Extended Abstract for
An Experimental Analysis of the Effect of Near-Peer College Advising on High School Seniors

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Abstract

Despite the numerous college access programs operating in high schools across the country, there is very little experimental evidence demonstrating their effectiveness. This paper presents a randomized control trial of a near-peer, school-based college advising program called the National College Advising Corps. Students who were likely marginal college matriculants in 15 high schools across three states were randomized to receive attention from a college adviser to encourage and assist their post secondary enrollment. Although outcome data is forthcoming, the data indicate that randomization produced balance across treatment and control, and the treatment group received a higher level of interaction with the advisers than the control group. The multisite nature of the experiment enables an exploration of the most effective college advising mechanisms that lead to student success.

Introduction

Almost two and a half million low to moderate-income high school students who are academically prepared for college did not receive a bachelor's degree in the last decade (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2006). This enormous loss to our collective human capital growth undermines our economic well being as a nation as well as seriously limits those individuals' financial success as the average college graduate earns 1.66 times the average high school graduate in lifetime earnings (Baum et al., 2010). Furthermore, additional benefits such as improved health outcomes and higher engagement in civic activities are associated with college enrollment and completion.

There are many documented reasons why high school students struggle to enroll and persist in college. Financial barriers continue to grow as college charges outpace growth in financial aid, but a potentially even greater obstacle is the complicated series of procedures required to apply to and enroll in an institution of higher education. Students must conduct research about course offerings and college programs, take standardized testing, complete admission applications, apply for financial aid, and decide where to enroll over the course of their last two years of high school. This process can be especially daunting for first generation college students whose parents are not able to offer guidance.

College access programs attempt to fill this gap in knowledge and guidance. They often supplement the work done by high school guidance counselors who are often overburdened by large caseloads and additional duties. The is a vast variety of these programs with different target populations, intervention strategies, and funding streams (see Gandara (2001) for a taxonomy of programs and Perna et al. (2008) for a more recent typology of federal and state programs), but they share similar goals in promoting college entrance and success by providing information, guidance, and sometimes financial support.

Unfortunately, despite the attention paid in the policy world to college access programs, they remain somewhat of a black box. Different programs supports different college preparation activities, and we

do not fully understand which mechanisms lead to student success. This multisite experiment has the potential to reveal variation in outcomes related to different college preparation and advising activities which will begin to shine light into the black box of college advising.

This paper examines the effectiveness of one model of providing this informational support: near-peer college advising through a full-time, school-based intervention. This service is provided by the National College Advising Corps at hundreds of high schools across 14 different states. The model places recent college graduates into high schools to work primarily with seniors on a variety of college preparatory activities such as the college search process, the application process, test preparation and registration, and financial aid applications. Although the advisers work with any student who requests assistance, they can also seek out students who may benefit from the adviser's knowledge and experience.

This study is a causal analysis and asks whether this near-peer college advising intervention improves college preparation, college knowledge, and college enrollment among students with whom the adviser works. It uses experimental methods to randomly assign seniors to receive extra attention and support from the adviser. It also focuses on students who are typically on the margin of deciding to enroll in college, those with a 2.0 to 3.0 cumulative high school GPA at the beginning of their senior year. The experiment itself is described in more detail below.

Importance of this Study

As Gandara (2001) notes, there is a dearth of causal evidence on the effectiveness of college access programs. This pattern is beginning to change as funders have become savvier in requesting efficacy studies before financing programs. Still, there are very few experimental studies of their effectiveness as most rely on quasi-experimental methods. The few experiments that do exist are focused on national, federally funded efforts such as Mathematica's famous randomized study of Upward Bound (Myers et al., 2004). Additionally, most evaluations of privately funded college access programs are confined to a single site in one local area. The current study contributes to the literature by providing evidence on a privately sponsored college access program across multiple sites in multiple states. Because many programs use similar strategies to encourage college enrollment, evidence from the National College Advising Corps can be usefully applied to a broad range of college access interventions.

Conceptual Framework

Numerous conceptual models of how high school students decide if, when, and where to enroll in college exist. They often approach the decision from either a rational choice model firmly fixed in economics or a cultural model drawing from sociology, although Perna's (2006) model integrates the two approaches. Some models are focused on specific populations such as McDonough et al.'s (1997) paper on how black students choose to enroll in a Historically Black College or University or specific time periods in the process such as Long's (2004) study, which relies on an economic model of considering cost versus quality and focuses on the post admission decision in which a student chooses which offer of admission to accept. This study relies on the most classic college choice model initially posited by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and reviewed and updated by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000).

Hossler and Gallagher's three phase model begins in grades 7-9 and focuses on the predisposition to attend college which is affected by parental encouragement and student academic ability. In this phase, students embark on a college preparatory high school curriculum. The second phase, search, follows in grades 10-12 and incorporates the consideration of educational and occupational interest and aspirations, and it involves listing potential colleges and universities and searching for information on those institutions. The model concludes in the last two years of high school with the choice phase in which students seriously consider the varying characteristics of each institution, financial aid, standardized testing, and admission application procedures.

This framework provides excellent structure for analyzing the intervention studied in this paper. Because it is limited to the senior year, it focuses primarily on the final phase of the college choice model. The obvious downside of this intervention is that it is difficult for an adviser to alter some of the earlier phases. If, for example, a student has little predisposition to attend college and has not begun to search for information, it may be difficult for that student to complete all of the steps necessary to enroll during the senior year.

Data & Methods

This multisite randomized experiment took place at 15 high schools across three geographically diverse states (RI, NC, and MO). At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, about 30 seniors in each school with a GPA between 2.0 and 3.0 GPA we randomly selected to receive extra attention from the adviser over the course of the school year. The other seniors between 2.0 and 3.0 GPAs serve as the control group in each school. The treatment is defined by the advisers meeting with these students to encourage college enrollment, establish a post graduation plan, and assist in making that plan viable. This assistance varies for each student but commonly includes conducting college entrance exam test prep, taking them on a college visit, and helping to complete scholarship and financial aid applications. It is important to note that advisers worked with any student that requested assistance, so it is likely that some of the control students also received the treatment.

There are numerous data sources incorporated into this study. Initial student selection into the treatment relied on administrative data at the high school level. Advisers provide individual contact data with each student through an electronic log that indicates the date and type of interaction with each student in the treatment and control groups. Each student in the senior class was asked to complete a survey near the end of the school year that asks questions about college aspirations, knowledge, and preparation. Finally, National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data will be used to verify college enrollment. The outcomes of interest are whether receiving attention from the adviser causes increased college preparation activity, increased knowledge about college, and eventual college enrollment.

Although advisers have completed the treatment phase of the study, data collection and cleaning are ongoing. The student conducted the surveys on paper, and they are currently being digitalized for analysis. College enrollment data will not be available from the NSC until late October at which point college outcomes will be analyzed.

Results

In any experimental study, randomization should be checked to ensure balance exists across the treatment and control groups on pretreatment covariates. Unfortunately, the initial data that was used to conduct the randomization only includes rosters from the high schools with name, birthdates, and GPA. Table 1 displays the average GPA for the treatment and control groups. Additional covariates such as demographic information are currently being collected to supplement this table. Randomization at least produced balance between treatment and control groups on the GPA metric as can be seen by the extremely high p-value testing thee two groups' GPA equivalence.

It is also necessary to test whether the treatment group actually received more of the treatment than the control group. This is especially important in this study given that the control group could easily access the adviser and therefore obtain the treatment. This test is conducted by comparing the average number of interactions between the treatment and control groups with the adviser. Results are reported in Table 2. Although the control group clearly sought out the advisers' assistance, on average, the treatment group received 1.8 more meetings with the adviser than the control group. This is highly statistically significant as can be seen by the tiny p-value in Table 2.

As the survey and college enrollment data arrive this summer and in October, it will be possible to compare the average outcomes of the treatment and control group to determine whether this increase in contact with the adviser translated into any enrollment impact.

Table 1: Randomization Balance Check for GPA

	Treatment	Control	p-value
Cumulative GPA	2.481	2.478	0.88

Table 2: Dosage Difference between Treatment and Control

	Treatment	Control	p-value
# Meetings with Adviser	7.471	5.633	0.0005

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