Inertia in College Lists

> Relatively few students, after experiencing a positive "shock" in SAT scores, apply to much more competitive institutions.

By Scott Jaschik November 5, 2018

Much is written about students who think they are Ivy material only to have their dreams crushed by bombing the SATs, or bombing them again and again for those who have the money to hire tutors and retake the test many times. Such students (many of whom may not have the grades to match their ambitions, either) tend to adjust their lists, guided by counselors and parents. Such a dream college may stay on the list, but test scores can lead to some realism as well.

But what about students who do much better than they expected on the SAT? Do they aim higher?

It turns out that they don't aim that much higher, even after getting the good news. That's the finding of a paper recently published in *The Journal of Labor Economics*.

The scholars -- Timothy N. Bond of Purdue University; George Bulman of the University of California, Santa Cruz; Xiaoxiao Li of Villanova University; and

Jonathan Smith of Georgia State University -- used College Board data reflecting one of the services that the College Board offers test takers, the ability to send test scores to selected colleges. The College Board encourages students to designate colleges for this purpose *before* taking the SAT. As a result, the scholars were able to look at students whose SAT suggested the ability to gain admission to colleges that were significantly more competitive than those designated by test takers who didn't yet know how they would do.

The scholars argue that students whose scores were 100 points better than the scores needed to get into the colleges they designated to receive scores should be adding to their lists of potential institutions. But to the extent students do so, those with a 100-point "shock" act as if their scores were only about five points better than expected. In other words, they might add one or two slightly more competitive colleges, but relatively few students seem to reflect on the possibility of looking at a range of different options.

Those who do add more competitive colleges to their list tend to add colleges that are more expensive and farther from students' homes than the original list.
The researchers argue that at least some of those with higher-than-anticipated scores are missing out on potentially good options. And the results, they say, point to the importance of educating high school students early on about the range of college options they have and the importance of aiming high. And this issue may relate to the "undermatching" trend that many scholars have identified in which many academically talented, low-income students don't apply to competitive colleges at which they would have a good shot at admission.

"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," the scholars write. "The results contribute revealed preference-based evidence to a growing literature that attempts to understand how students update their human capital choices and why college mismatch occurs. A point of significant policy interest is identifying ways to close

the gap in outcomes between students from higher- and lower-income households."

They add, "This study suggests that the SAT can play a role in bringing college portfolios into alignment with academic performance. However, there is a significant amount of inertia in portfolio choice that must be overcome. The predetermined nature of college choice for many students could be due to nonacademic factors, such as poor counseling, geographic preferences, price sensitivity, and loyalty to colleges attended by relatives and friends. Alternatively, students may not be skilled at translating SAT performance into college admission predictions. The magnitude of student updating is likely to vary with both the timeliness and the salience of new information about college choice. These findings may help to improve the way in which students, parents, and school counselors receive and respond to critical information in the application process."