

Applying to college—more information could mean big opportunities for low-income students

31 March 2017, by Laurel Thomas Gnagey

When admissions officers know more about their high schools, students from low-income backgrounds have a much better chance of getting into selective colleges, researchers at the University of Michigan School of Education have found.

In a study led by Michael Bastedo, director of the U-M Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, when admissions officers were supplied with ample data about an underserved [high school](#), they were up to 28 percent more likely to admit a low-income applicant.

"Surprisingly, admissions officers often do not have consistently good information on high [school](#) context," Bastedo said. "Thus, with a relatively simple intervention, we could have a real impact on the proportion of low-income students admitted to selective colleges."

Bastedo said that particularly for low-income applicants, admissions officers often lack quality information about a district's [standardized test scores](#), which advanced placement (AP) courses have been offered, and what support services are available to students, such as free or reduced lunches.

Students from low-income backgrounds are highly underrepresented at selective colleges, making up only 4 percent of the incoming class. Despite movement in recent years toward a more holistic look at students that goes beyond measures like grade-point-average, current admissions processes are hampered by implicit biases that decontextualize a [student's](#) achievements, Bastedo said.

"There is a natural bias among human

beings—called correspondence bias or the fundamental attribution error—that causes us to attribute results to people's personalities or dispositions rather than to their contexts or opportunities," he said.

"It's not about having the wrong values—all selective schools want to admit more low-income students—but they often don't have the right data to contextualize a student's achievements inside the opportunities available to them."

Bastedo and U-M graduate Nicholas Bowman, director of the University of Iowa Center for Research on Undergraduate Education, recruited 311 admissions officers at 174 undergraduate science and engineering programs to participate in the study.

The researchers presented hypothetical white male students from three socioeconomic backgrounds to the participants. All candidates were applying to be engineering majors. Each admissions file was randomly assigned varying levels of contextual information about the high school. One group received a more "normal" amount of high school information and another received a more robust set of measures.

Bastedo said, to date, most actions taken to make sure low-income students have opportunities in college have been focused on changing student behavior. This study is believed to be the first to suggest that admissions officers can play a greater role, with relatively easy fixes to the admissions process.

Bastedo is working with the College Board to develop a dashboard that can provide accurate and robust high school and neighborhood information. Admissions officers also don't have access to

community profiles of crime data, housing stability and other environmental factors that may translate into unequal educational opportunities for some applicants. The dashboard combines this data into an easy-to-use format for admissions officers to use.

More information: Improving Admission of Low-SES Students at Selective Colleges. *Educational Researcher*. DOI: [10.3102/0013189X17699373](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17699373)

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