

# Promoting College Match for Low-Income Students: Lessons for Practitioners

By D. Crystal Byndloss and Chera Reid

**M**ost high school reform efforts understandably focus on boosting the success of low-income students who are underachieving academically, aiming to help them graduate ready for the rigors of college. But in every school district where students struggle, there are academically capable low-income and minority students who do graduate from high school and are well prepared for college. Yet each year, many of these students choose to attend nonselective four-year colleges where graduation rates are distressingly low. Others enroll at two-year colleges, where degree completion and transfer rates are even lower. Many more do not attend college at all.<sup>1</sup>

This phenomenon — called “undermatching” — was first examined by Melissa Roderick and her colleagues at the Consortium on Chicago School Research.<sup>2</sup> Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson confirmed that students are more likely to graduate college when they attend the most academically demanding institution that will admit them.<sup>3</sup> More recently, a study by Caroline Hoxby and her colleagues gained popular attention for demonstrating that it was possible to increase the rate at which very high-achieving, low-income students enrolled in the most selective colleges and universities by providing them with tailored information about opportunities there.<sup>4</sup>

In 2010, MDRC and its partners pilot-tested an innovative advising program, College

Match, in three Chicago public high schools. It took on the undermatch challenge directly by delivering crucial information to help a broad range of academically qualified students and their parents make thoughtful decisions about college enrollment. College Match has now expanded to New York City. This practitioner brief presents practical lessons from the College Match Program in Chicago. It offers five strategies that show promise, that could be widely applicable, that counselors and advisers can integrate into their existing college guidance activities, and that can be implemented in college advising settings in and out of schools.

## WHAT IS COLLEGE MATCH?

To be eligible to participate in College Match in Chicago, students have to build a strong academic profile, including a grade point average of 3.0 or higher and an ACT score of at least 20. Trained College Match advisers who are recent college graduates themselves work with each student from the spring semester of her junior year until high school graduation. These advisers replicate the support that students in more affluent schools and homes get to help them make informed decisions about college enrollment by considering “match” and “fit.” (“Match” refers to a college or university’s *academic* suitability for a student; “fit” extends beyond purely academic

considerations to encompass the student’s academic, financial, personal, and social needs.) The intervention, delivered through a combination of classroom activities and one-on-one meetings with advisers, is organized around five key elements:

- **Information sharing and awareness building:** College Match teaches students and their families about general application strategies, financial aid, and the concept of a match college. The program also exposes students to more selective colleges through campus tours and visits from alumni and admissions representatives.
- **Individualized advising:** College Match helps students identify best-fit colleges based on their individual interests, academic abilities, and other personal and family considerations.
- **Application support:** College Match helps students navigate the complex college application process, advising them on how to develop competitive applications and essays, procure fee waivers, and complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).<sup>5</sup>
- **Parental engagement:** College Match helps parents understand the college options available to their students and the financial and personal implications of those choices.
- **Decision making and planning ahead:** College Match helps students choose among multiple acceptances and financial aid awards. Advisers also help students prepare for the transition to college and campus life.

The program helps students and parents make informed college search, application, and enrollment decisions by exposing stu-

dents to a wide range of more selective colleges that are suitable academic matches and that meet their financial and personal needs.

## FIVE COLLEGE MATCH STRATEGIES

College advisers can use the following five strategies to help students make more informed college enrollment decisions.

### STRATEGY #1:

Make “match” the message by embracing match as a fundamental part of the college search and selection process.

### Challenge:

Many low-income students make “safe” choices about where to apply to college. In some cases, they — and those who advise them — are unaware of the range of postsecondary options available to them and do not understand how these institutions can increase their likelihood of thriving and graduating with a college credential. In other cases, students may be reluctant to apply to a college that might be a good academic match but that they perceive to be too demanding. In still other cases, students lack information or receive inconsistent messages about the application process and related timetables, and apply to colleges too late to meet the admissions deadlines at selective institutions

### What You Can Do:

Create a college-going atmosphere in which students are encouraged to aim high by applying to and attending four-year colleges that meet their academic qualifications and that are well aligned with their financial, personal, and social needs. Applying to selective colleges means meeting nonnegotiable deadlines in the

fall of their senior year. All stakeholders who support students' college search, application, and decision-making processes — parents, staff, and program or school leaders — must together encourage them to raise their college aspirations.

- Create a culture of high aspirations among college-ready students by introducing them to the full range of selective four-year colleges, including liberal arts colleges, private universities, public flagship institutions, and minority-serving institutions. As a first step, visit the College Board's Web site Big Future: <http://bigfuture.collegeboard.org>. In addition, encourage students to learn more about honors programs within less selective institutions that offer a challenging academic curriculum at a more affordable price.
- Keep students aware of important deadlines they must meet. Where possible, follow up with them to ensure that they have completed their applications and submitted them on time.
- Cultivate relationships with school or program administrators, teachers, counselors, and college advisers. Meet with these people to introduce the match philosophy, fine-tune the appropriate match message, and share knowledge, resources, and expertise.

### STRATEGY #2:

Engage parents early and often in discussions of their students' appropriate match and best-fit postsecondary options.

### Challenge:

Students and their families may not choose colleges together, and they may have misconcep-

tions or incomplete information about selective institutions. Legitimate concerns about affordability and fit may prevent them from ever considering some colleges and universities.

### What You Can Do:

Parents are their students' first teachers.

From the beginning invite them to join important, ongoing conversations about match and fit.

- Ask parents at the start of the college application process how they would like you to communicate with them.
- During initial advising meetings, ask students and parents about their expectations, beliefs, and values related to college. This exercise will help students and parents to identify any differences in opinions. For example, students and parents may have very different beliefs about living on campus in a residence hall as opposed to living at home and commuting. Beginning the conversation early will allow time for all parties to reach agreement before important decisions must be made. Use joint meetings with students and parents to generate a list of colleges suitable for both student and family.
- Enlist family support during the critical process of applying for financial aid. Remind parents that their involvement is crucial to their students' college choice. In the fall of senior year, encourage parents to begin preparing documentation needed to complete the FAFSA in January. Prepare parents to talk openly and honestly with their students about cost and affordability.
- Money talks: information about affordable ways to finance a college education is valuable to parents. Host a financial aid

series that extends the conversation about searching for, applying to, and choosing a match college. Consider hosting workshops that provide parents the specific information they need. (See strategy #4 for additional ideas about financial aid.)

### STRATEGY #3:

Guide students and families to tools and technologies that will help them make well-informed decisions about their best match.

#### Challenge:

There is a great deal of information available about the college application process and the postsecondary landscape, yet misconceptions and misinformation abound about both. Too often students and families make college choices based on limited information and not on a student's specific needs. Yet just as each student has unique needs, colleges also differ. Postsecondary institutions' academic rigors, instructional approaches, and resources vary dramatically — and some institutions are more successful at graduating students than others. Enrollment decisions made without sufficient information reduce a student's chances of success.

#### What You Can Do:

Outline for students and families the steps they should take to determine what colleges are the best match and fit.

- Help students develop a “what matters to me” self-inventory to distinguish between their wants and needs. Would the student learn best at a smaller college that offers a low student-to-faculty ratio and seminar-style classes? Or would he thrive at a larger institution with a higher student-to-faculty ratio and lecture-style classes?

- Introduce students and parents to College Results Online ([www.collegeresults.org](http://www.collegeresults.org)), an interactive online tool that provides important information about colleges' and universities' enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. Help families interpret the information at this site (and others too). Students from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, those who would be the first in their families to attend college, and those who are undocumented immigrants should be directed to information that will help them weigh their odds of success at different postsecondary institutions.
- Direct students and parents to information about specific programs at selective colleges — such as “bridge programs” — designed to support undergraduates who share their abilities, talents, interests, and backgrounds.

### STRATEGY #4:

To increase their chance of being able to afford a match college, encourage students to complete the FAFSA as early as possible and to also pursue institutional aid, scholarships, and grants.

#### Challenge:

Sticker shock in response to the published total cost of attendance dissuades many qualified low-income students and their families from applying to colleges and universities that could be a good match. Up-front application costs may prevent others from ever considering certain colleges.

#### What You Can Do:

Encourage students to apply to at least three match colleges they would want to attend were cost not an issue, and encourage them and their parents to meet pertinent deadlines. Students

## ACTION STEPS FOR BETTER MATCH-MAKING

The match approach to college advising requires developing a base of knowledge about a wide range of high-quality colleges — including important information about each college’s performance and its potential match and fit for a student. It also requires staying up to date about the college search, application, and choice process, so that you can provide parents and students with the most accurate information. Below are a few suggestions for those ready to take the next step.

- ✓ **Fine-tune the match message and gather your team.** Secure the support of colleagues and peers inside and outside your school or program who will commit to working together to articulate a consistent message about match and implement some or all of these match strategies.
- ✓ **Deepen your knowledge about various types of high-quality colleges.** Investigate the selective postsecondary institutions in your region. Learn more about these colleges’ entrance requirements, performance, and the campus support services they provide for students who are low-income or minority, or who will be the first in their families to attend college. Share this information with students, parents, and your colleagues or peers who may be unaware of these more selective colleges, especially those that may not be “big-name” institutions.
- ✓ **Deepen your knowledge of financial aid.** Sign up for in-depth training that provides up-to-date information on the changing policies affecting the FAFSA, guidance on how to troubleshoot during the financial aid application process, and hands-on training using existing online tools such as the Internal Revenue Service Data Retrieval Tool (at [www.finaid.org/fafsa/irsdataretrievaltool.phtml](http://www.finaid.org/fafsa/irsdataretrievaltool.phtml)). If you can bring real knowledge and a “financial aid toolkit” to planning conversations with families, you can help them develop a more comprehensive understanding of college affordability and enable them to make sound college choices.
- ✓ **Make college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates available.** Display college enrollment, retention, and completion rates for the most popular postsecondary institutions in the region. Highlight the rates for different races and genders, and for students who are the first in their families to attend college. Start a conversation with students about how to interpret this information so they understand its value in their search and choice process. Discuss it with members of your college counseling team as well, and decide together how it will guide your advising practices.
- ✓ **Raise the profile of students in your school or program.** Make contact with the admissions staff at several selective postsecondary institutions in the region that do not typically recruit students from your school or program. Where available, connect with networks of selective colleges. Send these new contacts information about your school, including information about upcoming college events, and invite them to participate. Tap alumni networks: invite former students to return to speak about their college experiences.

Understandably, advisers and counselors may not have the resources to implement every strategy described here. Practitioners are encouraged to do what is within their means to help students identify, apply to, and select postsecondary institutions that align with their individual interests and academic abilities, taking into consideration their personal and family circumstances and needs.

## MICAH'S STORY\*

Micah transferred from a small high school to a large one at the start of his senior year. He came to the new high school with a strong academic record, but seemed to be avoiding his guidance counselor.

Micah's college match adviser persisted by seeking him out in the school building. Once Micah saw that his adviser was invested in his success, he began to schedule appointments with her during lunch and after school. The adviser continued building trust by following each in-person meeting with an e-mail sent using Naviance that recapped their meeting highlights and agreed-upon next steps.

Through the individual meetings, the adviser learned about Micah's deep interest in robotics. He had been the president of his previous high school's engineering club and sought a similar opportunity at his new school. He was even thinking about pursuing engineering as a major, but he was planning to apply only to programs at less selective institutions. Micah's match advisor reviewed his academic background, considered his desire to pursue engineering, and talked with him about financing college. She helped him identify scholarship opportunities and begin applying to those for which he was eligible.

Micah is now a sophomore studying engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he was awarded a renewable \$20,000 academic scholarship. He also applied for a number of smaller scholarships, two of which he received. Micah combined federal and state aid with an institutional scholarship and local awards to pursue his college dream and intellectual passion — debt free.

\*A pseudonym has been used to protect the student's identity.

who do not apply to any match colleges, who apply late, or who only apply to one will have limited options when it comes time to make a decision about their postsecondary plans.

- Address assumptions about financial aid and college affordability directly. To do so, first deepen your knowledge of financial aid planning tools and stay up to date on them, so that you can begin these critical conversations early with your students and their families and reinforce key messages throughout the college search, application, and choice process.
- Participate often in financial aid training sessions and hands-on FAFSA workshops geared toward advisers and counselors. Learn your way around the College Board's College Scholarship Service (CSS)/Financial Aid PROFILE (<http://student.collegeboard.org/css-financial-aid-profile>) so that you can walk students and families through the process of applying for institutional aid above and beyond the FAFSA.
- Many students will need scholarships above and beyond federal, state, and institutional aid, so become familiar with national and local scholarship programs. Encourage students to apply for application fee waivers and any and all scholarship programs for which they are eligible — and, again, to do so early so that their applications are competitive. Every dollar counts.
- The FAFSA ([www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov)) becomes available on January 1. In the weeks before that date remind students and families to review and compile the information they will need, and urge them to complete the application as soon after January 1 as possible. Doing so will increase students' chances of obtaining available aid.
- Direct students and families to several informative online tools such as the “net cost” or “net price” calculators featured on individual college Web sites (links to many of which can be found on the Web site of the U.S. Department of Education's College Affordability and Transparency Center at <http://collegecost.ed.gov/netpricecenter.aspx>). These calculators are designed to help families estimate *total* college cost and *net* college cost and help college aspirants make informed decisions about which colleges are affordable given their family circumstances. The Center's College Scorecard (<http://collegecost.ed.gov/scorecard>) also provides information about different colleges' affordability and graduation rates.
- Suggest to students that they consider applying to honors programs in less selective colleges that may be a strong social fit and that may be more affordable. Honors programs can provide students with a rigorous academic curriculum and typically have four-year graduation rates that far exceed their college or university averages.

#### STRATEGY #5:

Develop and nurture relationships with college admissions officers at selective institutions that are appropriate matches for your students.

#### Challenge:

Selective colleges and universities often actively recruit high-performing students from selective “feeder” high schools that boast large numbers of qualified students. High-performing, low-income students who do not attend these high-profile “feeder” high schools may not make it onto the radar of selective colleges and universities that rely on such recruitment practices. Recently, public-

ity concerning socioeconomic class in higher education and the “missing one-offs” has put more pressure on elite colleges to change these admissions practices, among others.<sup>6</sup>

### What You Can Do:

Become a long-term champion for your students, and help them and their families become smart consumers of higher education.

- Educate admissions officers at match colleges and universities about the promise your students hold. Reach out to admissions officers and let them know that students who have earned high grade point averages and demonstrated their resilience, or “grit,” are likely to thrive at their institutions. High school grade point average is a better predictor of college completion than standardized test scores. You believe in your students’ college potential and want admissions officers to see what you see.
- Meet admissions officers in person whenever possible to share information about your qualified students that they might not otherwise know, and ask for their insights on the application process. When an in-person meeting is not possible, consider alternatives: arrange a Skype meeting or conference call.
- Encourage your students to personalize their applications by meeting with alumni interviewers, who can help them bring their applications off the written page. Even where not required, an interview signals to an admissions officer that the applicant has a strong interest in that college or university.
- Suggest that students and their families visit colleges where students have been admitted before making their college choices. As counselor or adviser, reach out

to your contact in the admissions office if a student will need financial assistance to arrange a campus visit. Many colleges offer admitted students the chance to stay overnight with a current undergraduate, which both reduces the cost of the visit and provides an opportunity for the admitted student to imagine herself at that college.

## CONCLUSION

This brief precedes a How-To Guide scheduled to be published in late 2014. That guide will offer more detailed tips on how to implement college match services. It will include lessons learned from three years of program operations in Chicago Public Schools and early lessons from upcoming work in New York City public schools.

## NOTES

- 1 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009).
- 2 Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2009).
- 3 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009).
- 4 Hoxby and Avery (2012); Hoxby and Turner (2013); Leonhardt (2013).
- 5 U.S. Department of Education (2013).
- 6 Leonhardt (2013).

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