



Study of Enhanced College Advising in Upward Bound: Impacts on Steps Toward College

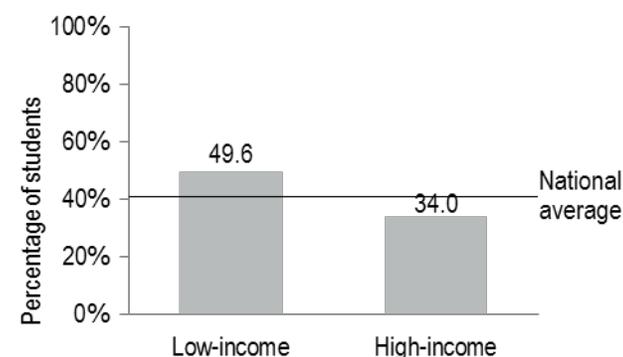
Find the Fit advising increased the number and selectivity of colleges applied to by disadvantaged students in a federal college access program. *Find the Fit* includes customized information about college going and costs, text messaging of key application and financial aid deadlines, and related advisor training. These research-based strategies are designed to help students enroll in the best college they can and stay in until they complete a degree. This first report looks at *Find the Fit*'s effects on students' steps toward enrolling in a more selective college.

Why this Study

Where students go to college, not just whether they go, may be important to their educational and career success.ⁱ Yet many students—more than 40 percent nationally—don't enroll in college at all or don't go to the best college they could. The extent of this "undermatch" is even greater for high school students who are from low-income families (Exhibit 1) or would-be "first generation" college goers. For these students cost, application logistics, and concerns about falling short are real barriers to attending more selective colleges.

The U.S. Department of Education serves these disadvantaged students in the Upward Bound program. Upward Bound funds projects across the country to help prepare students to enroll in and complete college. Congress requires the Department to evaluate strategies that can improve student success in its college access programs. Because Upward Bound projects report that most of their students go to college, program leaders committed to testing an approach that might shift where students enroll and whether they persist in their postsecondary studies.

Exhibit 1: Undermatch Nationally, by Family Income



Source: Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013).

What was Studied and How

The study tested promising strategies for advising that were combined into a low cost approach called *Find the Fit* (Exhibit 2). The strategies in *Find the Fit* focus on addressing key challenges disadvantaged students face in applying to and choosing a college.



Exhibit 2: Components of

- (1) college planning materials organized in personalized student folders with some information tailored to their likely college opportunities;
- (2) text or email messages customized to where students were applying; and
- (3) training webinars for their Upward Bound advisors.

Specifically, *Find the Fit* includes practical help on the logistics of applying to college, seeking financial aid and understanding costs, and raising aspirations regarding college options. Because college advising is already a key part of Upward Bound services, *Find the Fit* was expected to enhance existing practices—adding to or replacing current activities or materials, depending on what was typically offered.

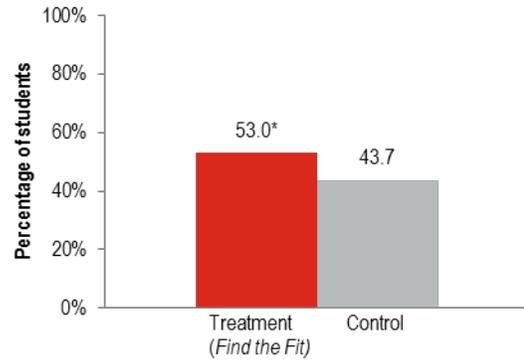
To investigate whether *Find the Fit* could improve students' college choices, the study recruited 194 out of 702 Upward Bound projects. These projects, serving nearly 4,500 rising 2015-16 high school seniors, were randomly assigned by lottery either to receive *Find the Fit* to supplement their regular college advising (the treatment group) or to offer their regular college advising (the control group). Since only chance determined who was offered *Find the Fit*, any differences between the groups can be interpreted as the impacts of the enhanced advising.

This first report from the evaluation looks at whether *Find the Fit* affected student actions and attitudes that are considered key steps in the path toward enrolling in a more selective college.

The Findings

- ***Find the Fit* increased the share of students who applied to four or more colleges.** Because applying to more colleges is associated with enrolling in and attending a more selective college, *Find the Fit* advising included a recommendation to apply to at least four colleges. Overall, students in treatment group projects were 9 percentage points more likely to report that they applied to four or more colleges than were students in control group projects (Exhibit 3).

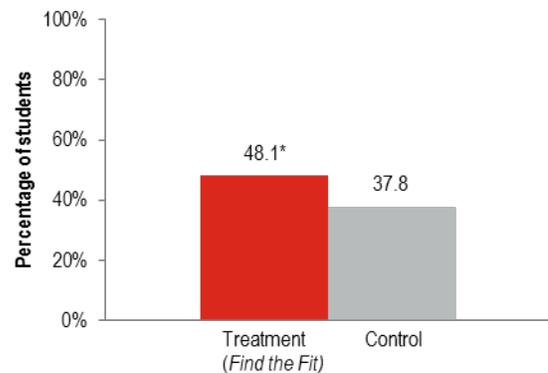
Exhibit 3: Percentage of Students Applying to Four or More Colleges



*Difference is statistically significant at the .05 level. Sample = 1,920 treatment group students and 1,710 control group students who responded to follow up surveys.

- ***Find the Fit* led students to apply to colleges of higher selectivity levels.** A first step in reducing academic undermatch is ensuring students apply to colleges ranging in selectivity or quality. This includes not only “safety” schools but also those that are a good “match” or even a “reach” for them, given their academic qualifications. Students in treatment group projects consistently applied to colleges with higher selectivity levels than did students in control group projects. For example, 48 percent of treatment group students applied to colleges rated at least “very competitive” versus 38 percent of control group students (Exhibit 4).

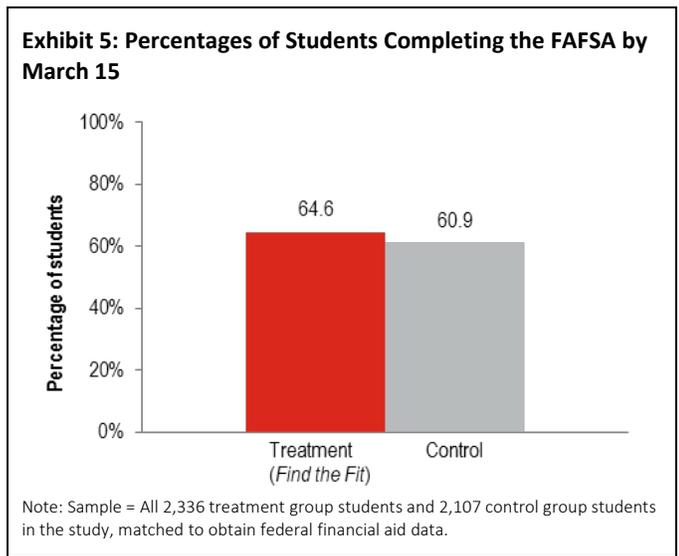
Exhibit 4: Percentage of Students Applying to a College with a Selectivity Level of at Least Very Competitive



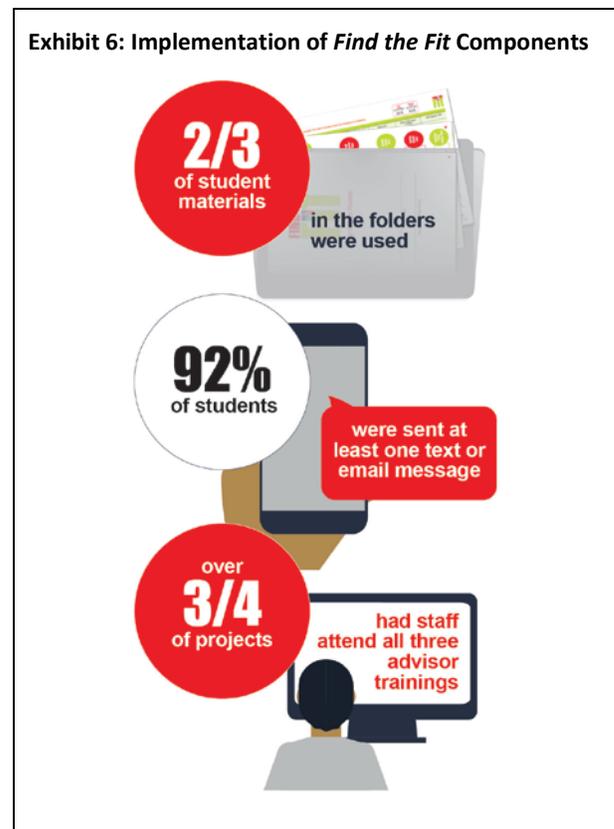
*Difference is statistically significant at the .05 level. Sample = 1,920 treatment group students and 1,710 control group students who responded to follow up surveys.

- *Find the Fit* had no impact on the importance students place on academic quality in choosing a college. Several components of *Find the Fit* were designed to increase the weight that Upward Bound advisors and students gave to the academic quality of the colleges students were considering. However, students in treatment group projects were no more likely than were students in control group projects to rate academic quality as “very important” in choosing a college (about 75 percent in both groups).
- Overall, *Find the Fit* did not affect the share of students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) early, but it may have increased completion among students from some groups underrepresented in college. Because financial aid can be a factor in whether students attend a more selective college, *Find the Fit* urged students to complete the FAFSA by March 15, a date when not only federal but also most state and individual colleges’ aid is still available. Similar percentages of students in treatment and control group projects completed the FAFSA by *Find the Fit*’s target date (65 percent and 61 percent, respectively) (Exhibit 5).

- *Find the Fit* was implemented to varying degrees by all treatment group projects, and it had a positive effect on two of seven directly related advising practices. Because the delivery of regular Upward Bound services varies across projects, *Find the Fit* offered suggestions but did not require that all of its components and materials be used. In projects that were offered *Find the Fit*, over two-thirds of the student materials included in the folders were used on average, 92 percent of students were sent at least one text or email message, and three-quarters of projects had staff attend all three advisor trainings (Exhibit 6). According to student reports of their project’s advising practices, *Find the Fit* translated into Upward Bound advisors encouraging more students to: submit four or more college applications (57 percent for the treatment group versus 51 percent for the control group); and complete the FAFSA by March 15 (44 percent versus 38 percent). There was no effect on the five other advising practices measured, including the extent to which advisors encouraged students to consider the cost of college after grants and scholarships (net cost).



However, treatment group students who were Black or had low college entrance exam scores (a proxy for academic preparation) were significantly more likely to complete the FAFSA by March 15 than their peers in control group projects (by 10 and 8 percentage points, respectively); these findings may be due to chance because of the large number of subgroups examined.



Looking Ahead

Find the Fit's early effects on steps toward college suggest it may be more effective at changing students' behaviors rather than their mindsets. That is, it increased the number and selectivity of colleges to which students applied but did not change the consideration that students said they gave to colleges' academic quality.

These findings support some of the hypothesized pathways to reducing college undermatch among Upward Bound students, but also raise some questions to be explored. The next report will examine whether and where students enrolled in college right after high school graduation, including the selectivity of colleges attended. A final report will determine whether *Find the Fit* improved college persistence and explore how persistence was influenced by college selectivity.

ⁱ Bowen, W.G., Chingos, M.M., and McPherson, M.S. (2009). *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Dillon, E.W., and Smith, J.A. (2017). *The Consequences of Academic Match between Students and Colleges* (CESifo Working Paper No. 6344). Munich, Germany: Center for Economic Studies and Ifo Institute (CESifo). <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/155586>; Hoxby, C. (2001). The Return of Attending a More Selective College: 1960 to the Present. In M. Devline and J. Meyerson (Eds.), *Forum Futures: Exploring the Future of Higher Education, 2000 Papers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Smith, J. (2013). Ova and Out: Using Twins to Estimate the Educational Returns to Attending a Selective College. *Economics of Education Review*, 36: 166-180; Witteveen, D. and Attewell, P. (2017). The Earnings Payoff from Attending a Selective College. *Social Science Research*, 66: 154-169.

IES develops these briefs to offer short, accessible summaries of evaluation reports. For the full report with technical details, see: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20194002>.

Martinez, A., Linkow, T., Miller, H. and Parsad, A. (2018). *Study of Enhanced College Advising in Upward Bound: Impacts on Steps Toward College*. (NCEE 2019-4002). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.