

## Low-income students with high grades encouraged to apply to elite universities

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This year, up to 20,000 of the nation's top high school students will receive an unsolicited packet in the mail that could change their lives — if they don't toss it in the junk pile.

The mail, marked with the College Board's seal, might make the star students think twice about their college choices and open doors to top-flight universities that they often pass up.

"I really think that students need to know more about where they're going and not just assume that (any) college is equally good," said Stanford University economics professor Caroline Hoxby.

Hoxby has spent years studying why lower-income students with stellar grades and high entrance exam scores — about 35,000 nationwide each year, by her estimate — weren't even applying to top colleges.

She found that simply informing students about their likelihood of success and financial support at the nation's most selective schools made many reach higher. That was enough to persuade the College Board to put its name and resources behind the project.

Students are more likely to graduate in four years and enjoy high-paying careers if they attend a university that spends more to educate them, Hoxby said. And with generous scholarships and shorter graduation times, she calculates that some of the elite schools would cost top students less than their local colleges.

Just one-third of these promising students attend selective institutions or their state's flagship universities, Hoxby said, and less than 10percent apply to even one college she would consider an academic match.

"We asked ourselves, 'Why are they not applying?'" she said.

Smart and hardworking, Ivy Martinez is the kind of student Hoxby hopes to reach. The aspiring neurologist from San Jose, who wanted to stay close to her family, settled on Cal State East Bay, an open-access university in Hayward with a nursing program.

Martinez said she is happy with her decision, but some friends and family members were surprised.

"They're like, 'How come you didn't apply to UCs? You've got the grades, you've got the test scores, why not take this opportunity?'"

Materials from Hoxby's Expanding College Opportunities Project, which cost less than \$10 to print and mail, help fill the information void for students unlikely to find the right guidance at their high schools or at home.

The thick binder thumping down at their doorsteps compares the net costs, graduation rates and SAT scores at a sampling of public and private institutions, including the students' local colleges. Complete with application fee waivers, plain-English financial aid information, access to online help and deadline reminders, it made an impression.

A study published in March found that students who opened the packet were 46percent more likely to attend a selective college — which Hoxby defines as one of the nearly 250 listed in Barron's Selectivity Index — than equally high-achieving students who didn't get one. They also enrolled in colleges that had higher completion rates and spent 22percent more on instruction.

The results were so promising that the College Board, which administers the SAT, will send the packet to students in the class of 2014 who scored above the 90th percentile and were likely to come from lower-income homes. Hoxby has also approached the ACT test organization.

Because of privacy concerns, the students in Hoxby's studies were not available for interviews, but others liked the idea of a good guide to the overwhelming world of college applications and aid.

"I feel like some of my friends could have gotten into better schools if they knew where to look," said Athena Fong, a San Leandro High School graduate who plans to attend University of California-Berkeley in the fall.

While Fong benefitted from an intensive guidance program at Berkeley, she said some of her high school classmates felt they were "forced to go into a lower option because of financial problems."

Bright students living far from elite universities — and who don't attend schools popular with college recruiters — are even less likely to be discovered. Some might not realize how important their college choice is or that they might be able to afford a costlier college with scholarships and grants, Hoxby said.

Such barriers inhibit social mobility and perpetuate racial inequality in America, wrote Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, the authors of a July

Georgetown University report that drew a sharp distinction between classes of colleges.

While more black and Latino students are enrolling in college than 15 years ago, the Georgetown report found, they are largely attending overcrowded, open-access schools that spend a fraction of the money on their education that selective schools do.

"There are enormous benefits for high-scoring Hispanics and African-Americans who go to one of the 468 most selective colleges," they wrote, noting they were nearly twice as likely to graduate as they would otherwise.

That story is familiar to students like Laura Torres, a University of California-Davis-bound student from Pittsburg High. Torres and other recent graduates said they watched many of their classmates forgo their university dreams so they could live at home, work and take community college classes — a difficult route with a lower success rate.

"It's devastating to see all these people not have the resources or knowledge to go off to college," she said.

#### A BOOST TO THE TOP COLLEGES

In a Stanford University study comparing low-income, high-achieving students who received (and opened) a college guide with similar students who didn't get one, the recipients were:

55.8 percent likelier to apply to a school where students have similar SAT scores

77.5 percent more likely to be admitted to such a school

46.3 percent more likely to enroll in one

Admitted to 30.8 percent more colleges

Source: Expanding College Opportunities Project