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COMMENTARY

Measuring the Impact of High School Counselors on College Enrollment

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When school districts' financial resources are strained and they are cornered into dismissing staff, school counselors are among the first personnel to lose their jobs. Recent budget cuts have led to mass layoffs of counselors across many districts and states, particularly in California where, according to the U.S. Department of Education, the student-to-counselor ratio is now the highest in the country; more than 1,000 students per school counselor.

What is the motivation for honing in on counselors as more dispensable than other staff? Perhaps the lack of causal empirical evidence on the impact of school counselors on student outcomes is to blame. Educational researchers have had a laser-like focus on the impact of *teachers* through studies on class size, value-added, and the like, but there are only a few rigorous studies on the extent to which school counselors influence student outcomes and most of those focus on attendance and disciplinary issues. In this study, our research provides the first evidence on the causal impact of an additional high school counselor on students' four-year college enrollment rates.

We examined three waves of data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey (NCES-SASS), which collects information on teachers, principals, districts and schools in order to understand school and teacher climates, pay structures, and general perceptions of these groups' professions. In addition to school-level demographic characteristics, this survey also collects data on each high school's four-year college-going rates, student enrollment, and the number of school counselors.

In order to identify causal rather than just correlational effects, we analyze a subsample of states that have mandated maximum high school student-to-counselor ratios or have programs through which the states subsidize the hiring of counselors with school accreditation guidelines reinforcing these ratios. Our analyses focus on 12 states with such policies: Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Maine, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah, and Vermont.

The mandated student-to-counselor ratios in these states allow us to apply a methodological approach known as regression discontinuity design, which essentially focuses in on those high schools that fall on either side of each state's mandated ratio. Such high schools are basically identical in observable and unobservable ways *except for* their student-to-counselor ratios, mimicking a randomized experiment.

In this scenario, the treatment group can be thought of as the set of high schools with student enrollments just large enough to exceed the mandated student-to-counselor ratio, thus justifying the addition of a school counselor. The control group high schools have student-to-counselor ratios just shy of the maximum allowable ratio.

We find that an additional high school counselor is predicted to induce up to a 10 percentage point increase in four-year college

enrollment. Among the typical sampled high school with an enrollment of 113 graduating students, our results imply that an additional high school counselor would be predicted to induce 11 more graduating seniors into four-year colleges.

The College Board's *2012 National Survey of School Counselors and Administrators* revealed that more than half of high school counselors believe they should spend more time on building a college-going culture. While our research is unable to uncover exactly why the addition of school counselors bolsters four-year college-going rates, it is consistent with counselors' perceptions that more resources are needed to help students reach their college potential. The evidence in our study can be leveraged by counselors and administrators alike to defend claims that current counselor staffing levels are sub-optimal and that students are being penalized as a result.

The full study can be found in Michael Hurwitz and Jessica Howell, "Estimating Causal Impacts of School Counselors With Regression Discontinuity Designs", Journal of Counseling & Development, Volume 92, Issue 3, pages 316–327, July 2014.

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