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Assessing the relationship between school counseling and college enrollment

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Introduction

School counselors facilitate college enrollment for many students, yet little research has been devoted to analyzing their influence on college-going behavior. In light of current goals to improve postsecondary participation, and given the significant number of students who rely on counselors for college planning, this study aimed to assess the relationship between school counseling and postsecondary attendance, and devoted special attention to the college destinations of students with low socioeconomic status. The author addressed the following research questions in particular:

1. To what extent do students who visit their school counselor for college-related information have a greater likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education, and at four-year institutions in particular?
2. To what extent do the effects of student-counselor visits vary by socioeconomic status?

Method

Data and Sample

To answer the above research questions, this study used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS). From 2002 to 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics relied on ELS to biennially track the academic progress and postsecondary transitions of a nationally representative sample of tenth grade students. The final analytic sample for this study included 11,260 students from one of 750 schools, and after weighting, represented 2,679,049 students attending approximately 23,500 high schools across the United States.

Variables

The dependent variable used in this study was categorical and indicated the institutional level of the first college or university that students attended in 2006, the year immediately after respondents were presumed to have graduated from their respective high schools. Respondents were classified as having enrolled at a four-year institution, a two-year institution, or as having not enrolled in postsecondary education.

Independent variables corresponded to the theoretical and empirical foundations of college choice, and indicated elements of background, achievement, and environment that prior research highlights as necessary to college-going. At the student-level, variables included demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, high school GPA and standardized assessment scores, curricular intensity as indicated by the highest math course that respondents completed, and college-related expectations (Adelman, 2006; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Variables at the school-level included those for school-control, student-to-teacher ratio, the percentage of each school's graduates attending four-year college and universities, and a measure indicating the average SES of a school's attendees (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010).

The study's primary independent variable was categorical and derived from two dichotomous variables featured in the ELS study. The first dichotomous variable indicated whether students visited their counselor for college-related information in tenth grade; the second variable indicated whether students visited their counselor for college-related information in twelfth grade. ELS students were categorized as having visited their counselor in both grades, one grade only, or never.

Finally, this study incorporated one interaction terms to examine variations in counselor "effects" by socioeconomic status, and to determine whether low-SES students do indeed benefit most from their involvement with a school counselor, as prior research has suggested (Kim & Schneider, 2005; Plan & Jordan, 2001).

Analytic Techniques

To "tease out" counselor-related effects, it was necessary to consider unmeasured or unmeasurable factors omitted from the model that were likely to influence both the independent variable (i.e., visiting a counselor) and outcome (i.e., enrolling in college). It is reasonable to assume that unobservable factors that affected a student's decision to visit a counselor for college information also influenced his or her decision to enroll in postsecondary education. For example, it is likely that students with greater motivation or family support were more inclined to attend college *and* visit with their counselor. Not accounting for the probable correlation between these two college-related behaviors is likely to produce biased estimates—in other words, any positive effects uncovered with respect to counselor visitations may not really be the result of counselors, and may actually be the result of other latent characteristics (e.g., motivation, family support, etc.) that move one to prepare and plan for college. Therefore, to account for a student's propensity to obtain counseling and to reduce (but not eliminate) potential bias associated with influential yet unmeasured variables, the author employed coarsened exact matching (CEM) (Iacus, King & Porro, 2012).

CEM is commonly referred to as a "pruning technique" as it eliminates observations that do not share similar pre-treatment variables (e.g., variables that predict counseling) with any other observations in a given data space. Eliminating these observations usually results in less bias and a more equally balanced sample. For example, in the context of this study, CEM ensured that comparisons were made only between counselees and non-counselees of similar backgrounds, academic records, postsecondary expectations, and school environment, and who given their shared *pre-treatment* observed characteristics, were likely to compare on unobserved characteristics that may have otherwise produced significant bias. Ideally, CEM allows users to compare "apples with apples"—if not of the same shape, at least of the same color.

After employing CEM to achieve "balance" between counselees and non-counselees, the author relied on two-level, multinomial logistic regression to identify significant student- and school-level predictors of two-year and four-year college enrollment. Multinomial logistic regression is used to distinguish between the differing influence that counseling may have on "two-year" enrollment and "four-year" enrollment, respectively. This distinction is important, given the varying academic and professional pathways of "two-year" and "four-year" students. In addition, counselor visitations may be more positively and strongly related to "four-year"

enrollment, given that the application process at four-year institutions is considerably more rigorous than at two-year colleges, and requires significantly more work on the part of both student and counselor.

Results

As hypothesized, and after controlling for other important predictors of postsecondary enrollment, model results showed that students who visited their counselor for college-related information were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education and at four-year institutions in particular. Results also demonstrated that the influence of school-based college counseling varied based on socioeconomic status, and that low-SES students were likely to yield the most benefit from their relationship with a school counselor. Finally, post-estimation statistical tests revealed that low-SES students who visited their counselor in both 10th and 12th grades were more likely to enroll at four-year institutions (vs. two year enrollment or no college enrollment) than students who visited their counselor in one grade only.

Critical Perspective

Although the author used sophisticated methods to reveal a strong and significant relationship between school counseling and postsecondary enrollment, the study's results may still be subject to bias. CEM and similar techniques can match only on *observed* variables. While matching on the above variables produced an analytic sample in which counselees and non-counselees were likely to share similar unobserved characteristics. There was not a perfectly reliable way to control entirely for influential variables not included in the ELS dataset. As such, analyses employing CEM, or matching of any type, may fail to fully distinguish the effects of counseling from the effects of omitted indicators that lead one to visit a counselor, and that also move one to enroll in college.

Implications

This study is among the first to incorporate quasi-experimental techniques to assess the college-related effects of school counseling. Encouragingly, it revealed school counselors as making a significant contribution to the college enrollment and destinations of high school students, and of low-SES populations especially. Moreover, it suggests that improving the availability of school-based college counseling may reduce inequalities in postsecondary participation—in particular, by increasing enrollment rates among low-SES populations, and by encouraging additional low-SES students to enroll in four-year institutions, where they are more likely to complete a college degree (Doyle, 2009; Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

However, other research indicates that many counselors are unable to facilitate college transition (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010; McDonough, 2005). While low-SES students are more reliant on high school personnel for college-related information (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2004), they are least likely to have access to a counselor who can assist with college-related matters (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Thomas, & Li, 2008). Charged with addressing the more immediate needs of their students—including issues related to dropout prevention, academic remediation, mental health, and domestic conflict—many “low-SES” counselors can no longer provide adequate college guidance (Venezia & Kirst, 2005), and are

increasingly divesting themselves of college admissions counseling (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011; Perna & Thomas, 2009; Rosenbaum, Miller & Krei, 1996).

The shift away from college counseling is becoming common in large, affluent high schools as well, and is largely due to the increasingly manifold and ambiguous role of the school counselor (McDonough, 2005). Over the past several decades, as the administrative responsibilities of school have expanded, counselors have been assigned to more job duties unrelated to their training and intended purposes (American School Counselor Association, 2005) such as scheduling, proctoring, hall monitoring, and various discipline-related tasks (Beesley, 2004; Leuwerke, Walker & Shi, 2009).

In response to the curtailment of school-based college counseling, more advantaged students have sought “outside” assistance, and have increasingly relied on a burgeoning industry of private counselors to secure their place in the most selective and affluent tiers of an increasingly stratified postsecondary system (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; McDonough, 1997). Consequently, gaps in college-related information, resources, and support are being compounded, as are the disadvantages that low-SES students face with respect to their educational and professional advancement.

Regrettably, neither educators nor policymakers have given much priority to addressing these disparities, or to improving the training and availability of school-based college counselors. Currently, only 25 percent of high schools require their counselors to complete professional development in college advising (Clinedinst et al., 2011), while less than 10 percent of counselor education/training programs offer coursework or practica devoted to college admissions and/or financial aid advising (Savitz-Romer, 2012; The National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2004). At present, the condition of school counseling and college guidance in America’s high schools is not an issue of importance on any major policy agenda, and is consistently absent from national- and state-level discussions on education reform (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; McDonough, 2005).

The lack of legislative and programmatic attention to devoted school-based college counseling may stem from the fact that research has not adequately established the effectiveness of school counselors (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Gysbers, 2004), and in particular, their ability to aid the postsecondary planning of students (Bryan, Holcomb, Moore & Day, 2011). Moreover, while research has demonstrated that increased educational attainment among low-SES populations is integral to sustained growth and the nation’s sustained economic growth and competitiveness, there has been a lack of empirical evidence supporting a positive relationship between school-based college counseling and the college participation of low-SES students in particular—until now. The results highlighted above suggest that counselors can improve the postsecondary prospects of this underserved student population, perhaps in spite of their current job role. Ideally, this study will influence policymakers and education administrators to consider increasing the number of school-based college counselors and/or to provide school-based college counselors with the training and flexibility that need to adequately engage in postsecondary planning.

Equally important is the hope that this study encourages further research on how schools can more competently and more effectively advise students on the college admissions and financial aid process. While this study was unable to uncover the potential benefits of

counseling in general, the variables and data on which it relied prevented analysis of which elements of a counselor's background, and what advising activities in particular, have the greatest influence on postsecondary enrollment. As such, recommendations for future research include quantitatively and/or qualitatively exploring how school counselors encourage college enrollment and choice, as well as assessing the "college knowledge" and professional development needs of school-based counselors.

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