

GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS MOVING INTO POSTSECONDARY

Sade Bonilla | University of Massachusetts Amherst
Celeste K. Carruthers | University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dominique J. Baker | Southern Methodist University

Brief No. 3

This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. [Click here](#) to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can research inform student transitions from high school to college and career, given the financial and health uncertainties that students – particularly those who are marginalized and traditionally underserved – are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

KEY INSIGHTS

Breaking Down the Issue

- Recent recessions have increased existing employment gaps between workers with and without a college degree.
- Research generally shows that students are better off attending college versus not and better off attending a more selective bachelor's degree-granting institution.
- Both college-bound and career-bound students are at risk of losing momentum in 2020-2021 and transitioning to a less secure postsecondary pathway.

Strategies to Consider

- Student trajectories can shift when students are made aware of institutional discounts, grants, and scholarships, particularly those offered by more selective universities.
- Students often benefit from a better understanding of their chances of admission to institutions with the best track records of bachelor's degree completion.
- Student coursework and School Profiles can communicate college readiness and how COVID-19 played out at individual schools.
- Students moving from high school straight to careers may benefit from advanced career and technical education (CTE) in addition to employer and postsecondary partnerships.

Strategies to Avoid

- Reducing access to effective counselors will limit informed course selection and hinder college enrollment, which is likely to increase inequality in postsecondary outcomes.
- The Class of 2020 may have graduated, but they should not be forgotten. All students, and especially those who delay college enrollment, will likely benefit from proactive advising and support from their K-12 schools and districts.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Recent recessions have increased employment gaps between workers with and without a college degree.

- **Workers without a college education tend to have higher unemployment rates, even more so during recessions. During the 2007-2009 recession, unemployment gaps widened considerably and have yet to close.**
 - U.S. employment recovered slowly after the 1991, 2001, and 2007-2009 recessions. Recessions cause employers to adopt new technologies, which hurts workers with less education and less experience.
- **Unemployment rates were higher for Black and Latinx workers prior to the COVID-19 recession, and as of May 2020, about one in six Black and Latinx workers were unemployed, versus one in eight White workers.**
 - In addition to disparate economic impacts, COVID-19 itself is having more pronounced effects on communities of color, who are disproportionately more likely to become infected or die from the disease.

Research generally shows that students are better off attending college versus not and better off attending a more selective bachelor's degree-granting institution.

- **On average, workers with a college education earn more and are less likely to be unemployed than workers with a high school diploma.**
 - Although results differ across contexts, research finds that each year of college typically raises earnings by at least 9%. There are other benefits of a college education as well, such as better health, increased civic participation, more stable marriages, and a greater sense of accomplishment.
 - The benefits of college are not limited to high-achieving students, or to the most elite colleges. Students whose high school GPA just barely qualified them for admission at a moderately selective four-year university in Florida had 22% higher earnings eight to 14 years after high school than students who had slightly lower GPAs. Importantly, the income gains were largest for students from lower-income families. Evidence from Georgia shows a similar 20% increase in earnings for students whose SAT score just qualified them for admission to public four-year universities.
- **Community colleges can be a more affordable option for some students, but those savings come with risks.**
 - For students choosing between a community college and no college at all, they might earn 22% more in their careers if they complete a degree at a two-year college. But if students are deciding where to enroll in college, they will likely earn more later in life if they start at a four-year university rather than a community college, and research has found that the benefits outweigh savings from lower tuition at two-year colleges. Universities have more resources and streamline the process of obtaining a bachelor's degree.
 - Community college enrollees who ultimately want a bachelor's degree will have to navigate complicated transfer processes that lower the likelihood of degree receipt. When students transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution, some of their course credits may not move with them, lengthening time to degree.
 - During the Great Recession, community colleges absorbed half of the increase in college enrollment. Community colleges are located throughout the country and are lower-cost than four-year schools. Despite their lower cost, students and their families face significant challenges affording tuition and fees and basic living expenses given cost increases and stagnation in federal Pell Grants.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Student trajectories can shift when students are made aware of institutional discounts, grants, and scholarships, particularly those offered by more selective universities.

■ **Students frequently need assistance with processes for obtaining the need-based financial aid for which they are eligible.**

- Students and their families can request a [Professional Judgment adjustment](#) to their financial aid package based on documented changes in their financial circumstances like job loss. This [recalculates](#) the students' expected family contribution (EFC) and can result in increased eligibility for federal grants, state and institutional aid, work-study, and loans. There are [free online resources](#) that can help students and families create a financial aid appeal.
- Many states have extended their internal deadlines for FAFSA completion and applications for state awards. There are many resources available to [increase FAFSA completion](#).

■ **Schools and districts can use existing administrative data to target and tailor advising about college.**

- One low-cost experimental intervention used [school records to identify low-income, college-ready students](#) and inform them that they qualified for free tuition at the University of Michigan. The aid they would receive was the standard amount of aid for the school's lower-income applicants. Treated students were more than twice as likely to enroll at the university (27% versus 12%), an effect that was entirely driven by students who would have otherwise attended a less selective institution or not have enrolled in college at all.
- Another intervention provided low-income, high-achieving students with [targeted information about their likely out-of-pocket tuition](#) at a variety of institutions, along with no-paperwork college application fee waivers. This resulted in students applying to more colleges, enrolling at more selective institutions, and succeeding academically at those institutions.
- Up to 20 percent of high school seniors who intend to enroll in college never show up in the fall, a phenomenon called "summer melt." [Districts and nonprofits that sent text messages](#) to students during the summer after high school graduation reminding them of financial aid and other deadlines (i.e., course enrollment, residence life paperwork, required orientations, etc.) found that college matriculation increased by [10-15%](#).
- Implementation is important, and not all of the low-cost information interventions we mention here have worked as well [at-scale](#) or under a [different delivery model](#). One possibility is that local knowledge and targeted, personalized assistance to students are more effective than large-scale and generic awareness campaigns.

Students often benefit from a better understanding of their chances of admission to institutions with the best track records of bachelor's degree completion.

■ **Low-cost interventions, such as [personalized online college planning tools](#) that match students with potential colleges, and [proactive advising for college-bound students](#) during the summer after high school graduation, have each been shown to increase college-going.**

- Students are more likely to apply to college when they have a stronger sense of their probability of being accepted. Online college planning tools allow students to input their information and be matched with colleges. A recent study found that students who used such a tool to assess their likelihood of admission at different colleges were [more likely to apply to four-year schools](#), although less likely to apply to the most selective institutions.

- **Virtual advising will be a necessity for many students and schools during the pandemic. Although we know very little about virtual advising for high school students, research from postsecondary settings shows promise.**
 - Remote one-on-one coaching for community college students increased 6- and 12-month [retention by 5% and degree completion by 4%](#). Coaches contacted students regularly, assisting with goal setting, study skills, time management, and self-advocacy.
- **Low-income and first-generation college students have benefited from intensive one-on-one coaching through the college application and aid processes. While effective, these programs require increased staffing and are thus costly.**
 - One intensive college advising program matches first-generation low-income high school students with counselors who meet with students several times per month. Counselors provide one-on-one guidance on college applications, applying for financial aid, and choosing a college. Students who received support were [14%](#) more likely to attend a four-year college. The program costs approximately \$6,000 per student.

Student coursework and School Profiles can communicate college readiness and how COVID-19 played out at individual schools.

- **ACT and SAT scores factor heavily into college admissions, but in-person administrations of these exams now have limited capacity and entail health risks to students and their families. This has accelerated a trend amongst more selective colleges and universities to adopt “[test optional](#)” admissions criteria.**
 - This will make coursework more important for the classes of 2021 and 2022, which may have equity implications because Black, Latinx, and lower-income high schoolers [tend to take fewer advanced courses](#), and access to Advanced Placement courses (which have been tied to a [higher likelihood](#) of completing a degree later on) is uneven across [urban and rural areas](#).
 - Districts should ensure that all high schools in their district [update or create a School Profile](#) that accompanies each student’s transcript during the admissions process. School Profiles should clarify any grade policy changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and explain how the school/district approached online learning, whether there were changes in course availability, and whether students were assisted with internet connectivity and access to technology.
 - High school teachers and counselors should make students aware of opportunities to explain how COVID-19 has impacted their preparation for college. The [common app](#), for example, has a new space for this purpose.
- **While the ACT and SAT are increasingly optional for college applications, they may still be required for merit-based financial aid, honors programs, and placement into college credit-bearing courses. Counselors should make sure students understand the potential for this and help them learn more about up-to-date policies on how tests are used by colleges and financial aid offices.**

Students moving from high school straight to careers may benefit from advanced career and technical education (CTE) in addition to employer and postsecondary partnerships.

- **Nationwide, three out of four high school students [participate in CTE](#). Students who enroll in multi-year sequences of CTE courses [complete high school](#) at higher rates and [earn more](#) when they enter the labor force.**
 - Students who focus on obtaining skills that are transferable to the labor market may be [better positioned for employment after high school graduation](#) and have the ability to continue their studies at two-year or four-year colleges.

- Although significant shifts in job industry growth due to the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to occur, it is unlikely that existing labor market trends of [replacing routine manual labor with technology](#) will reverse course. Schools should advise students to consider taking CTE courses that connect to [growing industries](#) and [today's technologies](#).
- Successful CTE models include the opportunity to take a sequence of courses that build skills in a particular CTE area. These models often include employer partnerships, either as part of a comprehensive [technical high school](#), [Career Academy](#), or grant-funded program aligned [with community colleges and businesses](#). These programs offer students the opportunity to learn about occupations and participate in internships or apprenticeship programs while completing their high school studies.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Reducing access to effective counselors will limit informed course selection and hinder college enrollment, which is likely to increase inequality in postsecondary outcomes.

- **Much of the labor for the proactive strategies we outlined above will fall to high school counselors, who can be very effective at helping students – particularly lower-income and lower-achieving college-eligible students – get to college. These positions will be vulnerable to budget cuts during the COVID-19 recession, at the exact time that low-income and first-generation college students will be in more need of guidance and information about their options after high school.**
 - Research suggests that [lower counselor caseloads](#) and more resources spent on college-going activities (i.e., college fairs and visits) are associated with increased four-year college-going rates. Access to counselors are particularly important for [students from marginalized and underserved communities](#).

The Class of 2020 may have graduated, but they should not be forgotten. All students, and especially those who delay college enrollment, will likely benefit from proactive advising and support.

- **In normal economic times, just 1 to 3% of high school seniors take a year off before enrolling in college. But today, more students in the Class of 2020 may be considering delayed enrollment due to concerns about health, financial constraints, or online instruction.**
 - Students who do not enroll in college directly after high school have [much lower](#) college degree attainment rates. Given existing inequities in college completion rates by [race/ethnicity](#) and [family income](#), high schools should be cautious in advising students to take a break from their educational pursuits during the pandemic.
 - Enrolling part-time rather than full-time is also risky. Students [who attend college part-time have lower college completion rates](#), and students who never complete their degrees are [twice as likely to be delinquent](#) on their student loan debt.
 - College instruction will be heavily reliant on virtual learning in 2020-2021. Research from a variety of settings – [large public universities](#), [for-profit universities](#), [community and technical colleges](#), and [virtual K-12 schools](#) – has consistently found that students [learn less](#) in online formats than traditional face-to-face classes. Concerns about the quality of college in 2020-2021 are valid but should be carefully weighed against the next best alternative use of a student's time.

■ **For students who choose or have no choice but to delay college enrollment, there are a few strategies that may help to keep them on track for college and make the most out their time.**

- Class of 2020 students considering delayed enrollment should continue to participate in college admissions processes that they initiated before the pandemic. Rather than “melting away” from fall 2020 enrollment, they should ask the college to formally defer their admission.
- High schools and districts can support students who delay college enrollment by maintaining contact and – through letters of recommendation and the School Profile – put their delayed enrollment in context.
- Students considering a pause for financial reasons might be interested in paid service opportunities. [AmeriCorps](#) participants can be involved in COVID-19 response work or even work remotely for community organizations while earning room and board and a [scholarship of up to \\$6,195](#).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More evidence briefs can be found at the [EdResearch for Recovery website](#). To receive updates and the latest briefs, [sign up here](#).

Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

Acknowledgments: The authors of this EdResearch for Recovery Project brief would like to thank [Michal Kurlaender](#), [Lindsay Page](#), and [Joshua Goodman](#) for their helpful feedback and comments on this brief. The authors also thank [Emely Medina](#) and [Evelyn Chavez](#) for their excellent research assistance.

This EdResearch for Recovery Project brief is a collaboration among the following organizations and institutions:



The EdResearch for Recovery Project partners would like to thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its support of this work.