
Participation in Student Search Service[®] Is Associated with Higher College Enrollment and Completion

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The Higher Education Landscape and College Outreach

Despite the growing evidence that attending college leads to improved life outcomes (Ma, Pender & Welch, 2019), students still face information barriers on the road to college. The college planning process is complex and often overwhelming for even the most well-resourced families, and it is increasingly difficult to estimate the cost of college (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). These complexities can lead students, especially lower-income and first-generation students, to colleges where they have a lower chance of success (Roderick et al., 2008; Smith, Pender & Howell, 2013).

Student Search Service

The College Board established Student Search Service® (Search) to facilitate a connection between students and potential colleges and/or scholarship programs. Students who register for College Board assessments and provide contact information, including mailing and email addresses, are given the opportunity to opt into Search during every exam registration and while engaging in college planning activities on the College Board's BigFuture™ website. Students can opt out of Search at any time, and institutions that use Search must adhere to strict guidelines to protect student privacy. Once students agree to participate in Search, colleges can find those students by licensing their information. Colleges strategically use Search to find students who are likely to succeed at their institution by selecting from available criteria, including expected high school graduation date, cumulative GPA, geography, test score ranges, intended college major, demographics, and responses on student questionnaires regarding collegiate interests. Colleges and scholarship organizations can then contact students via U.S. mail or email, providing information about the college and opportunities available to prospective students, including scholarship opportunities that can help reduce the cost of college.

Data, Sample, and Research Design

College Board researchers recently examined the relationship between Student Search Service and college enrollment among SAT® takers in the 2015–2018 high school graduation cohorts. We also examined the relationship between Search and college completion among the subset of students in the 2015 and 2016 high school graduation cohorts who have had at least four years to complete college. For each student in the study, we observed their College Board assessment scores, demographic characteristics (gender/sex, race/ethnicity, and parental education level), year of high school graduation, high school attended, whether they opted into Search, and the number of colleges that connected with them through Search. These data are merged with data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to observe whether students enrolled and completed college.

Because colleges are strategic about which students they connect with through Search—often basing their Search on student characteristics that are associated with successful college enrollment and completion at their institution—a simple comparison of outcomes between students who were found through Search and those who were not could overstate the role of Search on college outcomes. We therefore control for a rich set of student-level characteristics to better isolate the relationship between being found through Search and enrolling in and completing college. In all analyses we control for student gender/sex, race/ethnicity, parental education level, SAT score, last Search opt-in status, high school graduation cohort, and the high school the student attended.

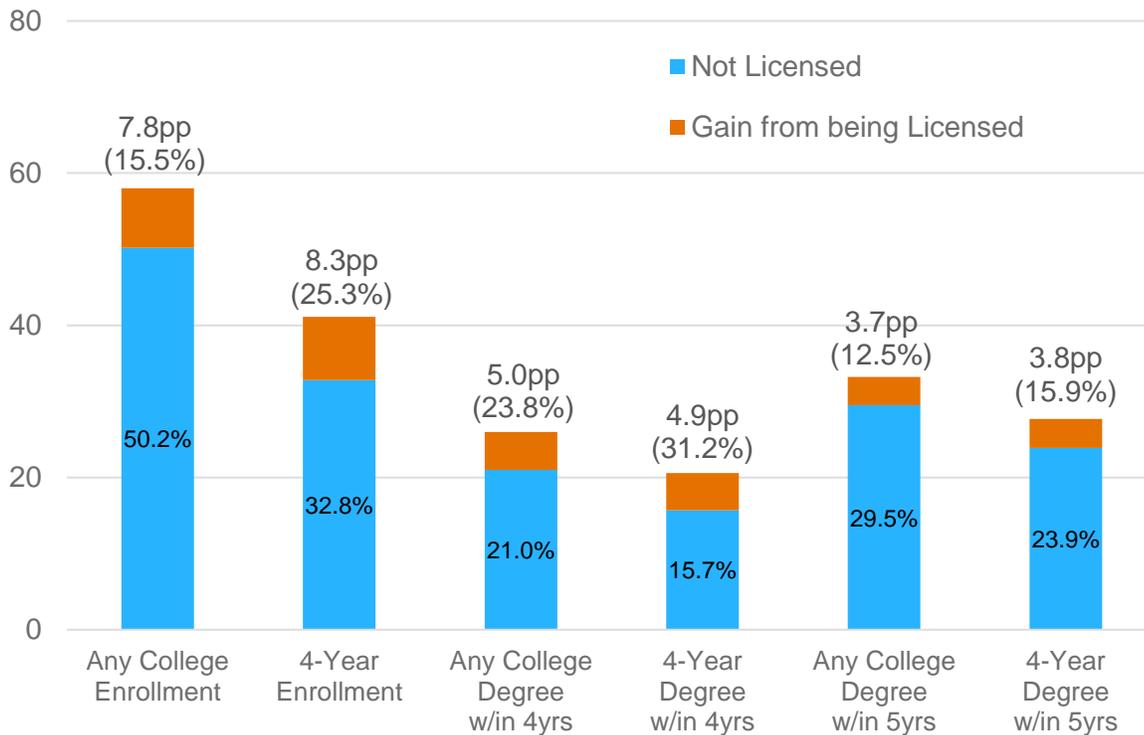
Participation in Student Search Service

Students found through Student Search Service have better postsecondary outcomes.

On average, students who participate in Search have better postsecondary enrollment and completion outcomes than observationally identical students who do not participate in Search. As shown in Figure 1, students found through Search enrolled in college at a rate 7.8 percentage points higher than similar students who did not participate in Search. This represents a 15.5% increase in the likelihood of college enrollment overall compared to the enrollment rate of 50.2% among students who did not participate in Search. Students found through Search also enrolled in a four-year institution at a rate 8.3 percentage points higher than similar, nonparticipating students, which represents a 25.3% increase relative to the four-year enrollment rate of 32.8% among students who did not participate in Search.

Figure 1 also shows that when colleges find students through Search, those students are significantly more likely to complete their degree. Students found by colleges through Search graduated within four years at a rate 5 percentage points higher than similar students who did not participate in Search. These gains represent relative increases of 23.8% and 31.2%, respectively, in overall and bachelor's degree completion within four years. Furthermore, the degree gains persist over a five-year time horizon. Students found through Search graduated within five years at a rate nearly 4 percentage points higher than their peers who did not participate in Search. This represents relative increases in overall and bachelor's degree completion within five years of 12.5% and 15.9%, respectively.

Figure 1: Student Search Service and College Enrollment and Degree Completion



Note: The sample for enrollment outcomes includes all SAT takers in the 2015–2018 high school graduation cohorts. The sample for four-year completion outcomes is restricted to students in the 2015–2016 cohorts. The sample for five-year completion outcomes is restricted to students in the 2015 cohort only. Results are estimated from regressions that include student-level controls for: sex, race/ethnicity, SAT score, parental education level, last Student Search Service opt-in status, and graduation cohort and high school fixed effects. All differences between students whose names were licensed and those whose names were not licensed are statistically significant at the 0.1% level.

Participation in Student Search Service is associated with better college outcomes for students from many different backgrounds. Figures 2 and 3 show that the relationships between Search and improved college outcomes hold across student race/ethnicity and levels of parental education. In Figure 2, the enrollment and completion gains are similar in absolute magnitude across racial groups. For example, Hispanic students found through Search enrolled in a four-year college at a rate 8.3 percentage points higher than similar Hispanic students who did not participate in Search. The analogous difference among White students is 9.6 percentage points. However, because Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students in the sample are less likely to enroll in college overall relative to White and Asian students, the relative enrollment and completion gains are largest among Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students. For example, the relative gains in four-year college enrollment and completion associated with participating in Search are 34.4% and 43.3% among Hispanic students versus 21.6% and 27.9% among White students.

Figure 2: Student Search Service and Four-Year College Enrollment/Completion, by Student Race/Ethnicity

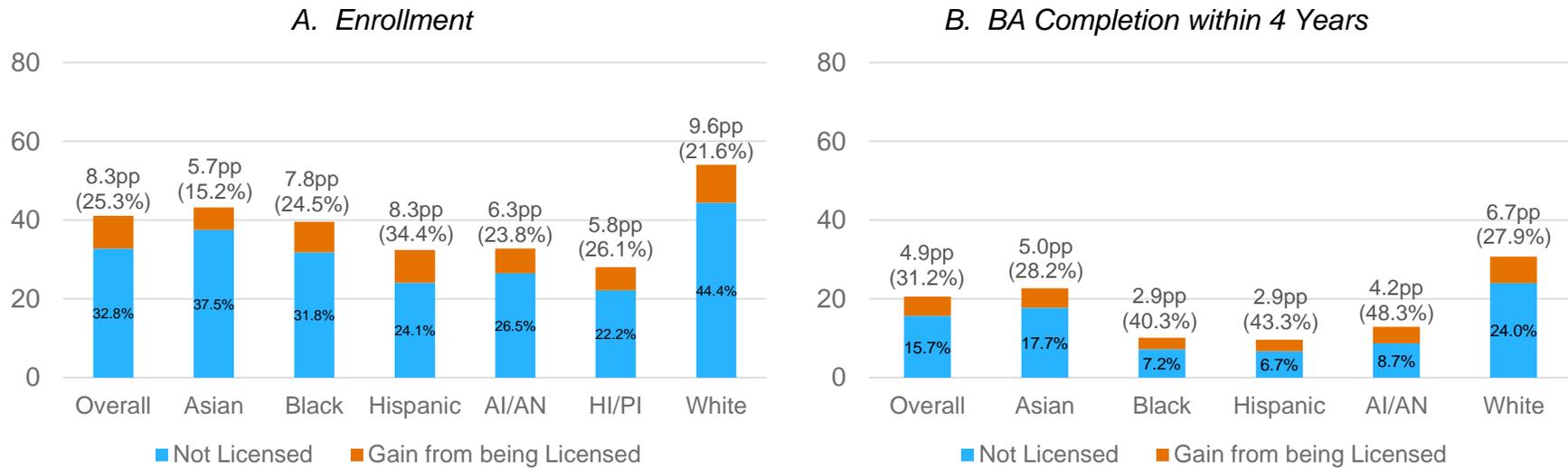
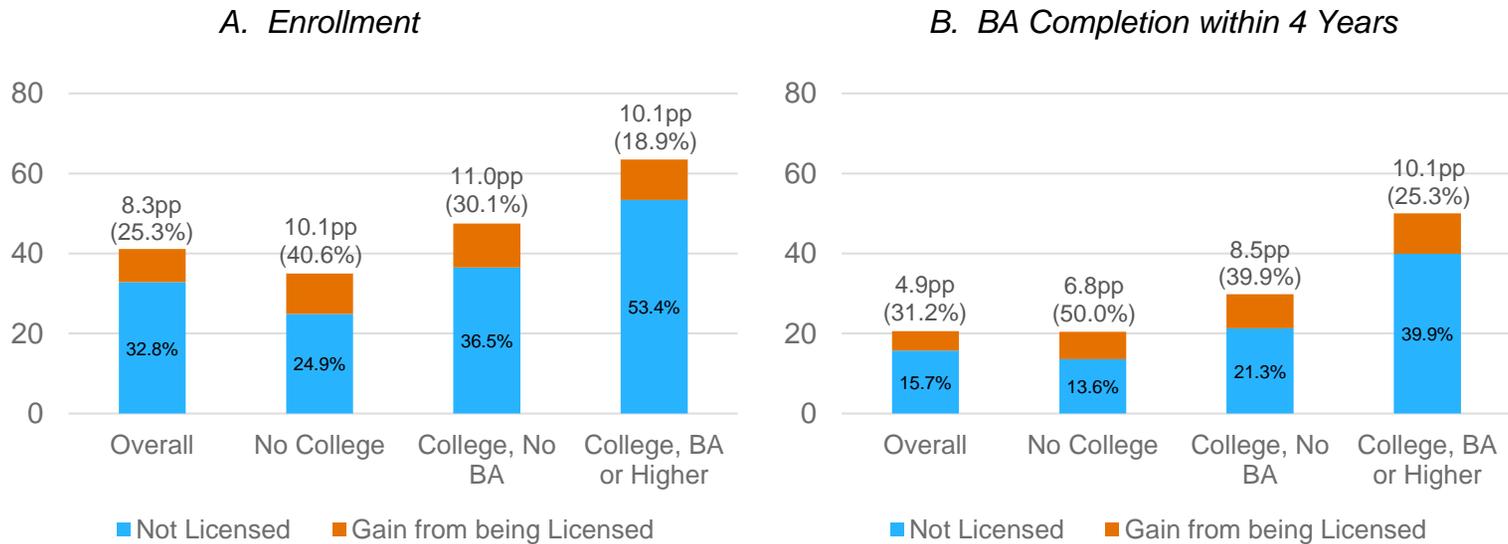


Figure 3: Student Search Service and Four-Year College Enrollment/Completion, by Parent's Highest Level of Educational Attainment



Note: AI/AN = American Indian or Alaska Native. HI/PI = Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. The sample for enrollment outcomes includes all SAT takers in the 2015–2018 high school graduation cohorts. The sample for completion outcomes is restricted to students in the 2015–2016 cohorts. Completion results are not reported for HI/PI students due to very small sample size (N=2,749), which returns imprecise estimates. Results are estimated from regressions that include student-level controls. See Figure 1 for the list of covariates. All differences between students whose names were licensed and those whose names were not licensed are statistically significant at the 1% level.

The pattern of results in Figure 3 is similar with respect to parent educational attainment. The associated gains across education levels are similar in percentage point terms, but the gains in percentage terms are largest among students whose parents did not attend college. For example, the relative gain in four-year college completion associated with being found through Search is 50% among students whose parents did not attend college versus 25.3% among students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree. Taken together, the results in Figures 2 and 3 indicate that Search participation is strongly associated with higher college enrollment and completion rates across students from many different backgrounds, and especially among students from groups that historically attend college at lower rates.

Additional Evidence on College Outreach

Connecting with institutions and scholarship organizations through Search causes shifts in students' application behavior and college choice. Prior research on the impact of Search by Smith, Howell, and Hurwitz (2020) shows that when students receive outreach from a college through Search, they are 23% more likely to apply to and 22% more likely to enroll in that college compared to identical students who also met the college's Search criteria and opted-in to Search, but whom that college did not reach out to via Search.¹ The research finds that the positive impact of Search is largest for student subgroups who are historically underrepresented and under-resourced. For example, Black and Hispanic students who receive Search-enabled college outreach are 46% and 66%, respectively, more likely to apply to the licensing college than identical Black and Hispanic students who did not receive Search-enabled college outreach. Students from lower-income families with less educated parents are also more responsive to college outreach in their application and enrollment choices than identical students who do not participate in Search.

The National Hispanic Recognition Program (NHRP) shows Search-enabled college outreach works. NHRP is a College Board program that operates through the Student Search Service to support colleges' identification of and outreach to the highest scoring 11th-grade Hispanic students every year.² Research by Gurantz, Hurwitz, and Smith (2017) shows that the Search-enabled college outreach to NHRP scholars causes high-achieving Hispanic students to enroll in colleges that they might not have ordinarily considered. For example, high-achieving Hispanic scholars who achieve the NHRP designation are 16% more likely to enroll in a college that recruited them via Student Search Service than their otherwise identical high-achieving Hispanic peers who just missed being eligible to receive the NHRP scholar

1. College application is proxied by SAT score sending in this research.

2. The National Hispanic Recognition Program identifies the top 2.5% highest scoring Hispanic students on the PSAT/NMSQT®, which results in approximately 5,000 NHRP scholars each year.

designation. These students are also substantially more likely to enroll in a four-year institution, an out-of-state college, and a public flagship. As a result of these shifts in enrollment patterns, Student Search Service has helped NHRP scholars find colleges that were a better academic and financial fit and that increased on-time bachelor's degree completion for high-achieving Hispanic students by nearly 3% compared to those who were not designated by NHRP.

Conclusion

The new research in this Brief shows that students who receive college outreach through Student Search Service are more likely to enroll in and complete college. The evidence builds on the research showing the positive impact of one of the largest college outreach efforts in the United States and indicates that college outreach via Search can play an influential role in discovering hidden talent, smoothing the transition from high school to college, helping colleges achieve their goal of recruiting a diverse and desirable student body, and shaping the higher education landscape.

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