

Make Me a Match

HELPING LOW-INCOME AND FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS MAKE GOOD COLLEGE CHOICES

By Jay Sherwin

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It has become a truism and a rare example of political consensus: Educators, researchers, and policymakers across the political spectrum agree that America must send more of its young people to college and must find ways to help them graduate. Despite this broad consensus, it has been difficult to design and implement effective strategies for dramatically increasing college enrollment and graduation.

Students fall through the cracks at each step along the road to a college degree. Many students — particularly low-income students and students of color — attend high schools that do not recognize their potential or engage them academically, and many of them drop out. Of those who do graduate, many confront financial or personal challenges that prevent them from even considering college.

Of those who do enroll in college, many are academically unprepared or too financially fragile to complete a degree and may attend institutions that offer them little support. Only 68 percent of high school graduates immediately enroll in college,¹ and only 57 percent of students at four-year institutions earn a degree in six years.² At many public four-year universities, the graduation rates are considerably lower.³

In Chicago, an intervention now under way — the College Match Program — takes an innovative approach to solving the problem of low college graduation rates. Developed by MDRC in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools, College Match targets a population that has been overlooked by many other college suc-

cess initiatives: moderately to high-achieving students who are prepared for college but need advice and support to choose college wisely. By placing young adult advisers in high schools to help these students find colleges that meet their academic, social, and personal needs, the program tests the theory that students who enroll in a “match” college are most likely to thrive, persist, and graduate.

UNDERMATCHING: A PROBLEM AND AN OPPORTUNITY

Even in school districts where many students struggle, there are many academically capable low-income and minority students who *do* graduate from high school and *are* well prepared for college. These are students who should enroll in college and should graduate — but too few do. 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.

“College Match asked, ‘Why are you choosing this school? Is it going to be enough of a challenge? Is it the right size? Is it going to get you to a degree?’”

Jeff Wright, Principal,
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
College Preparatory High School
Chicago Public Schools

This phenomenon — dubbed “undermatching” — was first examined by Melissa Roderick and her colleagues at the Consortium on

Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. In two studies published in 2008 and 2009, the Consortium studied the college-going patterns of students graduating from the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).⁴ These studies found that a large percentage of students were enrolling in colleges for which they were academically overqualified; even more alarmingly, they found that many highly capable students were not pursuing any postsecondary studies.

For example, among students in the CPS class of 2005 who responded to a survey question that they “aspired to complete a four-year degree,” only 59 percent actually completed all the steps required to apply to a four-year college, and only 41 percent completed the additional steps to enroll in a four-year college the following fall.⁵

The undermatching problem affected both the highest-achieving students and a second tier of moderate to high achievers. Among CPS students who were qualified for admission to a “very selective” college — the highest achievers — only 38 percent enrolled in a college at that level of selectivity. A nearly equal number, 37 percent, enrolled at a college for which they were significantly overqualified, or did not enroll at all.⁶

The moderate to high achievers, who were qualified for admission to “selective” colleges, fared even worse. Only 27 percent of those students enrolled at a “selective” or “very selective” college, while the vast majority attended less-selective four-year colleges or two-year colleges, or did not enroll.⁷ As illustrated in Table 1, CPS graduates in 2005 and 2006 at all levels of academic ability consistently enrolled in colleges for which they were overqualified, and 44 percent of the graduates did not enroll in any college.

Roderick and her colleagues also assessed the importance of a school’s culture on the postsecondary choices its students made. They found that teachers, counselors, and other school pro-

fessionals could significantly influence those decisions by creating an environment that promotes high academic standards and recognizes the value of postsecondary study:

[T]he single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate, that is, they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in supporting students in completing their college applications.⁸

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

In their widely acclaimed book *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*, authors William Bowen, Matthew Chingos, and Michael McPherson cite and build on the Consortium’s research and uncover strikingly similar evidence of undermatching.⁹ Even more importantly, *Crossing the Finish Line* sounds an alarm about the social cost of the undermatching problem. Citing compelling evidence that students are most likely to graduate when they attend the most academically demanding institution that will admit them, the book argues that students who enroll in colleges for which they are overqualified are placing their academic future at risk.

Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson found many students doing just that. In their research, they tracked college enrollment outcomes for a cohort of North Carolina students from the high school graduating class of 1999. Among graduating students who qualified for admission to the state’s most selective public universities, more than 40 percent undermatched: A total of 31 percent enrolled in a less-selective four-year college, 3 percent attended a two-year college, and 9 percent did not attend any college.¹⁰

Table 1. Chicago Public Schools, Graduating Classes of 2005 and 2006

	VERY SELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE	SELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE	SOMEWHAT SELECTIVE FOUR- YEAR COLLEGE	NONSELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE	TWO- YEAR COLLEGE	SPECIAL OR UNRATED INSTITUTION	NO COLLEGE
QUALIFIED TO ENROLL	9%	16%	30%	19%	26%	*	*
ENROLLED	6%	6%	17%	8%	17%	2%	44%

SOURCE: Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2009, p. 27).

NOTE: *All CPS high school graduates are qualified for some level of postsecondary study. While some graduates enroll in unrated or proprietary programs (such as beauty college or truck driving school), CPS considers those students qualified to attend two-year or four-year colleges.

The research suggests that undermatching particularly affects students from families with low incomes or limited parental education. Among students with family incomes in the lowest quartile, nearly 60 percent enrolled in colleges for which they were overqualified; among students whose parents did not attend college, 64 percent undermatched.¹¹

The effects of these undermatches were equally striking: For students who were presumptively eligible to attend the most-selective colleges but chose less-selective four-year colleges, the six-year graduation rate of 66 percent was 15 points lower than the 81 percent rate for academically similar students who enrolled in the top-tier colleges.¹²

While recognizing that undermatching is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of educational, social, and economic factors, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson reached the following broad conclusion:

We suspect that the primary forces leading to such high undermatch rates were a combination of inertia, lack of information, lack of forward planning for college, and lack of encouragement.¹³

And they offered this recommendation:

[T]here is a considerable opportunity to increase social mobility and augment the

nation's human capital. The key is to find ever more effective ways of informing high-achieving students and their parents of the educational opportunities that are open to them — and of the benefits they can derive from taking advantage of these opportunities.¹⁴

THE COLLEGE MATCH INTERVENTION

In response to the provocative data on undermatching and the promising ideas for addressing the problem, MDRC engaged with the authors of *Crossing the Finish Line* and colleagues at the Consortium on Chicago School Research to develop an intervention that could be tested in public schools that serve students from low-income families. The goal was to design a school-based program that could proactively deliver crucial information and help students and parents make thoughtful decisions about college enrollment.

Beginning in the spring semester of a student's junior year and extending through high school graduation, College Match delivers services through a combination of workshops and counseling by trained advisers who are recent college graduates themselves. These advisers replicate what is available to help students in more affluent schools and homes make informed decisions about college enrollment.

By assigning “near-peer” advisers to serve students in high school settings, the College Match program builds on the work of the National College Advising Corps (NCAC), based at the University of North Carolina. Since 2004, NCAC advisers have offered counseling and support to more than 189,000 students, most of whom are in the first generation of their families to attend college. In the current school year, 321 NCAC advisers are serving over 110,000 students in 368 high schools in 14 states.¹⁵

College Match is organized around several key elements:

- **Information-sharing and awareness-building:** College Match builds knowledge among students and their families about general application strategies, financial aid, and the concept of a “match” school. The program also exposes students to more-selective colleges through campus tours and visits by alumni and admissions representatives.
- **Individualized advising:** It helps students identify “best-fit” schools based on their individual interests, academic abilities, and other personal and family considerations. This attention to college “fit” extends beyond academic “match” by encouraging students to choose a school that meets their academic, financial, personal, and social needs.
- **Application support:** It 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).
- **Parental engagement:** It seeks to help parents understand the college options available to their children and the financial and personal implications of those choices.
- **Decision making and planning ahead:** It helps students choose between multiple acceptances

and financial aid awards. Advisers also help students prepare for college life and the transition to enrollment in college.

While College Match serves academically capable students, the program is not designed to help all of those students gain admission to the most elite colleges and universities. Instead, it seeks to increase the rate at which students apply to, are admitted to, and enroll in colleges that fit their academic profile and meet their financial and personal needs. In many cases, the program works with students who expected to enroll in a two-year community college — or did not plan to attend college at all. College Match advisers help those students understand that a selective four-year college can be a practical, affordable, and superior option.

EARLY PROGRAM RESULTS

In 2010-2011, MDRC piloted the College Match program in three Chicago public high schools that primarily serve students of color from low-income families:

- **Curie Metropolitan High School**, a magnet school serving over 3,500 students. Over 77 percent of its students are Latino, and 93 percent are from low-income families.¹⁶
- **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. College Preparatory High School**, a selective-enrollment high school serving just under 1,000 students. Over 95 percent of its students are African-American, and 75 percent are low income.
- **Lake View High School**, a neighborhood high school serving 1,500 students. Over 60 percent of its students are Latino, and 88 percent are low income.¹⁷

Three advisers were hired and each was assigned to one high school. All three advisers were recent college graduates, and two were alumni of the National College Advising Corps. The advisers sought out students with a minimum 3.0 grade point average and a minimum

score of 20 on the ACT exam, reaching a total of 160 students at the three high schools. Over 87 percent of those students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

While the advisers' experiences were different at each high school, the program was successfully implemented at all three sites, demonstrating that the program's design was feasible. Most importantly, the pilot demonstrated that a group of advisers employed by an external organization could function effectively in a school setting, establishing and building trust with students and offering specialized advice and support without intruding on the responsibilities of full-time counselors employed by the district. At all three pilot schools, College Match was welcomed by principals who understood the "added value" that the program brought to their schools and students.

At the conclusion of the pilot year, MDRC analyzed the postsecondary plans of graduating seniors targeted by College Match in the three pilot schools and compared them with those of similar students in recent graduating classes. Most notably, this preliminary analysis found:

- Students targeted by College Match chose to attend more selective colleges and universities than a comparison group of academically similar students from recent graduating classes. For example, 35 percent of College Match-targeted students planned to enroll at colleges in the "most/highly/very selective" categories — the most competitive colleges in the country — compared with 23 to 28 percent of similar students in earlier years. In two of the pilot schools, the number of students planning to enroll in these colleges increased by 11 and 23 percentage points, respectively.
- 38 percent of College Match-targeted students intended to enroll in colleges in the "selective" category — the next-highest ranking — which also represented a modest increase over earlier years.

- Only 23 percent of 2011 College Match-targeted students intended to enroll in two-year or proprietary colleges or had unknown plans after high school, compared with 30 to 40 percent of similar students in earlier years. This finding illustrates that the program offers significant potential benefits for students who otherwise might choose a community college or forgo college enrollment entirely.

While these initial findings do not support conclusions about the effectiveness of the program, they are encouraging enough to invite further analysis based on a larger sample size and more rigorous research methodology.

For its second year of implementation, the College Match program has been expanded to serve over 400 students in eight Chicago high schools. Four College Match advisers have been assigned to two high schools each, with each adviser serving at least 50 students per school. Beginning in 2012, high school juniors will be randomly selected to participate in the program through a lottery open to all students who meet program eligibility criteria.

The program's growth in Chicago lays the groundwork for planned expansion to additional schools and districts. As College Match reaches a larger number of students, MDRC can conduct a rigorous analysis of the program's effects by comparing college enrollment, persistence, and graduation outcomes for academically similar students in randomly assigned "treatment" and "control" groups. A larger sample size across multiple districts will also make it easier to reliably assess the cost per student of the College Match model.

The College Match Program has the continuing support of the leadership of the Chicago Public Schools. In addition, MDRC has been approached by several funders with an interest in bringing the program to urban, suburban, and perhaps rural high schools in other states.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT COLLEGE

Darlene and Robert* are bright, talented, and successful students. Both were admitted to Chicago’s Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. College Preparatory High School, a selective-admissions public high school that requires good grades and attracts motivated students. Both did well enough there to qualify for admission to competitive colleges and universities. But neither was sure how to choose the right college. That’s the kind of advice that the College Match Program’s Michele Taylor offered.

Darlene says that she “always knew she wanted to go to college.” Her family could not offer much advice, and her school counselor “was too busy to assess my situation.” Michele helped Darlene consider whether she wanted a large school or a small one, public or private, local or distant. “With College Match, I felt like I was more than a number,” she says. “Ms. Taylor was involved with my process every step of the way.”

Robert was not so certain about going to a four-year college and thought he might attend a local community college, instead. He knew that he would need a generous financial aid package to convince his family that college was a good idea. Michele encouraged him to apply to a diverse group of colleges and to aggressively pursue scholarships. “I used to go to her office every day,” he adds. “Ms. Taylor kept me on track and reminded me when I needed to get things done.”

Both Darlene and Robert earned multiple offers of admission and significant scholarship support. At that point, Michele helped them assess their options. Darlene chose Howard University, while Robert selected Bradley University.

As a College Match adviser, Michele Taylor says she learned to combine the roles of parent, older friend, and professional counselor, offering encouragement but also enforcing deadlines and setting clear expectations. For Darlene, Robert, and 50 other students at their high school, Michele’s intervention was an important contribution to their success.

NOTE: *Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of students in the study.

Why focus resources and attention on academically successful students, most of whom are already enrolling in college, when many more students are struggling academically?

Indisputably, our nation’s schools must do more to create a pathway to postsecondary education for millions of high school students at all levels of achievement. However, the academically successful students that College Match serves represent the “low-hanging fruit” in that effort — they need relatively little support to reach and graduate from college. The fact that many of these students forgo college entirely — or choose colleges where they do not graduate — is both regrettable and correctable. By learning now how to help highly capable students choose a “match” college, we may be better prepared to help a much larger student population make wise college choices in the future.

Are less-intensive, technology-driven college advising interventions more practical and cost-effective than employing trained advisers and placing them in schools?

Several prominent scholars are currently studying models that offer remote, online, or other technology-driven college advising for high school students. These models are less expensive than the College Match intervention, but it is not yet clear whether they will prove more cost-effective. There is value in rigorously testing and comparing a variety of approaches to combat the undermatching problem.

Can the College Match model be expanded to serve large numbers of students, and is the program financially sustainable?

As a partnership between public schools and the private, nonprofit sector, the College Match program model offers potential for national replication.

The leaders of some of the nation’s largest school districts have already recognized the se-

ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

While the initial findings from the small College Match pilot are encouraging — and the program’s expansion will produce additional helpful data — the intervention raises a number of larger questions that merit further debate and research.

rious consequences of undermatching and the urgent need to address the problem. If more rigorous analysis confirms the program's promising preliminary results, it may spur other public school leaders to implement similar models in their own districts. While public school budgets are severely constrained, some of those districts may be prepared to commit public resources to support college match advising.

The College Match model is adaptable in ways that could support its expansion and increase its cost-effectiveness. For example, it may be practical to train existing school counseling staff on some of the key elements of match advising. Organizations like the National College Advising Corps or national service programs also could provide a pool of college match advisers at a modest or manageable cost.

To achieve the President's goal of producing 10 million new college graduates by 2020 — the “best educated, most competitive workforce in the world” — our nation must build a better pipeline to and through college. One obvious place to start is an effort to help academically successful students choose college wisely. By doing so, the payoff from the enormous investment of public resources that produced these capable students in the first place will be increased. With further development and assessment, College Match may prove to be a relatively modest investment that produces significant social benefits for students and their communities.

NOTES

- 1 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011).
- 2 U.S. Department of Education (2011).
- 3 U.S. Department of Education (2012).
- 4 Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2008); Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2009).
- 5 Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2008, p. 3).
- 6 Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2008, p. 6).
- 7 Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2008, p.6).
- 8 Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller (2008, p. 4)
- 9 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009).
- 10 According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which may miss some enrollments.

- 11 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009, p. 103).
- 12 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009, p. 107).
- 13 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009, p. 104).
- 14 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009, p. 105).
- 15 National College Advising Corps (2012).
- 16 As measured by eligibility for the federal free/reduced-price school lunch program.
- 17 Chicago Public Schools (2012).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MDRC wishes to acknowledge the funders that have supported the design, implementation, and initial research efforts of the College Match Program. MDRC also wishes to acknowledge the partners whose advice, guidance, and encouragement have been essential to the development of the program and the publication of this brief: Melissa Roderick and Eliza Moeller at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago; the authors of *Crossing the Finish Line*, William Bowen, Matthew Chingos and Michael McPherson; Nicole Hurd and Veniese Bradley at the National College Advising Corps; Bernard McCune, formerly at the Chicago Public Schools; and the principals, faculty, and staff of our partner high schools.

Funding for the College Match Program is provided by Ford Foundation, The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and The Spencer Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Ambrose Monell Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Kresge Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

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By Jay Sherwin

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