



## Intensive College Counseling and the College Enrollment Choices of Low Income Students

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### Key Findings

Bottom Line, which operates programs in Boston and Worcester, MA, provides intensive college counseling to low-income students throughout their senior year of high school. Advisors help students complete their college and financial aid applications and, once students have received acceptances, assist students in choosing which college to attend. Bottom Line actively encourages students to attend one of 20 colleges and universities in the state where it deems students have a good chance of graduating without incurring substantial debt. The majority of these institutions are public, four-year universities. This evaluation of the program yields four main findings:

1. Bottom Line strongly influences whether students enroll and persist in college. Bottom Line induces a substantial number of students to enroll in one of the encouraged four-year colleges.
2. Bottom Line's impacts are particularly pronounced for English language learners. Bottom Line advising appears to be most helpful for students whose language barriers may make the complexity of the college and financial aid process especially challenging.
3. Bottom Line advising results in students attending more affordable institutions. Students who receive Bottom Line advising attend institutions with the same average six-year graduation rates as students who do not get Bottom Line advising, but the average net price of the institutions Bottom Line students attend is substantially lower.
4. The analysis provides suggestive evidence that Bottom Line increases the overall share of students who enroll in and persist at four-year institutions.

### Research Questions

Research questions asked include:

- Does intensive college counseling have an effect on students' college enrollment decisions?
- Does intensive college counseling help students apply to and attend postsecondary institutions that are academically and economically the best fit for them?
- Does intensive counseling increase students' college enrollment and success?
- Do these effects vary by demographic characteristics such as income, race or gender?



## Data

Data for this analysis come from Bottom Line, ESE, and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Bottom Line's data include information it collects from students during the application process, such as full name, high school and self-reported GPA. These data were matched with ESE's administrative data on all MA public school students. ESE's data contain demographic variables such as gender, race, and low income status, as well as college enrollment outcomes from the National Student Clearinghouse. Finally, data from IPEDS measures college institutional characteristics such as six-year graduation rate, tuition, average net price, and three-year cohort default rate on student loans.

## Research Methods

Evaluating the impact of college guidance is generally difficult because the quantity and quality of guidance available to a given student is correlated with numerous other determinants of college enrollment and persistence. We exploit the fact that, as part of its selection process, Bottom Line uses a GPA threshold of 2.5 as a guideline for determining student eligibility. This guideline, which was not highly publicized, allows for a regression discontinuity design that compares college outcomes of students just above and below the threshold. Such students are nearly identical in terms of academic skills (as measured by GPA) and other observed and unobserved characteristics. They should differ only in their access to the college guidance services provided by Bottom Line.

## Detailed Results

This study estimates that:

- Treated students are 41 percentage points more likely to enroll in one of Bottom Line's encouraged colleges immediately following high school graduation, relative to a control group enrollment rate of 31 percent.
- Treatment increased by 31 percentage points the fraction of students enrolled continuously for two years at one of the encouraged colleges, relative to a baseline persistence rate of 24 percent.
- Treatment induces students to enroll in four-year colleges with average net prices \$7,400 lower than they otherwise would have, relative to a baseline net price of \$21,400.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

This evaluation suggests that intensive college advising can have meaningful impacts on college enrollment decisions. Such advising may improve persistence and, ultimately, degree completion for low-income students. Bottom Line students attended institutions with similar six-year graduation rates as students who were just below the eligibility threshold, but the institutions they attended had substantially lower average net costs. Moreover, the largest effects were observed among English language learners, suggesting that advising particularly reduced the complexity of the college application and financial aid process for students and families with language barriers.