College Mentoring Supports College Enrollment and Persistence

By Scott Carrell, UC Davis and Bruce Sacerdote, Dartmouth College

Among OECD countries, the United States has fallen from 1st (in 1990) to 9th (in 2016) in terms of the percentage of working age individuals with a bachelor’s degree. The benefits of a college education are widely known. People with some college or more have consistently higher rates of labor market participation and lower levels of unemployment than those without any college. Among the employed, those with a college degree have lifetime average earnings that are 43 percent higher for men and 51 percent higher for women than those with only a high school diploma. We compared different types of interventions aimed at increasing college enrollment among high school seniors. We find that more intensive mentoring is effective in supporting students who lack the assistance often provided by parents or college counselors.

Raising college enrollment and graduation rates has become a top priority for poverty and education policy in the United States. In 2016, 69.7 percent of 2016 high school graduates were enrolled in colleges or universities, however, just 21 percent of Americans age 25 and over had completed a bachelor's degree. A variety of interventions have been developed that aim to promote college readiness, most of which are aimed at students in middle school. However, researchers have recently begun to ask whether conducting interventions at later ages is more beneficial and whether brief or more intensive interventions are more effective.

Brief Educational Interventions Support College Planning and Enrollment

Leading theories about why students do not apply to and enroll in college include lack of prior planning, procrastination, lack of organizational skills, and lack of support. Interventions aimed at promoting college readiness are often carried out with students well before high school, in order to support preparatory course work. For older students on the verge of making a decision about whether to apply to college, brief interventions including email reminders and texting have been used. One study showed that brief, low-cost information interventions can increase college enrollment by as much as five percentage points for high-achieving, low-income students.

We wanted to find out whether interventions at older ages are effective among a broad group of high school students and whether there is a difference between brief informational interventions and interventions that are more intensive. Our research compares brief interventions with an intensive student mentoring intervention among high school seniors in New Hampshire from 2012-14. Based on a list of qualified students provided by school guidance counselors, we randomly assigned students to groups receiving different interventions and a control group as follows:

- Group 1 received an intensive mentoring program that provided one-on-one mentoring, payment of application and College Board fees and a $100 cash bonus upon completing the application process.
- Group 2 received a cash bonus upon

1 OECD. 2017. “Education at a Glance”.
Understanding poverty, shaping the future of poverty research

About the Center
The mission of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on poverty in the U.S., to disseminate this research and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Our research agenda spans four themed areas of focus:

- Labor Markets and Poverty
- Children and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty
- The Non-traditional Safety Net, focusing on health and education
- The Relationship Between Poverty and Immigration

For more information, visit us online at: poverty.ucdavis.edu

Mentoring works as a substitute for the potentially scarce resource of parental or school-based help in navigating the college application process.

Mentoring Interventions May be More Effective than Brief Interventions
Our results showed that only the intensive mentoring intervention was effective; it led to a statistically significant increase in college enrollment for these students by 10.3 percentage points. Students that participated in the intensive mentoring intervention that enrolled in college were as likely to continue in college as students in the control group.

Mentoring Support Acts as a Substitute for the Support of Parents and Teachers
Our results show the benefits of in-person mentoring support relative to less intensive, brief interventions. To learn more about why mentoring works for certain students, we looked at the relationship between the intervention received and students’ level of need for help navigating the college application process. We also looked at personality and demographic characteristics.

We found no evidence that the program worked better or worse for students based on personality characteristics or demographic differences. However, the mentoring intervention was more effective in schools with limited support for students preparing for college. We concluded that mentoring works as a substitute for parental or school-based help in navigating the college application process. Given the benefits of mentoring interventions, we need to find cost-effective ways to provide support to students who need it.