

COLLEGE CHOICE: ECONOMICS AND POLICY INNOVATION

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Introduction:

College choice is an economics problem. Students (and their families) make decisions about where to apply and, in turn, where to attend based on the expected cost of attendance, expected returns and other factors related to individual preferences. On the other side of the market, selective colleges and universities use admission and financial aid policies to determine who enrolls, ultimately allocating a scarce resource. Yet, this “market” is not without failures.

Many high-achieving students do not apply to a broad portfolio of colleges and universities. When this happens, students miss opportunities and colleges are deprived of a rich and diverse pool of talent as these students are often first-generation, low-income or from other underrepresented groups. Colleges and universities aim to enroll these students but often lack the tools to identify these students and help them negotiate the gateways to college application and admission.

As one illustration of the challenge in the state of Virginia, 40 of the state’s 132 school districts sent no students to the College of William & Mary in 2017-18 and 19 districts sent no students to UVa. Evidence suggests that students and their families are often poorly informed about strategies for college application, net price and the differences among different colleges and universities.

This class uses the tools of economic analysis to not only understand this problem but also to make progress on a policy innovation, in the form of Virginia Gateways to College Project.

Participants: Is this course for you?

This course is unlike typical economics courses. While there is substantial background reading that is grounded in economic analysis, this course is action and engagement oriented. Students will be involved in data analysis, survey design and implementation, and intervention design. Students will also take an active role in gathering information from students, high school personnel and college administrators, while also communicating the objectives of the project.

The course will hold a weekly meeting with topic-based discussion combined with specific design and research activities related to the Virginia Gateways to College Project. Students in the class will be expected to function as part of a research team, with research tasks and other development activities taking considerable time outside of class hours.

Pre-requisites include ECON 3010, ECON 3720 and a demonstrated interest and enthusiasm for the subject of the class.

Learning Objectives and Course Goals

Course objectives include developing the capacity to apply the tools of economics to the design, implementation and evaluation of a policy innovation.