Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

Introduction

In order to understand barriers that affect financial aid outreach and accessibility, this review focuses on fundamental lessons from the behavioral economics literature. Rather than considering high school students as rationally weighing the costs and benefits of particular actions, this literature provides a few theories as to why individuals often do not participate in activities that are clearly beneficial.[1] In short, people:

- Have limited attention, so even consequential decisions, such as applying for financial aid, quickly get lost in the shuffle;
- Are more focused on the present than the future, which leads them to procrastinate on unpleasant tasks; and
- Are optimistic, which leads them to believe they will complete tasks or that things will "work out," even when they are not taking the right steps.

Taken together, these behaviors suggest a number of general policy solutions:
- Simplify everything to encourage students to take action in the present. This should include minimizing administrative or application barriers and changing student "default" choices so they are—as much as legally possible— automatically entered into programs but can choose to opt out, rather than requiring them to opt in;
- Refocus attention by using "nudges" (*e.g.,* frequent reminders) or playing off social norms (*e.g.,* encourage friendly competitions between groups by publicizing participation levels); and
- "Shrink" the distance between present tasks and future rewards. This could mean offering small or intermittent rewards in the present to encourage the completion of short-term tasks such as aid application forms.

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[1] These lessons have also been put forth in psychology, sociology, and other literatures, but my background in economics makes me more familiar with these discussions in this area, so my interpretations may differ from others. I focus on aspects of behavioral economics that appear to my mind mostly immediately relevant to the financial aid literature, rather than all possible topics.

DRAFT FOR NC STUDENT AID STUDY GROUP – OCTOBER 10, 2018 MEETING

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Lessons from Behavioral Economics Research

Financial aid impacts whether a student attends a postsecondary institution and where they enroll, and the more a state subsidizes a particular sector, the more likely students will shift enrollment toward those institutions.[2] Evaluating aid's impacts requires patience, as some programs have no impact on initial college attendance but increase persistence, degree completion, and employment many years later (Bettinger, Gurantz, Kawano, Sacerdote, & Stevens, 2019; Denning, Marx, & Turner, forthcoming), while other programs help in the short term but have no long-term impacts (Cunha, Miller, & Weisburst, 2018). One caution is that most of the research that explicitly focuses on outreach and accessibility has focused on short-term outcomes, so we are not yet aware whether these findings overstate or understate the potential impacts of various programs.[3]

This section discusses interventions designed to increase: (i) the information an individual has; or (ii) the likelihood that they use a program. In almost all cases, the research has been rigorously tested through a randomized control trial (RCT), so these are causal effects, not just correlations.

One way to provide information on financial aid is through broad advertising campaigns, but we have little evidence this is likely to be effective. Most research on advertising is not focused on financial aid per se, but still offers insights. Although a few studies show that advertising is effective in influencing what individuals purchase, each individual advertisement has only miniscule effects simply due to the amount of information people are bombarded with every day (Blake, Nosko, & Tadelis, 2015; Lewis & Rao, 2015; Lewis & Reiley, 2014).[4] In one example from an educational setting, the College Board identified students likely to benefit from taking the SAT, used a highly targeted Facebook advertisement designed with the input of their experienced, professional marketing team, and, in an RCT with over 900,000 students, was unable to induce more students to take or retake the SAT exam (Avery, Castleman, Luca, Page, & Smith, 2018). Reaching students and families via advertisements alone is unlikely to produce large changes in behaviors.

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[2] Unfortunately, subsidies can induce students into attending less selective four-year or two-year colleges than they would have otherwise, diminishing the likelihood that students earn a degree (Cohodes & Goodman, 2014; Gurantz, 2018b). Academic research tends to use a few words, such as "selectivity" or "quality," as synonyms when discussing college, but they often are measured through observed criteria such as SAT scores or graduation rates. Obviously this is just one measure of a college's academic standing but often serves as a useful construct.

[3] Page and Scott-Clayton (2015) have published a longer research summary on college access broadly.

[4] This literature also suggests that researchers running randomized control trials might need millions of distinct observations to estimate these likely small impacts.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

Providing better information directly to students has been shown to be effective in a number of educational settings, but results focused on financial aid are more mixed. First, we know that direct outreach from colleges to students can be effective, particularly when combined with large financial aid packages (Gurantz, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2017; Howell, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2018; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). We also know that students have limited information on many aspects of college pricing—the likely net cost, differences in grants versus loans—as well as the financial returns to various degrees, which, in theory, should weigh into their cost-benefit calculus on where to attend (Baker, Bettinger, Jacob, & Marinescu, 2018; Bleemer & Zafar, 2018; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Yet when researchers have experimentally added information to fix misperceptions of college costs, there is typically no change to students' self-reported expectations on whether they will attend college (Bleemer & Zafar, 2018; Cheng & Peterson, 2018). In contrast, adding information about the average financial returns to a degree has been more likely to increase college-going expectations (Baker et al., 2018; Bleemer & Zafar, 2018).[5]

Informational campaigns focused on financial aid specifically, rather than college costs, have also been relatively ineffective. First, it bears stating that most of the existing research on informational campaigns has been around educational tax credits and loans, and not on grants. An RCT of over one million students in Texas used emails and letters to describe tax credits and articulate the costs and benefits of college, and across various combinations of treatment effects (*e.g.,* simplified vs. detailed information) had no impacts (Bergman, Denning, & Manoli, 2017). One possibility is that tax credits are relatively ineffective as they do not target the neediest families who are mostly ineligible (Bulman & Hoxby, 2015), but previous research found that receiving tax benefits when a student is in 12th grade increased enrollment (*i.e.,* receiving tax benefits from an older sibling gives a family more "cash in hand" and induces the younger sibling to start college) (Manoli & Turner, 2018). This reinforces the idea from behavioral economics that families are more responsive to immediate rewards, and less likely to change behaviors based on the promise of a tax benefit in the "distant" future.

Evidence from the student loan program suggests that how aid is offered matters more than the information itself. Experiments done in both the United States and the Netherlands show that simply providing students information to make more informed

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[5] One study in Canada observed increased interest in college but offered information on both college costs and returns, so we cannot distinguish which drove these effects (Oreopoulos & Dunn, 2013).

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

decisions around loans has no impact on loan take-up (Booij, Leuven, & Oosterbeek, 2012; Darolia & Harper, 2018). In contrast, Marx and Turner (2017) changed the loan "default" to essentially require students to opt out of receiving a loan offer, rather than needing to take additional steps to "opt in;" as a result, students took out substantially more credit and, after one year, had higher GPA and credits earned.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility: Simple, Often & Easy
In order to improve on the mixed effects described above, research indicates that informational interventions, including financial aid, should be "simple, often, and easy."

   1. *Simplify information to increase awareness*

First, information should be simple, as complexity and a lack of transparency increase inaction (Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz, 2012). Although not rigorously tested, the use of simple messages is often cited as key to a program's success. Examples include:

- Tennessee Promise: "Two years of tuition-free attendance at a community college."[6]
- California's Cal Grant: "Money for college you don't have to pay back" (pays for full tuition and fees at any in-state college).
- University of Michigan's HAIL Scholarship: offers full scholarships to low-income students who might be academically ready to be successful at this flagship institution. Although this suggests that the money is what matters, many of these students would have likely been offered either full or very large institutional aid packages had they applied. Interviews with students suggested that they were unaware of this fact or were not confident they would be successful at Michigan, but the simplicity of the messaging, combined with the direct outreach to parents and schools, is what pushed them to apply.[7]

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[6] An unpublished working paper implies that the Tennessee Promise increased in-state public enrollment at eligible institutions, but there are many possible factors and it would be difficult to tie this specifically to the messaging (Bell, 2018).
[7] An academic study of the HAIL program is not yet publicly available, but initial results show large increases in attendance at the University of Michigan among students randomly assigned to receive the offer.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

While not the direct focus of this brief, providing transparency and predictability of award levels advances objectives of simplicity. The use of complex eligibility formulas necessarily makes the amount of aid received opaque. As future rewards already feel less real in the present, anything that creates more uncertainty will decrease the urgency students feel to complete their application forms. Discussed in the recommendations below, simplifying information on aid packages, potentially by highlighting the median payment or interquartile range rather than highlighting all possible values, should increase the saliency. Some tools, like online net price calculators, are set up this way, though there are concerns about their accuracy.[8] Anthony, Page, and Seldin (2016) suggest that aid calculators will be more accurate if they include some measure of academic merit, which correlates with receiving more scholarships, and are updated annually.

2. Provide information often and create incentives to encourage action

In addition to simple messages, informational outreach should occur often because repetition encourages behaviors. Although quite a different setting, randomly assigned reminders from the IRS increased tax filing but individuals quickly fell back into old habits and forgot to file; when the same individuals were sent follow-up reminders, they improved once again (Guyton, Manoli, Schafer, & Sebastiani, 2016; Manoli & Turner, 2017).[9] Other research on advertisements has found that some individuals will respond only after seeing the same message 50 times (Johnson, Lewis, & Reiley, 2016).

Another way to facilitate application completion is through incentives that provide some type of immediate reward to the student. Strategies include:

- ***Financial incentives***: One study in California found that FAFSA completion increased when workshops promised one student in attendance would win a $1,000 scholarship (Gurantz, 2018a). Informal conversations with administrators in several states suggested that these types of random giveaways (*e.g.,* scholarships, cars) are very effective, even though they had no concrete evidence to support their claims.

- ***Social norms***: A different form of incentive is the use of social norms, which make completing application forms common practice (or put less generously,

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[8] Sample online calculator: http://www.collegeforalltexans.com/apps/CollegeMoney/
[9] Interestingly, reminders increased filing among individuals owed money (e.g., those who qualified for EITC) as well as those who owed the IRS money.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

create a negative stigma toward people who do not complete these forms). Many states engage in financial aid competitions, where a school's FAFSA completion rate is shown publicly, and the "best" schools can win prizes or simply be recognized for their achievement. Examples include Tennessee's FAFSA Frenzy or California's new Race to Submit.[10] Another example from Tennessee is the "Path to College," where schools are officially recognized for completing four events that include college workshops and other early outreach activities that promote a "college-going culture."[11]

3. *Make the process as easy as possible*

Finally, information is more effective when paired with additional services that ease application burdens.

Individuals are more likely to use services if trained individuals help them overcome administrative hurdles. The most relevant study is Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2012), where access to H&R Block accountants increased FAFSA submissions and subsequent enrollment behaviors. (Two underappreciated aspects of this study: information alone did not change behaviors, and impacts were much larger for dependents than older, independent students.) Positive effects for administrative support have been found in other contexts. For example:

- A simple informational letter that encouraged out-of-work individuals to attend college led to higher enrollment, but also included an infrastructure, such as employment services offices, that likely helped deliver these gains (Barr & Turner, 2018).
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation was higher when information was paired with application assistance (Finkelstein & Notowidigdo, 2018).

Given that application assistance matters, potential solutions include:

- ***College Counselors***: Multiple studies suggest that counselors have positive impacts of college-going, and that direct, face-to-face assistance in filling out forms, whether for financial aid or college applications, is a key lever. This has occurred for full-year, in-school high school counselors or college students who

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[10] https://www.tn.gov/gearuptn/tn-fafsa-frenzy.html; http://www.csac.ca.gov/post/statewide-2018-19-race-submit-winners-announced
[11] https://www.collegefortn.org/open/pathtocollege; https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Tennessee-Path-To-College.pdf

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

visit a local high school once per week (Bettinger & Evans, 2018; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2017; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014).[12] There is some concern that students who only go to college as a result of this attentive service may lack sufficient maturity or academic preparation to be successful; a study of Texas' college and career information "GO Centers" found that personal assistance yielded a large increase on applications but smaller impacts on enrollment and no impact on college completion rates after eight years (Cunha et al., 2018). In general, we do not observe long-term impacts for most studies. One counterexample is the Dell Scholars program, where intensive counseling—both before and during college—combined with significant financial support led to large increases in bachelor's degree completion (Page, Kehoe, Castleman, & Sahadewo, 2017). Overall, counseling services have a strong impact on initial enrollment but less is known about long-term completion effects.

- ***Financial aid workshops***: An alternative or supplement to college counselors is to provide high-school level workshops on an ad hoc basis. Examples include:

    - ***California's Cash for College Workshops***: California provides state funds for "Cash for College" workshops that assist low-income college goers to learn about and complete financial aid applications; these mostly take place on high school campuses or through local service providers (*e.g.,* non-profits).[13]

    - Some states have also created easy application forms to request local college counselors or other workshop providers to visit a school.[14]

- ***Text-messaging campaigns***: Even with support, students are likely to start applications but fail to make it to the finish line, and "nudges," or frequent reminders, can help them complete these tasks. Text-messaging

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[12] Other studies have also found counseling to be helpful in getting some students enrolled in four-year colleges to earn their degree (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). In some contexts, coaching is more effective than informational or text-messaging interventions (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2018) or financial aid (Clotfelter, Hemelt, & Ladd, 2018) in helping students graduate.

[13] https://www.cash4college.csac.ca.gov/

[14] This could happen at the state level (e.g., West Virginia, http://www.cfwvconnect.com/financial-aid-outreach/host-a-workshop/) or through individual institutions (*e.g.*, Texas, http://www.finaid.txstate.edu/contact/outreach.html).

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

campaigns are the most common example, where even small, positive impacts can be a worthwhile investment due to the relatively low cost of the intervention. Regular text reminders have helped students successfully transition from high school to college by guiding them through complex administrative and financial processes, often during the summer when some have little outside support or are overwhelmed by initial tuition payments (Castleman & Page, 2013, 2015, 2016; Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014; Page et al., 2017). Text messages have also increased FAFSA submissions even among college freshmen transitioning into their sophomore year (Castleman & Page, 2016). As these freshmen had already filled out financial aid forms the prior year, this intervention is about keeping students progressing through unpleasant tasks, rather than providing them more information.

- *Virtual advising*: There are a few other ways states and colleges have attempted to create more cost-effective counseling services. Though more research is needed to understand their impact, some programs, like the College Advising Corps, have taken to using "virtual" advisers—relying on one-on-one interactions, but over the computer—to minimize costs and increase their geographical spread. One experiment at Georgia State used an RCT to test a "conversational artificial intelligence" bot that provided personalized text messaging and outreach to students (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). Students who were able to access the bot completed more application steps on time and were more likely to show up in the fall.[15] A "spillover" benefit of this approach is that human counselors were then freed to do more intensive work with students that had more difficult questions.

- *Open resources and toolkits*: Another approach has been to create substantial toolkits and other online resources to allow high schools to more easily provide college workshops. Conversations suggest that this is particularly important for rural communities that lack the size or resources to draw outside service providers. Some tools have been funded philanthropically, such as Lumina's Foundation's KnowHow2GO or an

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[15] A brief write-up of this research is here: https://hbr.org/2018/01/how-georgia-state-university-used-an-algorithm-to-help-students-navigate-the-road-to-college.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

interactive computer game developed at University of Southern California.[16] Some states have also developed their own resources—including toolkits, outreach materials, or phone hotlines—to maximize interest in specific colleges or local issues.[17] One big question is whether the new FAFSA mobile application, with an upcoming launch, helps increase completed applications.[18]

Enhancing Data Systems to Improve Outreach and Accessibility

Even when students apply and complete their forms, there are many instances when they do not ultimately receive financial aid from the state. It can be hard to know why utilization is low; in an informal analysis conducted for the California Student Aid Commission, the primary "cause" of low take-up rates was eligible students enrolling in a community college and almost immediately dropping out before aid could be disbursed.[19] Thus, other issues—such as lack of motivation to attend, an inability to get desired courses, finding that aid packages are insufficient to support their learning, or re-evaluating whether they are academically prepared for the postsecondary environment—are likely to be a large part of low take-up rates, at least in the short term, outside of financial aid's purview.[20] One ongoing experiment in California is using an RCT to test whether different messages that incorporate behavioral science principles impact whether eligible students increase their take-up of state aid, but results are not yet available.[21]

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[16] Lumina Foundation (http://knowhow2go.acenet.edu/); USC computer game (https://getschooled.com/dashboard/game/2476-play-mission-admission).

[17] One example is this toolkit from West Virginia that includes items like an overview of available aid and sample flyers and postcards (http://cfwvconnect.com/request-resources/product/financial-aid-workshop-digital-toolkit/). Another example is Tennessee's FAFSA Frenzy toolkit, described later in this document (https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/gearuptn/fafsa-frenzy/FINAL.TNFAFSAFrenzyToolkit201819.pdf). Multiple states offer hotlines for student support (*e.g.*, http://www.collegeforalltexans.com/index.cfm?objectid=F387C3D2-040B-53D2-512FCDE83F71E383).

[18] https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/announcements/fafsa-mobile-options

[19] Students also did not take up aid for other reasons, such as enrolling out of state, or simply being uninterested in attending college relative to their other options.

[20] This could be a sign that state aid needed to be disbursed faster, but it bears noting that in California, state aid-eligible students were also likely to receive fee waivers that make community college enrollment free, so the state aid program was more about providing additional cash rather than fulfilling tuition payments.

[21] This experiment by Jesse Rothstein has been preregistered at the American Economic Association website, with a brief description here: https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/3031.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

Much of this potential work—both the implementation and the subsequent evaluation—relies on effective data systems to identify students early and track them over time. For example:

- **Michigan's HAIL** project used both the state-funded offering of the SAT and a state database with student GPAs and free/reduced price lunch status to find low-income, high-achieving students they believed would benefit from the program.
- **The Georgia State artificial intelligence bot** required direct access to student information systems so that outreach messages were highly tailored to the specific tasks students had to complete next, rather than simply telling them to "stay on track" without any real guidance.

If data were available that showed which students started but did not complete the FAFSA, then states could reach out to those students well in advance of submission deadlines to encourage them toward the finish line.

Better data systems can also alleviate application barriers.

- **California's Cal Grant** requires students to submit their high school GPA for eligibility, and a law enacted in 2014 authorized the automatic electronic exchange of student GPAs from high schools into the state data system; although results are not yet public, initial results suggest that the electronic exchange increased the number of awards used by students.[22]

As one final note, better outreach and assistance directed toward parents, rather than students and schools, may be an important determinant of the success of these interventions. A number of studies have pointed to direct action toward parents as beneficial for improving early literacy or high school attendance (Bergman, forthcoming; York & Loeb, 2014). Carrell and Sacerdote (2017) suggest that the counseling program worked because the visiting counselors served as a substitute for parents and teachers that were missing or unfamiliar with the process (and that low application rates were not due to lack of information or inattention). Informal conversations with college outreach providers in a number of states suggested that being able to contact parents directly, rather than working indirectly through students

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[22] Gurantz has initiated a study of the law, but results are still preliminary. Legislative text on AB-2160, authored by Rep. Phil Ting, is here: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140AB2160.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

or high schools, could lead to better results. Better data systems with parental information might provide one way for easier direct outreach to students' parents.[23]

Considerations for Improving Outreach and Accessibility in North Carolina

The survey results presented to the North Carolina Student Financial Aid Study Group (Analysis of North Carolina Financial Aid Programs: National Comparisons, Trends, Survey Results) broadly support the research findings described above. In North Carolina, general knowledge about the existence of aid is strong (Slide 33) and many of the key functions, such as the application portal, work well for their intended tasks (Slide 36). Significant challenges remain in making financial aid *easy*. The myriad of programs led over half of survey respondents to feel aid is overly complex and in need of simplification (Slides 34, 37, 41, etc.). There is also a concern that current aid packages are insufficient (Slide 37).

Recommendations to improve alignment of North Carolina's practices with the "Simple, Often, Easy" principles that can advance outreach and accessibility include:

- Securing better data;

- Improving FAFSA completion;

- Simplifying messaging to make students aware of award amounts;

- Experimenting with incentives for students to complete applications;

- Streamlining the application process;

- Providing direct and indirect supports for students throughout the process; and

- Tracking outcomes.

1) Secure better data to identify and reach out to students earlier and more frequently during the application process

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[23] An example of a policy brief discussing how California should approach this issue of data connectedness is here: http://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/making-california-data-more-useful-educational-improvement-0

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

North Carolina would have more tools to increase aid applications if the state could identify students earlier in the process, thereby creating opportunities to provide families regular reminders over time.

In general, colleges or aid-granting agencies must wait until students start the application process before they can initiate outreach, preventing them from contacting the neediest families, who often begin too late. There are a number of ways to identify students earlier, all of which rely on improved data systems and processes.

- *Access comprehensive state systems*: Leverage centralized data on the K-12 student population, particularly if these data include free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) participation.[24] The University of Michigan's HAIL project cited access to FRPL data as instrumental to its success, to ensure that most of the full-tuition aid packages were not subsidizing high-income students who would have attended Michigan regardless.
- *Simplify requested information*: Getting data is easier if students do not have to exert much effort up front. An example of this approach is the Tennessee Promise, where state law requires students to apply in the fall of their 12th grade year, prior to FAFSA availability (at least, before the recent implementation of "prior prior" year FAFSA). To minimize application barriers, Tennessee created an extremely simplified initial form that required a student's email address and asked for a parent email address or cell phone number as an additional option. In essence, they created a "one-click" option to authorize outreach, rather than requiring students to go through many steps up front. Then, with these data in hand, they were able to conduct regular outreach over many months directly to parents, who are key to successful application behaviors.
- *Targeted follow-up*: Discussed in the context of FAFSA completion below, using data to provide targeted follow-up once information is in the system to students and families can help spur completion. In multiple conversations with state- and university-level aid administrators, people note that students and families are drowning in information, but much of it is too vague.[25] Better data access can help make outreach more timely and provide families

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[24] Two recent papers suggests that though FRPL may have problems, it can generally be used as a proxy for disadvantaged students (Domina et al.; Michelmore & Dynarski, 2017).
[25] My conversations included staff in California, Michigan, Tennessee, and Texas.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

concrete next steps that are likely to spur action, as occurred with Georgia State's artificial intelligence bot.

2) Improve FAFSA completion

North Carolina relies primarily on the FAFSA to determine financial aid eligibility, so any initiatives to increase FAFSA completion are likely to have significant impact.[26] Information-only outreach is unlikely to achieve large gains in FAFSA completion, as low take-up rates are predominately due to administrative barriers (*e.g.,* (Bettinger et al., 2012) or lack of motivation due to disinterest, uncertainty, or the like. North Carolina does appear to engage in some activities that have been considered successful in other states, such as FAFSA Day in late October, where families can meet with financial aid advisers or, alternately, receive assistance throughout November at State Employee Credit Union branches.[27] This type of initiative should help in theory, though it is not clear that needy families are geographically close to services or would make the effort to attend. Considerations to improve this form of outreach include:

- *Direct high school outreach*: Moving these types of services into the high school might serve as something closer to an "opt out" strategy, rather than requiring parents to "opt in" to visiting a center. Having within-school activities that promote FAFSA applications could help identify the full population of eligible students, including those who typically would not even begin the process.
- *Timing of event***:** One challenge is that of "reconciling" future rewards with the tendency to procrastinate in the present; getting an early start helps, but so would having more events closer to FAFSA deadlines.
- *Outreach to non-completers*: Another example would be to observe students after they have begun the FAFSA; once their data is in the system, outreach to non-completers is possible through various strategies discussed above. North Carolina does this through the Finish the FAFSA initiative with participating   high   schools.

3) Simplify messaging to give students information on how much aid they are likely to receive

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[26] Some states include other criteria, such as merit-based GPA or standardized test scores.
[27] https://www.cfnc.org/fafsaday. It may be possible to rigorously evaluate FAFSA Day impacts through geographic variation, such as distance to the closest center or variation in where the centers are located across years.

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

North Carolina offers multiple awards, but the amount of aid depends in large part on where students ultimately enroll (*e.g.,* community college vs. four-year college). As noted above, it can be hard for students to make decisions without better knowledge of their actual aid amount for each sector. It is unclear when colleges inform students as to the size of their aid packages—prior to or after selecting their college of enrollment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some cases the timing of the initial billing does not square well with when aid is known or disbursed—particularly as it relates to the first tuition or room and board bills—leading to sticker shock and likely contributing to the issue of "summer melt" where admitted students do not show up in the fall. Students might also be better served if they receive the full range of their potential aid packages from the state rather than waiting for individual colleges to provide this information.

Creating messages around how much aid students are _likely_ to receive, rather than the full range of total aid available, can both simplify outreach campaigns and increase the salience of future aid packages. Although states should provide all the detailed information necessary, most of the variability in FAFSA awards can be predicted from just a few questions (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006). For example, a simpler message might be "among families making $50,000 per year, the average student received between $2,500 and $3,000 of support from the state" (or alternately, "among families making $50,000 per year, state aid covered half of their tuition bills"). This could be done using data on current enrollees from previous years and calculating median aid for students of various income backgrounds. This could be made slightly more nuanced by reporting the "interquartile range" (from the 25th and 75th percentile) or, if possible, adding information on institutional aid amounts. In addition to giving a more accurate picture of the likely award, it might help students to not _overestimate_ awards, as students might naively add all the potential totals without understanding the ways that various aid programs often cannibalize each other (Turner, 2017).

4) Experiment with financial or social incentives to get students and schools to take action

As noted, small incentives or social pressures can spur action. North Carolina should consider experimenting with incentives—whether financial, social, or other—that might prompt action. For instance, California's Cash for College workshops drew in more students when they offered a $1,000 scholarship, even though given the typical workshop size, this meant paying students roughly $2 to $3 to attend (Gurantz,

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

2018a). These small incentives may work to get families to participate in FAFSA Day or visit credit union offices. Public recognition has been shown to spur action in various settings, particularly when making social comparisons to others (Ferraro, Miranda, & Price, 2011). There are many examples of state-level or local-level competitions to participate in activities that could work to increase aid applications, though impacts have not been rigorously tested.

5) Streamline the application process for students

Finding ways to streamline the application process can remove barriers for students that discourage them from applying for financial aid or finishing the process. Strategies to increase completion include:

- _Survey data_: Surveys directed at both high school and continuing college students can identify where students struggle in the application process and help address barriers and simplify the process for students. For example, knowing if students are aware that they have to list certain schools (_e.g.,_ community colleges) to be eligible for specific awards, or if they are familiar with the FAFSA verification process could inform the design of specific supports. FAFSA verification is an understudied process, and often occurs over the summer when students have fewer supports.

- _Create a centralized portal for college applications_: It would benefit the state to reconnect all in-state colleges to a centralized application portal, similar to Apply Texas and other states. Having one application portal could free up student time that could then be used toward completing financial aid applications. In addition, some students do not apply to selective institutions because they think they would be too expensive, not understanding that more selective schools are often cheaper for low-income students (Hoxby & Turner, 2015). A simpler application portal might encourage a more diverse set of students to apply to selective schools, with the ancillary benefit that outreach on financial aid may be simpler as a result. If the portal could mimic aspects of other widely used portals, such as the Common App, this might also benefit students in the long run.

6) Increase supports, including the number of counselors focused on college outreach and preparation and/or tools that can provide relevant information to students

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

While perhaps the least feasible recommendation, finding ways to strategically increase the number of counselors or the focus of counselors can have a large return, particularly for certain underserved student populations. Tennessee is one state that has placed counselors in most high schools, and early results from counseling interventions are consistently positive.[28] In informal conversations, financial aid staff consistently spoke to embedded counselors as being able to spur action through personal connections and knowing their local community. A number of people spoke to challenges, particularly with rural or low-income families, of government mistrust and spotty tax filing as serious barriers to getting some communities to engage with the FAFSA.

For example, there is a relatively lower number of aid awards used by students in the far western and eastern portions of the state (Analysis of North Carolina Financial Aid Programs: National Comparisons, Trends, Survey Results Slides 19, 23, 27). On average, these counties are lower-income, which might be evidence that those most in need are less aware of or able to navigate the aid application process; on the other hand, these counties are less populated, so without awards adjusted per capita, this might be an erroneous conclusion. Nonetheless, it is commonplace that more rural and low-income communities often have a hard time navigating the aid process, and additional resources targeted towards those communities may be needed. Many of the interventions discussed above—ready-made toolkits, virtual advising initiatives—have been specifically created to reach these hard-to-serve populations.

7) Track long-term outcomes for state- or local-led initiatives

Finally, there are a few other issues that came up in multiple conversations with financial aid staff. One is the issue of the "middle class," wherein low-income students often have access to aid but middle-income families assume, perhaps incorrectly, that they make too much money to receive assistance. Many aid advisors believe that this assumption is preventing middle-income families from applying, and that they need to be made aware that they might be eligible for some form of financial support that often rely on FAFSA completion for identification.

As one final note, improved outreach and accessibility might help more students come to college, but attention should be paid to whether they succeed while there. Whereas some interventions increase enrollment without changing completion, likely driving

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[28] Advise TN is described here: https://www.tn.gov/thec/bureaus/student-aid-and-compliance/college-access/redirect-college-access-and-success/advise-tn.html

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

up debt (Cunha et al., 2018), initiatives that sustained the connection through college —including something as simple as regular reminders to resubmit the FAFSA—helped lead students to the finish line (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Castleman & Page, 2016; Page et al., 2017).

Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
Dr. Oded Gurantz, Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri

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Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
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Improving Outreach and Accessibility of Financial Aid
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