Research Summary: Admissions Policies, Cohort Composition, and Academic Success

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I study a large state-wide policy that changed admissions rules in a large number of post-secondary programs. In 2007, the California state legislature reversed a policy that banned merit-based admissions at community college associate degree in nursing (ADN) programs. The new admissions policies allowed individual colleges to replace their waitlists and lotteries, in order to select students based on prior grades, work history, essays, and personal references. I leverage the incremental adoption of these new admissions rules after 2007 across the state's many ADN programs to provide estimates of their effect on the academic preparation, demographic composition, and academic outcomes of new ADN cohorts. I use individual-level administrative data on all California community college students between 1992 and 2019, and an event study differences in differences approach.

I first study whether the policy worked as intended, bringing in cohorts with higher past academic performance. I find that a switch to merit-based methods led to particularly large increases in the math and biology GPA of incoming students, as well as decreases in the number of remedial courses students had taken.

I then examine the demographic composition of new cohorts. The reason that the colleges initially banned merit-based screening processes in the early 1990s was because of a lawsuit alleging that these policies unfairly excluded minority students. I find that colleges switching to merit-based admissions did not meaningfully change the demographic composition of their students.

Finally, I examine academic outcomes. The purpose of the 2007 legislation was to increase completion rates and pass rates on the national licensing exam. However, I find no evidence of improvements in first-year GPA, completion rates, time to degree, or licensing exam pass rates for students in cohorts accepted under the new admissions regimes. I do find a large decrease in the number of years between when a student first started taking community college coursework, including prerequisites, and first enrolled in an ADN program. These effects are especially large for programs that formerly had waitlists.

Taken together, I find that merit-based admissions for ADN programs brought in better-prepared students, as intended. However, these admissions policies did not have any meaningful change in academic outcomes. In addition, the new admissions dramatically decreased the amount of time students had to wait before entering the cohorts. The findings suggest that admissions may not be the best tool for impacting academic outcomes. Other approaches, such as increasing capacity or providing better mentoring and other supports, could be more effective.

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