

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT BEHAVIORS:

A Prerequisite to Supporting College Enrollment and Success

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The goal of increasing the number of students who enroll and succeed in postsecondary education is getting a lot of attention from policy makers, foundations, and the higher education community. Whether the focus is on the inequities reflected in and exacerbated by the differentials in educational attainment across demographic groups or on concerns about the United States falling behind other nations in educating its population, the conclusion is frequently that we must speed progress toward the goal.

Some of the barriers are clear. Education is expensive, and we have to be sure both that the money is available and that young people know the money will be available so they can prepare and plan for college. The quality of our elementary and secondary schools is dramatically unequal, and too many young people graduate from high school unprepared to do college-level work—if they graduate at all.

The papers in this collection have a different focus. We ask how students make choices, how their behaviors and responses to opportunities and circumstances affect their educational outcomes, how they process available information, and how the structure of the student aid system and the classroom might either interfere with or support their aspirations.

Taken as a whole, these papers provide important insights into potential strategies for improving educational attainment. They also point to some difficult hurdles and to the need for further targeted research.

Support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation allowed the project organizers—Sandy Baum, Robert Shireman, and Patricia Steele—to confer with and convene a diverse group of experts on student aid, on student success, on cognitive psychology, and on behavioral economics. Our conversations led to a framework for a set of papers we hoped would allow us raise questions and spark new thinking about improving student outcomes.

Ben Castleman's paper, "Prompts, Personalization, And PayOffs: Strategies to Improve the Design and Delivery of College and Financial Aid Information," focuses on how we can communicate more effectively with students. The lack of adequate information about the costs and benefits of college and about how to navigate the complex processes associated with applying for admission and for financial aid is frequently cited. Recent efforts on the part of the federal government and others are generating college search websites, net price calculators, and new ways of estimating the payoff to specific college credentials. But Castleman asks whether the *availability* of simpler and more personalized information will

be sufficient to mitigate the informational obstacles that prevent low-income students from attending colleges and universities that are well-matched to their abilities and interests. He looks to recent work in a range of behavioral sciences to examine how information is presented and delivered and whether students and their families can access individualized assistance when they need it. He points to evidence that low-cost interventions that provide students with prompts and reminders to complete important tasks in both the college and financial aid processes can increase college enrollment. Castleman's paper provides an important reminder that we should stop to think about how potential students are likely to access and process information before we rush simply to provide even more sources of information.

In "Student Aid, Student Behavior, and Educational Attainment," Sandy Baum and Saul Schwartz examine the financial aid system's impact on student choices and behaviors. They discuss the importance of simple incentives like giving students more money when they enroll in more courses and make more academic progress. But they focus primarily on insights from behavioral economics and cognitive psychology, which suggest that responses are less straightforward. In the face of complexity, students, like anyone else, are likely to take the path of least resistance, going with the most salient option or the one that requires the least action. The authors discuss implications of the reality that people are not always able to make necessary sacrifices to achieve long-term goals. In addition, there is a tendency for people to over-estimate their ability to beat the odds, leading to choices that may be self-defeating. Rather than advocating a specific set of policy changes, Baum and Schwartz focus on increasing our understanding of how the student aid system shapes student behaviors and how modifications might facilitate the goals of improved access and success.

The insights of cognitive psychology and behavioral economics remind us that the standard economic models of rational, utility-maximizing individuals are not adequate for developing a comprehensive understanding of how people behave and for finding ways to "nudge" people into making choices consistent with their long-run interests and goals. While our focus is on postsecondary education outcomes, it is clear that we can learn from studies of the ways people behave in other environments. In his paper, "Motivation, Behavior, and Performance in the Workplace: Insights for Student Success in Higher Education," Charles Kurose looks to the literature on motivation and its relationship to performance in the workplace. His goal is to find potential lessons for higher education in studies of effective strategies for improving workplace outcomes. Kurose emphasizes the importance of goal setting and the prevalent finding that specific, challenging goals elicit the best outcomes. However, because completing college is a complex and novel task that spans multiple years, these goals should focus on learning processes rather than on final performance outcomes. The goals should direct attention and effort toward development of the skills and abilities that one needs in order to succeed in college, rather than toward general goals students are unlikely to know how to achieve.

In "Go to Class! Participate! Study!" Robert Shireman and Joshua Price focus on some of the specific goals Kurose argues are likely to be most effective. Recognizing the role of cognitive biases like time-inconsistent preferences, which cause people to make immediate decisions inconsistent with long-run goals previously established, the authors discuss potential strategies for encouraging more constructive decisions and behaviors. Pointing out that it would be possible, for example, to provide monetary incentives for every step along the way, they raise the concern that this strategy could undermine the fundamental goal of nurturing independent and self-motivated learners. They argue that high quality instruction is of paramount importance and should be designed to help students feel that they are capable of doing the intellectual work necessary.

Nicole Stephens and Sarah Townsend also focus on the role of incentives and how increasing understanding of the complexities of human decision-making can further our ability to provide an environment in which students adopt behaviors more likely to further their goals. In “How Can Incentives Improve the Success of Disadvantaged College Students? Insights from the Social Sciences,” the authors, like Price and Shireman, examine the potential effectiveness of financial incentives in modifying student behaviors. Their analysis is in the context of key barriers facing disadvantaged students seeking a college education. They argue that properly designed financial incentives have the potential to help students overcome financial barriers and develop necessary academic skills. While specifically targeted supplementary subsidies might make it easier for disadvantaged students to overcome some environmental barriers resulting from prevalent negative stereotypes and prejudices, money will not solve these problems. Moreover, the fundamental issue that some students lack the “cultural capital”—the understanding of the rules of the game—necessary to succeed in an academic environment, is not amenable to such a straightforward solution.

All of the papers highlight the contributions the behavioral social sciences have made to our understanding of human decision-making. Historically, standard economic theory has focused on the outcomes of “rational” decision-making. Basically, the idea is that people weigh the costs and benefits of their options and make choices likely to yield the highest net benefits. While nonmonetary factors are clearly part of the calculus, translating everything into monetary terms facilitates measurement and comparison.

Behavioral insights do not negate the importance of money or of people’s responses to financial incentives. But they enrich and complicate the picture. Particularly in complex situations where there are not obvious and manageable steps to follow to achieve a goal, people tend to make choices based on what is presented as the option that requires the least active decision, to respond to information that is hard to ignore, and to avoid paths that risk losses from the status quo. The issue is not that students—or adults in other environments—are lacking in ability. It is that human beings naturally respond in ways that don’t always lead to the best outcomes.

To further the goal of increasing educational attainment, we should take these realities into consideration in how we provide information about postsecondary education and its risks and benefits, in how we design the system of subsidies intended to diminish financial barriers to education, and in how we design the educational environments in which more students will thrive. Giving people more money, especially more money attached to desirable outcomes, matters. But money alone will not close the gaps in college access and success. We need to better understand the hurdles students face in taking advantage of educational opportunities, and we must modify the learning environments, the incentive systems, and the subsidy programs to better support the human beings navigating those systems.