Title: Pathways to Increasing Postsecondary Attainment

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Section: Student transitions

Symposium justification

Efforts to increase postsecondary attainment have moved from a focus on building college aspirations to building a clear path for students to achieve their goals. This change in focus has been driven by changes in the college aspirations and college enrollment patterns across all demographic groups. The aspiration to attain a college degree has become nearly universal among high school students, and the percentage of students making the immediate transition to college has risen among all racial and ethnic groups (Planyt, et al., 2008). However, a gap remains between college aspirations and degree attainment; despite increases in college enrollment, the proportion of students who complete a college degree has barely changed (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2009).

Over the past several years, policy discussions have focused on college readiness as a critical lever in increasing college attainment rates. However, many factors other than high school qualifications affect whether students enroll in and graduate from college, including college costs, being able to navigate the college application process, and making good college choices. Many different approaches have been suggested to address the gap between college aspirations and attainment, from intervention programs that provide targeted support around college application to students to building the overall capacity of schools to build college readiness and support students in the college application process.

The papers in this symposium take a look at different approaches to bridging the gap between students’ college aspirations and likelihood of receiving a degree. The first two papers use data from two different large urban districts, New York and Chicago, to look at indicators of college readiness and how predictive they are of college outcomes. These two studies focus on identifying key predictors of college outcomes and seek to provide a more general picture of what policy and practice levers may have the biggest impact. The third and fourth papers take a different approach and evaluate the effectiveness of two different early college outreach interventions using data from randomized trials. The third paper looks at the impact of The Degree Project (TDP), an early scholarship promise of college aid to low-income students. The fourth paper is a reanalysis of data from an evaluation of Upward Bound, a program designed to lessen gaps in educational outcomes by providing low income and minority students with the preparation and college knowledge required for academic success.

Meeting the challenge presented by the rising aspirations of today’s students requires creating new systems, capacities, and interventions to ensure that the pathway to degree attainment is clear. The four papers in this symposium highlight two different approaches to helping students meet their college aspirations, one focused on capacity building in schools and the other on interventions external to the school setting. Barbara Schneider will discuss the implications of this work.
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Paper 1: Creating College Readiness Indicators in Chicago

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Paper 2: Mapping Pathways to College: An In-depth Examination of College Readiness in New York City

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Paper 3: Is Traditional College Aid Too Little, Too Late? Impacts on High School Outcomes from a Cluster Randomized Trial of an Early College Scholarship for Low-Income Students

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Paper 4: Does Upward Bound have an Effect on Student Educational Outcomes? A Re-Analysis of the Horizons Randomized Control Trial Study

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