Title: Stumbling blocks on the road to college and the promise of low-touch interventions to pave the way

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Conference Section Preferences:
1. Understanding the effects of educational policies
2. Education and Social Inequality

Educators and policymakers have invested considerable resources over the past decade to increase college application and enrollment among low-income students. Nonetheless, substantial barriers remain. The papers in the symposium provide evidence on the stumbling blocks that students face and on promising interventions to improve students’ outcomes in the process of considering, applying, and transitioning to postsecondary education.

Beginning with the process of applying to college, the first paper provides quasi-experimental evidence on the sizeable responses that potential college applicants exhibit to seemingly small changes in application procedures and requirements, such as modest increases in application fees or the addition or deletion of an essay in application requirements. These results highlight the responsiveness of student decision making to small cues in the college application process and highlight the need for students to receive better information or advising in order to mitigate these disproportionate behavioral responses.

The second paper provides quasi-experimental evidence on the impact of a whole-school college-going program that aims to provide better information and support to students through the entire process of college preparation, consideration, application and matriculation. In particular, the paper focuses on issues and impacts associated with bringing the program to scale across several high schools in the state of Michigan.

Finally, the third paper focuses on the period of transition from high school to college among college-intending high school graduates. 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. This paper provides experimental evidence on the relative impact of counselor-led versus text-message based outreach strategies to provide better information and access to support to students on whether students successfully transition to postsecondary education.
Collectively, the papers in the proposed symposium employ rigorous research designs to shed light on the challenges and complexities that students can face from college consideration to college matriculation. In addition, the papers provide evidence on how modest changes in the process, such as modifications in institutional application procedures and provision of low-touch additional support, can alter students’ behaviors and outcomes throughout the process. Connie Betterton, Vice President of Higher Education of Research and Partnership, will serve as discussant. In her comments, she will reflect on the papers and on how the larger body of research of which these papers are a part are currently informing policy actions being taken by the College Board.