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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to be here with you today to testify about low-cost, scalable strategies to increase college persistence and success, particularly among economically-disadvantaged students.

Gains in College Access, Widening Inequality in College Success

We have made considerable progress over the last decade increasing the share of the populace that pursues postsecondary education. Enrollment in degree-granting institutions has increased 32 percent over this time period (NCES, 2014). Of particular importance, the gap in college enrollment between low- and high-income high school graduates is now narrower than it has been anytime in the last 25 years (Baum, Ma, and Payea, 2013).

At the same time that we have witnessed improvements in college going, however, disparities in college completion have actually widened over time (Bailey & Dynarski, 2012). Among students who started college in 2003, nearly 60 percent from the top family income quartile earned a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with only 25 percent of students from the bottom income quartile (Baum, 2015). These differences persist even when we compare students with similar academic achievement going into college (Belley & Lochner, 2007).

Traditional policy approaches to remedy these inequalities

Traditionally, policy efforts to increase college persistence and success have focused on improving college affordability and academic readiness for students. Recent rigorous research shows that these approaches can generate substantial positive effects. In research with my colleague Bridget Terry Long, for instance, we find that Florida high school seniors who were eligible for a \$1,300 need-based grant were over twenty percent more likely to earn a bachelor's degree from a Florida public university within six years of high school than very similar students who just missed the eligibility cut-off (Castleman and Long, 2013). There have also been a variety of effective policy solutions to improve academic readiness for college, such as the City University of New York Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, which provides students with a highly structured and supportive academic program. The program, which targets students assigned to remedial education, doubled graduation rates for participants (MDRC, 2015).

The importance of information and advising in improving persistence and success

I believe policies to improve affordability and academic readiness will continue to be integral elements of the national push to increase the share of Americans—both young and old—who earn postsecondary credentials. While we continue to invest in these policies, recent innovations also highlight the potential for low-cost, scalable strategies to generate meaningful improvements in college persistence and success. These innovations stem from the growing recognition that targeted information and advising about college and financial aid can play an essential role in helping students and families navigate critical junctures on the road to and through college.

I owe my own success in college to my mother and high school counselor, both of whom invested countless hours in helping me find a school that was a good fit for my abilities and interests. But for too many low-income youth, this kind of sustained, individualized advising is often unavailable. Parents want to help but lack personal college experience; high school counselors often have caseloads of nearly 500 students and spend only a fifth of their time on college planning (Civic Enterprises, 2011). Policy makers and educators have long recognized that a lack of access to advising can prevent talented students from getting to college, and a wide variety of college access programs have emerged over the years to address this gap.

Until recently, however, what we largely failed to recognize is how important sustained advising is for students even after they successfully navigate the college and financial aid application process. During the summer after high school, for instance, high school graduates who have been accepted to college and plan to enroll still have to complete a complex array of financial and procedural tasks to successfully matriculate, yet they typically lack access to professional assistance during these months. In a phenomenon that we've called summer melt, my colleagues and I find that 20 – 30 percent of college-intending graduates from urban districts fail to enroll anywhere in the year after high school as a result of challenges they encounter completing these tasks (Castleman and Page, 2014). Even students who make it to college and are successful academically continue to struggle with complex tasks. For example, one out of six freshman Pell Grant recipients with GPAs of 3.0 or higher fail to refile the FAFSA in order to renew their financial aid (Bird and Castleman, 2014). Failure to refile the FAFSA is strongly associated with students dropping out before they earn a degree.

The 160-character solution: how text messaging can improve persistence and success

The good news is that we have developed a variety of innovative and inexpensive solutions to help students navigate these complex processes and continue on the path through college. Much of my own work has leveraged text messaging as a strategy to provide students personalized college information and to make it easy for them to connect to professional advising when they need help. Texting is the primary means by which young people communicate, and we can automate and personalize text messages to be delivered at scale in the same way that we can with email. We can use texting to deliver consolidated bursts of information about tasks students need to complete, with the confidence that—at least for a moment in time—that content will reach students and grab their attention. And we can configure messages so that connecting one-on-one with a college advisor is as simple as responding to the text.

My colleagues and I have run a series of text messaging campaigns to help reduce summer melt. Working with school districts like the Dallas and Austin Independent School districts and the Boston-based college access organization uAspire, and with the generous support of the Gates Foundation and other philanthropies, we've sent students texts that provide simple information about the financial and procedural tasks they have to complete, and that invite them to write back if they need help from a counselor. These texting campaigns cost less than \$10 per student to operate, which includes hiring counselors to work over the summer, but can increase the share of college-intending high school graduates who make it to campus by over ten percent, with the biggest impacts among the lowest-income students (Castleman and Page, forthcoming-a; Castleman and Page, in progress).

With generous support from The Heckscher Foundation for Children, we have also applied these text messaging strategies in a pilot study to encourage college freshmen to successfully renew their financial aid. Starting in January of freshman year and continuing through the following summer, we sent students about 15 messages with information about important financial aid deadlines and with the offer of help completing their FAFSA or renewing award letters. Community college freshman who received these messages were 25 percent more likely to persist through sophomore year than students who didn't receive the texts (Castleman and Page, forthcoming-b).

Bringing text messaging to scale

I think we're just at the cusp of seeing how technology can be creatively leveraged to help students more effectively navigate what have historically been very complex and challenging decisions. Much of my texting work has been conducted with urban populations; with support from the Kresge Foundation, the West Virginia GEAR UP program has a texting project underway demonstrating that these strategies can be equally effective for rural students.

Separately, there's broad recognition of the need to provide students with better loan counseling so they can make informed borrowing decisions. With generous funding from the Lumina Foundation, work is now underway at the Community College of Baltimore County to use text messaging as a channel for providing students with simplified information about borrowing, like the relationship between how much they borrow and what they would owe in monthly payments. These texts also provide an easy way for community college students—who often balance extensive academic, work, and family commitments and spend limited time on campus—to receive one-on-one loan counseling from a financial aid professional. Student engagement in this texting campaign has been particularly impressive.

Texting is not the only form of interactive technology that we can leverage to connect students to high-quality advising. With support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the non-profit America Achieves and several prominent college access organizations are reaching out to tens of thousands of high-achieving high school seniors to offer them sustained, virtual college advising. By leveraging interactive technologies like screen sharing and video chat, these advisors can, from thousands of miles away, provide the kind of personalized advising to which these students wouldn't otherwise have access. This same kind of model could be applied to help college students across the country.

Now, technology is not the only means of connecting college students to individualized college advising. Two of the more successful college success organizations, Bottom Line and College Forward, have adapted their high school advising models to focus on college persistence. Working in partnership with several colleges and universities, Bottom Line and College Forward provide intensive in-person coaching to help students navigate the various academic and social challenges they encounter. Early indications from both organizations is that this type of intensive coaching for college freshman can generate double-digit gains in sophomore year persistence.

What sets text messaging and other interactive technologies apart, however, are their low-cost and scalability. Any organization with access to students can collect cell phone numbers and consent to message them. There are a variety of technological platforms on the market that can automate and deliver tens if not hundreds of thousands of highly personalized messages to students, drawing on data the organization already has. These platforms can also facilitate rich and real time two-way exchanges between students and counselors. I am proud to be collaborating with the Institute for Education Sciences and Abt Associates to investigate how digital messaging can be leveraged to help GEAR UP students make a successful transition from high school into the first year of college. This demonstration project capitalizes on the option Congress gave the GEAR UP program in the 2008 Higher Education Authorization Act to support students in the transition year after high school, and I think it has considerable potential to further GEAR UP's positive impact on students.

Federal Student Aid is similarly well-positioned to utilize personalized digital messaging to help students and their families navigate various stages of the financial aid process, from successfully filing the FAFSA to making informed borrowing and repayment decisions. The FAFSA and the loan entrance counseling process both provide ideal access points to collect cell phone numbers and other forms of contact from millions of students who could benefit from simplified information and access to help with these complex processes.

Conclusion

In closing, it is worth emphasizing that the success of these strategies depends on being able to direct students to existing resources, like the federal financial aid and college advising programs. With these resources in place, and so long as students continue to encounter complexities on the road to and through college, creative leveraging of interactive technologies offers a low-cost and scalable strategy to improve college persistence and success among disadvantaged students.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today.

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