

UNDERMATCHING

a barrier to higher education for low-income, first-generation college-goers

Undermatching, or when a student chooses to attend a less selective institution than that which they could attend, results in lower rates of degree attainment. Research has shown that undermatching disproportionately affects low-income students, students who are the first in their family to attend college, rural students, and underrepresented minority students such as African American and Hispanic students.¹ The point at which the majority of students undermatch is when choosing where to apply to college; many academically capable students either do not apply for college at all or do not apply to any selective institutions.²

Researchers have tested multiple successful interventions to reduce the incidence of undermatching, including college advising from trained college counselors, interventions in which personalized information on selective colleges was mailed to academically capable students, and the use of near-peer mentors to advise students on the college choice process.⁴

Undermatching results in lower rates of degree completion regardless of the student's academic capabilities as measured by standardized test scores; both high-achieving students and less high-achieving students persist at higher rates at more selective institutions. Typically, more selective institutions spend more on instruction per student, have lower faculty to student ratios, and cultivate sources of peer support for students that researchers posit contribute to higher rates of student success at more selective institutions.

In one study,
65% of first
generation
students
under-
matched.³

Why this Matters in Tennessee

In its Seamless Pathways report, the Tennessee Department of Education shared focus group results indicating that about half of Tennessee high school students feel left in the dark in terms of postsecondary guidance. At the same time students report a need for increased advice and support about college, the majority of teachers, even in high schools with low college enrollment rates, reported that students were receiving the information they need. The same report shares that the mean student caseload for a Tennessee school counselor is 439 students, far too many for counselors to provide the type of expert, individualized support research indicates can reduce undermatching.

In some high schools and communities, nonprofit organizations are helping to provide college counseling support, often working collaboratively with school counselors to ensure each student is getting appropriately advised. Organizations like the Niswonger Foundation in East Tennessee, the Hamilton County Schools College Advisors supported by the Chattanooga Public Education Foundation, and the Oasis Center in Nashville assist students in finding the right college for them and work to ensure students are applying to colleges that match their academic abilities.

Questions to Consider

- How can college advising from school counselors and nonprofit organizations be expanded to reach more students, ensuring students matriculate to institutions where they are most likely to graduate?
- What opportunities exist to provide teachers, school administrators, and other K-12 professionals the support they need to assist with college advising?
- Does state funding to higher education provide opportunities for institutions to play a role in college advising and exposing high school students to postsecondary opportunities?

¹ Bowen et al (2009); Carnevale & Strohl (2013); Hoxby & Avery (2013); Hoxby & Avery (2012); Pallais (2014); Smith et al (2012);

² Bowen et al (2009)

³ Bowen et al (2009)

⁴ Avery (2010); Carrell & Sacerdote (2013); Castleman et al (2012); Cunha & Miller (2009); Hoxby & Turner (2013); Stephan (2013).