SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW

Organizer: Ben Castleman, University of Virginia

Title: Nudges, Norms, and No Excuses: Applying Behavioral Insights to Improve Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Students

Discussant: William Congdon, Vice President at ideas42

Policymakers have invested substantial resources over the last several decades to improve educational outcomes for economically-disadvantaged students, yet substantial disparities in educational access and achievement remain. The stubbornness of these inequalities in the face of concerted policy efforts is at first glance quite perplexing. Many communities have greatly expanded school choice, yet families often choose to remain in failing schools. The federal government has substantially increased the size of the Pell Grant, yet many students who plan to go to college and who would be eligible for aid do not apply. Why have these policies not had a greater impact?

What policymakers have frequently overlooked is that the way policies are communicated to students and families often has as much—if not more—impact as the intervention itself on whether people participate. The papers in this symposium apply insights from the emerging science of decision-making to: (1) diagnose why education policies do not always achieve their desired goals and (2) identify innovative strategies for improving educational outcomes for economically-disadvantaged students. While behavioral insights are increasingly employed in other policy contexts to achieve socially-desirable outcomes, these strategies have not been applied broadly in the context of education. That being said, there is increasing momentum behind and interest in exploring how behavior principles could be leveraged to improve educational outcomes among disadvantaged students.

Each of the papers in our symposium reports the results of separate randomized trials or lottery based program admission to investigate the efficacy of behavioral interventions to improve educational achievement and/or attainment. The first paper in our symposium focuses on a text messaging campaign designed to increase financial aid re-application and freshman-to-sophomore year persistence among low-income college freshmen. The authors randomly selected college freshmen in Massachusetts to receive text-based reminders of important stages in the financial aid renewal process. The messages were customized to students’ institutions where possible and offered help from a financial aid advisor. The second paper investigates the impact of teacher-parent communication on student achievement. The authors randomly assigned parents of students enrolled in a summer credit recovery program to receive proactive and personalized communication from their child’s teacher. The authors investigated two separate treatments: sending parents weekly messages highlighting what the student was doing well, and sending parents weekly messages highlighting areas in which the student needed to improve, or to a control group. The final paper examines the effect of Boston charter school attendance on SAT, AP, high school graduation, college-going and college choice. The authors use the random charter school lotteries to estimate causal effects. While charter schools per se are not behavioral interventions in the sense of the first two experiments, the schools in the Boston sample consider
themselves “No Excuses” schools. These schools, in addition to structural differences from traditional public schools, constantly use behavioral techniques to improve classroom management and thus time on task.

The papers in our symposium collectively employ rigorous research designs, and offer educators and policymakers valuable information on innovative strategies to improve educational achievement and attainment among economically-disadvantaged students.