The Impact of In-School Application Support on College Application and Enrollment Rates in Canada

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Sample: 86 high schools

Target group: Students

Outcome of interest: Enrollment and attendance

Intervention type: Subsidies Tailored instruction

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A complex application process discourages some qualified students from attending college. Researchers studied the impact of an in-school program to provide application assistance at schools where fewer than half of high school seniors typically enter college the following year. Application fee waivers combined with an online tool that provided customized college information boosted college application and enrollment rates. A less customized version that includes fee waivers increased application rates but not enrollment, and variations with no fee waivers had negligible or even negative effects on application rates and enrollment.

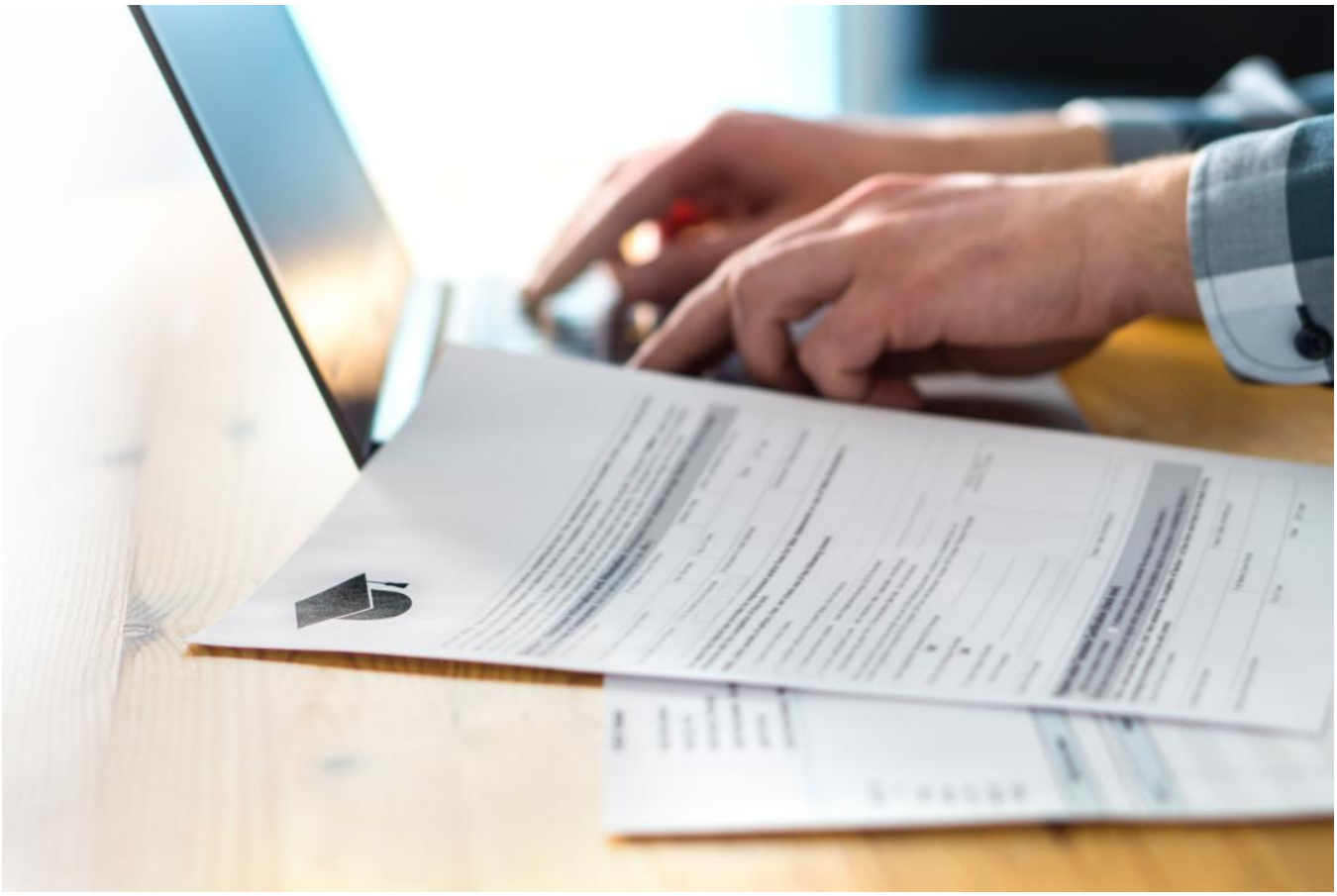
Policy issue

The process of applying to college can be complex and intimidating. Students must decide they want to go to college, choose appropriate high school courses, earn qualifying grades, select programs to apply to, complete applications, write essays, pay application fees, and often take standardized tests and complete financial aid applications. Students in low-income neighborhoods typically receive less support in navigating this process.

Context of the evaluation

This evaluation took place in Ontario high schools with low college enrollment rates. At these schools, only 52 percent of grade 12 students graduated the year before program implementation, and fewer than half of grade 12 students typically enroll in postsecondary education the following year.

In Ontario, the college application process is more straightforward than in other places – students are not required to take standardized tests like the SAT or write entrance essays. Nonetheless, students are required to complete online application forms, send in transcripts, and pay $100 application fees, and many students apply for financial aid as well.



A person filling out a college application in Canada.

Photo: Shutterstock

Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of in-school application support on college application and enrollment rates among students at Ontario high schools with low college-going rates. The program, LifeAfterHighSchool, provided instruction and a 'one-stop' online platform to help all grade 12 students select schools they would likely be eligible for, direct students to application websites, calculate predicted financial aid eligibility, and complete financial aid applications. Students also received paperwork-free application fee waivers.

In Phase I (2011-12), researchers partnered with 86 high schools with low college-going rates, half of which were randomly assigned to receive the LifeAfterHighSchool program. Students in schools receiving the program attended three application assistance workshops in computer labs during normal class times. In each workshop, instructors and the online platform helped students walk through steps of the application process. Students received fee waivers.

In Phase II (2013-14), researchers worked with 66 of these schools, half of which were randomized to receive a version of the LifeAfterHighSchool program, which differed from the Phase I version in a few respects. Application assistance workshops used laptops in normal classrooms and occurred two rather than three times during the school year. In this case, the online program did not suggest a list of local college options based on students' qualifications. Researchers also varied whether students received fee waivers, whether the schools received external instructional support and laptops, and whether facilitators returned after the workshops for additional small group help.

Researchers measured college application and enrollment rates using data from the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Results and policy lessons

School-based workshops including an online tool that provided customized college exploration and application information, in conjunction with fee waivers, boosted college application and enrollment rates in Phase I. In the second phase of the program, application rates rose when fee waivers were included, but enrollment did not. Phase II provided less personalized information, which researchers suggest may explain the enrollment patterns – students may have applied to programs that they were not qualified for or were otherwise not a good fit.

Phase I Results:

Application rates: Among high school graduates, the program increased postsecondary application rates by 13.6 percentage points from a control mean of 64.2 percent, an increase of 21.2 percent.
Among all grade 12 students, the program increased postsecondary application rates by 13.9 percentage points from a control mean of 39.5 percent, an increase of 35.2 percent.

Enrollment rates: Among high school graduates, the program increased postsecondary enrollment rates by 5.2 percentage points from a control mean of 53 percent, an increase of 9.8 percent.

Among all grade 12 students, the program increased postsecondary enrollment rates by 2.9 percentage points from a control mean of 30.1 percent, an increase of 9.6 percent.

Phase II Results:

Application rates: Among high school graduates, the program including fee waivers increased application rates by 20.4 percentage points from a control mean of 62.7 percent, an increase of 32.5 percent (a larger effect than Phase I). When the program did not include fee waivers, the program had no significant effect on application rates. Researchers noted that school counselors also emphasized the importance of application fee waivers.

Enrollment Rates: Among high school graduates, the program including fee waivers had no impact on enrollment rates. The program without fee waivers appears to have decreased enrollment rates by 3.8 percentage points, from a control mean of 48.8 percent.

Fee waivers and personalized guidance in choosing appropriate programs appear to be important components of supporting students in the college application process. According to educators, this program was particularly helpful for students who lacked support in completing the college application process.