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Nudging Can, Actually, Make a Difference in Enrolling Low-Income Students

To the Editor:

Unpublished research that was not known to you for your recent article on “nudging” calls into question an important conclusion about the inadequacy of economical outreach to high-achieving low-income students (“‘Nudging’ Looked Like It Could Help Solve Key Problems in Higher Ed. Now That’s Not So Clear” (Chronicle, September 4). Attempting to replicate earlier findings by Hoxby and Turner, College Board research concluded that nudging “...produces no statistically significant effect in enrolling students at selective schools.”

But neither the College Board original draft nor the Chronicle article reported research findings from the partnership between the College Board and the Enrollment Planning Network (EPN), a consortium of 25 selective private research universities.

EPN conducted two mailings in addition to the College Board materials and launched a special “Realize Your College Potential” website for additional information to the students in the high-school graduating class of 2016 about the consortium and member schools. Internal EPN research indicated that roughly 10 percent of the high-achieving low-income students receiving the materials visited the special website. College Board analysis found a statistically significant 10-percent increase in test scores sent to EPN universities and a 7-percent increase (not statistically significant) in EPN university enrollment the following fall as a result of the EPN materials. It also found that students receiving the EPN materials were 6 percent (not statistically significant) more likely to be enrolled at EPN member universities in the fall of 2017.

EPN did, in fact, increase the probability of score sends from high-achieving, low-income students that ordinarily would not have applied to these universities. EPN, without additional contact or personalized contact did, in fact, minimally increase the probability of enrollments from the students that ordinarily would not have enrolled at these universities. And the College Board’s published research found an increase in both score sends and enrollment of Latinx and African American high-achieving low-income students that ordinarily would not have enrolled at selective colleges and universities.

These important finding get lost in the headlines of the Chronicle article — a repeat of the rollout when the College Board research was originally presented. Nudging low-income students to apply to selective colleges with appropriately targeted materials can make a difference and ignoring the finding sends the dangerous message of “why even try?”

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