Information and College Access in Canada

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Toronto, Canada

Sample: 1,616 Toronto public school students

Target group: Students

Outcome of interest: Enrollment and attendance

Intervention type: Information

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Students deciding whether or not to pursue post-secondary education may not be fully informed about the costs and benefits of such an education. Researchers examined whether a simple, inexpensive information campaign could change students' knowledge and perceptions about post-secondary education. When exposed to an informational video, students who had been initially unsure about pursuing higher education reported expectations of higher returns to a post-secondary degree, lower concerns about costs, and also reported a greater likelihood of enrolling in a post-secondary institution. Students who had already been planning to pursue post-secondary education were more likely to believe they were eligible for grant aid.

Policy issue

Many low-income students do not pursue further education after receiving a high-school degree. A growing body of evidence suggests that students facing barriers to academic success may not be able to make informed decisions about pursuing post-secondary education because they do not have full information about the costs and benefits of these programs. Low-income individuals tend to overestimate the cost of college and underestimate the average returns to income of post-secondary education. Intensive programs advertising financial aid and promoting the benefits of a post-secondary education have been successful in various settings, but it is unclear whether less intense programs, such as a brief internet information campaign, can have any impact on student' perceptions about colleges and universities.

Context of the evaluation

Toronto public school enrollment is determined by geographic boundaries and students usually attend schools in their neighborhoods. Students who attend schools in higher-income neighborhoods tend to perform well on standardized tests, while those in low-income areas have lower scores on average.[1] The intervention was conducted in five of Toronto's most under-resourced public schools. Compared to other schools in the province of Ontario, these five schools showed substantially lower percentages of students meeting standardized test standards in grades 9 and 10. About 30 percent of grade 12 students in these five schools attended post-secondary institutions after high school, among the lowest rates in Toronto. Among surveyed students, 32 percent reported that their father has a university degree and 21 percent reported that their mother has a university degree.



Students getting off a school bus in Canada.

Photo credit: BalkansCat, Shutterstock.com

Details of the intervention

Researchers evaluated the impact of an internet information campaign on students' interests in and expectations about post-secondary education. The information was provided in the form of a three-minute video about the benefits of post-secondary education and a simple financial-aid calculator.

In December 2008 and January 2009, homeroom teachers in five Toronto high schools distributed handouts to students in grades 9-12, which offered C$20 (US$16) to those who went online to complete two surveys and "find out about life after high school." Out of a total of 5,017 enrolled students, 1,616 logged on and completed the first survey. This survey asked all students if they expected their highest degree to be a high-school degree, a two-year community college degree, a four-year university degree or more, or whether they were unsure. It also asked questions about their knowledge of their own eligibility for financial aid.

A random half of the students were then shown a three-minute video. The video presented post-secondary education in a positive light. It informed viewers of the costs of post-secondary education and differences in average earnings for individuals with different levels of educational attainment. It suggested that many students who are unsure about post-secondary education might overestimate costs or not realize their eligibility for financial aid. The video was accompanied by a transcription of the text and a financial-aid calculator. By inputting approximations of household income and family size, students could estimate their own eligibility for financial aid. The median student in this treatment group spent three minutes on the webpage with the video and calculator. Those students who did not receive the video or calculator served as a control group for the experiment. Randomization was the only channel that affected whether or not surveyed students were shown the video and calculator.

After three weeks, students in both the treatment and control groups were sent a reminder and a link to a second survey (identical for both groups). Students were required to complete both surveys to receive the C$20 (US$16) (in the form of an online bank deposit, amazon.ca gift certificate, or to be given as a donation to the school). Sixty percent of all students completed the second survey, at similar rates in both the treatment and control groups. This survey asked students how much they expected to earn under alternative levels of education attainment. Like the first survey, it asked them about their own expectations for post-secondary education and their knowledge of their own grant and loan eligibility. Students were also then given the opportunity to request information about specific colleges and universities and to download a PDF booklet about applying to post-secondary education.

Results and policy lessons

Researchers found that exposure to information had the largest impact on perceptions among high school students who were initially unsure about pursuing post-secondary education, approximately 12 percent of the sample. These students reported higher expected returns to a post-secondary degree, lower concerns about costs, and a greater likelihood of attaining post-secondary education.

Impact on perceptions of earnings: The information intervention led uncertain students in the treatment group to predict that they would earn 2.1 times as much with a degree as they would without one, a 40 percent increase compared to the control group. These students decreased their expected earnings from leaving education after high school by C$9,029 (US$7,369) from a base of C$43,542 (US$35,539) in the control group. The researchers had theorized that without information, students would be more likely to underestimate the differences in earnings between those with and without a post-secondary degree.

Impact on perceptions of cost: Uncertain students exposed to the information were 22.6 percentage points less likely to believe that costs prevent some from going to post-secondary institutions from a base of 61.7 percent (a 37 percent decrease).

Impact on plans for post-secondary attainment: Initially uncertain students were 17 percentage points more likely to expect to attain a degree after high school from a base of 42 percent (a 40 percent increase).

Students who had already been planning to attend a post-secondary institution—approximately 85 percent of those surveyed—increased their perception of their eligibility for financial aid. They did not change their perception of expected returns to different educational attainment levels, but were 6.5 percentage points more likely to believe that they were eligible for grant aid from a base of 50 percent (a 13 percent increase).

The video made students who had not previously planned to pursue higher education more likely to request materials from specific post-secondary institutions, but no other sub-groups were significantly more likely to ask for more information. Individuals who had not expected to pursue higher education before the intervention were 37 percentage points more likely than similar individuals in the control group to request information about specific universities compared to a base of 46 percent (an 80 percent increase).

A short, inexpensive information program was able to change students' perceptions about the costs and benefits of post-secondary education. Information presented through videos, websites, or presentations could help students make informed decisions about their post-secondary education. Researchers suggest that such efforts, concentrated during times when students must make decisions about post-secondary education, might lead to higher levels of post-secondary education enrollment and degree completion.

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1. Alphonso, Carolin and Tavia Grant. 2013. "A Tale of Two Schools: The Correlation between Income and Education in Toronto." The Globe and Mail, November 16.