

# New, inexpensive tools help smart, low-income kids realize great college opportunities, study shows

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Students on U.Va. grounds. Credit: Cole Geddy

(Phys.org) —The highest-achieving, low-income teens rarely enroll in the country's top colleges, and the reason is more obvious than you'd think: they don't apply.

University of Virginia Professor of Economics and [Education](#) Sarah Turner and Stanford Economics Professor Caroline Hoxby say cost isn't

the reason – high-achieving, low-income students actually pay less to attend a very selective college than the nonselective ones they usually attend.

It also isn't the fees associated with applying – low-income students are eligible for application fee waivers if they file the right paperwork.

And it isn't that [colleges](#) are ignoring them – the country's most selective colleges try to recruit low-income students by visiting hundreds of high schools, inviting students to campus and working with numerous college mentoring organizations.

"Still, the vast majority of high-achieving, low-income students are dispersed – often one of only a few high-achieving students in their area. The result is that many high-achieving, low-income students may be unreached by traditional outreach efforts even if counselors and admissions staff conscientiously do everything that is cost-effective for them to do," said Turner, who holds positions at U.Va.'s College of Arts & Sciences, its Curry School of Education and its Batten School for Leadership and Public Policy. .

What's more, in a [recent study](#) Hoxby and Professor Christopher Avery of Harvard demonstrate that high-achieving, low-income students who do apply to very selective colleges are admitted and graduate at the same rates as their high-income peers with similar achievement.

So what is the reason these students don't apply? Experts speculate that students are either poorly informed about their college choices or just did not want to attend selective colleges. For example, students might believe top colleges cost much more when they really cost less. Or perhaps low-income, high-achieving students want to attend the same postsecondary institutions that other students from their high schools often pick – even if these institutions have low graduation rates and

slender instructional resources.

It's one thing if students don't apply because they know about their college-going opportunities and don't want to attend, Hoxby says. It's quite another if they are underinformed.

"If a child has managed, despite coming from a low-income family, to become extremely well prepared for college, it is a huge waste if she fails to get a great college education simply because she doesn't know that she could," Hoxby says.

It's a waste not just for the student but for the university she could attend as well. If a university can enroll a student who is just as prepared but brings more socio-economic diversity to its student body, a wider array of ideas may flourish in its classrooms.

To figure out whether low-income, high-achieving students would choose different colleges if they were better informed, Hoxby and Turner devised and tested new tools to inform students about their college-going opportunities. The Expanding College Opportunities program was tested on about 40,000 students using a randomized controlled trial.

The program tools are inexpensive – about \$6 per student – provide customized information to the prospective students and don't promote any particular college.

"We set out to design a set of interventions that were so inexpensive that they could be delivered 'at scale' to a large number of students with a great deal of fidelity. In short, the interventions potentially have a very high benefit-to-cost ratio," Turner said.

Students targeted by the project received the same sort of information

and reminders that they might receive if an expert counselor were guiding them through the college application process. But, in this case, the information comes not in person but through the mail and online.

"We showed students how to find colleges for which they were best prepared academically. We had them compare colleges' graduation rates and instructional resources. In other words, we tried to help them make wise decisions for themselves," Hoxby says.

Students were also confronted with information about the differences between colleges' "sticker prices" and the actual net costs they could expect to pay.

"Many don't know that for low-income students, the net price actually may go down as the sticker price goes up," Turner said.

Students received application fee waivers that allowed them to apply to eight of about 200 selective colleges for free, with no paperwork.

"Low-income students are already eligible for fee waivers," says Hoxby, "so what we did was eliminate the modest paperwork." Related research shows that apparently small [paperwork](#) barriers deter some applicants.

Hoxby and Turner found that the Expanding College Opportunities intervention caused low-income, high-achieving students to apply and be admitted to a wider array of colleges, and caused them to enroll in colleges with higher graduation rates and greater instructional resources.

Students who received the intervention submitted 48 percent more applications than those who did not, and they were 56 percent more likely to apply to a "peer" institution where other students also have high grades and instruction is geared toward people like them, the study found.

The students were 78 percent more likely to be admitted by a peer institution and 46 percent more likely to enroll in a peer institution. The intervention caused students to enroll in colleges with 26 percent greater instructional resources.

The researchers said the program could yield a substantial payoff for students. For each \$10 spent on the program, the interventions caused students to have college experiences that will likely translate into an extra \$222,990 to \$567,821 in higher lifetime earnings.

Why hasn't this type of intervention been used already since it appears it could transform the college application landscape?

First, the researchers say, the data on students hasn't previously been available to power this type of intervention.

"We were the first to figure out how to combine enormous amounts of data in order to identify low-income, high-achieving students and tailor the information to their circumstances," Hoxby said.

And second, it would not make sense for a single institution to undertake such a project every year. This is a task for collective action, the paper says. A natural host for such a project would be a pan-collegiate organization or other organization with social goals.

The paper, "Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving, Low-Income [Students](#)," will first be issued as a policy paper by the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research and then as a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper.

Provided by University of Virginia

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