



RESEARCH IN FOCUS:

College Fit

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, President Obama charged lawmakers, educators, and United States citizens with raising college enrollment rates and ensuring that all students commit to at least one year of postsecondary education (The White House, 2009). Unfortunately, the college application process is a very complicated one. Students must navigate many factors; admission requirements, differences in institution type and quality, financial aid, assorted deadlines, available programs, and so on can overwhelm even the most dedicated students. Additionally, students must then select a college to attend and successfully enroll in that institution. Without help, the process of successfully applying, selecting, and enrolling in higher education is extremely challenging, and for some, impossible. If every American student is to succeed in at least one year of postsecondary education, educators and lawmakers must establish an infrastructure to help them. Recent research indicates that programs focusing on college fit and admission requirements will be the crucial difference for youths interested in attending college.

DESCRIBING THE COLLEGE MATCH AND FIT PROCESSES

The college-match process often refers to how well the student's academic achievements match the selectivity of the institution in which they enroll, and it is the first process on which educators and policy makers should focus. Undermatch occurs when students enroll in institutions that are less selective than what their high school academic achievements would otherwise allow them to access (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). Although students who undermatch may find success in their chosen universities, we believe that it is more likely that undermatched students will not be as academically successful as their well-matched peers. Recent research shows students are more likely to graduate from a more selective institution, and students who believe that they are attending a low-quality institution may be more likely to drop out of their programs (Light & Strayer, 2000; Mattern, Shaw, & Kobrin, 2010). Both trends suggest that when students undermatch, they are at risk of failing to graduate.



“Although the rate of undermatch has decreased significantly over the last decade, rates for rural, minority, first generation, and low SES students remain as high as 50%

(Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013).”

Because the aforementioned population is typically underserved, this brief focuses on research and interventions that have been shown to improve match and fit rates for these particular students. If undermatch leads to reduced success in higher education, improving the college-match process should be a serious focus. However, Smith and colleagues (2013) suggest that students who choose to attend an academically undermatched institution may be making a decision in their best interest, meaning that a good match does not necessarily lead to a good college fit.

Bean (2005) described fit as “being similar to other members of a group and [having] a sense of belongingness to that group” (p. 219). A student making a decision based on his or her best fit take into consideration parent and family member experience, peer discussion, athletics or music programs, favorite sports team, religious environment, location, etc. It may be that these considerations are as important, if not more important, than finding an academic match. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2012) believes that practitioners with a more extensive grasp on the importance of fit, match, and college choice will be better equipped to advise students during the all-important college selection process. Little research has been conducted on the correlation between undermatch and college fit. In fact, Smith and colleagues (2013) encourage future researchers to measure the balance between fit and match that gives students the best opportunity to succeed in an institution. As there is little research focusing on the aforementioned balance, effective interventions must look to improve both academic match rates and college fit.

WHAT MAKES STUDENTS MORE LIKELY TO MATCH OR FIT

Before looking into reasons for student success, we must first begin to understand why low income, minority, and first-generation students continue to undermatch. Roderick and colleagues (2008) suggest that students attempting to enroll in a four-year college must successfully navigate two sets of tasks. They must successfully steer their way through application, financial aid, acceptance, and enrollment while simultaneously focusing on selecting the right college for them. Unfortunately, low income, minority, and first-generation students come up against seemingly immovable barriers on both accounts. These students apply to fewer colleges, are less likely to apply to four-year programs, are less likely to apply for financial aid, are less likely to enroll if accepted, and less likely to attend once admitted (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Hoxby & Avery 2013; Roderick et al., 2008; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Smith et al., 2013). If students are struggling through every step of the college enrollment process, then it is not surprising when these same students enroll in institutions that are not their best academic match or environmental fit.

A multitude of factors impact whether or not students succeed in the college enrollment process. Dillon and Smith (2013) suggest that mismatch is driven by financial constraint and lack of information. The struggles of low-income,

minority, or first generation students stem from the fact that family members, unfamiliar with the college application process, are unable to help their students; and alternative information resources are hard to find or are insufficient.

Roderick and colleagues (2011) found that students will be more likely to plan to attend, apply, gain acceptance, and enroll in a well-matched institution if they attend a high school where students are expected to and regularly enroll in a four-year institution, otherwise known as a college-going culture.

“It seems that high school environments that expect students to enroll in college produce students who enroll in college.”

Similarly, high schools that provide a college-linking process have higher rates of students who pursue higher education (Hill, 2008). The college-linking process is the process of helping students to plan for, apply, select, and enroll in college. Rather than leaving students to navigate the application process on their own, college-linking high schools guide students step-by-step and use several strategies to ensure resources reach the students that need them.

The most effective strategy, according to Hill (2008), is the brokering strategy. A brokering strategy is characterized by the availability of substantial resources and strong organizational commitment to providing students and families with access to resources. High schools that utilize the brokering strategy have well-organized, efficient college-linking-structures that promote equitable access to resources and support for all students. It is not enough for high schools to just refer students and their families to various resources, schools must also ensure the equitable distribution of resources and references. Emphasis on equity is central to the success of the brokering strategy.

While the student’s high school is extremely important to increasing a student’s pursuit of postsecondary education, it is not the only influence. IHEP (2012) finds that availability, transparency, and quality of information are equally compelling. For students to have the best chance at success, they must receive information about postsecondary education at an early age. For example, Bryan, et al. (2010) found that students who visit their school counselor prior to 10th grade are more likely to apply to multiple institutions, and Roderick and colleagues (2008) suggested that middle school students who

receive college-planning information are more likely to enroll in a four-year institution. If students receiving early information are more likely to both apply to and enroll in four-year institutions, then schools must prioritize distributing information to students as early as possible.

POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS

Though high school resources are essential to student success in the enrollment process, several researchers suggest that it is problematic to rely solely on high school resources to provide adequate college advising. Many low-income and minority students attend high schools with few resources to offer (Bell et al., 2009; IHEP, 2012). As long as students and their families cannot regularly rely on high school resources to help them to navigate through the college application, selection, and enrollment processes, students will continue to undermatch and/or choose institutions of poor fit. This is another point of entry for the GEAR UP program. Research indicates several important areas of intervention to improve match rates, fit rates, and enrollment.

- Promoting early planning
- Providing information and support for parents and family members
- Creating a college-going climate
- Providing counselors and other key personnel with adequate training on the financial aid process
- Subsidizing ACT costs
- Sending students on campus visits
- Providing encouragement and tangible support for students through the enrollment stage

(Roderick et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Perna et al., 2008; Pallais, 2013; IHEP, 2012; MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007; Castleman & Page, 2013; Bell et al., 2009)

One intervention that may be particularly cost effective and far reaching involves the training of school guidance counselors and other key personnel. Research shows that many guidance counselors do not address the importance of applying for federal financial aid (Perna et al., 2008), but students—particularly low-income, first-generation, and minority students—are less likely to be able to attend college without the resources provided by financial aid. However, the financial aid process is often unnecessarily tricky, so it is no wonder that students who do not receive help with this process enroll at lower rates and continually undermatch. Perna and colleagues (2008) believe that a key reason for counselors’ deficiency in explaining

financial aid might be that counselors are “intimidated by the complexity of the federal financial aid application processes” (p. 154). Addressing the issue of guidance counselors’ lack of information serves two purposes. First, if counselors have a better understanding of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application process, they are more able to help students work through the process. More importantly, students will be better equipped to match to a college successfully. Numerous research studies indicate that providing students and parents with a better understanding of both the importance of financial aid and the timeline of the application process increases the likelihood of student enrollment and success in a best-fit college (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2011). Teachers and administrators can use methods suggested by researchers to help counselors improve their own financial aid knowledge.

Since the high school’s influence is only part of the equation, formal financial aid training for students and families is suggested by Perna and colleagues (2008). This training should include online navigation (Bell et al., 2009) and provide a place for parents and students who do not have Internet access to work successfully (Roderick et al., 2008).

Although we believe the above interventions will help students improve their match and fit rates, we realize that support and encouragement for students cannot end after students have applied and been accepted to college. According to Smith and colleagues (2013), academic undermatch in 2004 was more likely to occur after students were accepted to college, when students choose not to enroll in the most selective college to which they have been admitted. This research indicates that successful college transition efforts in high schools should maintain student supports during the decision-making and enrollment processes. Sherwin (2012) and Castleman and colleagues (2013) suggest an immediate, cost-effective method to mitigate this trend is to initiate peer mentoring programs and text message reminders, which help students stay on top of deadlines and suggest good preparation steps during the summer before they enter college. High schools may choose to provide peer mentoring and text message reminders to help high school seniors during the summer between high school and college. In this way, they will help students to succeed throughout the entire college-linking-process.

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