



# Digest of Recent Research

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Edited by Matthew J. Mayhew

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### About the Digest

CIC's *Digest of Recent Research* is a compendium of summaries of research that independent college and university presidents are likely to find helpful. Published periodically, the *Digest* highlights timely research from scholarly journals and other publications with a focus on findings useful to presidents and to other leaders of independent colleges and universities. Edited by Matthew Mayhew, William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration at the Ohio State University, each *Digest* offers a brief summary of selected articles that includes a discussion of the findings and implications for action by the leadership of independent colleges and universities. CIC is grateful to the Spencer Foundation for its support of this series.

Article reviews in the *Digest of Recent Research* can be downloaded as a single document (PDF). For questions or comments about the *Digest*, please contact Lesley McBain, director of research projects, at [lmcbain@cic.nche.edu](mailto:lmcbain@cic.nche.edu).

### About the Editor

Matthew J. Mayhew is William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration with a focus on higher education and student affairs at the Ohio State University (OSU). He earned his BA from Wheaton College (IL); his MA from Brandeis University; and his PhD from the University of Michigan. Before coming to OSU, he served as associate professor at New York University and an administrator at Fisher College and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Mayhew's research examines college and its effects on students. To support this line of inquiry, he has been awarded over \$17 million in funding from sources including the U.S. Department of Education, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Merrifield Family Foundation. He is lead author of *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence That Higher Education Works* and has published over 70 peer-reviewed articles in top-tier journals in the field. He has served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*.

# Do High-Impact Practices Increase Graduation Rates?

Johnson, S. R., and F. K. Stage. 2018. “Academic Engagement and Student Success: Do High-Impact Practices Mean Higher Graduation Rates?” *Journal of Higher Education* 89 (5): 735–781.

## SUMMARY

This study explored the association between ten high-impact practices and graduation rates among students at four-year public colleges. Specifically, the authors examined the effect of the following “high-impact” practices on graduation rates: first-year seminars, core curricula, learning communities, writing courses, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning, internships, and senior capstone projects. These practices, often considered critical for student success, have rarely—if ever—been empirically studied using rigorous research designs that enable educators to make substantive claims about their effectiveness.

Extending this argument, the authors designed a study that merged survey data provided by academic officers at 101 institutions with those from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Academic officers chose from four options regarding institutional availability of each of the ten practices: required for all students, required for some students, optional for students, and not offered. The dependent variables for the study included four- and six-year graduation rates reported to IPEDS for the 2013–2014 academic year.

The authors constructed models to test these relationships. They accounted for the information provided by academic officers, a composite measure of high-impact practices on any given campus (that is, does the number of practices offered at any given institution matter?), institutional selectivity, Carnegie Classification, expenditures per student, proportion of students receiving federal financial aid, proportion of students receiving federal loans, and proportion of the student body identified as White.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The most surprising finding was that “8 of the 10 high-impact practices had no significant relationship with either four-year or six-year graduation rates” (p. 775). Only participation in first-year seminars and internships shared significant and negative relationships with graduation rates. These findings held across institutional selectivity, type, and all other institutional conditions included in this study. To explain these “puzzling” (p. 776) and counter-intuitive trends, the authors suggest that institutions may be using most of their resources for these programs to the detriment of spending on “further engagement or guidance practices later

in the student’s career” (p. 776) or that institutions have more “rigorous academic expectations, which may lead some students to delay graduation to later years” (p. 776).

In addition, the composite score of high-impact practice also failed to positively predict either four- or six-year graduation rates. This finding indicates that institutions that offer a high number of these practices are also not necessarily helping students complete their degrees in four or six years.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

Although this study focuses on public colleges, CIC members may extrapolate

many of the study’s findings to their own institutions. What constitutes a high-impact practice? How do we know when a practice is effective? For whom is it effective? Results from this study echo recent sentiments among higher education researchers that it is not the practice that matters, but the educator charged with enacting the practice that matters.

In addition, high-impact practices should be scrutinized to ensure that they effectively advance the institution’s mission and are designed and implemented by effective educators. Simply adding a practice to an institution’s menu for engaging students may be insufficient; CIC administrators should exercise caution in proceeding

with any practice, even those historically positioned as high-impact.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Sarah Randall Johnson is associate director of institutional research at Harvard Business School.

Frances King Stage is professor of higher education, leadership, and technology at New York University..

## **LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT**

Arum, R., and J. Roksa. 2011. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kuh, G. D., and C. G. Schneider. 2008. *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

# Admissions Office Diversity and Equitable Admissions Decisions

Bowman, N. A., and M. N. Bastedo. 2018. "What Role May Admissions Office Diversity and Practices Play in Equitable Decisions?" *Research in Higher Education* 59, Issue 4: 430–447.

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to explore equitable decision making by admissions officers who work at selective institutions. The authors approached the topic from a series of perspectives ranging from conversations about institutional prestige to understanding admissions as a holistic process, defined as "evaluating prospective students in the context of the educational, personal, and financial conditions experienced by the applicant" (p. 431). Their discussion of prestige was offered as a rationale for the study's importance, as the admissions officers recruited for this study were employed at selective colleges. The authors determined whether these officers followed a holistic admissions process by using a rigorous method that involved a survey collection and an in-person data collection effort. In the effort, officers were asked to simulate their admissions decision-making processes through a series of fictitious cases, which the authors describe:

"One applicant had strong academic credentials (in terms of high school grades, difficulty of coursework, and standardized test scores) and attended an upper-middle-class high school. Another applicant also attended an upper-middle-class high school, but his grades, coursework, and standardized test scores were all lower than those of the first applicant. A third applicant received good grades and took among the most difficult courses offered at the lower-SES [socioeconomic status] high school that he attended, but his courses were less advanced and his standardized test scores were lower than those of the most qualified applicant. The grades, coursework, and test scores were adjusted across selectivity tiers so that these hypothetical applicants could be reasonably competitive in institutions with very different admissions standards" (p. 434).

Through this complex approach to examining admissions decision-making practices at selective colleges and universities, the authors hoped to shed some light on the "black box" (p. 432) of access to these institutions, especially for students from historically marginalized socioeconomic groups. Through accompanying survey and analytic work, the authors also highlight the importance of understanding how the characteristics of an admissions officer inform the process that officer uses to make admissions decisions based on the presented simulated cases.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

A number of results are noteworthy. Many admissions officers indicated the importance of high school curricular rigor as an admissions determinant, especially those at top-tier institutions. Despite the push for holistic admission considerations that take distinctive family or educational circumstances into account, these officers also noted that academic criteria "almost solely" (p.

443) determined whether students received a full reading of their file and ultimately a positive admissions decision, with little to no consideration of the applicant's family or educational circumstances.

The number of files any given officer had to review also played a role in admissions. The authors note that "the number of admissions files read during busy weeks predicts lower admissions recommendations for all applicants" (p.

440). This load intensity is offered as a potential reason for participants not being able to execute a holistic admissions approach to each presented case as "the life of an admissions officer in high season is intense, with 2/3 of our respondents reading at least 100 files per week, in addition to other duties" (p. 443).

The authors also suggest that admissions officers at more competitive colleges and universities behave differently

from their peers at less competitive institutions. When compared with their peers at competitive colleges and universities, admissions officers at less competitive institutions were more likely to enroll most applicants and were less likely to write a paragraph explaining their admissions decisions.

Moreover, admissions officers who were alumni of the institution or who had more years of admissions experience treated cases differently than their counterparts. Working at one's alma mater and having more years of admissions experience served as a deterrent for admitting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Finally, positive admissions recommendations were more likely to be made by admissions officers who identified as women, people of color, and/or people whose parents had achieved lower levels of education. Extending the equity argument, the authors conclude that "admissions officers from historically underrepresented groups may be more inclined toward equity and social justice in the decision-making process" (p. 443).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CAMPUS LEADERS

What should CIC senior administrators expect from their admissions officers? This question underlies the many questions raised by the authors of this study. Given the number of applications—especially at competitive institutions—and the limited resources admissions officers often have for adopting a holistic approach to every applicant, is this type of review process practical? What alternate ways to maintain a commitment to holistic review might be considered? Careful consideration of admissions practices would be a first step toward concerns about equity and social justice.

CIC institutional leaders may want to consider the characteristics of admissions officers hired to do this important work. Findings from this study suggest that officers from historically underrepresented groups may be more likely to take a more holistic view of each applicant—a strong empirical note, as institutions

strive to increase the diversity of their student bodies.

Also, institutional leaders may need to examine the admissions recommendations of officers working at their alma mater, officers with more years of work experience, and officers with heavy file loads. These characteristics often lead officers to privilege applicants from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Turning to the selectivity of the institution, leaders may want to require all officers to draft a summative paragraph for each applicant—a practice more often associated with officers employed at competitive institutions. This step would help leaders better track the admissions decisions of each officer and could help improve the equitable treatment of all files, as written narratives often provide officers with greater opportunities to reflect on each applicant they review.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nicholas A. Bowman is professor of educational policy and leadership studies and director of the Center for Research on Undergraduate Education at the University of Iowa.

Michael N. Bastedo is professor and director, Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education (CSHPE), University of Michigan.

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# Importance of Reporting Instructions for Sexual Assault

Taylor, Z. W. 2018. “Unreadable and Underreported: Can College Students Comprehend How to Report Sexual Assault?” *Journal of College Student Development* 59 (2), 248–253.

## SUMMARY

As this study’s author indicates by citing statistics from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center’s 2015 report, more than 90 percent of all sexual assault victims on college campuses do not report the crime. Given these statistics and the national outcry concerning the #MeToo movement, this author takes a novel approach in researching why sexual assault remains critically underreported on college campuses. He uses readability measurements to examine whether college students actually understand the often complicated reporting instructions provided by institutions to help students report crimes related to sexual assault.

In this investigation of the reporting instructions for sexual assault and sexual violence at 100 four-year public and private institutions, he applied four empirically validated coding techniques to determine the readability of the reporting instructions. The 100 institutions were randomly selected from 2,386 institutions in the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The author then used two search phrases, “report sexual assault” or “report sexual violence,” to access reporting instructions for each of the 100 institutions. Once the instructions were located, he used a series of coding schemes to assess their readability. Readability indicators included the grade level of words used in the reporting instructions, number of words, number of sentences, use of complex words (namely, words containing three or more syllables), and use of compound words.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Based on this methodology, the author concluded that “college students of average reading comprehension ability likely cannot read instructions for reporting a sexual assault provided by 4-year, public and nonprofit private institutions” (p. 251). Specifically, the author reports that the average sexual assault reporting instructions were written at a third-year college reading level, with only 11 percent of all instructions written at levels readable for first-year college students. Readability challenges included both issues with semantics (word choice) and syntactic elements (sentence structure). The author points out that these results are especially problematic for students with reading disabilities and

students for whom English is a second language.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

Campus leaders are encouraged to do a thorough review of sexual assault policies to make sure that their language is accessible and understandable for all students, including those with reading disabilities or non-native fluency in English. Failure to do so—especially regarding sexual assault policies—may contribute to underreporting of sexual assaults on many campuses.

In his discussion of the results, the author suggests that student affairs professionals work closely with institutional legal counsel, as the latter are more likely

to compose institutional reporting guidelines for students. Despite the need for compliance with federal and state policies regarding sexual assault reporting, it remains critical that messaging to students can actually be understood. By bringing the readability of policy language to the forefront of this important issue, this study takes a small but important step toward empowering victims of sexual crime on college campuses.

Vetting policy-related language for students with students might also be an effective strategy for maximizing the reach and utility of institutional messaging. Adding faculty and students to the conversation might signal to the campus that it takes the resolve of the entire

campus to address the issues of sexual assault and its underreporting.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Zachary W. Taylor is a PhD student in higher education at the University of Texas at Austin.

## **LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT**

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# Effectiveness of Flipped Classroom Instruction in Mathematics for Liberal Arts Students

Carter, C. L., R. L. Carter, and A. H. Foss. 2018. “The Flipped Classroom in a Terminal Mathematics Course for Liberal Arts Students.” *AERA Open* 4 (1) 1–14.

## SUMMARY

This study evaluated the efficacy of a flipped classroom on the final exam scores of 632 students enrolled in different sections of a terminal general education college mathematics course. The authors adopted a quasi-experimental design, comparing the final exam scores in traditional versus flipped sections of the same math course. In addition to examining these differences in scores, the authors were able to test whether these pedagogical approaches had a different impact on students based on race.

The authors adopted the Flipped Learning Network’s 2014 definition of flipped learning as “a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic interaction learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter” (p. 1). Extending this definition and applying it within the context of the study environment, the authors noted that the flipped classrooms examined in their study used online videos of content-related lectures, rearranged seating to increase collaboration, and instructors who served as mentors to guide students through problem-solving activities.

Turning to research design, seven adjunct instructors, who collectively taught 13 sections, participated in the study. In the fall, these seven instructors taught the curriculum using traditional classroom methods. In the spring, these same instructors—after being trained in how to effectively design a flipped classroom environment—delivered the curriculum in flipped classrooms. A common final math exam was administered to students in both iterations of the course.

Of the 632 students enrolled in the fall and spring semesters, 91.1 percent and 92.7 percent were respectively exposed to the traditional and flipped classrooms. Most identified as White (41 percent), followed by African American/Black (11 percent), Hispanic/Latinx (11 percent), and other (4 percent). More than three in five (62 percent) identified as female. Most were first-year students (65 percent) and 22 percent were sophomores. Nearly eight in ten (79 percent) were receiving need-based financial aid. The average math SAT score—based on 519 students—was 440 out of 800.

The authors performed statistical modeling to assess the differences in final math exam scores between students who experienced the traditional versus the flipped classroom. Models included the course condition (flipped versus traditional), race, class standing, financial aid, gender, transfer status, math SAT score, and grade point average.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The authors report that students in the flipped sections scored 5.1 percent higher on average than those in the traditional sections, after controlling for model covariates. In other words, students in the flipped class were, on

average, more likely to receive a C+ on the final exam, while those in the traditional class were, on average, more likely to receive a C. These differences were statistically significant.

In addition, there was an interaction effect reported for pedagogy by race. This effect was driven by the differences

in exam scores among White and Black students. On average, the final math exam scores for Black students in the flipped classroom environment were 7.8 points higher than scores for their peers in traditional classes, after accounting for model covariates. Course condition

(flipped versus traditional) did not influence White student scores to the same degree, with final exam scores for White students in flipped classes only 1.0 points higher than scores for their White peers in traditional classes.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

Although the study is flawed by a number of limitations that the authors articulate, it remains an important contribution for CIC leaders as they consider innovative pedagogies and their influence on student performance in mathematics. Recently, CIC spent four years exploring the efficacy of flipped classrooms

(among other online modalities) for helping students succeed in humanities courses and found little differences between these pedagogical deliveries with more traditional ones. Perhaps, flipped classrooms are more effective in helping students learn math than subjects related to the humanities.

These questions are critical as leaders assess instructional resource allocation issues. Recent evidence suggests that the more resources institutions directly allocate toward student instruction, the more likely students are to make learning gains (Mayhew et al. 2016). That said, once resources are allocated to help an instructor—like the adjunct faculty members who participated in this

study—flip a classroom, that instructor may depart the institution, leaving the institution with little to show for its investment in educator training.

Of course, trade-offs like these are nothing new to CIC leaders. Perhaps the part of the study that might tip the balance involves the math score performance of the Black students in the flipped classroom compared to their counterparts in the more traditional classes. The more individualized attention students receive in the flipped environment may be one key component to helping them succeed, especially in a math context.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christina L. Carter has most recently taught mathematics at Buffalo State College.

Randolph L. Carter is professor emeritus of biostatistics at the University at Buffalo.

Alexander H. Foss is a senior statistician at Sandia National Laboratories.

## LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT

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Mayhew, M. J., A. N. Rockenbach, N. A. Bowman, T. A. Seifert, and G. C. Wolniak, with E. T. Pascarella and P. T. Terenzini. 2016. *How College Affects Students (Volume 3): 21st Century Evidence That Higher Education Works*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

# Exploring Food and Housing Insecurity Among Undergraduates

Broton, K. M., and S. Goldrick-Rab. 2018. “Going Without: An Exploration of Food and Housing Insecurity among Undergraduates.” *Educational Researcher* 47 (2): 121–133.

## SUMMARY

As college costs rise and the wealth of many American families remains stagnant, the hidden burdens of being a college student increase. For many students, these involve food and housing insecurities. The authors analyze data on this topic from four surveys, administered to more than 30,000 two- and four-year college students, in a time frame spanning 2016–2018. Although most students in the sample attended community colleges, the sample includes four-year college students from low- and moderate-income families in Wisconsin and undergraduates from all of Wisconsin’s 42 public two- and four-year institutions. Food and housing insecurities were assessed through responses to empirically validated surveys and a series of interviews. Respondents were asked questions such as whether they had gone a whole day without eating due to lack of money or whether they were homeless, including those in both sheltered (for example, living temporarily with friends or family) and unsheltered (living in cars or abandoned buildings) situations. The authors performed mostly descriptive analyses on the data to describe the prevalence of college food and housing insecurity and information on how students cope with these challenges.

The data presentation reviews the four surveys’ results as evidence for claims offered regarding students’ food and housing insecurities. The authors explain the nuances of results for each data collection effort and offer discussion points based on an overview of the four studies. The discussion of findings here is based on these points but focuses mostly on the four-year college students the authors included as part of their sample.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

“Despite variation in methodology and study samples, we found that many students are struggling with economic precarity such that they do not have the security or predictability of basic material welfare” (p. 128). With regard to food insecurity, more than half of the two- and four-year college students reported problems obtaining food that sometimes disrupted their eating patterns or forced them to reduce their food intake and go hungry.

Housing insecurity was more prevalent among two-year college students than their four-year peers. That said, the authors note that—among four-year students in their samples—“at least 1 in 10 and up to 1 in 5 indicated that they

were housing insecure” (p. 128). The authors expand this analysis by explaining that housing insecure students “most commonly report affordability challenges related to an inability to pay the rent and/or utilities” (p. 128). In addition, the authors said that 2 percent of the total four-year college student sample indicated that they were homeless or had been over the past year, with homelessness defined as “being formally or informally thrown out of the home; not having a place to sleep at night; or staying in abandoned buildings, cars, or other places not meant for human habitation.”

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

CIC members should be aware that their students may experience food and housing insecurities. Given the shame often associated with these experiences, campus leaders need to consider how to provide places where students can freely discuss problems and receive immediate help. As the authors note—citing Daugherty, Johnston, and Tsai (2016) and Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Hernandez (2017)—material hardship challenges are disruptive and have been documented to affect well-being as well as degree attainment.

Some institutions have made available small allocations of emergency funding as resources for faculty and staff members to help students with material

hardship. These monies should not be considered loans nor difficult to administer. At the very least, faculty and staff members should know where to turn to help students address these concerns.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Katherine M. Broton is assistant professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies and Sociology (by courtesy) at the University of Iowa.

Sara Goldrick-Rab is professor of higher education policy and sociology at Temple University.

## **LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT**

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Goldrick-Rab, S., K. Broton, and D. Hernandez. 2017. *Addressing Basic Needs Security in Higher Education: An Introduction to Three Evaluations of Supports for Food and Housing at Community Colleges*. Madison: Wisconsin HOPE Lab.

# Implications of Identity-Based Fundraising

Drezner, N. D. 2018. "Philanthropic Mirroring: Exploring Identity-Based Fundraising in Higher Education." *The Journal of Higher Education* 89 (3): 261–293.

## SUMMARY

As financial issues challenge college and university leadership, research on advancement and fundraising is becoming increasingly important. This study explores the relationship between fundraising and the social identity of the fundraiser. With data derived from the National Alumni Giving Experiment (NAGE), the author establishes correlations between the act of fundraising, the social identity of the fundraiser, the social identity of the students profiled in fundraising solicitations, and the amount of money donors give to the institution.

Adopting a framework that merges social identity theory with philanthropic giving, the author draws from a subfield he refers to as "identity-based fundraising (see Drezner & Huehls, 2014)" (p. 262) to suggest that donors' social identities play extremely important roles in their decisions to give and how much to give. Extending this argument, the author suggests social identity may be one of the most important factors in fundraising from not only the perspective of the person making the donation and the person asking for the donation, but in the ways institutions present and discuss students as stewards of the institutional message. With these perspectives in mind, the author develops what he refers to as the philanthropic mirroring framework, "in which the prospective donor sees a reflection of himself or herself in the profile of the recipient" (p. 267).

The author used an experiment (the NAGE) he designed to test this framework and two subsequent hypotheses: first, that "respondents sharing at least one marginalized identity with the student profiled in the solicitation letter will perceive the cause as more important and will be more likely to increase their gift than other respondents" (p. 268) and second, that "respondents sharing at least one privileged identity with the student profiled in the solicitation letter will perceive the cause as more important and will be more likely to increase their gift than other respondents" (p. 268). The 1,621 respondents who participated in NAGE had to have graduated from a four-year institution with an academic degree. The average age of respondents was 40.1 years; just under half identified as female (46.0 percent) and most identified as White (76.1 percent). They were randomly assigned fictitious solicitation letters from their alma mater, with versions of the letter varying across the gender, race/ethnicity (White/African American/Latinx), and name (for example, John/Juan, Mary/Maria) of the student.

Two outcome variables were considered for this study. The first measured the importance of the fundraising priority introduced in the letter, and the second assessed the likelihood of giving based on the student's presented story (for example, "Thinking about your last gift to your undergraduate college or university, would a solicitation highlighting this student's story lead you this year to give more, less, or the same as last year?" [p. 270]). Models were then constructed predicting these outcomes, with variables designed to measure students' profile characteristics, respondents' profile characteristics, and the interaction between them.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The first important result is that prior giving to an institution predicted likelihood of future giving. Just over one-third of respondents (33.5 percent) had been previous donors to their alma mater.

The second noteworthy finding was that the cause articulated in the letter was an important determinant of

potential alumni giving. Causes were articulated through four fictitious solicitation letters, which the author summarizes:

"The first version of the solicitation letter described an individual student who is academically high-achieving and to whom the institution has awarded a merit-based scholarship. The second letter described an individual student with a general financial

need as a result of the recent market downturn. The third version described an individual student with a financial need related to the student's first-generation status. The fourth letter described an individual student with a financial need related to a lack of parental support (parents stopped financial support after son/daughter disclosed their sexual orientation)." (pp. 269–270)

Just over half of the respondents (50.7 percent) reported that the cause articulated in the letter was either very or somewhat important to their giving considerations, while 30.0 percent indicated that the cause was unimportant. The remaining 19.2 percent were neutral concerning the importance of the cause to their likelihood of giving.

Another important finding tested the philanthropic mirroring framework. Respondents who shared at least one marginalized identity with, or mirrored, the student profiled in the solicitation letter assigned more importance to supporting the causes described in the letter and were significantly more likely to increase the size of their gift from their previous donation. The shared space of marginalization is what seemed to matter (e.g., Black alumni supporting female students); this was not just a story about

“supporting your own” (for instance, Black alumni supporting Black students) (p. 283).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS**

CIC leaders, especially chief development officers, should note the importance of social identities when soliciting donations from alumni and other philanthropists. Results from the study not only demonstrate the importance of a cause to the likelihood of giving, but how that cause is understood by prospective donors based on the gender, race, and name of the student profiled in the solicitation request. Alumni with at least one marginalized identity were more likely to consider the cause articulated in the letter important; they ultimately were more likely to donate more

money if the presented student possessed either the same or another marginalized identity.

Campus leaders should consider involving underrepresented students in institutional messaging for advancement efforts. Leaders should consider tailored messaging when soliciting donations from alumni with marginalized identities. Of course, to tailor messaging effectively, educators must understand how students from historically marginalized identities continue to make meaning of their college experiences, especially in light of the current political climate. They should routinely use smart assessment, including sound survey work, focus groups, interviews, and inclusive interpretive partnerships (perhaps involving a diverse taskforce to analyze and make recommendations based on data), to examine diversity climates.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Noah D. Drezner is associate professor of higher education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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# The Influence of Debt Letters on Student Borrowing Choices

Darolia, R., and C. Harper. 2018. "Information Use and Attention Deferment in College Student Loan Decisions: Evidence from a Debt Letter Experiment." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 40 (1): 129–150.

## SUMMARY

As the public outcry concerning college affordability increases, institutions are expanding their efforts to provide students with necessary information to make more informed college choices. One popular effort involves sending students a debt letter that articulates financial information in accessible ways. This study evaluated the influence of debt letters on students' borrowing choices.

Through an experimental design studying 9,802 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Missouri, the authors were able to determine if debt letters actually changed students' borrowing choices. They randomly assigned half of all non-graduating students who had borrowed in a prior year to two groups: the experimental groups where students received "individually tailored letters that included a summary of borrowing to date, an estimate of expected future monthly debt payments and data on the typical borrowing of their peers" (pp. 129–130) and the control group, where students received no additional information regarding their borrowing activity. The authors compared the two groups to determine whether the letter effectively changed students' borrowing behaviors.

To extend this experiment, the authors examined whether debt letters were more effective in informing borrowing decisions of first-generation students, Pell Grant recipients, and students with lower grade point averages as well as whether the information affected the borrowing decision based on students' academic major or class standing (for example, sophomores versus juniors). In addition, the authors created a variable to account for the intensity with which students borrowed: "(a) *Low* borrowing includes students with no loans in the prior year or prior year loan amounts of up to and including the subsidized loan amounts; (b) *Moderate* borrowing includes students with prior year loan amounts greater than the subsidized loan limit up to and including the total annual federal direct loan limit; and (c) *High* borrowing includes students with prior year loan amounts greater than the annual federal direct loan limit" (p. 137). The authors examined all of these variables for their effects on the relationship between debt letter receipt and borrowing choices.

In addition to this experimental approach, the authors also conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 students to explore themes related to the use of debt letters to inform decision making about borrowing.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Receiving a debt letter did not influence students' borrowing choices. In the authors' words, "We do not find evidence that the information letter affects the average amount that students borrowed" (p. 137). Turning to the additional analyses, debt letters had no significant effect on the borrowing choices of students based on any of the subgroup characteristics (namely, first-generation students, Pell Grant recipients, students with lower grade point averages, academic majors, class standing, or varying levels of borrowing

intensity). On a brighter side, the authors did find that receiving the debt letter appeared to motivate students from the treatment group to schedule a meeting with a financial aid officer: Students who received the debt letter were 2 percentage points more likely to seek out help from a financial aid officer. It appears that information alone—at least as delivered in a debt letter—is not enough of a motivator to change student borrowing choices.

The follow-up interviews provided some reasons why debt letters may have been ineffective. The authors found that students were either in denial about their

borrowing behavior (for example, "I don't have to worry about it until I leave, so I don't really, I don't really think [the letter] helps"), or depressed due to the information provided in the letter ("[the letter] just kind of depressed me, because of how much money I have taken out...maybe I should take out less, but I don't").

Other important insights emerged from the interviews as students explained their response to the debt letters. First, students explained that they did not understand borrowing, even when provided data regarding borrowing and its short- and long-term effects

on students' economic outlooks. Second, students often ignore communications from the institution since they are bombarded with so much information from the university at any given time.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS**

Several implications from this study are noteworthy. First, information alone—when delivered in the form of a debt letter—does not change borrowing behavior. This does not mean that infor-

mation about borrowing is not important; it simply indicates that using a debt letter to communicate this information may not be effective and, in some cases, may be doing more harm than good. So what works? How do campus leaders responsibly educate their students about borrowing?

Many of the authors' recommendations require more investment in financial aid offices, which the authors admit "could prove challenging for financially-restrained institutions" (p. 143). First, institutional leaders need to find a way to differentiate important messaging

since some students report that they cannot determine what correspondence is most important.

Second, institutions should require college students to take courses on financial health and literacy, where instructors teach specific information about borrowing and its effects on quality of life. Some CIC institutions have introduced innovative financial literacy programs (as illustrated in *Innovation and the Independent College: Examples from the Sector*) and may serve as model programs for these sorts of initiatives.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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## **LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT**

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# Measuring Students' Capacities for Innovation

Selznick, B. S., and M. J. Mayhew. 2018. "Measuring Undergraduates' Innovation Capacities." *Research in Higher Education* 59: 744–764.

## SUMMARY

Innovation has become a buzzword in higher education, so much so that millions of dollars and resources have been allocated toward centers for innovation, minors in innovation, and innovation alliances. Private colleges and universities have joined the chorus, with innovation often driving strategic planning conversations, pedagogical reconsiderations, and even student learning outcomes. Despite all of the attention innovation is receiving, it remains an ill-defined concept and as a result widely misunderstood. Millions of dollars have been donated for innovations, but very few institutions have adopted a rigorous approach to their assessment. The purpose of this study was to provide institutions with a theoretically grounded and empirically validated measure of one aspect of innovation, students' innovation capacities, defined by the authors as a set of attributes students can develop to better engage in all aspects of innovation.

Grounded in theoretical perspectives that include human ecology, entrepreneurship, and latent trait theory, the measure of innovation capacities purports to assess different dimensions of student development and how these dimensions come together to explain a student's innovation capacity. Based on Kegan's (1994) human development theory, the authors locate innovation capacities along three lines of development: cognitive (e.g., I frequently ask myself "what could I do to improve this situation?"), identity (e.g., I am confident that I can continue working on a problem until I have found a solution), and social (e.g., I am effective working as part of a group with people who have skill sets). In addition to these items, further grounded in entrepreneurship literature (see Shane 2003), the measure asks students if they know how to take an idea and roll it out to execution (e.g., I know how to develop a strategy to direct mine and others' efforts toward realizing new opportunities, such as developing an action plan). This measure maintains high reliability and validity even across institutional contexts.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

One of the most interesting findings from this study is that the measure is able to efficiently produce one innovation score for every student. Through a rigorous statistical process, the final measure of innovation capacities is efficient (only 42 items long) and easy for administrators to understand: Each student has one innovation score that assesses his or her own innovation capacity. That the overall score has such sound psychometric properties in terms of its reliability, validity, and distribution

makes the measure an attractive option for administrators seeking to efficiently measure the efficacy of innovation interventions on campus.

The second result worth noting is how the measure effectively assesses its constituent constructs, including motivation, proactivity, innovation self-concept, networking, persuasive communication, teamwork across difference, creative cognition, intention to innovate, and risk-taking/tolerance. These dimensions can be examined as outcomes in their own right, as many employers are seeking to hire graduates who possess

the type of knowledge, skills, and attitudes these constructs reflect.

Finally, the measure supports the idea that innovation can be taught and learned. As part of the validation process, the authors compared these innovation scores to personality items since the literature base is replete with examples of scholars who believe that innovation cannot be taught or learned but is a characteristic with which people are born or socialized into based on a family's history with innovation and entrepreneurship. The authors then argue that personality and innovation capacities are distinct, with the former holding

stable over the span of a person's life and the latter something that can be developed and learned.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS**

CIC member presidents who attended the 2018 CIC Presidents Institute know that its theme centered on innovation

and resilience. Plenary presenters often addressed innovations occurring in the world (for example, regarding artificial intelligence) and those designed to meet distinctive campus goals. Common to these efforts was the idea that innovation is important to manage in the information age. Successful management requires assessing whether innovations are working on college campuses.

This study provides a theoretically grounded and empirically validated measure of innovation capacities to assess students' ability to develop to better engage in all aspects of innovation. As one piece of the innovation puzzle, it offers educators a tool to determine whether their efforts to equip students for innovation are actually working.

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