,499 students: 1,051 assigned to treatment and 1,448 to the control group. (No original program group students were dropped from the study).

The majority of study sample members (69.5 percent) were female. The dominant ethnicity of the study sample (62.0 percent) was Latino. English was most frequently cited as the student's primary language (57.6 percent), followed by Spanish (45.3 percent).

Analysis conducted after random assignment showed no statistically significant difference (and

almost no difference at all) between the characteristics of the treatment and control group members, an indication that our random assignment procedure was executed successfully.

Intervention/Program/Practice:

The SOURCE program provided college-focused advice, counseling, and oversight to 1000 high school students enrolled in LAUSD high schools. The program's intent was to help students understand their college options, the actual cost of attending college, and the requirements of college admission and financial aid. The program hired and trained college advisors, themselves undergraduate or graduate students, and matched them to 15 high school juniors each. The advisors then helped program participants manage and complete specific activities and milestones associated with the college and financial aid application processes. The advisors did not provide significant material or academic assistance, but rather advice, reminders, and encouragement through regular in-person meetings, phone calls, email, and other exchanges. Because each advisor had approximately 15 assigned students, their time with each one was necessarily limited.

Between May 2006 and May 2007, the advisors worked with students, guiding them through a sequence of steps necessary to complete applications to (a) CA's public universities, as well as other colleges of their choice, and (b) for state and federal as well as private sources of financial aid. Advisors received a monthly salary for their work, as well as bonuses for student achievement of various milestones. The approximate cost of providing these services was \$1,000 per student.

SOURCE also provided participants and their parents with free tax preparation services for the 2006 tax year. For this purpose, H&R Block offered all SOURCE program participants vouchers for free tax preparation in February 2007. Only a handful of participants, however, utilized this service.

Research Design:

Prior to program implementation, BPA designed a random-assignment implementation and outcomes study of the SOURCE program, in order to document all program components and determine program impact. BPA participated in student recruitment and data collection during all phases of implementation and then collected and analyzed outcomes data at two points in time: program conclusion and one-year post-program completion.

The SOURCE demonstration employed a classic experimental design, relying on random assignment of individual research subjects to two research groups (treatment and control) as the only source of inference for the estimation of program impacts. BPA assigned one set of applicants to a treatment group (approx. 1000 students) to receive the intervention, and the other to a control group (approx. 1500 students) that did not receive it in a 2:3 ratio.

We randomly selected a sub-sample of control group students to replace program group students whom advisors were unable to contact. After one month, we filled 61 program slots with these replacement students, who were then counted as part of the program group. (No original program group students were dropped from the study). The final sample consisted of 2,499 students: 1,051 in the program group and 1,448 in the control group. We conducted random assignment in

a blocked fashion, with high school and gender as the two blocking variables.

The random assignment design enables us to determine whether the intervention had the expected positive impacts on SAT taking, college application, college enrollment, and financial aid receipt.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Implementation data collected included (a) baseline demographic and educational goals data; (b) weekly program participation data on the treatment group; (c) individual semi-structured interviews with program staff; (d) focus groups with a large sample of program advisors; (e) on-site observations of advisor trainings; (e) document review of program training curriculum and student workbooks; (f) an on-line survey of all program advisors at program completion; and (g) a survey of control group members at the time of expected high school completion.

Baseline data were collected in hard copy and entered into electronic format for random assignment and analysis. Program participation data were collected and processed by BPA and converted into a normalized set of monthly variables for analysis. We analyzed all survey and qualitative data to document program implementation and identify key components of the pilot including whether implementation varied significantly by advisor, an important measure of the robustness and integrity of the overall program model.

We are now analyzing program impacts using baseline and control group survey data mentioned above, as well as (1) LAUSD follow-up data on all study participants SATs, course taking, GPAs, and graduation; (2) a comprehensive survey of both study sample members conducted one year after expected high school completion to document college- and financial aid-related services, supports and outcomes; and (3) a data match to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) database, facilitated and verified through LAUSD, to capture college enrollment.

The objective of these analyses is to describe how students who enroll in college perform once they are there. We are also considering 1) whether the services provided by SOURCE advisors (which ended with students' high school graduation) continued to benefit program participants after enrollment, and 2) whether the difference in college enrollment between the treatment and control groups dissipated as college-enrolled students confronted the realities of college. This survey also sought to confirm the results of the data match with the NSC data, and to describe what students who did not go to college were doing instead.

The experimental design of the study and the extensive baseline data collected at application will allow us to estimate program effects for a variety of different subgroups. We currently plan to estimate impacts by gender, ethnicity, native language, prior academic performance, educational expectations, extant knowledge of college expenses, and high school attended.

Findings/Results:

The analysis of SOURCE implementation data suggested both the potential and the challenges of offering college transition mentoring support to disadvantaged high school students in a large urban school district. With an investment of \$1,000 per participating student, the SOURCE program was able to recruit, train, and employ a pool of highly motivated university students to

provide a year's worth of college advisement services to a diverse group of high school students. The advisors established lasting mentoring relationships with most of their students, monitoring their efforts to prepare for college, assisting with financial aid applications, and seeking to broaden the range of colleges, universities, and aid to or for which they applied.

The logistics of providing these services posed a significant challenge. Advisors spent much of their time maintaining regular contact with their students, keeping track of their students' progress, and reporting on that progress to the SOURCE program. They spent comparatively little time in actual face-to-face meetings with their students or the students' parents. As a result, the intensity of the SOURCE program, as experienced by participants, was relatively modest, consisting of frequent contacts, mostly by phone or text, relatively short in duration.

Implementation data also suggested that services like those provided by SOURCE were already widely available to high school students in LA when SOURCE was implemented. A large majority of control group members reported receiving services similar to those of SOURCE and having access to support for completing their college and financial aid applications.

Both program advisors working with the treatment group and a majority of control group members reported applying to CSU and UC campuses, a major SOURCE program goal. Our preliminary analysis, however, has identified positive program impacts on key college outcomes, including enrollment in the UC and CSU systems.

At the same time, the relatively modest intensity of the SOURCE program and the use of similar services by the control group suggest that it may be difficult to identify and document other SOURCE program impacts. We have completed outcome data collection from LAUSD, NSC (to be updated again early 2009), and the one year follow-up survey and continue to conduct impact analyses at the time of proposal submission. Should our proposal be accepted, we will complete these analyses for the SREE conference.

Conclusions:

While it is too early for us to offer mature conclusions and recommendations, our preliminary analysis has found positive program impacts on some of the program's primary goals: Our initial impacts appear to indicate that a program that provides students and their families with accurate information about the college application process and college costs, along with assistance in identifying and applying for college and financial aid, has the potential to make a significant difference on college application and enrollment for low-income students. In other words, our findings may suggest that a relatively modest college transition intervention can impact college-going among disadvantaged students. If these impacts prove to be statistically significant, the SOURCE program has the potential to serve as a model of how to employ scarce resources to support a much larger group of disadvantaged students in their pursuit of college and financial aid than can current, more resource-intensive programs with similar goals.

Appendixes

References

Saunders, D.N. & Rasmussen, R. (2000) Enrollment of Los Angeles Unified School District seniors in California public colleges and universities, years 1987-1998. Independent Analysis Unit, Los Angeles City Board of Education.