

Changing College Choices with Personalized Information at Scale: Evidence on Naviance

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Choosing whether and where to apply to college is a complex and important choice which many students and families struggle to navigate. Naviance is an important tool for helping students, families and school counselors with these choices. Over 40% of US high school students use Naviance, but little research examines how it impacts their college choices. Given its widespread use and the importance of students' college choices, I partnered with one medium-sized school district to study how it affects where students apply to and attend college.

This study examines how the personalized information conveyed in Naviance's scattergrams impacts students' college choices. Providing students access to a college's scattergram increases applications and attendance at that college, and students are most likely to apply to a college when the admissions data suggest they are likely to be admitted.

The full paper can be found here:

https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mulhern/files/naviance_mulhern_april2019.pdf

They key findings include:

- Access to a college's scattergram increases applications and attendance at that college, especially for students with a high probability of admission. This means that students are nudged towards the colleges popular among previous students from their high school.
- Minority and low-income students are most responsive to the availability of a college's scattergram. Access to scattergrams for less selective in-state public colleges increases four-year college enrollment rates for these students.
- Students change their applications based on what Naviance signals about their probability of admission. Students prefer to apply to colleges where they are most similar to previous admits.
- Students respond strongly to the average admitted student's GPA. I find a discontinuity in application rates for students just above and below the average admit's GPA despite no discontinuity in a student's probability of admission at this point. Students appear to use these averages as heuristics to simplify their college choices.

These findings indicate that the admissions information conveyed in Naviance can have large impacts on where students apply to and attend college. The information increases college attendance for some students, but the admissions data deters others from applying to highly selective colleges. The extent to which students respond to scattergrams varies across counselors, so counselors can play an important role in helping students understand the information in Naviance. More broadly, this research suggests that technologies, such as Naviance, can have large impacts on students' college choices, and the popularity of Naviance means it has potential to influence national college enrollment patterns.