Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

Structural Racism in Student List Products

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Abstract:	Colleges identify and recruit prospective students by purchasing "student lists" from College Board and other vendors, which has substantial effects on college access. However, researchers and policymakers concerned with college access have ignored student lists for half a century - since the College Board launched the Student Search Service in 1972. This study analyzes College Board list products via student list orders purchased by public universities that were collected by issuing public records requests. Findings suggest that the design of student list products systematically exclude students from Communities of Color, low-income communities, and rural communities from student list purchases. We recommend federal and state level policy actions that can regulate and create a public alternative to the student list business.

Introduction

Colleges identify prospective students by purchasing "student lists" from College Board (and other vendors). Student lists contain contact information of prospective students that meet specified criteria (e.g., test scores, zip codes). Student lists are a fundamental input for recruiting campaigns targeting prospects by mail, email, and social media. Importantly, student lists have large effects on college access, particularly for Black and Latinx students, first-generation college students, and others historically excluded from higher education (Howell et al., 2021).

The student list business has grown in scale, sophistication, and in importance to recruiting, yet researchers/policymakers concerned with college access have ignored student lists since College Board launched Student Search Service in 1972. College access scholarship has focused on organizational behavior (e.g., Doyle, 2010; Salazar et al., 2021), but as universities outsource core functions to vendors/consultancies, scholars have failed to investigate how these products/services structure college access. As part of a broader project, we analyze College Board list products and ask "what is the relationship between the filters chosen for a particular student list purchase and the characteristics of prospects included in resulting student list?"

Theoretical Framework

We draw on racial capitalism--the process by which White organizations derive social/economic value from non-white racial identities (Leong, 2013)-- to ground student list products within the commodification of non-whiteness (and other marginalized identities) in admissions processes. The theory argues that society's preoccupation with representational diversity leads to framing non-whiteness as a commodity to be pursued and used. Applied to student lists, the theory suggests combinations of search filters (e.g., test scores, race/ethnicity, and zip code) may lead to exclusion as products structure the pursuit of diversity through filters that interact with but systematically ignore racial, socioeconomic spatial politics (e.g., residential segregation).

Methods

Data were collected by issuing public records requests to all public universities in five states-- California, Arizona, Illinois, Minnesota, and Texas. Data requests asked for (1) the order summary, which specifies search criteria; and (2) the de-identified prospect-level list produced from the search criteria for all 2016 to 2022 student list purchases (Table 1). Because we received data from a non-random sample of universities, we utilize a multiple case study research design via purposeful sampling. The analysis sample consists of 3,528,192 prospects from 417 orders made by 14 universities (complete sampling details provided in full paper). Empirical analyses consist of simple descriptive statistics presented in tables, figures, and maps.

Results

We present results from cases that convey commonly observed combinations of filters and their resulting student lists.

Geodemographic Segment Filters. 12% of orders by research universities in our study used geodemographic segment filters- filters created by College Board that categorize high schools and neighborhoods into "cluster" types based on demographic, geographic, academic, historical college-going characteristics (The College Board, 2011). Tables 2 and 3 show characteristics of clusters, with highlighted rows indicating selected clusters across eight orders by one university that filtered for GPA (B- to A+), PSAT/SAT scores (1220-1450), and segment.

Figure 1 compares the characteristics of resulting student list prospects to those of high school students in four metropolitan areas. For New York, Figure 1 shows White and Asian students comprised 56.5% and 26.5% of prospects, respectively, compared to making up 36.7% and 11.7% of public school students. By contrast, Black and Latinx students comprised 1.31% and 8.04% of prospects, respectively, compared to 17.8% and 31.7% of public school students. Furthermore, prospects lived in much more affluent zip codes – an average of $153,000 – than the overall New York median income of $91,000. Figure 1 shows similar patterns in the other three metropolitan areas.

Zip Code Filters. Another common combination of filters used were zip codes and test scores. Zip codes were filtered via text/excel files provided to the College Board-- which we were unsuccessful in acquiring after many attempts. To investigate how filtering by zip code may systematically exclude some groups of students, we conduct an analysis using a hypothetical zip code filter on one university's student list purchases within Los Angeles--which used a combination of SAT/PSAT filters and an overall California out-of-state filter.

Figure 2 shows how the resulting prospects of these orders would be sorted into purchased versus not purchased if the university applied a Top 10% zip code filter by income -- consistent with previous research that suggests universities focus recruiting efforts on affluent nonresident students (Salazar, et al., 2021). For example, if the university would have applied the zip code filter to the 14,875 "low PSAT" (1110-1210) prospects included in their Los Angeles student list, those that would still be included after the zip code filter would be, on average, 53% White, 18% Asian, 14% Latinx, 8% Multiracial, 1% Black. However, the prospects excluded by the hypothetical zip code filter would be, on average, 31% White, 29% Asian, 27% Latinx, and 2% Black. The racial disparities in students that would be effectively "missed" by using a zip code filter is consistent across orders with varying PSAT and SAT ranges (Figure 2).

Implications

The current design of College Board products exclude non-test-takers from the underlying database, then use problematic filters to select those included in student

lists, and charge $0.50 per name, incentivizing universities to act “efficiently” in student list purchases and leading to systematic exclusionary practices. The future of student lists is also concerning, which may become dominated by for-profit vendors that use alternative student list data (e.g., from college search engines) when test-optional admissions policies decline the number of test-takers in the College Board database.

Given student lists affect college access, at the federal level, we recommend regulating student list products via the Federal Trade Commission, which has authority over systematic exclusion caused by products sold by “marketing data brokers” (similar to student loan providers). Because regulations cannot overcome fundamental inequities in underlying test-taker databases, we propose state policymakers advocate and create public student list options (similar to national voter databases).

References

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Table 1: Summary of Data Received

State	# received order summary	# no order summary	# received list	# no list	# received both	# did not receive both
IL	6	6	6	6	6	6
MN	6	6	6	6	6	6
CA	16	16	16	16	16	16
TX	18	17	18	17	18	17

Table 2: Filter by Neighborhood Segments

2011 D+ Cluster	SAT Math	SAT CR	Going Out of State	Percent NonWhite	Need Financial Aid	Med Income
51	546	533	32%	30%	57%	$95,432
52	480	470	30%	58%	71%	$63,578
53	561	544	32%	50%	55%	$92,581
54	458	443	25%	83%	76%	$38,977
55	566	565	52%	24%	63%	$71,576
56	420	411	29%	93%	66%	$35,308
57	541	519	52%	47%	43%	$67,394
58	533	489	28%	87%	69%	$68,213
59	561	562	52%	24%	74%	$54,750
60	589	590	63%	37%	36%	$104,174
61	585	567	51%	30%	40%	$123,858
62	596	595	67%	24%	72%	$59,824
63	548	541	39%	23%	65%	$69,347
64	466	466	48%	34%	29%	$49,829
65	440	433	23%	93%	78%	$45,081
66	499	492	20%	12%	76%	$50,453
67	519	501	27%	53%	59%	$60,960
68	552	558	52%	35%	65%	$57,902
69	534	521	37%	19%	65%	$88,100
70	613	598	65%	29%	61%	$86,381
71	405	408	39%	97%	68%	$42,661
72	399	397	31%	87%	47%	$32,708
73	528	514	29%	42%	62%	$90,849
74	433	435	29%	84%	79%	$44,065
75	459	457	28%	85%	72%	$50,421
76	514	509	27%	38%	64%	$61,332
77	502	492	26%	18%	75%	$62,372
78	594	578	56%	26%	39%	$134,400
79	550	551	57%	32%	74%	$40,909
80	534	527	39%	39%	65%	$49,877
81	491	483	27%	57%	72%	$63,030
82	496	491	29%	21%	75%	$53,465
83	500	490	19%	26%	71%	$49,335
Total	**512**	**502**	**32%**	**43%**	**65%**	**$70,231**

Table 3: Filter by High School Segments

2011 D+ Cluster	SAT Math	SAT CR	Going Out of State	Percent NonWhite	Need Financial Aid	Med Income
51	462	457	14%	33%	68%	$40,918
52	489	496	81%	99%	77%	$64,730
53	471	484	28%	38%	62%	$60,833
54	376	371	33%	96%	38%	$38,146
55	489	481	39%	46%	44%	$71,845
56	536	508	73%	43%	49%	$63,967
57	434	435	29%	82%	79%	$48,301
58	592	577	51%	27%	32%	$104,509
59	499	489	19%	18%	74%	$47,685
60	523	549	23%	30%	33%	$70,175
61	485	370	33%	89%	9%	$61,385
62	474	473	34%	92%	67%	$55,515
63	440	427	28%	86%	72%	$49,238
64	606	542	37%	89%	57%	$81,911
65	515	503	28%	43%	65%	$72,692
66	498	515	37%	37%	73%	$60,272
67	526	546	48%	41%	69%	$71,279
68	541	540	41%	26%	62%	$79,260
69	390	395	36%	92%	74%	$43,391
70	595	581	56%	33%	48%	$105,721
71	400	412	57%	98%	80%	$43,137
72	528	544	35%	25%	64%	$70,018
73	451	438	24%	89%	76%	$48,406
74	654	579	76%	80%	46%	$59,089
75	514	502	31%	20%	71%	$72,850
76	600	584	72%	50%	28%	$90,265
77	595	508	64%	75%	39%	$39,490
78	473	468	48%	43%	22%	$56,703
79	594	585	61%	26%	71%	$65,180
Total	514	502	32%	44%	65%	$70,223

Figure 1: Segment Order Prospect and Public High School Characteristics

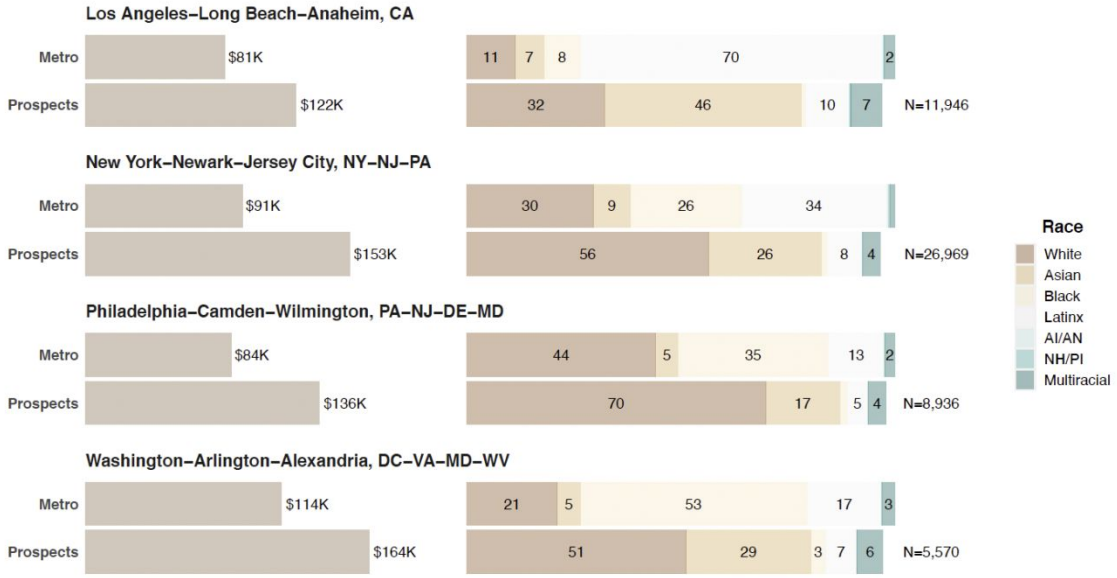

Figure 2: Hypothetical Zip Code Order Prospect Characteristics