

WWC Review of the Report “Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving, Low Income Students”^{1,2}

The findings from this review do not reflect the full body of research evidence on the effects of providing high school students with information about the college application process and college costs.

What is this study about?

The study examined the effects of providing low-income, high-achieving high school seniors with a multi-component intervention program including college application guidance, information about the costs of college, and a fee waiver for college applications.

Students were identified using data from the College Board and ACT. A random sample of students was selected from those who scored in the top decile of the SAT I or ACT and had estimated family incomes in the bottom third of the income distribution of families with students in the twelfth grade. This review focuses on findings from students who were randomly assigned to the multi-component intervention program ($n = 3,000$) or a no-treatment comparison condition ($n = 3,000$).³

The *application guidance* component of the intervention included information about deadlines and requirements for college applications at nearby institutions, at the state’s flagship institution, and at in- and out-of-state selective colleges. The *application guidance* component of the intervention also included tables that compared colleges’ graduation rates and provided tools for students to explore colleges’ curricula, instructional resources, and housing. The *information about the costs of college* component of the intervention provided students with information on the amount spent on instruction, the list price of attendance, and net costs of attendance for different colleges and universities. This net cost information was presented for hypothetical families with incomes

Features of Providing Information About College Application Process and College Costs

The authors of this study designed a multi-component intervention that provided low-income, high-achieving high school seniors with college application guidance, information about college costs, and a fee waiver for college applications. Specifically, the multi-component intervention included the following components:

- an *application guidance* component that included mailed packets with tables listing graduation rates for nearby colleges, state flagship colleges, and selective colleges;
- a *net cost* component that provided students with information about the actual cost of attending specific schools, including instructional spending and net costs for nearby, state flagship, and selective colleges; and
- a *fee waiver* component that provided students with no-paperwork fee waivers that could be used at 171 different selective schools.

of \$20,000, \$40,000, and \$60,000, but emphasized that the student’s actual cost of attendance at a given school would be unknown unless he or she actually applied. Finally, students received a *waiver* that allowed them to apply to 171 selective institutions without paying application fees. This multi-component intervention was administered by mailing these materials to the students’ homes, 4–14 months after they registered for a college entrance examination. The cost to implement the multi-component intervention was estimated at about \$6 per student.

What did the study find?

The authors reported, and the WWC confirmed, a statistically significant impact of providing students with college application guidance, net cost information, and fee waivers on postsecondary application submissions and postsecondary enrollment outcomes. The authors reported that the multi-component intervention increased the percentage of students who (a) applied to a selective institution (from 55% to 67%), (b) were admitted to a selective institution (from 30% to 39%), and (c) enrolled in a selective institution (from 29% to 34%), relative to the comparison condition. Students in the multi-component intervention condition also completed more applications and were admitted to more colleges than students in the comparison group. All of these differences were statistically significant.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report meets WWC evidence standards with reservations

Strengths: This study is a randomized controlled trial.

Notes: Although students were randomized to the intervention and comparison conditions, there was a high level of non-response on the surveys used to collect post-intervention outcome measures. The study demonstrated baseline equivalence of the analysis samples for the outcomes presented in this WWC report. Therefore, this evidence meets WWC standards with reservations.

Appendix A: Study details

Hoxby, C., & Turner, S. (2013). *Expanding college opportunities for high-achieving, low income students*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://siepr.stanford.edu>

Setting The study was conducted with low-income, high-achieving high school seniors in the United States. Participants received the intervention materials via postal mail and reviewed the intervention materials on their own.

Study sample A national sample of low-income, high-achieving high school seniors was targeted for this intervention and identified using College Board and ACT data, census data, and other sources. Low-income students were defined as those with an estimated family income in the bottom third of the income distribution for families with a student in the twelfth grade, based on the 2007–11 American Community Survey. High-achieving students were defined as those who scored in the top decile of test-takers of the SAT I or ACT (1300 math plus verbal on the SAT I, or 28 on the ACT). These students are typically geographically dispersed and so cannot easily be reached by usual methods of informing students about college. To assess whether information would change students' behavior, the sample was randomized to the Expanding College Opportunities Comprehensive (ECO-C) intervention ($n = 3,000$), a no-treatment comparison group ($n = 3,000$), or one of four other interventions which are not included in this single study report (see Endnote 3). The analytic sample for the ECO-C intervention and comparison conditions included 1,835 students who completed a survey the summer after they were expected to graduate from high school, and/or completed a survey the summer after which they were expected to have completed one year of college. The demographic composition of the original assigned sample was not reported. In the analytic sample for the ECO-C intervention and comparison conditions, 45% of the students were female and 53% were underrepresented minorities.

Intervention group Intervention condition students were high school seniors who had taken the SAT/ACT, who scored in the top deciles of the SAT/ACT, had an estimated family income in the bottom third of the income distribution for families with a student in the twelfth grade, and did not attend a “feeder” high school (feeder schools were those in which more than 30 students in each academic cohort typically scored in the top decile on college assessment exams). Students were randomly assigned to the ECO-C intervention program, a no-treatment comparison condition, or to one of four other interventions that provided only one intervention component (the four single component interventions are not included in this single study review; see Endnote 3). The ECO-C intervention included (1) *Application Guidance*, (2) *Net Cost*, and (3) *Fee Waiver* components intended to help high school seniors learn about their options for attending college and provide them with materials to help organize their multiple college applications.

The *net cost* intervention component provided students with information about net costs for low- to -middle-income students. This information included list prices, instructional spending, and net costs of the state flagship university, at least one other in-state public college, nearby colleges, a selective in-state private college, one out-of-state private liberal arts college, and one out-of-state selective university. The materials emphasized that the students' actual cost of attendance at a given school would be unknown unless they actually applied to that school.

The *fee waiver* intervention component provided students with no-paperwork fee waivers that allowed them to apply to up to 171 selective colleges.

Comparison group

The comparison condition did not receive the intervention packet, and therefore received treatment as usual. Comparison condition students were high school seniors who had taken the SAT/ACT, who scored in the top deciles of the SAT/ACT, had an estimated family income in the bottom third of the income distribution for families with a student in twelfth grade, and did not attend a "feeder" high school (feeder schools were those in which more than 30 students in each academic cohort typically scored in the top decile on college assessment exams). These students received no intervention services, but may have received college application/admission/enrollment information from other sources as part of usual practices.

Outcomes and measurement

College application, admission, and enrollment outcomes were based on student survey responses collected during the summer after they were expected to graduate from high school, and the summer after which they were expected to have completed their first year of college. For a more detailed description of these outcome measures, see Appendix B.

Support for implementation

The intervention materials were delivered in a packet via postal mail to the homes of high school seniors. No training of high school students or their families was reported. No implementation support was reported.

Reason for review

This study was identified for review by the WWC because it received significant media attention.

