



# The Social Life of College Information

Relationships and Experiences as Tools for Enhancing  
College Decision Making

---

Julie Margetta Morgan and Louis Soares December 2010

Center for American Progress



# The Social Life of College Information

Relationships and Experiences as Tools for Enhancing  
College Decision Making

---

Julie Margetta Morgan and Louis Soares    December 2010

# Contents

## **1 Introduction and summary**

## **5 Where are students getting information about college?**

5 Sources of college information

6 Federal efforts to give students information

## **9 Does information factor into college choice?**

## **12 The college information conundrum**

12 The role of social capital and habitus in the college search process

14 How consumer experience can inform research on higher education

## **16 Case studies in how experience and relationships can enhance college choice**

16 The National College Advising Corps

17 The Early College High School Initiative

18 ConnectEDU

21 Use Federal Work-Study program funds to create a college ambassadors network

## **21 Federal policy recommendations**

22 Create web-based support groups for parents and students to share information on college-going

22 Encourage more social entrepreneurship in relationship-based information and college choice

23 Encourage dual enrollment through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

## **24 Conclusion**

## **25 Endnotes**

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that college-bound students typically consult college websites, teachers, and guidance counselors for information.<sup>3</sup> Low-income students and working learners are the least likely to participate in a robust search for information about colleges.<sup>4</sup>

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.



# Where are students getting information about college?

Only about 55 percent of first-time, full-time bachelor's students in 2008 finished their postsecondary educational program within six years, and 238,000 students defaulted on their student loans. It is clear that we need to provide more and better information to parents and students to help them make better college choices—ones that are the best fit for their learning style, maximize value, and minimize cost. It is also clear that there are already plenty of sources of information out there about college but that they do not always provide students and their families with the information they need to make the best decisions about where to apply.

---

## Sources of college information

There is no shortage of information about college available to students. Amazon.com shows more than 26,000 results for college guide books. The most popular of these books include guides such as Fiske and Peterson's that showcases snapshots of colleges that include demographics, academic selectivity, and student-faculty ratio. Loren Pope's *Colleges that Change Lives* and *Looking Beyond the Ivy League* provide a more in-depth look at a handful of elite colleges.

The Internet also hosts a vast array of college information options. A Google search for "college information" turns up 868,000 results. The College Board, Kaplan, and Petersons all provide websites offering search tools that let students find basic information about colleges, often with the ability to look at side-by-side comparisons. *The New York Times* runs a series of blogs and columns about college choice in which parents, administrators, and counselors provide advice and insight into the college application process. And, of course, *U.S. News and World Report* offers its college rankings both online and in print.

There are also less trafficked sites such as the National Association for Independent Colleges and Universities' University and College Accountability Network or Mark Kantrowitz's financial aid resources, FinAid.org and FastWeb.



Add to this mix the thousands of college websites hosted by institutions themselves and it is readily apparent that information about colleges is abundant on the web—perhaps even too abundant.

Most high schools undertake college preparation programs that introduce students to the college search and application process. Guidance counselors may be available to answer questions and give advice. There is also a growing private college counseling industry that offers advice to parents and students on everything from college choice to financial considerations—for a price. According to the Independent Educational Consultants Association, more than 160,000 students work with an independent college counselor each year.<sup>5</sup> And nonprofit and for-profit colleges engage in outreach and marketing efforts that include radio, television, and print ads offering information about popular majors and certificate programs.

---

## Federal efforts to give students information

The federal government operates in the college information sphere through the Department of Education in two ways. First, it acts as a collector of data about colleges that for-profit and nonprofit entities can repackage in college guidebooks, websites, research, or other products. Second, it disseminates college information by hosting websites such as College Navigator and college.gov that repackage data and information about college-going for consumers. The 2008 amendments to the Higher Education Act increase the Department of Education’s responsibility in both of these areas by requiring that it collect more data from colleges and enhance its efforts at providing information to the public.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that Congress intended to provide families with “better” information about college but the closest it has come is simply providing more information.

The federal government’s primary tool for providing this information to the public is College Navigator—formerly College Opportunities Online Locator. College Navigator is an online database of college information that is operated by the National Center for Education Statistics. Congress mandates through the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Opportunity Act that College Navigator contain specific pieces of data about all colleges receiving financial assistance under Title IV of the HEA.

The data collection includes tuition and fees; average financial assistance received by full-time undergraduates; a statement of institutional mission; total number

of students who applied, were admitted, and enrolled; demographic information; student-faculty ratio; number of students who receive Pell Grants; graduation rate; student loan cohort default rate; and campus safety information. The National Center for Education Statistics houses College Navigator on its website. Users can refine College Navigator searches by geographical area, major, level of degree offered, or institutional type. College Navigator also offers the opportunity to compare institutional features side-by-side.

The HEOA also makes a few efforts to highlight the cost of education. The HEOA obliges the Department of Education to maintain “tuition watch lists” to inform the public of institutions with the highest tuition costs, as well as those whose tuition increased the most over a three-year period. HEOA also requires that the secretary of education develop a net-price calculator to post on college websites so that families can plug in data about their financial situation and get an estimate of the net cost of attendance at a particular institution. The secretary must also develop a multiyear tuition calculator that will allow users to estimate the amount of tuition one would pay to attend an institution in future years.

College Navigator has never been studied to ascertain its usefulness to students and families but some of its problems are readily apparent. The College Navigator site is not promoted or marketed to students so it is unlikely that they will learn of its existence. Research shows that students, to the extent that they access information on the Internet, rely upon college-specific websites or proprietary “catch-all” sites such as CollegeBoard.<sup>7</sup> And students that use federal websites for college information indicate that they use [fafsa.ed.gov](http://fafsa.ed.gov) to apply for federal student financial aid and learn about financial aid options.

College Navigator does not package its information in a way that is helpful to students—it offers complex definitions, no explanations, and no guidance. Each of these problems may boil down to one defining issue with College Navigator. When *The New York Times* asked students to review College Navigator in 2008, this quote summarized the site’s drawbacks: “It gives you exactly what you’re looking for, but that might not be what you’re looking for if you don’t know what you’re looking for.”<sup>8</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics is responsible for the database but the College Navigator’s purpose is not well-situated within NCE’s mission. NCE’s work centers on collecting data and making it available for policymakers and researchers. NCE does make data available to the general public but that is not its primary audience and we may not be able to expect it to change gears and provide college information in a format uniquely suited to college consumers.

Other federal college information sources include a series of websites related to college-going: college.gov, studentaid.ed.gov, and fafsa.ed.gov. These sites provide information about how and why a student should apply to college, as well as how to pay for it. The popularity of these sites is relatively unknown, as the research cited above shows that students do not mention college.gov and studentaid.ed.gov as major sources of information. This collection of websites also focuses on the “nuts and bolts” of college application but it overlooks the key question of where to apply.

A pattern emerges when looking across the print sources of college information. The majority offers statistics and data that assume that the reader has developed a set of preferences to “plug” into data points. But a college’s graduation rate is only useful if a student or parent has some idea of what graduation rate would be acceptable.

The current approach public policymakers and many other information providers take is essentially a hypodermic needle: The idea is to inject the right pieces of information into the college decision-making process. This approach is flawed because it requires individuals to have defined preferences based on that piece of information and it assumes that students and families seek objective information. This is not often the case. Students and their families do not always enter into the college-seeking process with a clear idea of what they want and need, and they generally want partial information from their peers, teachers, and counselors.

# Does information factor into college choice?

It may be surprising that with all of the time and money that is spent developing sources of college information, relatively few of them actually affect families' college choices. Research shows that students, particularly low- and middle-income students, use relatively few information sources in their college decision making.

The traditional way of looking at college information—the way that informs federal policy—is molded around the traditional-age college student who makes one choice and sticks with it. The research on information and college choice therefore centers on how individuals use information in the decision to choose a particular college. Studies of the use of information by college-bound students and their families look at both the factual knowledge that individuals have about college-going (“college knowledge”) and the sources of information that students and families tend to access.

Researchers Louis Tornatzky, Richard Cutler, and Jongho Lee from the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute focus, for example, on Latino parents' college knowledge. Their research gauged factual college knowledge through a “mini-test” and followed up by asking the participants about the sources and channels of information they use to learn about college. The mini-test focused on the basics of high school course selection, the SAT/ACT, and college costs and financial aid. The researchers found that 65 percent of respondents missed half of the questions and 19 percent missed seven or more of the eight items on the mini-test. They also found clear disparities in college knowledge across SES levels: 34 percent of low-SES parents missed seven or eight items whereas only 5.4 percent of high-SES parents missed as many. When asked about the sources from which they have learned the most about college, school counselors and teachers were the primary source, followed by family members, the child, or the child's friends. Colleges themselves also proved to be an important source of information about college characteristics and financial aid.<sup>9</sup>

The National Center for Education Statistics also conducted a study of the use of information that included focus groups of both traditional-age low-income

students and parents, and older students. The study looked at the sources parents and students used and the kind of information they sought during the college decision-making process. The results show that low-income and first-generation students are most interested in information about majors and programs of study, followed by cost and financial aid information. Parents are also most interested in these two areas, although they prioritize them in the opposite order. It also found that students often believe they cannot find the information they need about cost and financial aid.<sup>10</sup>

A few studies gauge the effectiveness of college information by assessing how well parents and students are able to estimate the cost of college and relating these estimates to factors such as race, family income, and reported knowledge of college costs. Laura Horn, Xianglei Chen, and Chris Chapman's report for the National Center for Education Statistics, for example, shows that only 52 percent of students in the 11th and 12th grades report having information about college cost, and the likelihood of having knowledge increases with both household income and parents' level of education. The study also found that students who talk to their parents, counselor, or teacher about college financial aid are more likely to report that they have knowledge of college costs.

These studies find that knowledge of college costs tends to increase with household income and parents' level of education. They also show that students and parents tend to significantly overestimate the cost of college.<sup>11</sup> The average tuition at public, four-year universities for in-state students was \$3,247 in 1998-99, but the students' average estimate was \$5,366. Another study showed that 72 percent of respondents claimed that they knew "a lot" or "a good amount" about college costs, but they overestimated the price of a four-year public institution by an average of 53 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Other research hones in on the sources of information that college-bound students and their families seek. A study of Gates Millennium Scholars in 2006 found that students most commonly received information about college from guidance counselors or through Internet searches. A study by college choice researchers Patricia McDonough and Shannon Calderone confirm that high school counselors are a primary source of information, though other research tends to show that counselors are less likely to advise on key areas of the college choice process, such as affordability and cost.<sup>13</sup> The Internet is rising in popularity as a source of information but some research shows that low-income students use very limited resources on the Internet, primarily individual college websites and the FAFSA site.<sup>14</sup>

Research on information use often overlooks older students, working learners, and students returning to education after dropping out. But the existing research shows that these students tend to rely less on other people in decision making, exhibiting a higher degree of autonomy. This also means that they are less likely to seek information, although if they do, they tend to seek information about convenience, cost, and the programs of study available at colleges.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that students and families do not use much information in making their college decisions does not seem to be particularly troubling from a public policy perspective. The solution could simply be to put out more sources of information. What makes it more difficult is the fact that students and their families are generally satisfied with the amount of information they receive, little though it may be.<sup>16</sup> If parents and students believe that their questions have been answered, then the public policy challenge here is getting them to ask more questions.<sup>17</sup>

These studies show that use of information varies by income level, with low- and lower-middle-income students being more likely to use few sources. It also shows that the school counselor and teachers are the most common sources of information about college for students and their families, and that federal sources or other comprehensive websites are lower on the list.

# The college information conundrum

Students and parents need information to help them make decisions about college, and the government and others provide plenty of it, yet very little of it seems to be used. Research on the role of sociocultural factors in the college search process and the way consumers make decisions among service providers supports the notion that students and families are greatly influenced by their relationships with others and their own experiences when it comes to getting information about college.

---

## The role of social capital and habitus in the college search process

Traditional models of college choice conceive of college access as composed of three distinct stages: predisposition, search, and choice. A student in this linear progression develops a predisposition to attend college in middle school or early in the high school years, engages in a search for college options in the junior and senior years of high school, and finally chooses a college at the end of the senior year of high school. One single college choice is made with years of buildup.

The tendency to view the college choice as a single event simply does not fit the reality of a majority of students today. It does not represent the experiences of low-income students, many of whom may develop the aspiration to attend college almost simultaneously with making a decision as to where to attend.<sup>18</sup> And there are many paths toward a college choice for the growing population of working learners who pursue education in fits and starts, as well as the nearly 60 percent of college students who transfer at least once in their college career.<sup>19</sup> There is at least one decision to attend a particular college, coupled with the choice and perhaps change of major and the choice to persist or transfer.

Some research on college choice remains applicable to all students. The college choice can be understood as a weighing of the costs of attending college against the benefits that one expects to receive from college. Costs include the monetary ones but also others such as opportunity costs and the missed opportunity to earn



a wage. The benefits of college can be the direct return on investment or other less tangible benefits such as societal status. A student will choose to attend a college if the benefits of attending college or a particular college outweigh the costs.

This human capital model represents a much simplified version of what actually happens when a student chooses a college. In reality, students do not have access to complete information on either the costs or the benefits of attending. And we know that societal and cultural factors influence the values and preferences that students bring to the college choice.

The closely related concepts of social capital and habitus help to explain the complicated sociological factors that affect rational decisions about college.<sup>20</sup> Habitus is the set of internalized, deeply held beliefs, outlooks, or experiences about the world that one acquires from one's immediate environment. UCLA Professor Patricia McDonough sums up the concept of habitus rather simply, saying that a student's attitudes and understandings of college will be based upon observing what is considered "good" or appropriate by the people surrounding her or him. These internalized beliefs and perceptions shape the way a student or parent understands the value of college, its cost, and the information he or she receives about college.<sup>21</sup> Habitus may affect a low income student's ability or willingness to access information about college at all. It may also affect the student's expectations about who will pay for college or a family's willingness to borrow money to finance a postsecondary degree.<sup>22</sup>

The term "social capital" refers to the value of the social networks and connections that exist among individuals. The value of social networks depends upon a particular situation. University of Southern California Professor William Tierney points out that strong connections to the Mafia may be advantageous in some contexts, for example, but not particularly helpful in others. Social networks can similarly constrain or enhance one's options in college choice.<sup>23</sup>

Many researchers have identified lack of social capital as a barrier to college access. Many low-income students lack the social connections, motivation, savvy, or confidence that are part of higher-income families' social and cultural capital and associated with greater college enrollment rates.<sup>24</sup> Social connections can be an important source of information for families, as research shows that word-of-mouth information about college cost, quality, and application procedures can feature prominently in college decision making.<sup>25</sup>

A student's habitus and social capital may affect the use of information but sociological research reveals some ways to confront this. The first is to expose a person to new experiences. Habitus can be altered by experiences that raise one's consciousness about the beliefs or attitudes that were embedded in the old habitus. Low-income students' attitudes toward college, receptivity to information, and capacity to process and apply information may change if they engage in experiential learning about college such as college visits or dual enrollment classes. The second way to encourage better use of information is to infuse students' and families' social networks with people who are knowledgeable about college. Connecting families to experts such as counselors, as well as to other students and families who share in the college choice experience, ensures that students have the social capital that would help them find reliable, quality information about college.

---

### How consumer experience can inform research on higher education

Conclusions drawn by higher education researchers about the college choice process are consistent with studies regarding consumer decision making. Marketing and consumer research show that consumers tend to use common patterns to navigate a choice among brands.

A buyer will first narrow the set of all possible options to a smaller "evoked set" of alternatives. This is done based upon categories within a product set (e.g., decaffeinated beverages) or by some other factor (e.g., colleges within driving distance of my home). An inexperienced buyer must develop a set of preferences or mediators that help make distinctions among brands. The buyer does this by gathering information about the product from a variety of sources and possibly past experience with a similar product. The process of information collection becomes less active, less complex, and less central to the decision as the consumer makes subsequent purchases of the same or similar products.<sup>26</sup> In other words, buyers learn, and as they learn, develop shorthand for making purchasing decisions.

Postsecondary education is a service, not a good. It therefore shares the characteristics of other services: intangibility, inseparability of product and consumption, heterogeneity, and perishability.<sup>27</sup> The educational services a college offers are intangible, so a prospective student cannot feel or observe them prior to purchase as they might touch, taste, or see a durable good. The inseparability of production and consumption means that a service like a college course is sold before it is either produced or consumed. The consumer of a service is also intimately

involved in the service's production. This means that there can be considerable heterogeneity in both the process and the outcome of service production.

Marketing theory views information as a way to reduce the financial, social, and time and convenience losses that are inherent in a purchase decision. In the case of a tangible good produced prior to purchase, a consumer can obtain information by going into a store and testing out the product or by talking to people who have purchased the product. Businesses that sell goods help consumers make purchase decisions by offering the opportunity to gather information and reduce risk. Car dealerships offer the "test drive," while stores such as Best Buy or Apple set out rows of televisions and computers so that potential purchasers can learn more about the products. Since durable goods remain the same no matter who purchases them, objective information can be found in reviews such as Consumer Reports.

Obtaining information about services is more difficult. It is not as easy to test drive a service and it is difficult to obtain objective information about its contents since the service is co-produced by the seller and purchaser after the sale. Yet the risk involved in purchase is very high for high-ticket services such as a college education. The best form of information about a service is the ability to draw upon previous experience with the service, to test drive.<sup>28</sup> Research shows that, absent experiential knowledge, consumers will depend heavily on the influence of person-to-person communication.<sup>29</sup>

There are different kinds of information within the person-to-person category. Information can come from a person who is an advocate of the product or a person who is neutral on the subject. A related categorization classifies information as consumer-dominated, marketer-dominated, or neutral.<sup>30</sup> Consumers prefer word-of-mouth information to consumer-dominated channels when decisions have a greater perceived risk.<sup>31</sup> This is confirmed by the 2009 Global Online Consumer Survey's conclusion that recommendations from people a consumer knows are the most trusted sources of information in decision making, followed by consumer opinions that are posted online.<sup>32</sup>

Marketing researchers recognize that these distinct characteristics of services mean that consumers will seek different information than they might when purchasing a tangible good. Policymakers should do the same. We must provide students and their families with experiential learning about college as well as access to others who are willing to discuss their experiences.

# Case studies in how experience and relationships can enhance college choice

It is clear from the research on consumer decision making, social capital, and habitus that people learn about college in many different ways. Public policy focuses on the most obvious way: reading data or information and incorporating it into decision making. The problem with this approach is that its success relies on the individual's desire to access the information, and much of the information that is published requires students and parents to have defined preferences about college. The research on college choice and consumer decision making shows that students often prefer to get information from people, not websites, and their preferences are typically defined through experience with a product.

A better approach would focus on the other ways consumers learn about products or services—through experience and relationships. By experiencing college for themselves, students gain insight into their own preferences on attributes such as course size, learning style, program, and living arrangements, in addition to gaining specific information about the particular institution. Students look to people in their lives who have experience with college to supplement this experiential learning. And we can turn the people in students' lives into more than mere conduits of information by ensuring that students have relationships with peers, counselors, or other individuals who can incorporate useful information about college into their advice.

The following case studies illustrate the potential for experiential learning and relational information sharing.

---

## The National College Advising Corps

When first-generation, minority, and low-income students consider applying to college, they need information about everything from the application process to how to select a college and how to pay for it. What Executive Director of the

National College Advising Corps Nicole Hurd realized was that the delivery of the information matters as much as its content. Based on research showing the influence of peers on college access, Dr. Hurd surmised that a young college graduate could serve as a counselor to students while also identifying as a peer.

High school students respond to information and encouragement from recent college graduates to whom they can relate. “When a kid walks into my office and hears a 22-year-old who just finished college saying: ‘You do it,’ then it has a big impact. No offense, but no 40-year-old guidance counselor in the world has that kind of pull with these kids,” explained Kimberly Morris, a former NCAC advisor.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Hurd’s idea for a college advising corps began from the simple concept that underprivileged students would benefit from guidance delivered by recent college graduates. She founded the College Guide Program at the University of Virginia with funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and eventually expanded the program’s scope nationally, relocating its headquarters to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. NCAC is loosely modeled on other volunteer service programs such as Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps.

NCAC partners with colleges to create state-based college advising programs. Each partner college employs and trains recent college graduates to serve as advisors. The colleges identify local high schools with high populations of low-income and minority students and place advisers in these high schools.

The college advisers work alongside high school personnel for one to two years to help students with every aspect of the path to college. NCAC advisers help students search for a college, complete applications and financial aid forms, and take the steps necessary for enrollment.

NCAC today employs 179 advisors, serving 65,000 students in 14 states. NCAC is currently reviewing the success of its program but the early results are promising. A review of North Carolina high schools showed that rural colleges participating in NCAC programs outperformed comparison schools. And high school students were about 7 percent more likely to attend a four-year college after participating in NCAC.

---

## The Early College High School Initiative

The Early College High School Initiative was founded in 2002 on the principle that all high school students can succeed in college if given a chance. The initiative is a “radical intervention” aimed at increasing the number of low-income students who finish postsecondary credentials. ECHSI partnered with nonprofit organizations and colleges to redesign more than 200 schools to offer early college high school services with the support of philanthropic foundations.

ECHSI schools serve low-income youth, first-generation college goers, and other underrepresented groups by offering the opportunity to simultaneously pursue a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit. Students take college courses offered either on-site at the high school or, more often, on college campuses.

One major purpose of ECHSI is to give students a leg up on completing a two- or four-year credential when they leave high school. Another less obvious but equally important goal is to demystify the college experience by giving students meaningful exposure to college. ECHSI essentially provides experiential learning about college.

The ECHSI environment supports students in making the most of their experiences in college courses. Students participate in courses on how to succeed in college, and visit colleges before they enroll in college-level coursework. The high school students are also generally involved in student orientation on the college campus.

The initial results of the ECHSI programs have been very positive. The total enrollment at all ECHSI schools in 2008–2009 was 41,972. The schools boasted higher college-going rates than other high school graduates, with a higher proportion enrolling in four-year colleges.

---

## ConnectEDU

The NCAC and ACHSI case studies present promising methods for using relationships and experience to help students learn about college but each presents challenges when it comes to scalability. The interpersonal touch required in each presents a challenge for expansion. Effective use of technology could be a key to success when considering large-scale efforts to facilitate relational learning for college-bound students. This case study considers how one company is experimenting with a technology-enabled platform to allow students to explore college information while also staying connected to their high school counselors.

The allure of a product like ConnectEDU is not just the fact that it connects the student with the counselor. It is also that their connection is infused with data—data about the student’s college search (for the counselor) and data about colleges (for both counselor and student). This data-driven approach enhances the relationship between student and counselor so that the counselor may better tailor his or her approach to the individual student, making more efficient use of the limited time they have together.

One of the primary obstacles to using experiential and relational techniques to enhance students’ and families’ ability to make informed decisions is the scalability of person-to-person programs. ConnectEDU takes a step toward addressing this problem with its web-based platform for college access. ConnectEDU’s software supports the relationships among guidance counselors, students, and college officials by enriching those connections with data about college quality and student performance.

The primary premise behind ConnectEDU’s product is that schools hold data that can inform students’ choices about college-going. ConnectEDU connects the data with interactive course planning, career exploration, and college search features to enrich the student experience. It also connects student-level information to the guidance counselor and college official portals so that these individuals can give better advice to students.

For instance, a student may log onto ConnectEDU to explore college options. The website offers college search tools that allow a student to find institutions based on criteria such as geography and program of study. ConnectEDU also links this search to data about the student’s GPA, test scores, and course history to help the student gauge whether the college is a good fit.

The student’s search and career exploration activities, as well as his or her college application progress, are linked to the guidance counselor portal so that the student’s guidance counselor can comment (either electronically or in person) on the student’s progress. This means that communication between student and counselor is more informed and more focused on the student’s goals and needs.

The community aspects of ConnectEDU provide “purpose networks” in which students can communicate directly with college admissions officials if they choose. The students can create profiles of themselves that include data pulled from school records to inform their interactions with college representatives.



There are many ways outside of these case studies to provide experiential and relational information to students on a large or small scale. Campus visits, for example, are experiential in nature. So are online courses that offer college-level learning. Relationship-based learning can arise in many different forms. High schools can facilitate conversations between high school students and current college students, or between the parents of high school students and the parents of college students.

More high-tech versions of relationship approaches might entail forums where students or parents can share their experiences, questions, or perceptions about college, in a format much like [CollegeConfidential.com](http://CollegeConfidential.com), a web-based forum in which students can comment on their college experience. One might also develop a site that allows users to rate colleges on various attributes or provide overall ratings of alumni satisfaction.

# Federal policy recommendations

Public policy levers are certainly more straightforward when it comes to collecting data or creating a website to house college information. But there are several ways in which the federal government can play an important role in ensuring that students and parents learn about college and, in the process, develop a greater capacity to use the data provided on sites such as College Navigator.

---

## 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. Making this connection would provide college information in the context of a more experienced peer.

The Education Department should set aside 15 percent of Federal Work-Study funds for low-income students who are willing to be trained and work as college ambassadors. These individuals would receive training on: how to coach students and families to better college consumers; how to explain available financial assistance; and how to blend in their own unique perspectives on getting into and succeeding in college.

These college ambassadors would be assigned to local high schools that serve low-income students over the course of a college year. They would facilitate discussions with groups of students and parents that will build the social capital and experiential knowledge that will help them become better consumers.

---

## Create web-based support groups for parents and students to share information on college-going

The U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid office, whose mission is to ensure that all eligible individuals benefit from student aid, has recently created the position of chief customer experience officer to be a champion for students and their families within the agency.

The chief customer experience officer should be directed to invest a portion of the department's 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.

State financial aid agencies, with their knowledge of student needs and local high school interests, can identify likely candidate schools whose college choice makers could benefit from a social media platform on which to discuss important issues.

A small grant program, with a match by the state agency, could facilitate the development of the social media platform. The FSA's Customer Experience Office could monitor the program to determine which interactions and groups of individuals are having the most affect on students' college choices.

---

## 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.

The federal government could use Social Innovation Fund resources to catalyze the development of new college choice support models similar to the National College Advisory Corps mentioned above, with an eye toward scalability. These types of social innovations lend themselves to the development of relationship and experience based approaches to college information and choice.

---

## Encourage dual enrollment through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

President 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.

The grants should require that dual enrollment opportunities incorporate opportunities to learn college success strategies. Students in such programs should both experience college-level learning and gain skills that will prepare them for future postsecondary endeavors.

# Conclusion

Students, families, and taxpayers invest billions of dollars in college every year. In order to ensure that this money is invested wisely, we must acknowledge not only the need for better information, but also how college consumers learn about college and form preferences that lead to their choices.

The available literature suggests that college consumers learn through relationships and experience. The recommendations in this report provide the federal government with guidance for how to begin to build a robust set of programs that will help policymakers provide students and their families with experiential learning about college as well as access to others who are willing to discuss their experiences. These resources will help create better college choice makers, not just better consumers of college information.

# Endnotes

- 1 State Higher Education Executive Officers, "State Higher Education Finance, FY 2009" (2010), available at [http://www.shеео.org/finance/shef\\_fy09.pdf](http://www.shеео.org/finance/shef_fy09.pdf); Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2011, available at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy11/index.html>.
- 2 Eric Grodsky and Melanie T. Jones, "Real and imagined barriers to college entry: Perceptions of cost," *Social Science Research* 36 (2) (2007): 745–766; Laura J. Horn, Xianglei Chen, and Chris Chapman, "Getting Ready to Pay for College: What Students and Their Parents Know About the Cost of College Tuition and What They Are Doing to Find Out" (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003030.pdf>; National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, "Deciding on Postsecondary Education: Final Report" (2007), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008850.pdf>; Gary Orfield and Faith G. Paul, "High Hopes, Long Odds: A Major Report on Hoosier Teens and the American Dream" (Indianapolis: Indiana Youth Institute, 1994); Kristan M. Venegas, "Low-Income Urban High School Students' Use of the Internet to Access Financial Aid," *Journal of Student Financial Aid* 36 (3) (2006): 4–15.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 NPEC, "Deciding on Postsecondary Education."
- 5 Independent Educational Consultants Association, "National Study Shows Dramatic Increase in Hiring Private College Counselors," Press release, October 20, 2009, available at [http://www.iecaonline.com/PDF/IECA\\_News-New-Study-on-Educational-Consultants.pdf](http://www.iecaonline.com/PDF/IECA_News-New-Study-on-Educational-Consultants.pdf).
- 6 Higher Education Opportunity Act, Pub. L. No. 110-315 (2008).
- 7 Venegas, "Low-Income Urban High School Students' Use of the Internet to Access Financial Aid"; Julie Margetta Morgan, "The role of financial information in college decision making: implications for federal higher education policy," Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 2010.
- 8 Samantha Stainburn, "The College Info Fest," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/education/edlife/blackbd-chart.html>
- 9 Louis G. Tornatzky, Richard Cutler, and Jongho Lee, "College Knowledge: What Latino Parents Need to Know and Why They Don't Know It" (Claremont, CA: Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2002).
- 10 NPEC, "Deciding on Postsecondary Education."
- 11 Grodsky and Jones, "Real and imagined barriers to college entry"; Horn, Chen, and Chapman, "Getting Ready to Pay for College."
- 12 Stanley O. Ikenberry and Terry W. Hartle, "Taking Stock: How Americans Judge Quality, Affordability, and Leadership at U.S. Colleges and Universities" (Washington: American Council on Education, 2000).
- 13 Patricia M. McDonough and Shannon Calderone, "The Meaning of Money: Perceptual Differences Between College Counselors and Low-Income Families About College Costs and Financial Aid," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (12) (2006): 1703–1718; Patricia M. McDonough, "Counseling and College Counseling in America's High Schools" (Alexandria, VA: National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2005), available at <http://www.inpathways.net/McDonough%20Report.pdf>.
- 14 Tait Jeffrey Martin, "Information processing and college choice: An examination of recruitment information on higher education Web sites using the heuristic-systematic model," Ph.D. dissertation, The Florida State University, 2006; Venegas, "Low-Income Urban High School Students' Use of the Internet to Access Financial Aid."
- 15 Trudy H. Bers and Kerry Smith, "The college choice and the nontraditional student," *The Community College Review* 15 (1) (1987): 39–45; Greg M. Broekemier, "A comparison of two-year and four-year adult students: Motivations to attend college and the importance of choice criteria," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 12 (1) (2002): 31–48.
- 16 Morgan, "The role of financial information in college decision making"; Orfield and Paul, "High Hopes, Long Odds."
- 17 Bridget Terry Long, "Grading Higher Education" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010).
- 18 Broekemier, "A comparison of two-year and four-year adult students"; Frankie Santos Laanan, "Degree aspirations of two-year college students," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 27 (6) (2003): 495–518.
- 19 Louis Soares and Christopher Mazzeo, "College-Ready Students, Student-Ready Colleges" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2008).
- 20 Laura W. Perna, "Studying college choice: A proposed conceptual model." In J.C. Smart, ed., *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, Volume XXI* (New York: Springer, 2006).
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 William G. Tierney, Kristan M. Venegas, and Mari Luna De La Rosa, "Financial aid and access to college: The public policy challenges," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (12) (2006): 1601–1603.
- 24 Amaury Nora, "The role of habitus and cultural capital in choosing a college, transitioning from high school to higher education, and persisting in college among minority and nonminority students," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 3 (2) (2004): 180–208; Stephen B. Plank and Will J. Jordan, "Effects of information, guidance, and actions on postsecondary destinations: A study of talent loss," *American Educational Research Journal* 38 (4) (2001): 947–979; Diane Reay, Miriam E. David, and Stephen Ball, *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education* (Sterling, VA: Trentham Books Limited, 2005).
- 25 Morgan, "The role of financial information in college decision making."
- 26 John A. Howard and N. Jagdish Sheth, *Theory of Buyer Behavior* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1969).
- 27 Valarie A. Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry, "Problems and Strategies in Services Marketing," *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 49 (2) (1985): 33–46.
- 28 Keith B. Murray, "A test of services marketing theory: Consumer information acquisition activities," *Journal of Marketing*, 55 (1) (1991): 10–25.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Alan R. Andreasen, "Attitudes and customer behavior: A decision model." In Harold H. Kassarian and Thomas S. Robertson, eds., *Perspectives in Consumer Behavior* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1981); Donald F. Cox, "Risk taking and information handling in consumer behavior." In Donald F. Cox, ed., *Risk Taking and Information Handling in Consumer Behavior*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1967).

31 Kaushik Mitra, Michelle C. Reiss, and Louis M. Capella, "An examination of perceived risk, information search and behavioral intentions in search, experience and credence services," *Journal of Services Marketing* 13 (3) (1999): 208–228.

32 "Global Advertising: Consumers Trust Real Friends and Virtual Strangers the Most," Nielsen Wire, July 7, 2009, available at <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/global-advertising-consumers-trust-real-friends-and-virtual-strangers-the-most/>.

33 "The Power of Personal Interaction," *Lumina Foundation Focus*, Fall 2007, available at [http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/focus\\_archive/fall\\_2007/college\\_guides.html](http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/focus_archive/fall_2007/college_guides.html).



---

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

---

