"Randomized Controlled Trials in Community Colleges: Early Results and Replication Studies."

Abstract 1: Performance-Based Scholarships: Replication at Six Sites Using Randomized Controlled Trials

Abstract 2: A Random Assignment Evaluation of Learning Communities Seven Years Later: Impacts on Education and Earnings Outcomes, and Results from Replication Studies

Abstract 3: Boosting Community College Graduation Rates: Positive Findings from the City University of New York’s (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP)

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This symposium will discuss three randomized controlled trial evaluations of higher education programs. The first is a financial aid intervention that was replicated, with slight variations, in six different states. The second is a learning community program with seven years of follow-up data in the evaluation. Promising early results from this program led to replication at five other colleges. The third is a comprehensive program with numerous student support, linked course, and financial aid components that has produced some of the largest impacts on educational outcomes to date. While it has not yet been replicated, lessons from the other studies demonstrate that it will be important to rigorously evaluate its implementation at new colleges before it is adopted more broadly.

All three of these studies address barriers to persistence and completion faced by low-income students, particularly students at community colleges. As community colleges currently enroll one-third of American degree-seeking students, with particularly large concentrations of low-income students and students of color, interventions aimed at helping students succeed in these often under-resourced institutions is a key component to providing pathways to well-paid jobs and careers. There are three broad strategies commonly tested to address the barriers these students face: financial reforms, student service improvements, and modifications to the course content, structure, or pedagogical approach. The interventions discussed in this symposium cover all of these topics. Performance-based scholarships are a financial aid incentive program that, in some states, included student service requirements to earn the scholarship. Learning communities focus on course content, structure, and pedagogy, with an element of student services integrated into the system. Finally, ASAP has tried to bring all of these strategies together in a multifaceted approach that addresses all three elements in an effort to remove multiple barriers to student success.
These studies are particularly interesting because of their past history of, and potential for, replication. Alternative models of financial aid receipt are increasingly popular. The performance-based scholarship RCT evaluations examined six different states’ variations on a single model that had shown tremendous promise in an early random assignment evaluation. These replication studies demonstrate that the program is generally effective for diverse students. Learning communities have been a popular strategy at undergraduate institutions for decades, and the promising early impacts on academic outcomes in the second study directly inspired evaluations of learning communities’ effectiveness at five additional colleges. These RCT evaluations found noticeably smaller impact estimates than the original study. It’s clear that a single experiment at a single college is not sufficient. Replicating across numerous sites, including small variations to the model that might increase or decrease impacts, contributes to the field’s understanding of generalizability of program effects. This is a key lesson for the third paper, which has shown very promising results, but has not yet been replicated elsewhere.