

Maximizing the College Choice Process to Increase Fit & Match for Underserved Students

First-generation, low income and minority students often face a range of challenges in the college choice process that prevent them from attending colleges and universities that are a good fit and match for their needs. As a result, such students are less likely to persist and graduate after enrolling in college. This *Research to Practice* brief synthesizes scholarly research on college choice, fit and match, features an interview with the *National College Advising Corps*, and serves as a tangible resource to practitioners working to improve student success and retention in college.

The percentage of high school graduates who immediately enroll in college after high school has increased substantially over the last three decades; however, degree attainment has not kept pace with enrollment growth. This is especially true for low-income and racial/ethnic minority students, whose enrollment and completion rates are significantly lower than their white middle- and high-income peers (Baum et al. 2010; IHEP 2010). These gaps are partly due to inadequate academic preparation in some K-12 schools, but they also reflect significant inequities in the college choice process for low-income, first-generation, and minority students who are ready to enroll in college (IHEP 2008a).

Choosing a college is a complex and often confusing process, requiring that students and parents be knowledgeable of differences in institution types, admission requirements, financial aid, and indicators of institutional quality. Unlike middle- and upper-income students, however, low-income college-ready students often embark upon the path to college without the information and resources available to their wealthier counterparts (Bergerson 2009; MacAllum et al. 2007). As a result, they are less apt to enroll in an institution that is well-matched with their needs and interests, or in some instances, attend college at all (Bowen et al. 2009; IHEP 2008a).

Attending an institution that is a good match

Definitions

Fit: a broad assessment of the extent to which an institution meets a student's social, academic and financial needs. Considerations of fit may be based on a variety of factors, including location, academic programs and majors, class sizes, graduation and employment rate and support services offered.

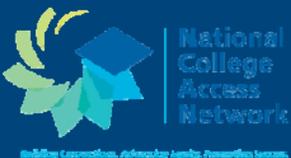
Match: one aspect of fit—it refers to the relationship between institutional selectivity and students' academic ability, and is usually assessed by ACT and/or SAT scores. Students often use "match" to assess their chances of being admitted to a particular institution and to determine where they will apply (Roderick et al. 2009). Those who choose to attend an institution with academic indicators (e.g. test scores) below their own are said to "undermatch" (Bowen et al. 2009).

can significantly improve student success and retention. Students are more likely to complete college if they attend an institution that fits their social, academic and financial needs (Bowen et al., 2009). Furthermore, student performance



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and graduation rates improve with increased institutional selectivity, suggesting that students are more likely to succeed in college if they attend the most selective institution for which they can qualify (Mattern et al. 2010; Melguizo 2008).

Considering the importance of fit and match to student success along with the national focus on increasing degree attainment, it is essential that low-income students receive the information, guidance, and support they need to choose a good fit institution where they are more likely to graduate. An understanding of the research on college choice, and fit and match in particular, will enable practitioners to more effectively advise students on selecting an institution that is well-suited to their needs.

This brief synthesizes research on the college choice process for low-income and racial/ethnic minority students, examining the factors that influence their choices and the challenges they face in selecting a good fit institution. It also provides recommendations for practitioners working directly with students to inform the college choice process, along with an insights direct from the National College Advising Corps, a non-profit that trains and places recent college graduates to serve as full-time college advisors in schools serving underrepresented students.

Understanding Choice, Fit, and Match

Colleges and universities vary across multiple dimensions, such as mission, student population, selectivity, academic majors, support services, size, and cultural inclusion. Some institutions have significantly higher retention and degree completion rates than others, and some graduate much higher proportions of low-income and minority students (Carey 2005). The Education Trust's College Results Online tool, which provides comparable graduation rates by race for four-year colleges and universities, illustrates these differences. Like institutions, students also vary, having different abilities, needs, and interests, and some may be better served at certain institution types than others. Put simply, students' likelihood of college completion is heavily influenced by their choice of college; therefore, where students choose to enroll can be just as important as whether they choose to enroll in college at all.

Attending a college that is a good fit and match is the optimal outcome of the college choice process—the steps students take to: 1) explore different types of institutions, majors, and financial aid options, 2) complete the admissions and financial aid processes, and 3) determine which institution to attend. The college choice process provides a framework for understanding the journey students take to arrive at their enrollment decisions. Several key factors influence the process, including parental education, socioeconomic status, students' perceptions of college cost and financial aid, academic preparation, career aspirations, and the availability of information about college (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000).

The choices students make regarding college greatly depend on the availability, transparency and quality of information they receive. Students access college information in a variety of ways, via their parents, counselors, teachers, peers, college

The College Choice Process

The college choice process—the steps that students take to apply for and enroll in college—can begin as early as middle school, and ends once a student completes high school and enrolls in college (Hossler et al. 1989). It is often defined by three stages: predisposition, search and choice. Each stage tends to correlate with a certain age and grade cohort (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000):

- **Predisposition (Grades 7-9):** During the predisposition stage, students develop education and career aspirations and begin to consider whether or not they will attend college after high school. Students with college intentions may begin planning for college during this phase.
- **Search (Grades 10-12):** During the search stage, students receive and sort through information about college and financial aid, using the information to develop a “choice set” of institutions to which they will apply.
- **Choice (Grades 11-12):** The choice stage is the point at which students decide whether they will attend college and where they will enroll. Students tend to make these decisions based on the amount of aid they receive as well as their overall impression of institutional fit.

representatives and the Internet (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; College Board 2010). However, the level of access and use of these sources vary by family income, race/ethnicity, and parent education level. For example, high-income students are more likely to use rankings to obtain information about the academic reputation of colleges and universities (McDonough et al. 1998).

Challenges to Achieving Fit and Match

The variation in the information and support students receive about college contributes to inequities in the college choice process that disproportionately challenge low-income and minority students. As a result, such students are less likely to apply to and enroll in a good fit institution and, therefore, less likely to persist to degree completion (Bowen et al. 2009). Several factors contribute to this:

Late College Planning

- **Low-income students are less likely to plan for college early.** The earlier students begin planning for college, the better their chance of enrolling in college and choosing a well-matched institution. Students who receive college information early are likely to consider a wider set of institutions (Roderick et al. 2009). Likewise, students who visit their school counselor for college information by tenth grade are more likely to apply to two or more institutions than students who do not (Bryan et al. 2010). Early planning is especially critical for admission to selective institutions that often set deadlines earlier in the year than non-selective and two-year colleges. However, low-income students are less likely to receive early information and support needed to plan ahead. As a result, they often miss critical deadlines for college admissions tests, admission applications and financial aid (Roderick et al. 2008; 2009).

Limited Knowledge to Inform College Choice

- **Underrepresented students have less access to comprehensive information.** Low-income students have fewer resources to help them understand and decide among college options and use fewer sources of information than their wealthier peers. More affluent students get information about college from a variety of sources: parents, peers, college admission counselors, school counselors, guidebooks and newsmagazine rankings (Bergerson 2009; McDonough et al. 1998). Low-income students, on the other hand, tend to rely primarily on high school guidance counselors for information (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). Although counselors can be a vital resource for students, those at high schools serving large numbers of low-income students frequently lack the time to focus on college advising. This is especially true for schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic students where student-counselor ratios are likely to be higher than those in predominately white schools (Bryan et al. 2010). Low-income students also have less access to information on the Internet than wealthier students. Many low-income students lack Internet or broadband access at home, and those who are able to find information online have a hard time understanding it, especially information about costs and financial aid (MacAllum et al. 2007). Additionally, information on college websites is sometimes biased and incomplete, and can be hard to navigate (Tucciarone 2009).
- **Underrepresented students underestimate their eligibility for financial aid and overestimate college costs.** Low-income students' enrollment choices are strongly influenced by tuition prices and their perceived ability to pay (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; IHEP 2010). Students and their parents often lack access to information about types of financial aid and how to qualify and apply for it. For example, some low-income students do not understand the difference between need-based and merit-based aid, and think their grades are too low to qualify for grants and scholarships. As a result, they often miss out on financial aid because they do not apply or fail to take the necessary steps to meet eligibility

requirements (IHEP 2008a; Luna de la Rosa 2006; Tierney and Venegas 2009). Having incomplete or inaccurate information about financial aid also leads students to make college application decisions based on misperceptions, ruling out well-matched institutions even before they apply. Students who are misinformed of federal, state and institutional aid options fail to consider good fit institutions based on cost (Hossler et al. 1999; IHEP 2008b; TICAS 2011). Some Latino students, for instance, have been shown to focus on sticker price without considering financial aid when choosing college (Santiago 2007).

Limited Support in the College Choice Process

- **Underrepresented students often lack tangible parental support in the college choice process.** Parents have the strongest influence on the college choice process for traditional-aged students; yet, parents of low-income and first generation students are less likely to be knowledgeable of how to prepare for college, distinguish between institution types, and find information to help their children choose and apply to institutions that are a good fit (MacAllum et al. 2007). Low-income parents are also less knowledgeable of financial aid programs and qualifications. Consequently, low-income and first generation college applicants are more likely to decide where they will apply to college with little or no parental input (College Board 2010).
- **Underrepresented students are sometimes discouraged from attending certain types of institutions based on counselors' and teachers' cultural misperceptions.** Many low-income students fail to receive needed encouragement from high school staff to properly assess their academic performance and apply to and enroll in institutions that are well-matched with their academic ability (McDonough and Calderone 2006). As a result, underrepresented students often underestimate their academic abilities, leading them to undermatch (Bowen et al., 2009). Educators' and counselors' misconceptions about race and class lead them to have lower expectations of low-income and minority students, resulting in the tracking of such students into high school programs that fail to challenge and prepare them for college (George and Aronson 2003; McDonough and Calderone 2006). Additionally, counselors' misconceptions of affordability and financial aid may lead them to discourage low-income students from attending institutions that are a good fit and match.
- **Underrepresented students limit college choices to a smaller geographical range than wealthier students.** Low-income and racial/ethnic minority students are less likely to attend college away from home (Lopez-Turley 2009; Mattern and Wyatt 2009). Due to financial constraints and family concerns, they often limit consideration of college options to those available in their local communities, regardless of their quality. Resident-based financial aid programs and tuition policies can also limit choice for students who are interested in attending college out of state but cannot afford non-resident tuition and associated costs (e.g. transportation,

room and board) (IHEP 2010). Also, low-income parents are more likely than middle- and upper-income parents to encourage their children to attend a local college, often resulting in a limited choice set (Lopez-Turley 2006). Racial/ethnic minority and low-income students are also more likely to live at home while attending college for cultural reasons—students who feel particularly connected to their family and community may be more reluctant to leave home due to employment and family commitments (McDonough 1997; Santiago 2007).

Implications for Practitioners

Given the challenges that underrepresented students face in the college choice process, there are several ways that school personnel and college access professionals can intervene to improve students' chances of enrolling in a college that is the best fit and match for their needs.

Promote Early College Planning

Providing low-income students and parents with early information about college and financial aid can help shape their college aspirations, increase their predisposition for enrollment, and equip them to prepare and plan for college (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Bryan et al. 2010; Bowen et al. 2009). Early information can also prevent students from prematurely ruling out institutions before applying, expanding their choices for enrollment and improving their chances of finding a good fit. Research shows that students who begin planning for college in middle school are better equipped to prepare and plan for college enrollment (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; IHEP 2008a). To facilitate early planning, school counselors and college access professionals can disseminate college-planning calendars and checklists to middle and high school students, parents and other supportive adults. The KnowHow2Go website managed by the American Council on Education and Lumina Foundation for Education is a great resource for providing college information grade-by-grade from middle school to senior year of high school.

Enhance Knowledge to Inform College Choice

To ensure that low-income and racial/ethnic minority students are receiving the best information available to guide their college choice process, school counselors and college access professionals should expose students to different sources of information and provide easy access to a variety of resources. By utilizing resources of college access programs such as TRIO and those operated by NCAN members, school counselors can increase their capacity to provide personalized guidance and support to underrepresented students. Schools and outreach programs can further empower parents and guardians to actively support the college choice process by educating young students on why choice is important, the steps involved in the application and enrollment processes, and where to find reliable information and guidance. There are several online resources available to students and families, some easier to navigate and use than others. Before suggesting online resources, counselors should

first explore these sites to make sure the information is accessible and reliable for first-time college goers. Given limited Internet access in low-income households, practitioners should also be mindful of the media they use to provide information. Brochures, videotapes, and worksheets are a few examples of non-web-based resources that can be useful to students and parents (MacAllum et al. 2007). Offering college-planning workshops on a recurring basis can also improve access to information for low-income families.

Organize and Encourage Campus Visits

Social fit is a key component of student persistence. Students who consider the social dynamics of the colleges in their choice set are more likely to be satisfied with their final college choice and more likely to persist to graduation (Nora 2004). Campus visits allow students to preview the campus environment and determine if they fit socially with the students attending the colleges in their choice set. Counselors and college access professionals can encourage students to visit campuses within and beyond their geographic area by arranging college tours and helping students schedule visits. Practitioners can also help students arrange visits with college students who share a similar background, particularly those from their same home community. Counselors and college access staff should help students pinpoint what to look for in a campus and assess their impressions of campus fit. For example, students should also be encouraged to seek opportunities to interact with staff and faculty in their programs of interest.

Provide On-Going and Targeted Feedback and Support

- **Combine information with on-going support mechanisms.** While information is critically important in the college choice process, the literature shows that simply disseminating information is not enough. Low-income students and parents often need help understanding and acting on the information they receive. This requires counselors, teachers, and college access staff to guide students and parents through the college-choice process, providing tangible support, such as helping them write college essays and complete financial aid applications.
- **Provide targeted feedback and appraisal support.** Considering that underrepresented students often underestimate their ability to qualify for college and financial aid, students also need appraisal support to help them properly assess their academic abilities and talents. Appraisal support ensures that students are receiving feedback from counselors and teachers on their academic and non-academic performance, which encourages them to work harder and set higher expectations (IHEP 2009). School counselors and college access practitioners can use several tools to provide appraisal support and help students understand their strengths and challenges, such as progress reports, PSAT and PLAN exam results, school report cards, student performance tracking systems, and awards for academic achievement.

Serve as an Advocate in the Community

- **Advocate for more training and resources for college planning.** Students who attend better resourced schools with a strong college-going culture are more likely to enroll in four-year institutions than those who do not; however, racial/ethnic minority students are more likely to enroll in schools with fewer resources (Bergerson 2009). Considering the limited resources and counselor availability at schools serving low-income students, teachers and counselors should advocate for additional training and funding from their school systems to support the hiring of additional counselors as well as professional development opportunities. In addition to petitioning local administrators for additional

resources, school teachers and counselors should tap community advocacy groups to garner political support for schools with limited resources.

- **Expand outreach efforts.** Considering the limited resources of schools serving large numbers of low-income students, outreach programs should strategize to expand the capacity of such schools to support more students and parents. By networking with other outreach organizations and strengthening collaboration with high schools, colleges and communities, outreach programs can broaden their reach and support more underserved students. Outreach program staff should also communicate regularly with school teachers and counselors and/or complementary staff to ensure that

Key Considerations to Inform College Choice

Net Price Information: Net price is defined as the “sticker price” of tuition less financial aid. Helping students understand the true cost of college will allow them to better assess the affordability of the schools available to them. As of October 2011, all colleges and universities receiving federal aid must provide a Net Price Calculator on their websites. Net Price Calculators allow students and parents to estimate their actual cost of college by answering a few questions to determine their estimated cost of attendance and expected family contribution (EFC) .

Distinctions Among Types of Financial Aid: Financial aid takes various forms, including scholarships, grants, loans and work-study. There are also differences within these categories, such as need and merit-based aid, subsidized and unsubsidized loans, as well as federal and private loans. Understanding these differences will help students and families make sound decisions on how to finance their college education.

Academic and Support Services Offered: Students who are concerned about their ability to succeed in college should be aware of the academic support programs offered at their institutions of interest. Some schools may offer small tutoring programs, while others may have entire offices dedicated to aiding student achievement, including targeted services for diverse populations. School counselors and college access professionals can help students determine what colleges offer the level of support best suited to their needs and help students devise a plan to compare such offerings across colleges.

Postgraduate Outcomes by Degree Received: To help students understand the value of a college education, school counselors and college access staff should explain that one’s future earning potential increases with more education. The College Board’s *Education Pays* report demonstrates that average salaries increase with each credential earned, from a high school diploma to a doctorate or professional degree. Students should also be provided with information on how salaries differ based on the field of study they choose. For example, graduates of science, technology, math, and engineering programs are likely to have higher salaries and lower unemployment rates than other fields.

Information on Current Students: Some college websites and guidebooks provide test scores and GPA averages instead of ranges, which can discourage students with below average scores and GPAs from applying. Helping students compare their scores to those of admitted students will increase their chances of applying to and enrolling in well-matched institutions. Information on student demographics and campus organizations can also help students assess aspects of social fit.

their advice to students is consistent with the information and messaging being provided by the school.

Low-income and racial/ethnic minority students face a number of inequities in the college choice process. They are less likely to receive the support and information necessary to plan ahead for college, consider a wide range of institutions when conducting their college search, and enroll in an institution that is well-suited to their needs and interests. However, schools and outreach programs can help fill this gap by providing them with the tools and guidance they need to make a good college choice. The National College Advising Corps provides an exemplary model of a school and outreach program partnership from which other college access practitioners can learn from as they consider ways to improve college choice for their students. 

Lessons from the Field: The National College Advising Corps

The National College Advising Corps [NCAC] works to increase the number of low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students who enter and complete college by hiring and training recent college graduates to serve as full-time college advisers in underserved high schools across the country. In collaboration with school counselors, teachers, and administrators, college advisers support schools by providing the advising and encouragement students need to navigate the complex web of college admissions and financial aid. Jennifer Cox Bell serves as the Advising Corps' Regional Director.



Jennifer Cox Bell

1. Research on choice, fit and match indicates reaching students early is important to their college decision making process. How early do Advising Corps advisers begin their work with students?

A main goal of the advisers' work is helping schools develop a college-going culture. Many students come from families where no one has attended or completed college. Advisers plan events that help promote a college-going culture school-wide including Decision Day events, Diploma Doors (where advisers make door signs for each teacher bearing their alma mater and college major), college acceptance bulletin boards, and other strategies to promote and celebrate having a postsecondary plan. These events make students aware of the resources available in their school and hopefully create excitement around postsecondary planning. Students also participate in college exploration activities such as college tours and college fairs, hold "College Knowledge" and financial literacy workshops, and have students complete career interest inventories to begin linking careers to postsecondary education.

2. The research shows there are three important parts to making the right fit for college: academic, social, and financial. Does NCAC work with all three areas?

Advising Corps advisers are trained to help students explore first which colleges will be an appropriate academic match and then,

based on those options, determine which institution(s) will be the best fit socially/emotionally, financially, and also geographically.

3. Students who do not attend the most selective college available to them are considered to be academically under-matched in their college choice. Do Advising Corps advisers encourage students to attend the most selective institution available to them? Is this an area of focus during the application process or after students know where they have been accepted or both?

The Advising Corps has adopted a goal-based strategy for students who work with an adviser. Since the research shows that it is in students' best interest in terms of college graduation to attend a more selective institution, students apply to at least three colleges or universities that are appropriate academic matches to their own academic qualifications. The purpose of this goal is to ensure that students are not "under-matching" and attending less-selective institutions when they are capable of attending a more selective one. Advisers can use the unweighted GPA and the most recent SAT/ACT score to determine which schools are an academic match. This focus is used primarily during the college search and application process.

4. Research suggests that some teachers/counselors/college advisers advise students based on their own biases about the person. How does the Advising Corps help their advisers avoid these biases?

The Advising Corps is about empowering students and helping them to have options after high school graduation. Although the Advising Corps is anchored at higher education institutions nationally, this is not a recruitment program for those partners. Many of the advisers come from very similar backgrounds to the students they serve. Although an adviser's personal pathway to college may be a useful story to share with students, advisers are trained to understand that the path they individually took is not right for everyone. Advisers understand that there are many paths to higher education and those paths are unique to each student. Also, advisers usually have no prior affiliation with the high school and only serve for a maximum of two years, so they bring with them an open mind and no background knowledge of students' histories. This clean slate can be advantageous to both the adviser and students in avoiding any biases based on the students' past.

5. Do Advising Corps advisers work with students on finding the right social fit for an institution? If yes, how

do advisers determine what is a right social fit for the student they are advising?

Several colleges may be a good match academically for a student, but to determine if a college is a good fit, the adviser and the student work together to research and consider several additional factors including: academic majors and programs, financial viability, support services, social/emotional fit and the college's persistence and graduation rates. In particular for the social/emotional fit, a focus is placed on campus visits, the size of an institution, and the environment. Advisers talk with students about the distance from home, the size of the institution, and work with the student, family, and institution to arrange college visits whenever possible to ensure that a student will feel comfortable at the college. Advisers help students assess student life on campus including clubs and organizations, athletics, etc. and help students try to envision themselves on the campus for four years.

6. How are advisers trained to help students make these difficult decisions pertaining to match and fit?

All advisers undergo an intensive six week training program with five weeks in their state lead by the program director and one week at the national leadership institute lead by the national office. During the training, advisers receive tools from experts in the fields of admissions, financial aid, college counseling,

College Planning Resources Recommended by NCAC Advisers

College.gov: Web resource provided by the federal government with information on the value of college, college planning, and financial aid. Includes links to the government's student aid and FAFSA websites.
Website: <http://www.college.gov>

Fair Test: Provides a searchable list of four-year colleges that do not use SAT I or ACT scores to admit bachelor degree applicants.
Website: <http://www.fairtest.org/>

Fast Web: A scholarship search database that allows matches students with scholarship opportunities based on their demographic and academic profile.
Website: <http://www.fastweb.com/>

First in the Family: Provides resources for first-generation students and their advisers to help with the transition to college.
Website: <http://www.firstinthefamily.org>

KnowHow2Go: College planning resource that guides students through the college choice process from middle school to senior year of high school.
Website: <http://www.knowhow2go.org/>

Information on College Costs: In compliance with the Higher Education Opportunity Act, the U.S. Department of Education provides college cost information, highlighting institutions with the highest and lowest tuition and net prices, reporting state appropriations to higher education, and listing for-profit institutions receiving more than 90% of revenue from federal student aid.
Website: <http://www.collegecost.ed.gov/>

You Can Go!: Provided by the College Board, this website includes information to help students evaluate their college options based on their academic background and geographic area. The site also provides college planning advice based on grade level and includes video testimonials of students from various racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.
Website: <http://youcango.collegeboard.org/>

secondary, and post-secondary education. The focus is to teach them to advise appropriately. Training includes a bus tour to colleges and universities in the state so that advisers can make connections with admissions, financial aid, and student services professionals. Once students are applying and enrolling on those campuses, the advisers have a network of real people on the campuses to contact to advocate for a particular student, and they also have a personal experience with the campus that they can relate to their students.

7. Low-income students frequently overestimate the cost of college and underestimate the amount of financial aid that they will receive. How does the Advising Corps work with students to overcome these assumptions?

Advisers talk to students and families about sticker price versus net price of college – and that a college with a high sticker price may end up being more affordable after financial aid awards are made – or might not. Advisers spend a lot of time educating students about net price, including one-on-one sessions, group workshops, and financial aid nights. The advisers will also start using the net price calculators that the Department of Education now requires every college to have on its website. Advisers also advocate for students and teach students to advocate for themselves once they receive their award letters. Advisers have been known to call financial aid departments to ask questions and clarify awards.

8. What resources would NCAC recommend for guidance counselors, college advisors, students, and families as they make their decision about which college to attend?

Advisers encourage students not to forget human resources once they are admitted and are looking to decide which school is the best fit for them. These individuals include: peers in college, friends, relatives, neighbors, counselors, teachers, and advisers. In addition, advisers encourage and help students to contact the colleges that accepted the student. The college picks the student, but the student also needs to pick the college.

For counselors and advisers, the Advising Corps recommends the American School Counselors' Association (www.schoolscounselor.org) and the College Board College Counseling Sourcebook: Advice and Strategies from Experienced School Counselors, 6th Edition. For NCAN members, the Adviser Training Manual is also a good resource (located on the NCAN website in the Building Blocks Toolkit). Other resources for consideration include: College Board's Own the Turf College and Career Readiness Counseling and NOSCA's The Eight Components of College and Career Readiness Counseling.

NCAC also recommends that students and families check to see if there is a college planning/paying-for-college portal in their state. 

Resources

ACT, Inc.—provides College and Career Readiness workshops and resources for K-12 educators to help them assess their students' progress toward preparedness. Also provides resources for families, including information for first-generation students and guides to help with preparation for high school and college. **Web site:** <http://www.act.org/ccrw/resources/>

College Board—provides resources to help students plan for and apply to college. Includes action plans for juniors and seniors, a college visit checklist, a guide for writing college essays, and other tools. **Web site:** <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/>

College Navigator—an online tool provided by the U.S. Department of Education to help students research colleges and universities nationwide. Provides information on net price, financial aid, programs and majors, campus safety, and enrollment by race, gender and attendance status. **Web site:** <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

College Summit—a national nonprofit organization that partners with schools and districts to strengthen college-going culture and increase college enrollment rates, so that all students graduate career and college-ready. Provides four-day workshops to help students prepare for the college application process. **Web site:** <http://www.collegesummit.org/>

Council for Opportunity in Education—serves low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities by providing membership services to colleges, universities, and agencies that host Federal TRIO programs. Federal TRIO programs help low-income students overcome class, social, academic, and cultural barriers to higher education, ensuring that they enroll in college and successfully graduate. **Web site:** <http://www.coenet.us/>

Education Cents—provides an online tutorial to help students and parents understand the value of higher education and their options for paying for college. Also offers personal finance tutorials on money management, saving and investing, credit, and other related topics. **Web site:** <http://www.educationcents.org/>

Education Trust's College Results Online—an interactive Web tool that provides users with facts on college graduation rates and allows them to compare which institutions do better at graduating diverse students. **Web site:** <http://www.collegeresults.org/>

Federal Student Aid for Counselors—a resource offered by the U.S. Department of Education to help school counselors provide financial aid information and workshops to students and parents. Includes a calendar of Federal Student Aid events for students, parents and counselors. **Web site:** <http://www.fsa4counselors.ed.gov>

National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)—a professional development organization for counseling and enrollment professionals that provides webinars, events and resources to support student access to higher education. **Web site:** <http://www.nacacnet.org/>

National Association of Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)—offers financial aid information to help students and parents be smart consumers of higher education. Also provides free training and resources for school counselors to help them understand financial aid and disseminate information to their students.

Web site: http://www.nasfaa.org/students/About_Financial_Aid.aspx

National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP)—provides program evaluation and support for GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). GEAR UP programs provide research-based early outreach strategies that include: academic support; information about postsecondary education and financial aid; scholarships; counseling services; and other relevant strategies.

Web site: <http://www.edpartnerships.org/>

Pathways to College Network Online Libraries—the Pathways libraries provide resources to help students, parents, counselors and mentors access college readiness information. The PCN Online Library provides a searchable database of research on college access and success for underserved students. Additionally, the College Planning Resources offer tools for counselors, teachers, mentors and families to use in helping middle and high school students plan for college.

Web site: <http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/Online-Libraries/Default.aspx> 

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***Note: This is an advanced copy of the research to practice brief, *College Choice, Fit and Match For Underserved Students*. Any errors and/or omissions will be corrected in the final version.**

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About the Pathways to College Network and NCAN

About the Pathways to College Network

The Pathways to College Network is an alliance of national organizations that advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, supporting innovative research, and promoting evidence-based policies and practices across the K–12 and higher education sectors. Pathways promotes the use of research-based policies and practices, the development of new research that is both rigorous and actionable, and the alignment of efforts across middle school, high school, and higher education in order to promote college access and success for underserved students. To learn more about the Pathways to College Network, please visit www.pathwaystocollege.net.

About the National College Access Network

The National College Access Network (NCAN) is a partner organization of the Pathways to College Network. Incorporated in 1995, the mission of the NCAN is to build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access and success so that all students, especially those underrepresented in postsecondary education, can achieve their educational dreams. Through advising and financial assistance, our members share a commitment to encourage and enable students to set and achieve educational goals. To learn more about NCAN, please visit www.collegeaccess.org/.