SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW

Educators and policy makers have invested considerable resources over the past decade to increase college enrollment among low-income students. Nonetheless, substantial barriers remain. Using random assignment research designs, the papers in the proposed symposium report on innovative interventions designed to alleviate two major barriers. First, the low visibility of financial aid programs and the complexity of the federal financial aid application process deter low-income students from accessing financial assistance and enrolling in college. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has been shown to be a major hurdle for low-income students. Second, students who plan to enroll in college encounter a host of additional financial and informational obstacles during the summer after high school graduation. For instance, students may struggle to distinguish grant aid from loan assistance on their financial aid award letters. Many of these obstacles may be particularly challenging for low-income students who no longer have access to high school guidance counselors, may not be familiar with support resources available at their intended college, and whose families may lack experience with the college-going process. Recent studies estimate that anywhere from 10 to 40 percent of students who graduate from high school with plans to attend a particular college fail to matriculate at any college in the fall semester following high school.

Each of the papers in this symposium reports the results of separate randomized trials conducted during Summer 2012. The first three papers present interventions employing unique and innovative strategies to help college-intending high school graduates realize their college plans. The first paper focuses on a text messaging campaign implemented in five large, urban school districts. The authors randomly assigned students (and in four school districts, their parents) to receive a series of 8-10 text message reminders of key tasks to complete over the summer. The reminders were customized to the institutions at which students intended to enroll and provided recipients with the option of requesting help from a counselor. The second and third papers document the impact of peer mentor interventions. The second paper focuses on peer mentor interventions in Massachusetts and Philadelphia, while the third paper focuses on a peer mentor intervention in central Michigan. Recent high school graduates were randomly assigned to receive outreach from a near-aged peer currently enrolled in college. The peer mentors offered help completing required tasks for successful matriculation and facilitated referrals to professional staff when students needed additional assistance. The final paper presents the results of an intervention targeting students with less well-defined college plans. School counselors in several large urban school districts contacted a randomly selected group of students who had yet to complete the FAFSA, to offer help with both financial aid and college application processes.

Collectively, these papers employ rigorous research designs, and offer educators and policy makers valuable information on innovative strategies to increase college-going among underrepresented students in higher education.