PACE

COMMENTARY

Can High Schools Reduce College Enrollment Gaps with a New Counseling Model?

A Summary of a Research Study

AUTHORS

Jennifer L. Stephan | American Institutes for Research

James E. Rosenbaum | Northwestern University

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State and federal policymakers are striving to improve four-year college attendance fordisadvantaged students. Despite a dramatic increase in the opportunity to attend college, disadvantaged students often enroll at higher rates in two-year colleges, which are associated with lower educational attainment and earnings. Successfully navigating the complex and unpredictable procedures of four-year college applications and financial aid requires students to make plans and take actions that in turn depend on college knowledge and assistance, which many students cannot get from their parents. Besides being limited by time constraints, counselors' effectiveness is also limited by the standard counseling model that serves students one-on-one and requires students' initiative. In this study, we find that a new counseling model may improve the types of colleges students attend. Importantly, the most disadvantaged students appear to benefit.

In 2004–2005, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) introduced the college coach program to a diverse group of high schools. One coach was assigned per school and charged with providing help in the enrollment process. The district directed both coaches and counselors to increase the completion of key actions that are particularly important for four-year college enrollment: applying to multiple colleges, completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and applying for scholarships. However, coaches' job tasks and advising strategies differed from those of traditional counselors. Unlike most counselors, coaches spent all of their time helping students with postsecondary plans. Coaches also had innovative advising strategies: (a) Coaches *proactively reached out* and engaged students. (b) Coaches *built trusting relationships* with students. (c) Coaches *enlisted students* to help each other. (d) Coaches often *used groups* instead of meeting individually with students. Coaches' strategies allowed them to provide social support, detailed and ongoing help, and monitoring of the completion of actions.

Following nearly all students in CPS from senior year through the fall after high school, we studied coaches' impact. Three key findings emerged from our study. First, we found two gaps in the enrollment process: many seniors with general college plans do not form specific plans, and specific plans don't always lead to enrollment. These gaps are larger for Latino and low-SES students. School staff or researchers should not assume that specific stated plans at the end of senior year translate into actual college enrollment in the fall.

Second, increasing the completion of key actions may reduce gaps in the enrollment process. Many students with general college plans do not take actions to make college happen. Students who do not complete these actions risk missing key deadlines, have less access to school help, and may have fewer (and perhaps less desirable) college options. Students who complete college actions are more likely to form specific plans, to enroll in college, and to enroll in selective colleges.

Third, students at coach schools were significantly more likely to attend four-year (less selective) colleges, which have much higher graduation rates than two-year colleges. Coaches appear to improve enrollment outcomes by increasing the number of students applying to three or more colleges and completing the FAFSA. Coaches' approach may particularly benefit students often underserved by traditional approaches including low-SES and Latino students.

Important questions remain about the coach approach: Does serving students in groups result in the needs of very high achieving students being overlooked? Can help earlier in high school improve outcomes even more than one targeting senior year? Can the coach model impact college persistence? Future research can investigate these questions.

This study provides evidence that advising models that provide group advising and support in the enrollment process, such as the coach program, may potentially improve the educational attainment of disadvantaged students.

The full study can be found in Stephan, Jennifer L. and James E. Rosenbaum, Can High Schools Reduce College Enrollment Gaps With a New Counseling Model? Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, June 2013 vol. 35 no. 2 200-219.

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PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

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