



The Social Life of College Information

Relationships and Experiences as Tools for Enhancing
College Decision Making

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Introduction and summary

Choosing whether and where to go to college is one of the most significant decisions a person will make in his or her lifetime. The choice often entails a huge financial burden but it also holds the potential of significantly increased earnings over a lifetime and greater economic mobility. And these decisions are increasingly important as a federal policy issue since the investment of government resources in grant-based financial aid now surpasses \$33 billion annually and postsecondary credentials are becoming more necessary for a strong workforce and economic mobility.¹

Graduation rates that can range from as low as 8 percent to as high as 98 percent are a good indicator that there are vast differences in quality across postsecondary institutions. The Department of Education's concerns over loan default rates and graduates' ability to find gainful employment suggest that there are also great variations in the returns on investment for a postsecondary degree. There are differences in quality and value and there are quite simply a lot of different programs, credentials, and educational opportunities out there for students to choose among.

It is important for the sake of the individual, the economy, and the taxpayer to help students make good decisions about where to go and what to study. Students and their families need reliable information in order to make the most of the choices that arise on the path to a college credential—particularly about the cost of college, the availability of financial aid, programs of study, career paths, quality, and return on investment. This may sound simple but it has been a challenge to provide this information and to encourage students to use it.

Students and their families use very few sources of information in making their college choices despite all of the websites, books, and counseling services available.² Research shows that college-bound students typically consult college websites, teachers, and guidance counselors for information.³ Low-income students and working learners are the least likely to participate in a robust search for information about colleges.⁴

There are three main reasons why students and parents may not use information about cost, quality, or value in their college choices:

- Lack of access to information—students and families are not aware of the information sources available to them.
- The information that is available is not what students and parents seek when making college choices.
- Information is not presented in a way that is relevant to individual students' decisions.

Bridget Terry Long's report, "Grading Higher Education," outlines a plan to meet the first two challenges presented here by making the federal Department of Education a clearinghouse of data that is both useful and relevant to students' college decisions. This report builds upon Long's foundation to examine how policymakers can meet this third challenge.

The problem, as we see it, is that the information dissemination strategies employed by policymakers rely upon students and parents' desire to access information and take it into account in their college choices, but they do not help build the skills to understand how the information can be relevant to their decisions. A website such as the federal college information site College Navigator, for example, lists important information such as graduation rates and student loan default rates. But if students have not developed preferences as to what is an acceptable graduation rate, the information will not be important to their college choices.

The missing piece is that students and parents are learning to be good consumers of college even as they are making their decisions. Policymakers' information strategies must help students develop their preferences, not just give them data as though it can be plugged into some previously defined decision matrix.

We can help students learn about college and become equipped to use information in two main ways. First, we can encourage students to engage in relationships and social networks that pass along useful information and insights about college. Second, we can help students develop their preferences through glimpses into the college experience, such as dual enrollment programs or campus visits.

To support these conclusions, we draw upon research on the sociocultural factors that affect college choices and on the decision-making patterns in service consumption. The importance of social capital and habitus (deeply held values) in the

college choice process illustrates the powerful role that peers, family, and other individuals play in helping students understand college and develop preferences. Service sciences research shows that experience with the service itself is the best and most preferable source of information when purchasing a service like education, followed by accounts from others who have experience.

There are many ways to use the strength of relationships and experience to infuse the college choice process with useful information while helping individuals develop the capacity to seek other information. For instance, dual high school-college enrollment programs give students a chance to experience life in a college classroom. This is a chance to develop a deeper understanding of one's own preferences in terms of learning environment, campus type, and other facets of the college experience.

The federal government can play a role in ensuring that students and families have effective access to relevant, useful information about college. It can help students develop into better consumers of college by promoting learning about college that is incorporated into relationships and experiences. The following recommendations represent simple policy levers that would encourage experiential and relationship-based learning about college. These programs would help college-bound students and their families better define their preferences about college, which will in turn make them more equipped to make effective choices about where to attend.

- **Use Federal Work-Study program funds to create a college ambassadors network.** The Federal Work-Study program, managed by the Department of Education, pays low-income students for work done on college campuses, in nonprofits, and even for private-sector businesses as a way to help pay for college. The federal government could use these funds to help other students in the midst of the college choice process make more informed decisions by connecting them with college students from similar backgrounds who are current college students.
- **Create web-based support groups where parents and students can share experiences and information on college.** The White House should direct the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid office to invest a portion of its marketing and outreach funds to partner with state financial aid agencies to catalyze the creation of web-based forums that allow students and families, current college students, and guidance counselors to share information and experiences about the college choice and financial aid process.

- **Encourage more social entrepreneurship in relationship-based information and college choice.** The U.S. Department of Education should partner with the White House’s Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation and the Corporation for National and Community Service to find ways to incorporate college choice funding into the Social Innovation Fund—a program launched in February 2010 to invest in scalable, grassroots solutions to America’s most pressing challenges.
- **Encourage dual enrollment through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.** President Barack Obama’s blueprint for reform in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act includes a proposal for competitive grants to states to encourage accelerated learning opportunities. This grant program should be used to give more low-income students access to dual enrollment opportunities on community college and four-year college campuses.

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