

**The Socioemotional and Academic Impact of College Campus Visits:
A Randomized Experiment**

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Background

Limited access to postsecondary education is frequently highlighted as a threat to the American dream. However, current proposals for expanding access to higher education, such as loan forgiveness or tuition-free college, focus on financial barriers faced by students who have already prepared for, applied to, and potentially attended, college. In this paper, we argue that barriers to college access begin earlier, when students begin making academic choices that affect the extent to which they are prepared for college and can be competitive in the admissions process.

Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that individuals' conceptions of "possible selves" help to motivate and drive behavior, but that "the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and [...] the individual's immediate social experiences." In the context of postsecondary access, this means that students will be more likely to aspire to and prepare for college if they can envision themselves as college students, but that vision may be less salient for students from historically underrepresented populations. Many students determine their postsecondary aspirations early in high school (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989), and gaps between would-be first- and continuing-generation students emerge and widen in middle and high school (Anders & Mickelwright, 2015). Thus, an intervention aimed at increasing the salience of the experience of college students could increase the pool of students interested in attending college and shape students' long-term educational decisions.

In addition to the systemic inequalities that may make the idea of being a college student less salient for historically underrepresented students, first-generation and low-income students may lack the "cultural capital," or cultural knowledge and social assets (Bourdieu, 1977), necessary for navigating universities' complex formal and informal systems they face when applying to and attending college (Jack, 2019; Hamilton, Roksa, & Nielsen, 2018; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lareau, 1989; Swidler, 1986). Cultural mobility theory (Di Maggio, 1982) suggests that students can acquire cultural capital from outside the family, suggesting that a school-based intervention may be able to provide students with experiences that help build the cultural capital needed to feel confident in preparing for, applying to, and being successful in an institution of higher education.

Research Questions

We examine the impact of three field trips to a college campus during students' eighth-grade year using a randomized experimental design with two cohorts of students ($N = 1,478$). We use survey and administrative data to estimate the impact of these campus visits on students' college knowledge, socioemotional outcomes related to postsecondary success, academic engagement, conversations about college with school personnel, and ninth grade course load. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of visiting a college campus in eighth grade on students' knowledge about college and college-related socioemotional skills?
2. What is the impact of visiting a college campus in eighth grade on students' college-preparatory behaviors?

Intervention

In the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years, we worked with 16 schools in Northwest Arkansas whose student bodies were comprised primarily of students of color or low-income

students, and which were primarily located in rural areas with low college-going rates. In each year, participating students were randomized, within schools, to either participate in three field trips to the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville and receive written information about postsecondary options or to only receive written information about postsecondary options in school. We thus test the impact of repeated exposure to a college campus relative to only receiving written information about college.

The visits represented various aspects of college life and were designed to help students feel comfortable on a college campus as well as with the idea of being a college student. In their first visit to campus, students received a tour of campus and participated in a half-day workshop designed to introduce them to the process of preparing for, applying to, and succeeding in college. In their second visit, students toured on-campus housing and participated in hands-on workshops with various academic departments on campus to gain a better understanding of the potential fields of study available to them as college students. In their third visit, students either attended a university baseball game or participated in an on-campus scavenger hunt designed by the research team. Lunch was provided at all visits.

Research Design

This is a block randomized control trial. Students were randomized to the treatment (visits and information) or control (information only) groups within schools. We demonstrate baseline equivalence between these groups. We use a regression framework to evaluate the impact of the intervention. Our preferred model controls for treatment status and randomization block. We cluster standard errors at the school level. In robustness checks, we also include students' demographic characteristics and baseline measures of the survey outcomes of interest; results are consistent across models.

Data Sources

We surveyed all participating students in the fall of their eighth-grade year, prior to randomization as well as in the spring of their eighth-grade year, after all visits and the delivery of the college information packet. Additionally, we collected administrative records from all participating districts to capture students' ninth grade course-taking behavior.

Results

Among students in the first cohort, the campus visits led to increases in college knowledge ($\sigma=0.1$), academic engagement ($\sigma=0.2$), frequency of conversations about college with school personnel ($\sigma=0.1$), likelihood of enrolling in advanced math coursework (6.4 percentage points), and likelihood of enrolling in advanced science or social science coursework in ninth grade (6.1 percentage points). We also find that participating in the visits significantly decreased students' likelihood of wanting to attend technical school (3.4 percentage points). Combined-cohort analyses are ongoing and will be presented at the spring conference.

Conclusions

In this study, we contribute to the literature examining interventions that can help students overcome barriers to college access. While past work has primarily focused on the role of financial aid, information, and assistance navigating bureaucratic processes, we demonstrate that early exposure to a college campus can prompt students to take important initial steps towards preparing for and succeeding in postsecondary education.

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