



ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH 2009 DISSERTATION GRANT APPLICATION

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Title of Proposal

Converting General College Plans into Enrollment: Understanding and Improving the Process for Disadvantaged Students

Statement of the research problem and national importance

Over the last thirty years, the “who,” “where,” and “how” of college attendance have dramatically changed. New types of students attend a greater variety of institutions, use more diverse enrollment patterns

(Stephan & Rosenbaum, in press), and finance college in new ways (College Board, 2006). While expanding college choices may be necessary for increased opportunity, it is not sufficient. Students must also understand how to access dependable college pathways. For middle-class students, college-related actions and choices appear to flow automatically from college plans. In reality, college-educated parents and the norms and procedures of middle-class high schools guide this “automatic” process (McDonough, 1997), and it does not work as well for disadvantaged students. More than 90% of low-income 1992 high school graduates planned to attend college, but only 53% enrolled in the fall after high school (Berkner & Chavez, 1997).

While academic preparation explains much of the difference between plans and enrollment (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Perna, 2005), some disadvantaged students struggle with college-related actions (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Avery & Kane, 2004; Bloom, 2007; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Attending a two-year college may require little planning and few application steps, but selective four-year colleges typically require multiple steps to be completed according to a particular timeline. Not completing key steps on-time may limit college opportunities.

While previous research has documented problems in the application process, most has used local samples or considered a limited number of steps, and the scope of problems remains unclear. The variation available in national data can better show which college-related actions are problematic and for whom. Moreover, the link between application steps and college enrollment is not well-understood. To what extent does completion of application steps during senior year matter for different types of college enrollment (e.g., 2- vs. 4-yr colleges, part- vs. full-time, and delayed enrollment)? Finally, the role of policy in the application process has received little attention. For disadvantaged students whose parents are less likely to have college experience, high schools may be an important source of information or help. However, disadvantaged students more often attend schools with limited college-going norms (McDonough, 1997) and fewer resources (Hill, 2008; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987), and there may also be a role for government policy.

Earning a college degree dramatically increases earnings (Grubb, 2002), and the American higher education system offers many ways to attend college. The vast majority of students plan college, but disadvantaged students often struggle to convert general college plans into enrollment. While improving academic preparation is critical, the application process may be a barrier even for academically qualified students. This dissertation, organized into three chapters, asks: Does the application process present a barrier to college enrollment, and if so, for whom and for what types of enrollment (Chapter 1)? Do policies that provide school resources (Chapter 2) or simplify the process (Chapter 3) help alleviate problems? Since steps in the

college application process are potentially changeable, this research may identify practical actions and policies to reduce the gap between college plans and enrollment, particularly for disadvantaged students.

Review the literature and establish a theoretical grounding for the research

The traditional theoretical model of college choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) has several shortcomings for describing how high school students convert general college plans into enrollment. In the traditional model, college choice is a three-phase process. Students develop general college plans in the predisposition phase; they gather information and create a set of colleges to which to apply in the search phase, and in the choice phase, students select a particular institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). While this model may reflect the process for middle-class students, previous empirical work suggests three important modifications for disadvantaged students.

First, the traditional theoretical model ignores some important college-related actions. The model describes how students learn about colleges but deemphasizes many of the basic application steps. Yet, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) confuses some students (Bloom, 2007; Burdman, 2005; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006), and some who would likely qualify for aid fail to apply (Roderick et al., 2008). Many disadvantaged students with academic qualifications or bachelor's degree plans do not apply to a four-year college (Avery & Kane, 2004; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Roderick et al., 2008), and taking the SAT/ACT presents a hurdle for some (Avery & Kane, 2004). While the traditional model implicitly assumes that anyone with general college plans knows what actions to take to form specific plans, recent empirical work finds otherwise.

Second, models of college choice imply that college choice at the end of senior year is equivalent to enrollment. However, in Chicago Public Schools, 20% of seniors who planned and were accepted to a four-year college by the end of senior year did not enroll in a four-year college in the fall; completing the FAFSA by the end of senior year helped to reduce the gap (Roderick et al., 2008). This research analyzes the understudied gap between specific plans and enrollment.

Third, the traditional college choice model only considers the institution a student chooses, but students also choose how to attend college. Delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, and excessive work hours lower the odds of degree completion (Adelman, 2006; Anderson, 1981; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987; Gleason, 1993; Horn, Cataldi, & Sikora, 2005; Jacobs & King, 2002; Kempner & Kinnick, 1990; O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who fail to complete key application steps may increase their chances of engaging in these patterns or attending college types with lower degree completion rates

[e.g., community colleges or less selective four-year colleges (Dougherty, 1994; Melguizo, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stephan, Rosenbaum, & Person, in press)]. This research considers what college-related actions in high school help students to access dependable college pathways.

Building on the traditional college choice model and previous empirical work, I describe the college enrollment process with the following model:

General College Plans >> College-Related Actions>>>Specific College Choice>>Enrollment

The model posits that students turn “general college plans” into enrollment (broadly defined) only if they know how to take appropriate college-related actions and form “specific plans.” This dissertation seeks to understand how this model works for a greater range of (traditionally-aged) students, high schools, application steps, and types of enrollment than previous work, and it considers how specific policies may influence the process.

Students’ effectiveness in the enrollment process may depend not only on their individual motivations and resources, but also on school contexts, particularly if students’ parents do not know much about college. High schools, through the assistance they provide and the ways they shape students’ perceptions, influence the decision to attend college, choice of college, financing strategies, and enrollment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna, 2000; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2008). State policies have also been found to influence the types of college students choose (Dynarski, 2004; Heller, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2004), and they could influence other aspects of the enrollment process.

Extending prior work, Study 1 uses national data, which provide greater student and school variation than most previous research, to ask how the enrollment process works for different types of students and similar students at different types of high schools. While previous research has focused generally on the college-culture of high schools (McDonough, 1997; Roderick et al., 2008), college-related programs may be more easily implemented, and in some cases, may drive college culture. Study 2 uses a survey of all seniors in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to consider how a new college advising model may influence the enrollment process. Study 3 examines whether a state policy of statewide ACT testing may increase college enrollment by eliminating a potential barrier in the application process. While these analyses cannot establish causality, they will provide insight into the relationships among college-related actions, policies, and the process of converting general college plans into enrollment. This research may identify important areas for more rigorous testing in the future.

Describe the research method that will be used

Study 1: Student and School Variation in the Application Process

For students planning bachelor's degrees, the application process entails a sequence of key steps: plan a four-year college, take the ACT/SAT, apply to a four-year college, apply to multiple colleges, and apply for financial aid (for most students). All students attending four-year colleges must complete some of these steps, while completing others increases the chances of attending more selective colleges or receiving financial assistance. Parents and middle-class high schools may structure the steps and timing of the process for middle-class but not necessarily disadvantaged students. Extending Roderick et al. (2008), this study uses national data (ELS and IPEDS) to examine the application process for a wider variety of students, high schools, and application steps.

Research Questions

- (1) Which application steps are barriers and for whom? Among seniors with bachelor's degree plans, which students do not complete which key steps (the ACT/SAT, a four-year college application, multiple college applications, and the FAFSA) by the end of senior year to enroll in a four-year college?
- (2) Do these key steps help explain the gap between four-year college plans and enrollment? Logistic regressions are used to estimate the relationship between application steps and enrollment (whether enrolled, selectivity of college, and full- versus part-time) controlling for academic preparation, parental and school support, and student demographics.
- (3) Do high schools influence students' application behaviors? Using HLM, this analysis considers how student characteristics relate to timely completion of application steps and how the relationship varies across high schools with different composition and college-going cultures. Disadvantaged students may take different steps and have different outcomes in low versus high college-going schools.

Study 2: High School "Community Organizers" and the Application Process

To improve students' college outcomes, the Chicago Public Schools adopted a new advising model in a subset of high schools. Beginning in 2005, twelve schools received an additional staff person (a "college coach") charged with aiding students' college choice process and with a specific emphasis on the FAFSA. Unlike traditional counseling models, coaches use community organizing techniques, often learned in previous work experience. They focus only on college and do not handle testing, non-college counseling, or other administrative tasks.

Data

Data come from four cohorts (2004–2007) of all graduating seniors in the school district and include demographic, achievement, and high school composition variables; a senior exit survey (response rates over 90%); and, actual college enrollment. The Consortium on Chicago School Research, with which I collaborate as part of a research team, provided these data. IPEDS identifies college selectivity. Also, as part of a research team, I interviewed seniors and coaches in two coach high schools and two matched schools without a coach (2006-2007).

Research Questions

(1) What strategies do coaches use to increase completion of college-related actions (applications, FAFSA, and scholarships)? In interviews, coaches reported networking to enlist participation, creating clear incentives and strong social norms, providing small group and one-on-one assistance, and relentlessly monitoring students' progress.

(2) Among students with general college plans, do students attending coach schools complete college-related actions and form specific plans at higher rates? Using difference-in-differences estimation, which reduces potential selection bias by using a “pre-test” and a quasi-control group, the basic model predicts whether student i in school s in year t takes college-related actions or forms specific plans based on individual- and school-level characteristics, whether the student attended a coach school after program implementation, year fixed effects (to control for district-wide trends), and school fixed effects (to control for time-invariant school characteristics). Additional models will consider possible variation in coach effects over time or types of students (e.g., low achieving).

(3) Does the coach program help explain the gap between specific college plans at the end of senior year and actual enrollment? To what extent are potential effects direct versus indirect through changes in college-related actions? Using difference-in-differences models, this analysis studies a gap that has rarely been studied.

Study 3: Does Statewide ACT Testing Improve College Access?

While the prior studies examine school-level influences, state policies could have a broader impact. Among students planning a four-year college, low-income students complete the ACT/SAT at much lower rates than high-income students [32% versus 98% in Avery and Kane (2004)]. In 2001, Colorado and Illinois implemented statewide ACT testing for all high school juniors as part of their state assessment policies, which could increase college enrollment directly by removing a likely barrier in the four-year college application process (most require the ACT/SAT) or indirectly if schools raise scores to meet accountability standards.

Data and Methods

Ideally, enrollment data would be disaggregated by student background and also identify the state and year of high school attendance, but national data do not do both. Instead, IPEDS provides two alternative enrollment measures. In even years, IPEDS reports enrollment for recent high school graduates by students' state of residence but not background. Annually, IPEDS collects first time, first-year student enrollment by college and student race/ethnicity. Difference-in-differences models, one for each measure, compare enrollments in Illinois and Colorado before and after policy implementation and relative to similar states using data from 1994 to 2007. Additional controls include tuition; state unemployment, population, family income, and financial aid spending (from government statistics and NASSGAP); and, state and year fixed effects.

Research Questions

(1) Does implementation of statewide ACT testing correspond with increases in college enrollment? An immediate enrollment increase would suggest that it removes a barrier in the application process, while a delayed increase with an increase in ACT scores would suggest that schools may have improved students' qualifications.

(2) Do different types of colleges and students respond differently? Reformers often focus on highly selective colleges, but they may show a lower enrollment response than less selective colleges. Furthermore, the policy may have a greater effect on minority students, who may have less knowledge about the application process (Perna, 2000; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

Will you use a NCES target dataset?

Yes

Will you use a NSF target dataset?

No

Please select the datasets that you intend to use:

NCES-Educational_Longitudinal_Study_of_2002_(ELS:_2002),
IPEDS_Institutional_Characteristics_(IC),
NCES-IPEDS_Fall_Enrollment_(EF)

Explain why each dataset best serves this research. Include a variable list for each dataset used.

National data provide more student and school variation than the local data often used to study the enrollment process. Study 1 uses the following ELS variables:

College Plans: degree (f1s42); college type (f1psepln)

Application Steps: took/plans ACT/SAT (f1s21c); date of FAFSA receipt (c05134); 1st and 2nd institution applied to (f1s51cd1; f1s51cd2); number of applications (f2napply); when applied (f2b02).

High School Characteristics: percent of graduates at 4-year (f1a19a) or 2-year colleges (f1a19b); percent of seniors who attend college programs (f1a20a), financial aid programs (f1a20b), sat/act courses (f1a20c), college fairs (f1a20d), and meetings with college representative (f1a20d); percent free lunch (cp03flun), minority (cp03pmin), and limited/non-English proficient (f1a22b); school type (cp03styp).

College Enrollment: enrolled (f2evratt); date entered (f2psstrt); sector (f2ps1sec) and selectivity of first college (f2ps1slc); enrollment intensity (f2ps1ftp).

School/Parent Support: counselor's (f1s44e) and mother's (f1s44a) plans for respondent; gone to counselor (f1s48a), teacher (f1s48b), or parent (f1s48d) for college information; discussed courses (f1s64a), school activities (f1s64b), things studied (f1s64c), grades (f1s64d), jobs (f1s64e; f1s64f), preparation for act/sat (f1s64g), or college (f1s64h) with parents

Controls/Other: high school graduate (f2hsstat); math score (f1txmstd); gpa (f1rgpa); highest math course (f1himath); ap/ib courses (f1rapib); sex (f1sex); race/ethnicity (f1race_r); mother's education (f1mothed); income (byincome); weight (f2f1wt); stratum (strat_id); psu;

All studies use IPEDS to identify college type and selectivity (iclevel, satvr25, satvr75, satmt25, satmt25, actcm25, actcm75).

Study three would not be possible without IPEDS enrollment and tuition data (efrace03, efrace04, efrace09, efrace10, efrace11, efrace12, efrace15, efrace16, efrace24, lstudy, line, efcstate, efres02, tuiton2).

Will you address the NPEC focus topic?

Yes

If yes, please briefly describe:

The proposed research is designed to discover whether college-related actions impede student flow into college, into four-year or more selective colleges, or into enrollment patterns associated with higher college degree completion rates, particularly for disadvantaged students. If this research finds that certain actions impede this process for some students, high schools may wish to focus on these actions,

and colleges may want to consider whether their application procedures create unintended difficulties. Future IPEDS collection could further illuminate potential difficulties by collecting additional and more detailed information on application procedures and admissions requirements. If the college coach program or state testing requirements are shown to have impacts for certain kinds of students, these may have practical implications for improving educational opportunity.

Provide a timeline of key project activities:

January 2009: complete 1st draft of Chapter 2
February 2009: revise difference-in-differences model for Chapter 2
March 2009: analyze coach and student interviews for Chapter 2
April 2009: complete 2nd draft of Chapter 2 and submit to ASHE conference
May 2009: analysis for Chapter 1
June 2009: analysis for Chapter 1
July 2009: draft Chapter 1
August 2009: revise and submit draft of Chapter 1 to AERA conference
September 2009: finalize draft of Chapter 2
October 2009: analysis for Chapter 3
November 2009: analysis for Chapter 3
December 2009: draft Chapter 3
January 2010: revise and submit draft of Chapter 3 to ASA conference
February 2010: finalize Chapter 1
March 2010: finalize Chapter 3
April 2010: finalize introduction to dissertation
May 2010: finalize dissertation
June 2010: submit 2 copies of final paper to AIR(NPEC focus topic requirement)

List deliverables such as research reports, books, and presentations that will be developed from this research initiative:

Three conference proposals submitted to national conferences: Study 2 to Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Meeting (proposal due in May 2009); Study 1 to American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (proposal due in August 2009); Study 3 to American Sociological Association Annual Meeting (proposal due in January 2010)

Presentation at Northwestern University in Fall 2009

Two copies of final paper to AIR for NPEC focus topic (due in June 2010)

Describe how you will disseminate the results of this research:

In the past, I have had the opportunity to present research at several national conferences including the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (2005, 2006, and 2008), the Association for the Study of Higher Education (2006), and the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (2007). I plan to submit proposals related to this research to each of these conferences within the next year as well as the 2010 AIR Forum. As the research develops further, I plan to submit it to academic journals.

In addition, as part of a research team, I have discussed preliminary findings related to Study 2 with administrators from the school district. I am committed to conducting research that will benefit students, and I will seek out similar opportunities to further discuss my research as it develops with these and other practitioners.

Provide a reference list of sources cited:

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Statement of Institutional Review Board approval or exemption

I have already complied with all IRB procedures for the proposed analyses. Analysis of the restricted ELS data in Study 1 qualified for an IRB exemption because I will not be identifying individuals (exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)4). I have received IRB approval to analyze the CCSR data in Study 2, and the interview data in Study 2 qualified for an IRB exemption because data were collected in a commonly accepted educational setting and involved only normal educational practices (exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)1). Finally, because IPEDS data are publicly available, they are exempt.

Statement of Use of Restricted Datasets

I plan to use restricted ELS data. I am an approved user on the restricted license of James E. Rosenbaum.

Biographical Sketch

After graduating from Vassar College, I planned to pursue a Ph.D. in economics at Princeton University. My plans were sidetracked, however, by a deep commitment to research that affects the world. Although I had good grades at one of the top economics departments in the country, valued the rigorous econometric training, and enjoyed the challenging work, I felt unsatisfied with the heavy emphasis on economic theory that left me wondering how institutions and individuals actually respond to policy and how those responses differ for different types of institutions or individuals.

I left Princeton with a master's degree and worked for several years, most recently at a prestigious business consulting group, where I managed survey research design and the implementation and evaluation of statistical procedures. My work experience provided practical training using large databases, broadened my analytic skills to include psychometric techniques, gave me the opportunity to teach and direct others in statistical procedures, and challenged me to communicate sophisticated research to non-technical audiences. I was proud to receive awards from my colleagues for providing outstanding mentorship and technological innovation. Although the work was intellectually stimulating and financially rewarding, I still desired to understand how policy can assist disadvantaged youth.

My desire led me to an interdisciplinary policy program (Human Development and Social Policy) at Northwestern, where I also

became a pre-doctoral fellow in the selective Multidisciplinary Program in Education Sciences. At Northwestern, I have taken courses from leading scholars (Tom Cook, Greg Duncan, Jim Rosenbaum, and Jim Spillane) and in many fields (human development, sociology, economics, learning sciences, quantitative and qualitative methods, and research design). Importantly, I have had the opportunity to bring strong quantitative research skills to new questions that I care deeply about and that have important practical implications for improving educational opportunity among disadvantaged students.

In my work with Jim Rosenbaum, I have published a conceptual paper (Stephan & Rosenbaum, in press) that elucidates the ways policies and institutional procedures prevent transparency and hamper access in the high school to college transition. This paper has direct implications for how policies can improve the transition especially for low-income students. In another paper (Stephan, Rosenbaum, & Person, in press), I use the NELS and IPEDS datasets to examine institutional alternatives that may improve college degree completion, particularly for disadvantaged students, and I suggest practical reforms for improving community colleges. In a paper with Jim Spillane (revise and resubmit), I gained valuable experience working with mixed methods. I have had the opportunity to present research related to these papers and more recent work on the high school to college transition at several national conferences including the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (2005, 2006, and 2008), the Association for the Study of Higher Education (2006), the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (2007), and the Institute of Education Sciences Research Conference (2006 and 2008). My dissertation builds on my previous work by examining the college enrollment process for disadvantaged students and how school contexts and policy may lessen potential barriers.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University. My training and previous work experiences have prepared me to contribute to research on the high school to college transition and policies that promote access and success for all students. After completing my PhD, I plan to pursue a research position that allows me to help improve the lives of disadvantaged youth.

Budget	
Salary/Stipend: 14404	Tuition & fees: 3471
Travel: 125	Other travel related expenses: 2000
Other research expenses: 0	Total Request: 20000

Statement of Prior, Current, and Pending Funding

9/2004 – 8/2005: Northwestern University fellowship, tuition plus \$18,000 stipend

9/2005 – 3/2009: Fellowship in Multidisciplinary Program in Education Sciences, Northwestern University (IES Training Grant); tuition plus \$90,000 stipend

3/2009 – 6/2009: Institute for Policy Research Graduate Research Fellowship; tuition plus \$5,184 Stipend

I have also applied for the Spencer Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and plan to apply for the AERA Dissertation Grant.