

# Sudden SAT Score Gains Don't Change Students' College Choices

By [Catherine Gewertz](#) on December 12, 2018

Retaking the SAT and getting a much better score is a nice surprise, but it doesn't change students' ideas about where they should go to college, a new study finds.

The [study, published in a recent edition of the Journal of Labor Economics](#), asks whether "information shocks" lead students to revise the list of colleges they're applying to. This study focuses largely on the good kind of shock: scoring 100 points higher on the SAT than they did on a previous try.

In their study, the researchers focused on the list of colleges to which students sent SAT score reports. They looked at those lists before and after students got the happy surprise of a 100-point gain. They found that students adjusted their lists only slightly, choosing colleges that were a little more selective, expensive, and farther from home.

The "magnitude" of students' revisions, however, didn't match the promise of their newfound potential, the co-authors write. With SAT scores 100 points higher, students were qualified to reach for more selective schools than those on their revised lists, the study said.

After getting news of a 100-point score gain, if students choose to send their new scores to more colleges, they tend to be institutions where students' average SAT scores are only 5 points higher than those of the schools they originally planned to send scores to, the study said.

"These results suggest that it is difficult to change students' college choices even after providing them with new, highly relevant information about their probability of admission and likelihood of success," write the four co-authors, led by Timothy N. Bond, an assistant professor of economics at Purdue University.

The fact that students did revise their college lists—even a little bit—suggests that "information shock" can be harnessed to influence students' perceptions of their college

options, the study says. But policymakers must find ways to overcome the "inertia in [college] portfolio choice" that's formed by powerful influences in students' lives.

That inertia could be caused by things like poor counseling, geographic preferences, worry about the cost of college, and "loyalty" to colleges that friends and family members have attended. Students might also not know how to "translate" higher SAT scores into a list of colleges that are a better academic match for them, the study said.

The [phenomenon of college "undermatching"](#) is one that's bedeviled policymakers who want to see more minority, low-income, and first-generation college students participating in higher education. Previous studies show that those students are more likely to choose less-selective colleges than they're capable of succeeding in. That dynamic increases the risk that students won't complete a degree, since more-selective colleges tend to have higher graduation rates.