'Undermatched' students less likely to graduate on time compared to peers

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Credit: University at Buffalo

"Undermatching" is a term to describe when high-performing students, typically from economically-disadvantaged households, attend less competitive colleges than their qualifications permit.

A new study concerning this widespread phenomenon in the U.S. finds that it correlates with another higher education dilemma: delayed graduation.

The study, presented by University at Buffalo researchers at the

American Educational Research Association's annual meeting last month, shows that students who undermatch are less likely to graduate college within four or six years compared to peers who attend colleges that align with their qualifications.

After controlling for various components, such as gender and educational background, findings of the study include:

- Undermatching was highest for black students (49 percent), followed by white students (45 percent), Hispanic students (41 percent) and Asian students (31 percent).
- Undermatched students were about 80 percent less likely to graduate college within four years and 70 percent less likely to graduate college within six years than non-undermatched students.
- The graduation gap for undermatching students was widest for Hispanic students. For example, the study predicts 60 percent of non-undermatched students will graduate within four years, while only 30 percent of undermatched students will graduate on time. The gap improves, slightly, for six year graduations rates.

"The results suggest policymakers and educators need to be concerned about college completion for even highly qualified students if they are undermatched," says study co-author Chungseo Kang, a postdoctoral associate in the UB Graduate School of Education. "To improve college completion rates for students, in particular for Hispanic students, it is important to encourage them to attend a college that matches their qualifications."

Reasons behind undermatching range from students being reluctant to take out student loans or lack of confidence that they could attend more competitive schools to insufficient access to information about the higher education landscape.

Co-author Darlene Garcia Torres, a Ph.D. candidate in the UB Graduate School of Education says the study is important because it helps shed light on structural factors that may negatively impact minority groups' educational and socioeconomic advancement.

The study is unique for three reasons, she says. First, undermatching was measured and analyzed quantitatively (with propensity score matching). Second, they used a nationally representative sample. Lastly, they explored undermatching differences by race group.

Kang and Garcia Torres used the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences' Educational Longitudinal Study to generate a sample of 4,970 students who enrolled in a four-year college within one year of high school graduation.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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