Title: How late is too late? The Influence of Summer Outreach on FAFSA Completion and College Enrollment for the Uncommitted High School Graduate

Authors and Affiliations:

Laura Owen, PhD
Johns Hopkins University
laura.owen@jhu.edu

Eric Bettinger, PhD
Stanford University
ebettinger@stanford.edu

Bridget Terry Long, PhD
Harvard University
Bridget_long@gse.harvard.edu

Phil Oreopoulos, PhD
University of Toronto
philip.oreopoulos@utoronto.ca

Background / Context:
Despite increases in postsecondary enrollment at American universities and colleges, there are still significant gaps in who matriculates to college and persists through graduation. Low-income students and students of color continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education; for many of these students, a lack of awareness of available financial funding options remains a substantial barrier to college entry and completion.

Two recent studies examined the impact of FAFSA completion support on college enrollment. In one study, students who received school counselor support to file the FAFSA were 10 percentage points more likely to complete the FAFSA and nearly 12 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than those not offered additional support (Authors, 2012). In another study, students whose families were randomly assigned to receive assistance with the FAFSA as part of their tax preparation with H&R Block were 8 percentage points more likely to have completed two years of college than students whose families were not offered help with the FAFSA (Authors, 2012).

While these studies demonstrated the large impact that FAFSA completion can have on whether underrepresented students enroll in college, several subsequent tasks must also be completed for students to realize their college aspirations. Many of the tasks required for successful matriculation occur during the summer after graduation, a time when students often lack access to quality support and guidance. Isolation from professional support may be particularly problematic for first-generation college-bound students, whose families and extended social networks may lack direct experience with the college process (Authors, 2009, Simmons, 2011). Without support meeting the final requirements for college enrollment, low-income first generation students may unintentionally fail in their pursuit of higher education. Two studies (Authors, 2010; Roderick et al., 2008) have documented high rates of summer attrition (commonly referred to as "summer melt") among students who have been accepted to college, applied for financial aid, and in some cases even declared which school they plan to attend in the fall. A pilot experimental study (Authors, 2009) found that offering students college counseling over the summer months had a large and positive effect on college enrollment and follow up experiments conducted in Boston, MA and in Fulton County, GA indicate that the benefit of summer counseling outreach generalizes to mainstream, urban populations of low-income students (Authors, 2012).

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:
In this paper we investigate whether, among students who begin the summer without firm college plans in place and who have yet to complete the FAFSA, the proactive offer and provision of individualized school counselor support leads to improved rates of FAFSA completion and timely college enrollment.

Setting:
The research was conducted across three large urban school districts, Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), Dallas Independent School District (DISD), and Denver Public Schools (DPS). All three districts serve predominantly low income Hispanic students.

Population / Participants / Subjects:
Eligible students in Albuquerque, Dallas, and Denver were 2012 district graduates who graduated not having completed the FAFSA. Of the 6,300 students meeting these requirements, each district randomly selected half to receive proactive outreach during the summer months. Students randomly assigned to the treatment group in each site received proactive outreach through the school counselor. Each school district also advertised the availability of summer support to all seniors prior to graduation. The inducement to participate was the offer of additional support for completing the FAFSA and/or getting ready for college in the fall. The majority of students were over 18 years of age, predominantly low-income, and Hispanic.

Intervention / Program / Practice:
Counselors offered a broad range of supports, from assisting students with FAFSA completion and other necessary paperwork to talking with students more generally about the realities of transitioning to college. Students in the control group who took the initiative to reach out for support and guidance received the same level of support as those students in the treatment group; the distinction was that control group students did not receive proactive outreach.

Counselors invited treatment group students to meet at the school building or in a public community location to provide students with individualized support and guidance to complete their FAFSA, to answer any questions, and to address any barriers the student was facing in meeting the goal of timely college matriculation. Some students were asked to bring financial information with them so the counselors could help them submit their FAFSA. The treatment group students met with a counselor 2 – 3 times over the course of the summer, on average. The counselors recorded the content of their interactions with students in a simple data collection tool designed for tracking such interactions. The districts maintained this data, and did not provide any student-specific records from the interaction log to the research team.

During the course of the summer, the research team maintained regular contact with each district to assist in troubleshooting problems and to receive regular updates regarding the extent of treatment group take-up of the offer for summer counseling sessions. The team had no direct contact with the students involved in the study.

Research Design:
We will use the US Department of Education's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion database and the National Student Clearinghouse database to quantify the impact of summer outreach on FAFSA completion and college enrollment for students who graduated from high school uncommitted to attend college. The research team defined "uncommitted" as any student who as of high school graduation had not completed a FAFSA.

Approximately 6300 graduates were randomly selected to receive additional school counselor summer outreach (phone calls, assistance with FAFSA completion and college enrollment forms, etc.) to support their transition from high school to college. The research team will report FAFSA completion and college enrollment results with average effects of the program overall as well as the effects for important subgroups (e.g. minority students, free/reduced lunch participants, and low-achieving students).

To gather the relevant FAFSA completion data, the participating school districts will submit the names, birthdates, and zip codes for the graduating seniors to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). The DOE will match each student's information to their FAFSA record and return FAFSA completion information to each respective district with four possible options coded for each student. A student with a coded "0" reflects a match has not been found in the DOE's FAFSA completion database, a "1" reveals a missing signature, a "2" indicates the student had filed and completed the FAFSA with their expected family contribution (EFC) calculated, and a "3" signals the student has not fully completed the FAFSA application. Status information is returned to the school district along with the date the student filed the FAFSA. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) tracks approximately ninety-two percent of college enrollments nationwide helping districts identify which students matriculate to college. NSC returns coded college enrollment data back to the school district for submitted high school graduates. Each district will submit student identifiers to NSC, who will match each student's information to their college enrollment record and return college enrollment information to the district.

Data Collection and Analysis:
We anticipate receiving de-identified student-level data approximately two times during the course of the study. The first transfer of data will occur in late September and will provide us with information for analysis on the extent of student take-up of the offer of advising services. The second transfer of information will occur after the district has matched student-level records with the above-mentioned college enrollment information obtained from the NSC. Once the district receives the FAFSA and NSC data they will eliminate all student identifiers, assigned a random identification number to each student and submit student level demo-graphic, FAFSA, and NSC data to the research team. The data will be analyzed to determine if differences in FAFSA completion and college enrollment exist between treatment and control groups. Comparisons will be made across all students and then for relevant subgroups, including minority students, free/reduced lunch participants and low-achieving students.

The size of the causal effect is formalized in Equation 1, where T_x = effect size, *Outcome* = dependent variable outcome (e.g., FAFSA completed, college attended), T = treatment, and C = control. Therefore, $E(p(Outcome)|T)$ is the expected probability of success on an outcome, e.g., FAFSA completion, given being a member of the intervention group (treatment) and $E(p(Outcome)|C)$ is the expected outcome given being a member of the control group.

$$T_x = E(p(Outcome)|T) - E(p(Outcome)|C)$$

For the FAFSA Initiation (how many students started a FAFSA) dependent variable, we use the following linear probability model:

$$p(fafsa_{initiate})$$
$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 treat_i + \beta_2 black_i + \beta_3 asian_i + \beta_4 nativeamerican_i + \beta_5 hispanic_i$$
$$+ \beta_6 freereduced_i + \beta_7 age_i + \beta_8 highgpa_i + \epsilon_i$$

For the FAFSA completion dependent variable, we use the following linear probability model:

$$p(fafsa_{complete})$$
$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 treat_i + \beta_2 black_i + \beta_3 asian_i + \beta_4 nativeamerican_i + \beta_5 hispanic_i$$
$$+ \beta_6 freereduced_i + \beta_7 age_i + \beta_8 highgpa_i + \epsilon_i$$

For the attend college dependent variable, we use the following linear probability model on any college attendance:

$$p(attend\ college)$$
$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 treat_i + \beta_2 black_i + \beta_3 asian_i + \beta_4 nativeamerican_i + \beta_5 hispanic_i$$
$$+ \beta_6 freereduced_i + \beta_7 age_i + \beta_8 highgpa_i + \epsilon_i$$

For College attendance by level, we estimate the following multinomial logistic regression model:

$$\log\left(\frac{p_m}{p_M}\right)$$
$$= \beta_{0m} + \beta_{1m} treat_i + \beta_{2m} black_i + \beta_{3m} asian_i + \beta_{4m} nativeamerican_i + \beta_{5m} hispanic_i$$
$$+ \beta_{6m} freereduced_i + \beta_{7m} age_i + \beta_{8m} highgpa_i$$

Where m = category of interest (e.g., 2-year attendance). M = base category (no college).

Findings / Results:
The research team is currently working with participating districts to gather de-identified data so we can begin our intervention analysis, looking specifically at any differences between treatment and control group for FAFSA completion and FAFSA initiations. In December, when the NSC data is obtained, we will evaluate the impact of the intervention on college enrollment.

Conclusions:
The summer after graduation is a critical time for student postsecondary planning. Prior studies have shown support with necessary tasks for successful college matriculation significantly impacts college going. This study looks specifically at students who were uncommitted as of graduation to determine if the summer is too late to increase the likelihood of on time college enrollment.

Appendices

Appendix A. References

Roderick, M. R., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., & Moeller, E. (2008). *From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at University of Chicago. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0038040 711411280.

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