



# The impact of the promise of scholarships and altering school structure on college plans, preparation, and enrollment

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## ABSTRACT

The Washington State Achiever (WSA) program was a large-scale educational intervention of scholarships, mentoring, and school redesign designed to encourage students from moderate and low income families to attend college in Washington State. Using a quasi-experimental design based on pre- and post-intervention surveys of high school seniors in program and non-program schools, we find a significant WSA effect on educational outcomes, net of the demographic and socioeconomic composition of students across schools. Across the three intervention high schools, the program is strongly significant in one school, significant after a lag in another school, and not significant in a third. We speculate about the potential reasons for the differential program effect across high schools.

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## 1. Introduction

Educational attainment, and a college degree in particular, is the surest path for socioeconomic advancement in American society. In 2007, the median earnings for a college graduate (\$47,000) was 74% higher than that of a high school graduate (\$27,000), while median earnings for a worker with an advanced degree (\$60,000) was 31% higher than that of a worker with a bachelor's degree (Crissey, 2009, also see Cheeseman and Newburger, 2002). However, the doors to higher education are not equally open to all. Students from poorer families and those with less educated parents are less likely to finish high school and enter college (Kaufman et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1987). The gap in high school completion between black and white students has narrowed in recent years, but black students are still less likely to attend and graduate from college (Aud et al., 2011; Snyder et al., 2004). Latino and American Indian students are disadvantaged at all levels of schooling (Aud et al., 2011; Freeman and Fox, 2005).

Breaking the association between ascribed characteristics and educational attainment has been a national priority since the days of the Great Society and the War on Poverty in the 1960s. Head Start, Title I programs, and a host of other federal, state, and local efforts aimed to strengthen the quality of K-12 public education for children from disadvantaged origins. Federal and state scholarship programs as well as subsidized loans were designed to directly assist low income students in entering college. Affirmative action programs and similar initiatives were targeted to encourage and assist students in groups that had been left behind in expansion of higher education in the post-World War II era. Although there is evidence that these programs have made a difference, there has been a policy drift on how to expand college opportunity for disadvantaged students in recent years (Fitzgerald, 2004).

The assumption that direct aid to disadvantaged students and schools has not been effective or cost efficient has sparked new policies with an emphasis on market competition between public, private, and charter schools. These programs assume

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that school reorganization and reform will lead to improvements in the quality of secondary schooling and they will inspire and prepare disadvantaged high school students to attend college. School reform programs often stress local autonomy in order to reward innovative teachers and programs (Lee and Smith, 2001; Mehan et al., 1996; National Research Council, 2004).

There is considerable research, however, indicating that the costs of higher education remain a major obstacle for many students from low income families (St. John, 2003; Deming and Dynarski, 2009). In this study, we provide a preliminary evaluation of a major educational policy intervention designed to increase the numbers of disadvantaged students attending college—the “Washington State Achievers” (WSA) program. The WSA program, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, addresses both the traditional concern of insufficient resources to attend college with the provision of scholarships and the new emphasis on school reform to better prepare disadvantaged students for higher education (O’Brien, 2007). The WSA program operated in 16 high schools in Washington State from 2001 to 2010. In this study, we use data from the University of Washington Beyond High School Project, which includes three WSA high schools and two non-program (control) high schools, to offer an early evaluation of the impact of the program in one school. We find a strong impact of the WSA program on educational outcomes, but with considerable variation between high schools. The findings suggest that successful program interventions require not only good ideas and financial investments, but also effective implementation.

## 2. Educational stratification and policy interventions

One of the major trends of the twentieth century has been a dramatic increase in the levels of educational attainment across successive generations (Mare, 1995; Fischer and Hout, 2006). These gains have been recorded for all segments of the American population, but with few exceptions, there has been very little narrowing of educational stratification by class and race (Kao and Thompson, 2003; Mare, 1995). Although Asian students have reached educational parity with whites, other race and ethnic minorities (African American, Hispanic, and Native American) and economically disadvantaged students continue to display lower levels of success at all levels of schooling (Kao and Thompson, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Perriera et al., 2006; KewalRamani et al., 2007).

Massey and colleagues (2003) have recently synthesised theories of educational stratification in terms of a “capital deficiency” framework. This framework consists of four broad types of capital—financial, human, social, and cultural—that affect the likelihood that youth will succeed in school. Financial capital consists of the assets that constitute a family’s economic resources (e.g. income, wealth, property). Human capital is the sum of knowledge and skills, generally indexed by educational attainment that is rewarded in the labor market (Becker, 1964). College educated parents are more likely to know the value (economic and non-economic) of a college degree and they can provide encouragement and advice to their children during the college selection, preparation, and application process (Kim and Schneider, 2005; Perriera et al., 2006).

Social capital refers to the benefits and advantages accrued from participation in social networks and organizations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Membership in a community with high levels of social capital allows for the reinforcement of collective norms and values, and it can play a crucial role in sponsoring the educational attainment of the community’s younger members (Kao, 2004; Zhou and Bankston, 1998). Cultural capital is the values and attitudes that reinforce high ambitions, hard work, perseverance, and deferred gratification (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The four forms of capital are independent but are often highly correlated among families. For example, middle class parents can afford to buy homes in wealthy neighborhoods, which offer access to better schools as well as better social connections, including high status neighbors and high achieving peer networks for their children (Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002).

Policies and programs designed to increase educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth attempt to mitigate financial, human, social, or cultural capital deficits in isolation or in combination. The most widespread programs have addressed financial capital deficits through the provision of scholarships, grants, and loans. There are also programs designed to compensate for the lack of human, social, and cultural capital resources by using teachers, counselors, and mentors to encourage students’ educational ambitions, to improve study skills, and to provide knowledge about the college application process.

Not every study finds consistent support for financial capital interventions, but several federal programs designed to increase post-secondary access with generous financial assistance to students have been successful. For example, the GI Bill for returning veterans after World War II and the Social Security benefits for surviving dependents significantly increased levels of college enrollment and attainment (Bound and Turner, 2002; Katznelson, 2005; Dynarski, 2003). Pell grants, which are much less generous, do not appear to have markedly increased college attendance among low-income recent high school graduates, but they have increased college enrollment among older (“non-traditional”) students (Hansen, 1983; Kane, 1994, 1995; Leslie and Brinkman, 1988; Seftor and Turner, 2002).

In recent years, several state governments have created innovative scholarship programs to increase college attendance. There is considerable evidence that merit based programs increase overall levels of college enrollment and completion (Abraham and Clark, 2006; Cornwell et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2004, 2008; Leslie and Brinkman, 1988; Kane, 2007, St. John et al., 2004, 2010), but it has been much more difficult to reduce race and socioeconomic differentials (Dynarski, 2002, Binder et al., 2002, Cornwell and Mustard, 2002). Merit based programs in Georgia and New Mexico have disproportionately benefited students from advantaged social origins (Dynarski, 2002; Binder et al., 2002; Cornwell and Mustard, 2002). However, the “Twenty First Century Scholars” program in Indiana, which integrates both a merit and need based component, has

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