

A tale of two cities

Each year, as thousands of young people flock to Los Angeles to follow their dreams, many of the city's resident youth are struggling to reach their own. There is perhaps no point more crucial in their struggle than the decision of if and where to go to college. But not all students have the tools they need to make the best choice for themselves and their families. While most high schoolers living in middle class or affluent areas can rely on their older peers and siblings, college-educated family members, or even a college counselor to inform their choice, those in less affluent areas are unlikely to have these social or institutional resources.

The Los Angeles Unified School District alone has 665,000 students, of which nearly 70% qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch. Many of these high schoolers are more than students, often playing the additional role of provider, babysitter, and caretaker. College is not top-of-mind, even for those students who have earned impressive grades and SAT scores. To top it off, many parents, not having experienced college themselves, are wary of the significant time commitment and high sticker price of a college education. To them, staying close to home – or staying home altogether and working – seems like the smart choice.

As a result, talented students often find themselves at local state schools, community colleges, or no college at all. Low-income students seldom go through a rigorous process to match with a school that suits their potential. This means too many students end up at colleges and universities that can't provide the resources and guidance that low-income and first-generation students often thrive under. Consequently, some of the most promising students often don't realize their true potential.

To help address this problem we partnered with the Youth Policy Institute (YPI), a non-profit dedicated to improving L.A. area neighborhoods by providing a cradle-to-college-and-career pipeline for youth from low-income families.

A balanced approach

YPI places Ambassadors into low-income high schools to serve as all-purpose college counselors for students. These Ambassadors, who are often young men and women from the neighborhoods they're placed in, work tirelessly to help students through key steps in the college search, application, and matriculation process. Their impassioned, personal assistance is essential, but for many reasons it's often not enough. It's difficult to scale this type of intensive assistance. Additionally, low-income, first-generation high school students also face unique psychological barriers in the college search process that require special attention. Failing to address these factors leads to a bevy of undesirable outcomes, such as applying only to a small set of poor-fit colleges. This is particularly harmful because their test scores could match them with schools that offer better resources, like tutoring and counseling, and thus a better chance to succeed.

Highlights

- ▶ Small changes in the college search and application process could mean big improvements for low-income students in matching with a college that suits their potential
- ▶ Too many talented students often end up at a school that does not suit their potential or provide resources and guidance for them to thrive

You only know what you know

We diagnosed two barriers to optimal college choice for the students in the YPI program. First, students form a choice set of colleges based on those that come to mind easily, such as those their family and peers have attended. This means that students' choice sets are drastically constrained, as most students reached by YPI are not surrounded by peers or family members who have gone to college. Second, students lack a clear moment of choice in the application process. Instead of taking active application choices based on measures that predict their success in college, they often fail to choose at all and end up in a default option of community college (or no college at all).

Highlights

- ▶ Students form choice set of colleges based on those that come to mind easily
- ▶ Students lack a clear moment of choice in the college application process

Helping students choose a good-fit school requires more than a simple nudge. It requires a redesign of the entire choice architecture that leads low-income students away from the schools that could serve them best.

A tool for matching

We created a novel College Choice Tool to help overcome these realities for the students served by the YPI program. The Excel-based tool is filled with important college data, but has a user-friendly interface. Students enter SAT/ACT scores, GPA, zip code, and preferred distance from home into the tool. It then uses those inputs to populate a list of reach, target, and safety schools. By dividing the choice set into three tiers, it nudges students to consider reach colleges they often ignore, and reframes the middle tier 'target' colleges as a reasonable compromise between 'safety' and 'reach.'

Students can then select several schools of each tier, customized to their academic qualifications. Each college is compared across eight dimensions linked to success for first-generation and low-income students (such as graduation rate and academic quality). Each dimension is graded A through F, based on its ranking relative to rival institutions.

In other words, the tool first expands the student's choice set. Then, by grading colleges along alignable and meaningful attributes and awarding overall scores, it prompts a moment of choice for students to decide which schools seem best for them.

A comprehensive approach

Focusing on a few key insights allowed us to create a tool that gives students a better chance to apply to and attend a college that's right for them. But helping them form a better choice set is only one step on the path to college. To broaden our impact, we created a "Behavioral Tips & Tricks" guide to help YPI incorporate a range of light-touch behavioral techniques into their normal programming. Designed for YPI program officers and Ambassadors, it provides simple ways to enhance their programming with actionable tips for using proven methods like social norm messaging or removing hassle factors.

YPI Ambassadors now have additional tools to make their existing hard work even more effective for the students they're trying to help, and low-income students have a better chance to attend and succeed in college--and stay on track to achieving their dreams.

By understanding the unique barriers these students face when selecting a college, and redesigning a college search process to address these barriers, we can empower thousands of students to get the education they've earned.

Annex

Step A: Students enter their ACT/SAT scores, high school GPA, preferred distance from home, and zip code.

YPI College Comparison Spreadsheet Data for factors #1 - #6 are from collegeresults.org, a website of The Education Trust.

[Reset Sheet](#)

Step (A): Enter Your Test Scores, GPA and location preference.

Standardized Test (Select ACT or SAT): How far do you want to be from home?

Enter Your Test Score:

Enter Your GPA (on 4.0 scale):

Enter Your Zip Code:

I want to include the following types of colleges:

- Schools of art, music, and design
- Theological seminaries, Bible Colleges, and other specialized faith-related institutions

Step B: Students select three factors that are most important to them. These factors receive extra weight in the overall scores in step C. The tool also populates a list of suggested matches for students to use in step C.

Step (B): Select the three factors that are most important to you in choosing a college. Then take a look at your suggested college matches.

Choose Your Three Most Important Factors

1.
2.
3.

Suggested Matches

Reach	Target	Safety
College 1	College 7	College 9
College 3	College 6	College 10
College 4	College 8	
College 2	College 5	

Step C: Students select colleges from the dropdown menus in each of the reach, target, and safety buckets. Ratings for categories #1-#5 populate automatically, whereas students are directed to online resources to provide ratings for #6-#8. Overall scores take all of these ratings into account, giving students one simple number to estimate how well they match with each college or university.

Step (C): Now select schools from the drop down list (either from your suggested matches or other schools you're interested in) below and work through your college choice guide.

		#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	SCORE
		Resources for Students	Academics	Success Rate	Cost	Distance from Home	Campus Feel	Technology	Diversity	Overall Fit
Reach	School Name									
	College 1	A-	A-	A	A	A	A	B+	C-	86
	College 2	B+	A-	A	B	D+	B	B	A-	71
	College 3	A+	A+	B+	A+	B-	A	A+	A+	100
	College 4	A	A+	A	A-	D+	B	A-	B+	84
Target	College 5	B+	B	B+	B-	A	C-	B-	B	64
	College 6	B-	B+	B	B+	A+	B	B+	A	78
	College 7	B-	A	B+	B+	A-	A	A-	A+	87
	College 8	C+	B	B+	A-	A+	D	A-	A-	73
Safety	College 9	B	C	B-	C-	B+	C	B	B+	48
	College 10	C	C	D+	B	D+	D+	C-	B	35

Example: College Choice Tool