

Rejection and Happiness

The Effects of College Choice on Student Integration and Success

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July 8, 2011

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Future Work

Motivation

- Admission process at selective institutions has become more competitive than before (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009)
- This has created a perception that all four-year colleges are more competitive (College Board, 2008)
- Students place more importance on college quality today than in the 1970s (Long, 2004)
- First choice colleges tend to be more selective than second choice colleges (Niu, Tienda, & Cortes, 2006; Niu & Tienda, 2008)

The effects of increased competition are different for low-income students

- Low-income students are less likely to have information on a range of college choices
- Low-income students benefit more in the labor market from attending selective colleges (Dale & Krueger, 2002; 2011)
- Status competition theory suggests that low-income students try to move up the social order through education, but doing so is difficult (e.g. Haller & Portes, 1973; Karen, 2002)
 - Yet they are much less likely to attend after holding other factors constant (Hearn, 1991; Alon, 2009)

- Tinto (1975, 1993)'s model of student departure posed that academic and social integration impact retention
- His model has been empirically verified by numerous researchers across different types of students and colleges (e.g. Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Sorey & Duggan, 2008)

- Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler (1995) studied 263 four-year students in Indiana and found that students who attended their first choice college were more academically and socially integrated than students not attending their first choice
- They also found that students attending their first choice were more likely to indicate intent to return to the same college for a second year (also found by Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe (1986))
- No distinctions made among students who did not apply, were not accepted, and did not attend their first choice after being accepted

Research Questions

Do the academic/social integration levels and academic outcomes of students attending their first choice college differ from the following groups:

- 1 Students who did not apply to their first choice?
- 2 Students who applied, but were not accepted?
- 3 Students who were accepted, but did not attend?

The Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study (WSLS)

- My sample consists of 867 students who started college in fall 2008
- To be in the sample, students met the following criteria:
 - Have graduated from a Wisconsin high school within the past three years
 - Be receiving a Pell Grant and still have unmet financial need
 - Be enrolled as a first-time, full-time student at any public Wisconsin institution of higher education
 - First choice was a four-year college
 - Provided additional data consent to access ACT score
- Students applied to 87 first choice colleges in 19 states

Interview Sample

- 29 students participated in semi-structured interviews during their first two years of college
- Students were interviewed regardless of enrollment status or transfer
- Most students were interviewed every semester with very low attrition

First Choice College Outcomes

Students are classified into four groups based on whether they attended their first choice college and why they did not attend:

- Attended first choice (500 survey, 15 interview)
- Did not apply (73 survey, 3 interview)
- Applied, were not accepted (157 survey, 4 interview)
- Accepted, did not attend (137 survey, 7 interview)

- Measures from the WSLs survey include demographic characteristics, educational aspirations, parental education, number of applications submitted, and perception of adulthood
- High school level measures (from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction) include size and location of the student's high school, racial and economic diversity, the percent of students going on to college, and the percent of students taking AP exams/ACT

- Institutional level measures for first choice colleges (from IPEDS) include the cost of attendance, institutional level and control, admit rate, and median ACT score
- Student ACT scores, alternate measure of college choices, and self-reported high school GPA (from ACT)

Interview Measures of Academic and Social Integration

I assign students academic and social integration scores on a three-point scale based on their initial interviews:

- Low: Little or no evidence shown of positive integration; evidence of a lack of integration
- Medium: Mixed or weak evidence of positive or negative integration
- High: Strong evidence of positive integration; no evidence of negative integration

Survey Measures of Academic Integration

- I measure academic integration using the following four questions from the WSLS survey:
 - “My grades are lower than I’d expected.”[†]
 - “I’m not getting as much help or support from my college as I’d expected.”[†]
 - “How interesting are your classes?”
 - “Classes are more difficult than I’d expected.”[†]
- All questions are on a 1-5 scale, where 1 represents the least integrated outcome and 5 the most integrated outcome (questions with [†] have the scale reversed)
- Responses are added to get overall academic integration score
- Chronbach’s α : .444

Survey Measures of Social Integration

- I measure social integration using the following five questions from the WSLS survey:
 - “I’m not as happy in college as I’d expected.”[†]
 - “I have fewer friends at college than I had expected.”[†]
 - “How much do you enjoy the people you go to college with?”
 - “How much do you like the freedom of being in college?”
 - “How much fun is college life?”
- All questions are on a 1-5 scale, where 1 represents the least integrated outcome and 5 the most integrated outcome (questions with [†] have the scale reversed)
- Responses are added to get overall social integration score
- Chronbach’s α : .780

Persistence and Completion

- College persistence and completion outcomes are from the National Student Clearinghouse
 - Covers 92% of all American college students and nearly all Wisconsin institutions
 - Allows students to be tracked outside the initial institution
- Most previous research has only examined within-institution persistence

Limitations of the Dataset

- Only includes students who attended public institutions in the state of Wisconsin
- Low-income students who enrolled full-time and completed the FAFSA are relatively advantaged
- Students who granted administrative data consent are not representative of the full WSLs sample

Analytic Model

- Selection must be accounted for in order to estimate effects of attending first choice college
- I model three separate decisions using logistic regression models:
 - The student's probability of applying to his or her first choice college
 - The first choice college's probability of accepting the student
 - The student's probability of attending after being accepted
- I then include the probabilities into regression models estimating the effect of attendance on academic/social integration and college persistence

Results from Interview Measures

- Academic integration levels using initial interview are similar across all four groups
 - Most students show moderate or high levels of academic integration
 - “I like the atmosphere. I like all the professors in [my] department; they’re really nice. You can go up to their office and if they’re in their office they’ll help you out and they’ll take time out of their day to help you out and make sure you’re doing good.”
- Social integration levels of students who did not apply to their first choice are lower than students who attended their first choice
 - “I have to do some kind of job to help [my mother] out. Even though she doesn’t tell me to go get a job, I mean I can just tell looking at her she’s growing old really fast. My brother is like, ‘We have to get a job, we have to.’”

Quantitative Results: Academic and Social Integration

- Students who attended their first choice were more academically integrated than students who did not apply
 - Difference driven by perception of support received from college of attendance
 - The difference in social integration nearly rises to statistical significance ($p=.11$)
- No statistically significant differences between students who attended first choice and those who either were not accepted or did not attend

Quantitative Results: Persistence and Completion

- After controlling for selection, there are no statistically significant differences in persistence/completion rates (spring 2010) during the second year of college
- Before controlling for selection, students who did not apply (64%) or were not accepted (78%) had significantly lower persistence rates than students who attended their first choice (87%) or who were accepted but did not attend (88%)

- Include 2010-2011 persistence and completion data from NSC
- Include credits earned and GPA as outcomes for students who stayed in WTCS or UW System
- Use alternate measure of first choice college as robustness check

Acknowledgments

Thank you to:

- WSLs staff and partners
- Association for Institutional Research's 2010 forum
- UW-Madison mixed methods practicum

Funding for the WSLs was provided by:

- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Spencer Foundation
- William T. Grant Foundation
- UW-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty
- WISCAPE