The Degree Project (TDP): A test of promise scholarships

Douglas N. Harris
Dept. of Economics, Tulane University

Larry L. Orr
Institute for Policy Studies
Johns Hopkins University

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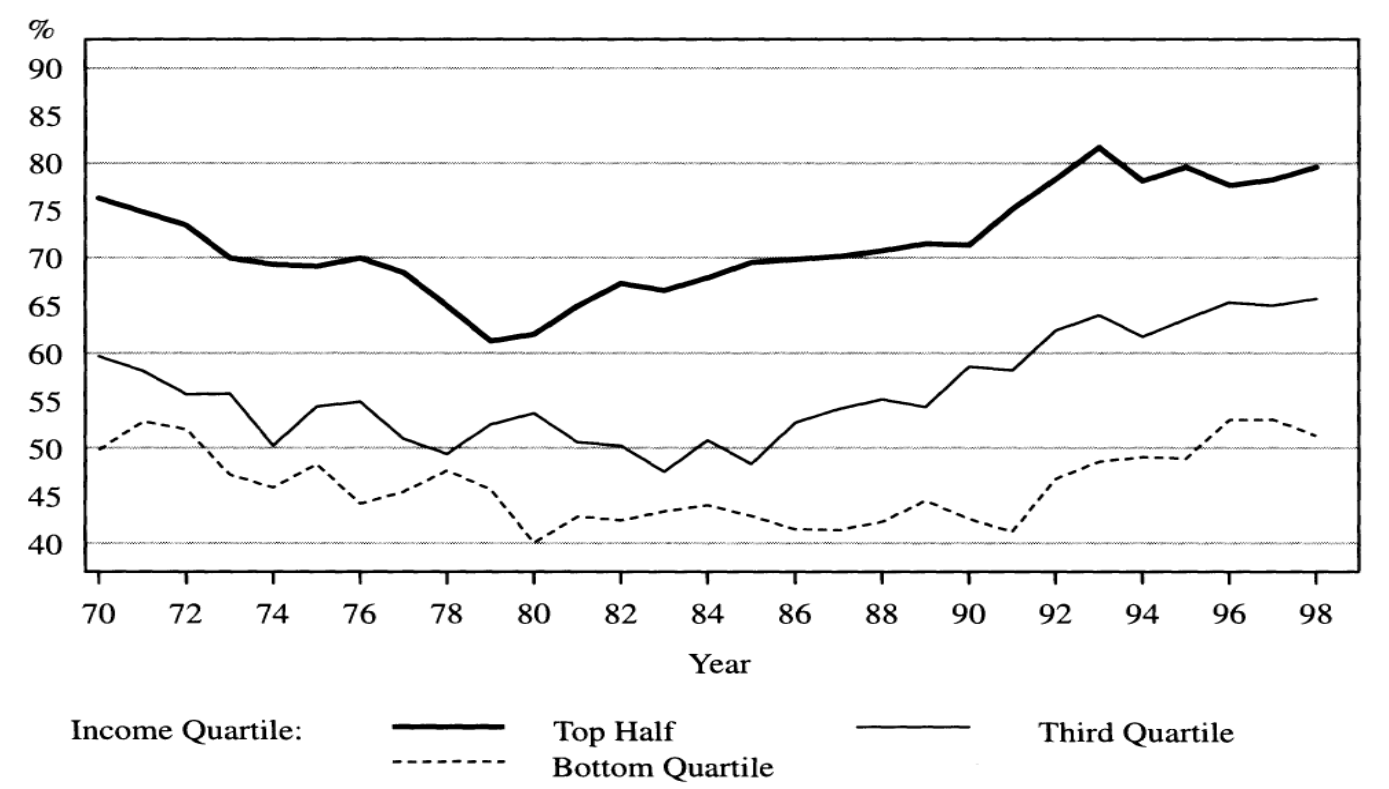
The problem

- Low-income and minority youth are unlikely to receive college degrees
  - Only 65% of minority students graduate from HS
  - Only about half of those go on to college

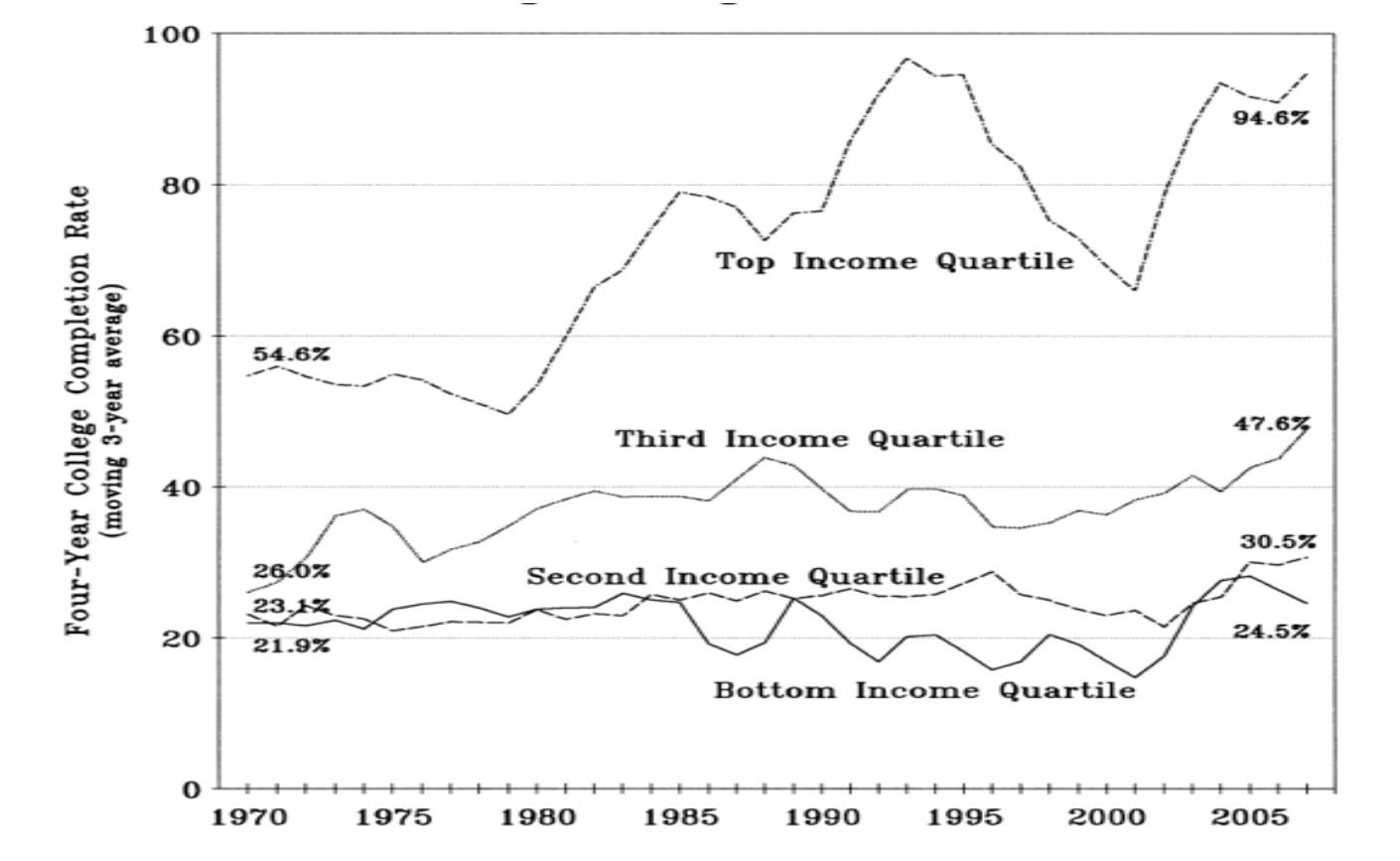
- Eighth graders from families in the top income quartile are nearly 10 times as likely as those from families in the bottom income quartile to receive bachelor's degrees

College attendance among 18-24 year old males



Source: Carneiro & Heckman (2002)

B.A. Completion by age 24 (conditional on entry)



Source: Postsecondary Education Opportunity

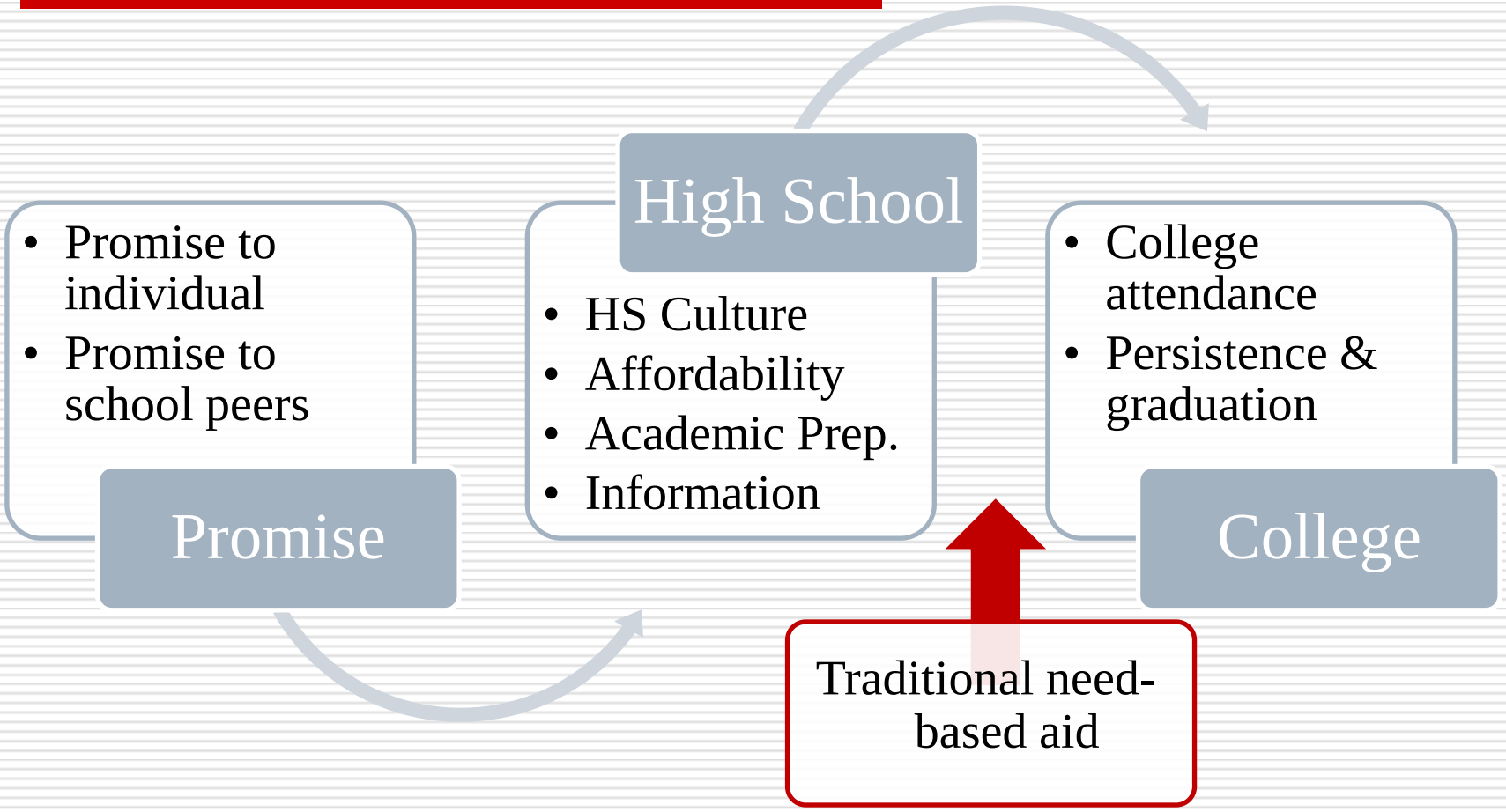
Underlying the problem

- High school culture that doesn't expect college degree
- Poor preparation
- Rapidly increasing college tuition
- Lack of information
  - Perceptions that college is even more expensive than it is
  - Poor understanding of HS courses needed for college prep
  - Poor guidance in choosing colleges

One potential solution: Promise Scholarships

- Promise programs guarantee college aid early in HS, usually with certain conditions
- Examples:
  - I Have a Dream (1981)
  - Kalamazoo Promise (2005)
  - Florida Bright Futures Scholarship (1997)
  - Pittsburgh Promise (2008)
- In all, 75+ promise programs in the U.S.
- Great claims have been made for these programs; a few have been evaluated, none rigorously with a randomized trial (one randomized trial in Canada found positive impacts)

The theory of Promise Scholarships



The Degree Project (TDP)

- $12,000 scholarships promised to 9th grade students in Milwaukee public schools (MPS) – similar to Pittsburgh Promise and Kalamazoo
- TDP is "last dollar" – covers total cost of attendance less "expected family contribution" and other aid
- Conditions:
  - Must attend class 90% of the time, and graduate from an MPS school on time with GPA ≥ 2.5; no income requirement
  - Must attend a nonprofit 2- or 4-year institution in the state of Wisconsin w/in 15 months of HS graduation
  - Can use up to half of the scholarship in the first year of college; must use all w/in 4 years
- Scholarships are funded by the nonprofit Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation (up to $30 million); evaluation is funded separately

Evaluating TDP

- Evaluation designer/director: Doug Harris, Dept. of Economics, Tulane University (formerly UW-Madison)
- Part of a larger project on college access (also directed by Harris)
- 36 MPS high schools RA'd to TDP or C (18 in each group); pair-wise RA based on college attendance of prior cohorts
- Initial announcements in TDP schools Nov 17, 2011
- "On-track" letters to TDP eligibles every 4 months during HS
- Additional information/advice from websites, texts, school counselors
- Hope to follow sample at least through college

The TDP sample

	Average	10th Percentile	90th Percentile
African-American	63%	--	--
Hispanic	20%	--	--
Free/reduced price lunch	78%	--	--
Math scores (percentile)	29	3	66
Mother's education (yrs)	12.4	7	16
Family income (2011 $)	$29,900	$62	$75,000

Data

- Administrative data from MPS and State of Wisconsin (attendance, grades, test scores, courses, disciplinary actions)
- National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data on college attendance (FT or PT) and graduation
- State administrative data on employment, earnings, incarceration, and participation in a host of government programs collected by the Institute for Research on Poverty
- MPS annual surveys of students and teachers
- Baseline survey of 1,845 students
- Qualitative interviews with students, teachers, counselors, principals

Research questions

- Overall impacts on college application, enrollment, persistence, and completion; type of college
- Mediating factors: perceptions of affordability, academic preparation, HS completion, social capital (social norms, information)
- Impacts on subgroups, by student and school characteristics
- How does implementation affect impacts

Some cool features of the TDP design

- Scale and nature of intervention is quite similar to those in many other cities, so results have some external validity
- Tests not only overall ("black box") effect, but also theory-based mediators
- Extensive use of administrative data makes data collection costs quite low, and long-term follow-up quite feasible w/virtually no nonresponse (Note: consent is not required for MPS or NSC data)
- Sample is generally low-income, but quite diverse – allows variety of subgroup analyses
- Cluster RA minimizes control disappointment and allows evaluation to capture peer effects, effects on school culture/climate (but raises power issue – see next slide)

Maintaining power in a cluster-randomized design

- To offset the loss of power associated w/cluster randomization, the TDP design includes:
  - Paired RA (on lagged college attendance rates)
  - Lagged values of the outcomes that explain > 50% of the variance of the outcomes
  - Covariates that further reduce the variance of the outcomes

- Result: 80% power to detect a 5-7 percentage point impact on college entrance or completion

For additional information, copies of these slides, etc…

lorr5@jhu.edu

dnharris3@wisc.edu

www.degreeproject.com