**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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