From Access to Intervention: Defying Undermatch Only to Mismatch and Reverse Transfer

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A 10-page summary of the dissertation
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This three-paper dissertation investigates the support high-achieving underrepresented minority high school students need in order to consider, apply to, and enroll in colleges and universities that “match” their academic abilities. It specifically examines support systems that provide youth from historically underrepresented backgrounds with the particular social and cultural capital that promote their college access. At the core of these systems are relational networks and the flow of information. Information about college and financial aid is central to college choice and persistence for low-income, first generation, Black, Latinx, and Native American college aspirants.

This dissertation also investigates the resulting college-participation experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds, as it is just as important to understand the consequences of match or undermatch, as it is to grasp the college choice processes leading up to the matching of students with postsecondary opportunities.

Background

The research problem concerns college choice and the resulting “match” between college-aspirants and the institutions they attend. Matching -- and consequences of the match -- is defined as the degree of social, cultural, and academic preparation and kind of fit between the college-aspirants and the intellectual or social environment in which they will study. Underrepresented students often undermatch, referring to the all-too-frequent occurrence of students choosing colleges that do not offer them learning opportunities commensurate with their academic profiles and potentials (see Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011, 2009, 2008). It is also possible to mismatch, which occurs when underrepresented students find an uncomfortable social and cultural fit on their new campuses (see Stephens, et al., 2012). In fact, students who defy undermatch in the college choice process often mismatch at predominantly, White resource-rich selective institutions. Some of these students ultimately choose to leave their four-year
colleges to attend a community college—a process known as reverse transfer (see Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009).

In explaining these phenomena, research has left critical aspects of the story unexplained. Four gaps, in particular, seem especially important to address. First, we know that high schools expose students to various college-promoting resources including academic preparation and delivery of college guidance. These schools also expose students to norms such as a college-going climate and parental involvement, as well as structural supports such as the network-relationships of parents, peers, teachers, counselors. We know these resources form the basis of the high school context and the “web of support” (Varga & Zaff, 2018) that shape students’ tastes for particular types of postsecondary education. However, much less is understood about how students’ interactions with these resources and conditions affects whether they match—that is, find the best higher education fit for their academic profiles, as well as for their financial, social, and personal needs.

Second, and just as important, little is known about the phenomenon of undermatch. More low-income, first-generation, Black, and Latinx students than ever before are participating in higher education – leading to the question of whether efforts to improve equity should be refocused on college completion rather than access (see Adelman, 2007). Yet Black and Latinx students graduate at a rate of 73 percent from selective colleges, compared with a graduation rate of 40 percent at community colleges (see Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). That is important because only an alarming one in every 25 Latinx and one in every 20 Black students attended a highly selective institution, compared with one in every six White and one in every four Asian students. The disparities were wider across family income, as one of every three students from high-income backgrounds enrolled in a highly-selective institution, compared with only one in every 25 of their low-income peers (see Bozick & Lauff, 2007).

The current enrollment trends of underrepresented students, a disproportionate number of whom are low-income, first-generation, Black and Latinx college aspirants, show the interacting and multiplying effect of race and socioeconomic class. Black and Latino males, in particular, are especially prone to ending up on the “wrong side” of a longstanding “achievement gap,” in which their educations, identities, performances, and attainments systematically and persistently lag behind those of their male counterparts and those of young women of any racial and ethnic background. Because undermatch sits at the center of both the college access and college
completion agendas, it follows that creating opportunities for underrepresented students to be more intentional about choosing colleges that match their academic profiles is likely to improve completion rates.

Existing studies stop short of exploring the role that information plays in undermatch, how information is conveyed and by whom, and what gives it meaning and resonance to college-ready students who have few or no real reference points for higher education or the process of seeking appropriate colleges. Access to information is not a mechanical or static thing; rather, it happens in the context of relationships that engage young people’s imaginations, hopes, dreams, and sense of selves. In short, we do not know how the high school context or its web of support promotes or limits undermatch. And we do not know what exactly happens that enables students to persist despite the various informational barriers they encounter. The answers to these questions undoubtedly involve students’ interactions with various people and the high school context. The phenomenon of undermatch begs for close, careful research that illuminates the dynamics of college choice in contexts in which undermatching is likely (Hurwitz et al., 2012).

A third gap in the research is that we know little about how youth support systems can be built that would enable greater access to college-promoting network-relationships rich in information as well as other college-promoting (or limiting) resources. Such systems are especially acute for students attending schools that are hard-pressed to serve basic educational needs, as is the case in many historically resource-poor communities. Certain organizations outside the school system called community-based organizations or CBOs are committed to college access and success, and they have clear potential to meet this need. However, scholarship has yet to unpack what these organizations do and how they do it.

Finally, once students have selected a college and enrolled, sometimes well matched but often not, we often find instances of mismatch between the dominant norms institutionalized in U.S. universities and the norms in working-class environments that first-generation college students or students of color are often exposed to before college. Understanding what leads to this situation and what follows from it is important work for scholars to undertake.

Conceptually, the three papers taken together further our understanding of the undermatch phenomenon in relation to the cultural and social capital development for first-generation college students from historically underrepresented groups. While social capital refers to the set of socially based resources (information, know-how, culturally based ideas) that
individuals can access through social networks. Cultural capital is the knowledge and experience that, once attained, facilitates individuals’ membership and ability to operate effectively in higher-status environments (see Bourdieu, 1986, and Coleman, 1988, for seminal work in this regard). These studies contribute to the existing college choice and undermatch literature, as well as the persistence/transfer and mismatch literature.

Because the nature and availability of college-going resources vary greatly across high schools, following the college choice process of students in the context of their school environments will better inform our understanding of the undermatch phenomenon. Looking at the ways in which students might mismatch once they start at a university will also add to our understanding. This dissertation undertakes these tasks, through three coordinated qualitative studies.

Methods

The three study designs are linked, primarily by following the same individuals at multiple time points in the college choice-persistence processes. Over the course of the three studies, I conducted semi-structured, 30-90-minute interviews with seven students and five adult participants (N = 12). Given the small sample size of the studies, my findings cannot be generalized to wider populations. However, the information and findings of these studies can be used to design further research on influences in the college choice-persistence process for this population of students, as well as the influences on reverse transfer. In addition, by understanding better the meaning of students’ college choice and persistence processes, educators and policymakers can devise meaningful and effective policies and practices to address inequitable access, to better enable the development of intergenerational cultural and social capital, and to improve campus climates so that all students can thrive.

Findings

In Paper 1, The Role of Informational Networks in Undermatching: A Case Study of College Choice in an Urban High School, I discuss how students interact with their high school contexts. I explore undermatch, wherein college-ready, low-income students often apply to and enroll in less competitive higher education institutions than their academic qualifications might
permit. The findings from this study suggest that there are at least three ways in which schools and districts might address the issue of undermatching: (1) ascertain what students and adults know about the college process and about better matching; (2) identify which adult relationships could be leveraged with college-ready students in order to help them make the best college matches; and (3) reconsider what policies and practices could be put in place at the building and district levels to assist students in making the best college matches. The findings suggest that if students are given access to the necessary information about the college process, understand the importance of their respective college choices in their future success, are partnered with adults who can help them navigate the process, and have access to systems at the school and district level to make the process more transparent, students will make better college choices that will lead to higher graduation rates and more and better professional opportunities (McDonough, 1997).

In Paper 2, Undermatch in the College Choice Process and the Role That Community-Based Organizations May Play, I discuss student interaction with the outside organizational context, examining how membership in a community-based organization (CBO) committed to college access and choice can support high school male students of color in the college choice process. The findings of this study show three main effects of a CBO’s interactions with first-generation, low-income college-bound students of color who are likely to undermatch. The first finding concerns how information about college and financial aid is transmitted to students through a CBO-generated network of relationships and how those relationships translate into support with exposure and access to particular types of college-going resources (academic preparation and college guidance), norms (college-going climate and parental influence), and ultimately the set of institutions students consider. These relationships are powerful helps in fighting undermatching. Second, the study found that CBOs can offer students strong support as they move through the college search process. Third, the study identifies ways that students developed cultural and social capital through their interactions with the CBO.

Paper 3, Defying Undermatch Only to Mismatch and Reverse Transfer, explores the phenomena of mismatch and “reverse transfer,” and tells the story of underrepresented students who mismatched at their selective four-year institutions and transferred to community colleges closer to home. In the final analysis, the challenge—and problem—with matching and with the consequences of the match—is not solely an institutional one. If it were, then the students’ own
agency would be lost. The cases examined in this study underscore the latter point, emphasizing that students needed to take control over their own struggles and develop their own resolution to the challenges they face. Both of these students did so. Their reverse transfer stories must be understood in these terms—as an empowered, self-directed step in what is often a long and difficult journey. They will come out of this episode in the journey stronger and their prospects for a successful outcome enhanced, not only with academic credentials established but also their dignity intact. And if the institutions that have served them can learn how to better support such students in their reach for an empowered and prosperous future, so much the better. The results of this study may help point the way.

Conclusions and Significance

These three studies taken together demonstrate how social, organizational, and institutional arrangements, processes, and the linkages between a high school and colleges, as well as between a CBO and colleges, help to limit and promote undermatch. In addition, the empirical evidence shows, through case studies of students who were accepted into colleges thought to be well-matched to their academic potentials, that successful academic experiences for first generation students and students of color are complex, relying on more than academic performance and potential. The results of the three studies in this dissertation complement and extend each other.

The starting point is the phenomenon of undermatch—a widespread situation facing numerous talented adolescents receiving their high school educations in economically depressed communities and often in schools serving large concentrations of low-income students of color. These students may or may not aspire to postsecondary education, and if they do, they are unlikely to have access to sufficient resources, information, and encouragement to explore a range of postsecondary possibilities. They are also unlikely to find several possibilities that are good matches to their academic profiles and preferences for their futures. Given the resource constraints in their high schools and the communities they serve, first-generation students and students of color usually participate in networks of relationships that are unlikely to impart sufficient social capital for their needs.
In some instances, other elements may enrich the support system available to such students, as when community-based organizations dedicated to college access and success are present. These organizations may greatly enhance the student’s social capital development, and, along with that, increase the odds that the students will not only apply to college but also will not undermatch. Furthermore, the CBO, by engaging with the high schools their students attend, can subtly nudge the existing system to pay closer attention to the needs of first-generation students and students of color, particularly young men, which could have implications far beyond the numbers of students they are currently serving. But these organizations are, in effect, primarily creating a parallel pipeline that bypasses, rather than fixes, the fundamental barriers that exist in the P-12 system.

In spite of the long odds facing many first-generation students and students of color (especially those who do not have the support of a community-based organization), determined students may persist. Often they select postsecondary options that appear to be undermatched to their academic profiles and needs. But, it is also possible that they may select colleges that appear at first glance to be better matched to them, as one of the students in the study did. Although such choices may look well matched to a student’s academic profile, there is still a potential for mismatch to occur, where the institution and the student do not meet each other’s needs, for any number of reasons. Socially, institutions expect that students will separate from the groups with which they were formerly associated, such as familial members and high school peers and undergo a period of transition when students start interacting in different ways with the new group they find at their colleges and universities, adopting the values and behaviors of that group. However, such separation may be more difficult for some students than others, particularly for students of color and first-generation students.

Culturally, colleges and universities emphasize and promote the cultural norms of independence (Fryberg & Markus, 2007). In an examination of cultural norms at U.S. universities and colleges, Stephens and colleagues (2012) surveyed high-level university administrators about their institutions’ expectations for students. The administrators reported that their institutions promoted primarily independent norms and expectations (e.g., students should pave their own paths, express themselves). These independent norms seem natural to intergenerational college-participating students, who have been socialized mainly in middle- and upper-class environments.
However, for first-generation students and students of color, these norms often present a cultural mismatch. These students often feel the burden of having to help provide financial assistance or other help supporting their families (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). The attention of many first-generation students is torn between home and school. Many low-income students, even those whose families can provide some financial assistance, are also constantly worried about the ways in which the cost of their educations might impact their families, while others are physically taking care of family members who face health issues. These external issues combined with facing a culturally-mismatched environment, can lead to an aversive psychological state that can have physical and chemical effects resulting in anxiety. Such anxiety amplifies stereotype threat. Together, these can disrupt a students’ academic engagement and performance.

The net result of this cultural mismatch between university norms and student norms is often an economic analysis, where students perceive that the cost of staying in a college outweighs the return on investment for staying there. When they make the decision to forego the opportunities selective colleges offer, they often “reverse transfer,” leaving for a community college close to home. Such was the case with the students in the study of reverse transfer.

Once again, social capital development (even with the help of a community-based organization), both prior to college enrollment and after enrollment, may not reflect what the students most need to navigate a challenging new environment. There, a new set of social capital dynamics come into play. Students who have been raised in interdependent communities will be expected or forced to develop new bonding and bridging relationships with people—professors, staff, peers—who have been socialized with norms of independence in order to make their way successfully through the society of the new campus community, one that can sometimes feel hostile and unwelcoming.

The decision by students to leave the selective four-year institution and return to nonselective two-year institutions, typically closer to home, less expensive, and less taxing as a cultural change, may be risky, as graduation rates for all students at highly selective colleges and universities exceed those at less selective schools. Furthermore, reverse transfer is often viewed as a failure, both of the student and of the original host institution. However, there may be more to the story, as the findings of the third paper in this group suggest. The students made empowering decisions that they thought were in their best interests, and this circuitous route may
turn out to be their best pathway toward greater social capital development, along the way contributing to ultimate educational success.

Though the three studies presented here are only exploratory and cannot lead to broad generalizations, they lead us to consider what might be done to improve the college choice and post-secondary experiences for underrepresented and first-generation students. It is important to note that the challenge spans the P-12 and postsecondary sectors. Whether the choice or persistence process, many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, particularly first-generation college aspirants, (especially those without membership in a college-promoting CBO) do not have access to the particular college-promoting or intergenerational cultural and social capital needed to fully engage with either process.

Furthermore, college choice, college entry, and college success are intimately connected with one another. Students’ social capital will impact their chances of undermatch, mismatch and reverse transfer. Therefore, a better understanding of the dynamics of the degree of match between preparation, aspirations, and choice, as well as engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence is important. In addition, relational networks are key throughout the movement into and through college, although the make-up of these networks is likely to change—and will need to change—as the student moves through the process.

Finally and perhaps most important, the challenge to students of color and first-generation college goers remains substantial regardless of their support systems because of the unwelcoming climates at most predominantly White institutions. A good match that is based on academic potential and even on financial ease will not be a good match if students do not feel welcomed by the institution or the student body. Therefore, when we think about ways to enhance support systems, we need to remember that they include middle and high schools, non-school organizations, and postsecondary institutions.

Longitudinal research conducted with larger samples moving through each point of the college choice and college persistence processes is needed before we can fully understand these relationships and improve them for students. This present research is a beginning.