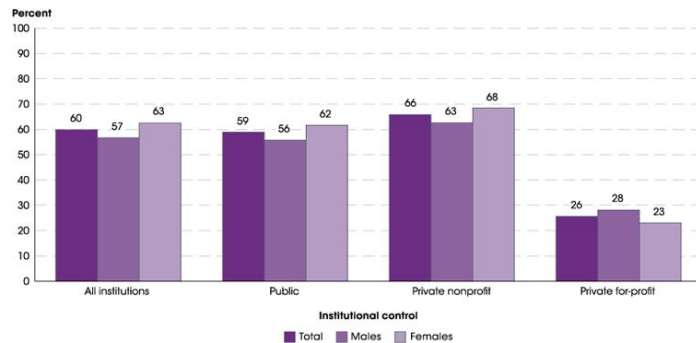


Improving College Graduation Rate by Broadening College Choice Portfolios for High School Students

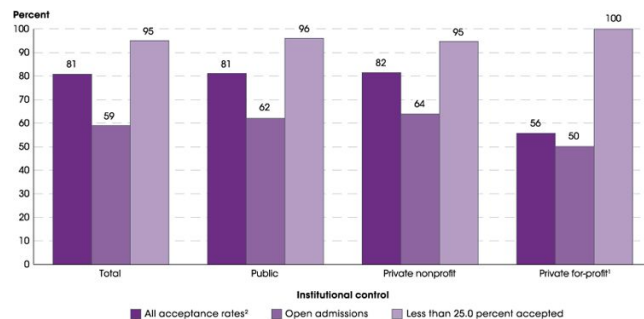
Robert Reynolds

In 2014 the White House commissioned a study¹ that found nearly 50% of high-income students have a degree by 25 years old; that number drops to 10% for lower-income students. One such reason is that lower-income students “undermatch” with their college choice at a higher rate², electing to attend a college or university that is *less* selective or challenging than what they are capable of attending. The focus of this paper is to examine how a tool could positively impact the college choice process by finding better college or university matches for students.

With over 4,500 higher education institutions in the United States, a high school student has an overwhelming amount of data and information to sort through before deciding where to attend college or university. This decision can have an impact on the academic success of that student³.



The national average graduation rate for 4-year institutions is only 60% (top figure), meaning that a significant percentage of students are leaving school without a degree. This is also reflected in the poor nationwide retention rate⁴ (bottom



¹ (n.d.). Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students. Retrieved May 27, 2018, from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/increasing_college_opportunity_for_low-income_students_report.pdf

² Jonathan I. Smith, Matea Pender, and Jessica S. Howell,. “The Full Extent of Academic Undermatch,” *Economics of Education Review*, 32: 247-261, 2013

³ Burke, M. R., Davis, E., & Stephan, J. L. (2015). College enrollment patterns for rural Indiana high school graduates (REL 2015–083). Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. *National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest*. <http://eric.ed.gov>.

⁴ Retention rate is the number of college students who return for a second year at the same institution

figure). Across all colleges and universities, only 81% of freshman return for a sophomore year at the same school⁵. There are many reasons why students dropout of school - familial issues, cost, academic performance, culture⁶. While some of these reasons are out of the control of the college or university, many can be solved by improving how students find the right school to attend.

One way to combat this is to help students broaden their application portfolio to increase their chances of finding a good match for their college or university choice. There have been some projects that have looked at simplifying the process of getting information to students, providing visualizations of information on those schools that might be relevant to students.⁷ This, while helpful, only provides surface-level access to information to students, and leaves them to search for themselves. The same is true of tools from CollegeBoard or Petersons, among others. The aim is to build a more impactful tool that will enable students and colleges to find good fits nationwide while using less time and resources overall.

An existing tool that is an inspiration for how to solve this problem is SportsRecruits⁸ which is a website dedicated to pairing student-athletes with college coaches across the country. The premise is simple - giving access to more athletes for coaches, and more colleges for athletes. Extending this to college as a whole, the tool would enable students of any socioeconomic class in any geographical location to get quick access to colleges and universities nationwide.

A next step this research can take is to build a tool that helps students connect more easily to colleges and universities for virtual tours, interviews, information sessions, to expand the portfolio of these students. HD Video Conferencing enables interviews and tours without leaving the house or library, letting students 'visit' more schools and admissions officers talk to more prospective students.

Many students in rural or low-income areas of the country are limited, or in some cases prohibited, from visiting colleges and universities. Challenges that account for these limitations include the cost of travel for visits, assumptions that they cannot afford tuition

⁵ "The Condition of Education - Postsecondary Education - Programs"

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp.

⁶ Leonhardt, D. (2005). The college dropout boom. *New York Times*, 24.

https://facultystaff.richmond.edu/~bmayer/pdf/SocialClass_college_UVa.pdf

⁷ Brunson, K. (2017). College Choice: Retention and Persistence. *OMSCS 6460*.

https://github.gatech.edu/kbrunson6/6460_papers/blob/master/papers/iUCzeGK3.pdf

⁸ "SportsRecruits | Home." <https://sportsrecruits.com/>. Accessed 25 May. 2018.

⁹, the quality of their school counselors, or even the lack of other college students that serve as an example in that town or area. All of these problems can be solved or mitigated with the expansion of an application portfolio, opening the door to finding colleges that are a good fit that potentially would never have been found just searching through a book or web search.

Once a potential college fit is found based on GPA, test scores, or other admission criteria, being able to quickly get in touch with admissions for an interview and culture fit assessment will hasten the process of finding the right school. Overall, as the cost of college continues to rise, and the importance of a college degree stays high, lowering the dropout rate while improving the retention rate is a critical task that needs to be addressed. A school finding and/or matching tool would help accomplish that task.

⁹ McDonough, P. M., & Calderone, S. (2006). The meaning of money: Perceptual differences between college counselors and low-income families about college costs and financial aid. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(12), 1703-1718. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002764206289140>. Accessed 25 May. 2018.