Endorsements enhance an MBA applicant's chance

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College applicants and job hunters are often told to scour their networks for someone who could make a quick call or send an email on their behalf, telling the decision-maker a special applicant is heading their way.

But not much is known about whether and why these personal endorsements work. Do they get the applicant in the door? And once at the college or company, does the applicant benefit the organization they've tried so hard to join?

A Cornell University researcher and his colleague offer the first empirical evidence answering these questions. Personal endorsements give applicants a leg up on the competition, both in getting interviewed and admitted, according to their study of applicants to a university MBA program. Endorsed applicants also tend to support the university at higher rates by taking on leadership roles as students and giving more generous monetary donations as alumni. However, colleges and companies may be missing out on valuable talent if they accept only endorsed applicants, the researchers note in "Best in Class: The Returns on Application Endorsements in Higher Education," published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

"This research highlights how an endorser can have a large effect on who gets interviewed, and who gets admitted, into an MBA program," said co-author Ben A. Rissing, assistant professor of organizational behavior in Cornell's ILR School.

Rissing and his co-author, Emilio J. Castilla of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, found that endorsed applicants were interviewed about 82 percent of the time, while those without endorsements scored an interview only 34 percent of the time. Among those who interviewed, endorsed applicants received offers to join the program 64 percent of the time, while those without endorsements got offers only 52 percent of the time. "These are big differences," Rissing said.

Researchers found that endorsed individuals were no more qualified than their non-endorsed counterparts, based on merit-based competency assessments conducted by admissions staff who didn't know the applicants' endorsement status. While endorsed applicants were sometimes seen as stronger "on paper" (after a review of their application materials), they generally scored worse during interviews than non-endorsed applicants. Further, students who were endorsed as applicants were neither better performers academically (in terms of awards or GPA) or on the job market after graduation (in terms of salary or signing bonuses).

That said, those who were endorsed as applicants did emerge as "better citizens" (more likely to lead student clubs) and "better alumni" (more likely to donate to the university, and notably, more likely to give large amounts) than those who had not been endorsed.

Endorsements do seem to identify individuals who will be committed to the organization. But they do not necessarily identify better-qualified candidates, Rissing said. "Organizations should go through their application process and ask, 'Are we selecting on applicant characteristics that are going to result in organizational members who are most desirable?'" he said. In selecting for qualified applicants and those who are community-minded, he said, "It's a question of how to balance the two of these considerations, so one doesn't overwhelm the other. Both have merits."

The study also raises concerns about inequality. For example, first-generation students, immigrants, and students without financial resources might not yet have contacts who are willing or able endorse them, Rissing said. "There are smart, qualified and community-minded individuals in all of these groups. Is their potential lack of awareness of these endorsement channels going to limit their opportunities?" he said. "Decision-makers must be attentive to the reality that access to these types of social connections, such as endorsements, are not ubiquitous."

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