

Can guaranteed admissions help reduce college undermatching?

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Low-income, highly qualified students are more likely to choose selective universities that match their academic profiles when they know their admission is guaranteed through state automatic admissions policies, according to a new study published online today in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

Prior research has found that low-income, high-achieving students are more likely than their high-income academic peers to undermatch—attend a less selective college than they are academically qualified for—creating an income-related gap in access to high-quality higher education among students with similar academic qualifications.

The new study, conducted by Kalena E. Cortes, an associate professor of public policy at Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government and Public Service, and Jane Arnold Lincove, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, investigated the effect of the "Top 10 Percent Plan" admissions policy in Texas on approximately 146,000 public high school students who graduated in spring 2008 and spring 2009 and who applied to at least one Texas four-year public university.

During the time of the study, Texas granted automatic admissions to any public university for all students who achieved a class rank in the top 10 percent in their high school during their junior year. (The University of Texas at Austin began automatically admitting students in the top 7

percent of high school rank beginning in fall 2011 and will raise the bar to the top 6 percent in fall 2019.) The state created the Top 10 Percent Plan in 1997 as a replacement for affirmative action.

The researchers found that while low-income, highly qualified students—defined as students who had high SAT scores along with top 10 percent class rank—were still more likely to undermatch, on average, than their high-income peers, Top 10 Percent eligibility reduced undermatch with a larger effect on low-income students than on similar high-income students.

Top 10 Percent status was associated with a 15 percentage point increase in high-income, highly qualified students applying to a closely matched campus but a significantly larger 24 percentage point increase for similar low-income students. Top 10 Percent status was also associated with a 16 percentage point increase in the probability of applying to a flagship campus for high-income, highly qualified students and a 22 percentage point increase for similar low-income students.

These results persisted to enrollment. The Top 10 Percent Plan reduced the likelihood of undermatch through enrollment at a "safety school" by 17 percentage points for a high-income, highly qualified student and a significantly higher 23 percentage points for a low-income, highly qualified student.

The plan also increased the likelihood of enrollment at a closely matched or flagship campus by larger margins for low-income, highly qualified students than for their high-income peers—22 percentage points compared to 16 percentage points, respectively, at closely matched campuses, and 22 percentage points compared to 17 percentage points, respectively at flagship campuses.

"We found that the automatic admissions policy in Texas can influence

student application and enrollment behaviors," said Lincove. "Because the effect of admissions certainty on low-income students with both high class rank and high SAT scores was larger than on their high-income peers with similarly strong academic performance, admissions guarantees may help close the income gap in college matching."

Admissions certainty did not improve the access gap for low-income students with high class rank but low SATs. Among Texas students who had a high class rank that triggered automatic admissions but also low SAT scores, only high-income students responded to admissions certainty by applying to and enrolling in universities where students had higher average SATs.

"Low-income students, unlike their high-income peers, pay attention to their own SAT scores as a signal of college qualification, even when the SAT scores don't matter for admissions decisions," Cortes said. "We have found similar racial differences in how students respond to SAT scores in other studies. The [test results](#) are having a differential effect on students."

Under the Texas plan, eligible students receive a notification of their guaranteed admissions status in the spring of their junior year, well prior to the fall deadlines for college applications. While many states have automatic admissions, Texas is unique in that automatic admissions is based solely on class rank, and in that automatically admitted students can attend any Texas four-year public university campus they choose.

"It has been suggested that low-income students tend to undermatch because they lack information about their college options," said Lincove. "Our results suggest that automatic admissions has the hidden benefit of overcoming that lack of information that discourages highly qualified, low-income students from applying to selective institutions where they could succeed."

A 2016 [study](#) by the authors found that automatic admissions status in Texas was also associated with higher rates of application to a flagship university among high-achieving black students, a group that is particularly underrepresented on those campuses.

"The difference in access to elite universities often begins with the student's application choice and the information she has about her college options," said Cortes. "Demystifying college admissions policy is a pathway to greater inclusion."

"In general, policies that can increase transparency about college admissions processes, including those that guarantee admissions based on clearly measured achievements, are likely to help resolve mismatch problems related to information gaps," Cortes said.

"It is unclear from our findings whether strategies such as active recruitment and publicizing generous financial aid policies could be as effective as admissions certainty in influencing application behavior among low-income applicants," added Lincove.

The study also looked at nonacademic types of [student](#) matching behavior. Most students prefer campuses with students of similar demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic background. Only highly qualified low-income students selected institutions where they had fewer same-race and same-income peers.

More information: Match or Mismatch? Automatic Admissions and College Preferences of Low- and High-Income Students, www.aera.net/Newsroom/Match-or-...-High-Income-Students

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