

Research Statement

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My dissertation research has helped to understand how college education standards and how college costs impact college enrollment and degree completion decisions and their implications on the labor market success of community college students. It has shown that

1. college education standards in the form of college exit exams affect associates in arts degree completion among community college students (See, 2011*a*, "Effects of College Education Standards: Evidence from Florida, Job Market Paper") ,
2. making the exit exams tougher by raising the examination's passing score have small negative effects on high school graduation, two-year college degree completion, and earnings (Clark and See, 2011, "The Impact of Tougher Education Standards: Evidence from Florida"),
3. a higher fraction of the costs of attending community college have negative effects on associates in arts degree completion and annual earnings (See, 2011*b*, "Effects of the Community College Attendance Costs on the Community College Education and Earnings").

Community colleges are state funded two-year colleges that offer associates in arts, vocational degrees, and certificates. Community colleges serve students on the margin of college going who would otherwise choose not to attend college. These students are more likely from low-income and underrepresented minority families who have high hopes on the power of the college education to improve their standard of living. Community colleges have played an increasingly important role in the nations education and training system (Kane and Rouse, 1999), but little is known about the effects of college education standards which shaped community college students college-going decisions, educational attainment, and labor market success. Also,

studies examining the effects of the community college costs on the community college education are abundant, but less is known about the impact of the community college costs on earnings.

Credentials are tied to education standards (Costrell, 1994; Betts, 1998). Proponents of education standards such as college exit exams argue that incentivizing students will make them work harder resulting to higher school performance. Critics argue that introducing exit exams would only add to the long list of the graduation requirements, preventing some students from acquiring college diplomas, thereby denying these students a better earning opportunities. Using a regression discontinuity approach to compare the outcomes among students who narrowly pass and narrowly fail the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST), my study finds that failing the CLAST has no impact on the number of semesters enrolled in community college but has a moderate effect of about 5 percent on the associates in arts degree completion.¹ Because the CLAST is designed such that retesting opportunities are available in the event of failing this test, the effect of this exit exam was greatly reduced. This suggests that the impacts of education standards could greatly depend on the details of the standards used.

Many proponents believe that making the education standards tougher would make students perform better in school, the effects of which are reflected in more opportunities to acquire higher education degrees and better labor market outcomes. Critics worry that tougher standards would prevent some students from graduating and cause others to dropout. My study (with Damon Clark) investigates how a tougher exit exam affects high school completion, post-secondary enrollment, and earnings. I find small negative effects of increasing the passing scores in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) on high school graduation rates, two-year college enrollment, and earnings.² I cannot detect any positive effects of the higher exit exam standards, although such effects may be too small to be picked up with my data.

The rapidly rising cost of college education received attention and concern from consumers and policy makers. Much attention has focused on whether the returns to college education

¹The College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) is a college exit exam administered by the Florida Department of Education. Passing the CLAST is necessary for the award of an associates in arts degree.

²The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is a high school exit exam administered by the Florida Department of Education. The Florida law requires all high school students in the Florida public secondary institutions to pass the FCAT before graduation, which is a requirement to obtain a high school diploma.

have kept pace with the increasing college costs. Despite the increasing returns to college education, the growth in the number of college students remains small. This is true especially among community college students who are more sensitive to the changes in the costs of college education. My study finds moderate negative effects of a higher fraction of the cost of attending community college on community college persistence and associates in arts degree completion.³ Also, my study finds large returns to community college persistence and associates in arts degree completion. These estimates highlight the implications and importance of attending college and completing an associates in arts degree.

My current dissertation research focuses on the effects of college education standards and higher education finance, however, in the nearest future I would like to extend my research related to the interplay between education, health, and labor and focus on the following:

1. The effects of college education on the health outcomes of individuals who attended two-year colleges.
2. The impact of the college exit exam on the earning opportunities of the community college students.
3. The differences and similarities in the educational attainment, health outcomes, and the labor market success of the traditional university students and the students who first started at the community college then later transferred to the university.
4. Understanding the costs and benefits of retesting an exit exam.
5. The effects of community college quality on college education outcomes and earnings potentials of community college students.
6. The impact of high school quality on college attendance, college persistence, degree completion, and earnings of college students.
7. Comparing the labor market returns to the vocational degrees, associates in arts degrees, and certificates among community college students.

³The fraction of the cost of attending community college is the ratio of the net college costs (i.e., the total community college costs less financial aid) to the total costs of attending community college.

References

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