

Tracking College Enrollment Rates for Precollege Program Alumni

Abstract

Many Extension precollege programs seek to increase young people's interest in and aspirations toward college by fostering the development of skills that support a successful college transition. By pairing existing data with participant enrollment records, Extension professionals can more easily capture the impact of precollege programs on college enrollment and degree attainment. This article summarizes the process a group of us at Michigan State University Extension use to track Michigan 4-H precollege program alumni college enrollment rates, leveraging existing data from the National Student Clearinghouse and the Michigan Department of Education. Our method is a relatively easy and inexpensive way to measure and share precollege program impacts.

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Introduction

As public-serving organizations, Cooperative Extension entities must demonstrate the impact programs have on participants (Franz & Townson, 2008). In measuring impacts, many Extension professionals measure only short-term outcomes, that is, changes in participants' knowledge, skills, attitudes, or aspirations. Measuring these outcomes is often easier than measuring behavior change as short-term outcomes can be captured immediately when programs end. Going beyond short-term outcomes to measure sustained behavior change can be difficult, time consuming, and costly, leading many Extension professionals to avoid evaluating programs in this manner (Workman & Scheer, 2012).

A group of us working on 4-H programming at Michigan State University Extension have developed a cost-effective, quick process for measuring behavioral change related to 4-H precollege programs. Precollege programs are unique in that their primary goal is to equip young people with the skills needed to be successful in college (e.g., time management, decision making) (Swail & Perna, 2002). Although postprogram surveys can demonstrate whether programs have increased youths' perceptions of their skills,

they cannot indicate whether a lasting impact was made on behavior. They cannot answer questions such as these: Are precollege program alumni more likely to enroll in and graduate from college? Are they more likely to study subjects related to the careers explored in these programs?

We have been able to answer such questions using existing data obtained through the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) StudentTracker for Outreach. NSC is a degree verification system that tracks enrollment in college and conferment of degrees and certificates (Dynarski, Hemelt, & Hyman, 2015). In exchange for a nominal fee, we submit lists of precollege program alumni to NSC and receive information on (a) whether they have enrolled in college, (b) at what institution they are enrolled, (c) whether they have earned a degree or certificate, and (d) the specific subject they studied. These data have proven invaluable in communicating the impact of our precollege programs.

Alumni Tracking Process

The process used to track program alumni through NSC is relatively simple. Michigan 4-H precollege program staff maintain historical lists of youths who participated in these programs. Key pieces of information maintained include the young person's first and last name, date of birth, and county of residence and the specific 4-H precollege program in which he or she participated.

Each year, we compile and submit to NSC lists of precollege program alumni who are of age to have started college that fall. This is done by scanning program lists across multiple years to compile lists of college-age alumni and then removing duplication for those who participated in multiple programs or across multiple years. We also submit these lists again 6 years after alumni should have started college to capture degree completion rates. NSC updates its database with fall enrollment data in December; accordingly, we submit our lists of precollege program alumni in early January. Specific details on how lists should be formatted and submitted can be found on the NSC StudentTracker for Outreach site at <https://studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/studenttracker-for-outreach/>.

After the lists have been submitted, we receive reports both in list format (listing individual students by name, college of enrollment, chosen major, etc.) and in aggregate (listing percentages of alumni who are enrolled in specific colleges). Using these data, we can summarize the percentages of youths enrolled in college by program as well as the number of youths who have enrolled at Michigan State University.

Critically, NSC tracking allows us to obtain college enrollment rates for 4-H precollege program alumni, but these data become much more meaningful when used in conjunction with college enrollment rates more broadly. Using publicly available statewide college enrollment data as a comparison can tell a more comprehensive story regarding the impact of 4-H precollege programs. In Michigan, these data are maintained by the Michigan Department of Education at <https://www.mischooldata.org/>.

Case Example

We have tracked and analyzed college enrollment rates since 2009 and degree attainment rates since 2015. Our analyses have demonstrated that 61% of Michigan 4-H precollege program alumni enroll in college on time, compared to 56% of Michigan youths overall.

County of residence is also tracked through this project, which yields statistics of on-time college enrollment rates for individual counties in Michigan. When used in conjunction with county-level comparison data, these

data can be useful for conveying the impact of 4-H programs to local county stakeholders. In fall 2018, Michigan 4-H precollege alumni's college enrollment rates exceeded those of their peers in 80% of Michigan counties.

NSC reports also return information on the specific institutions at which alumni are enrolled. These data have demonstrated that twice as many Michigan 4-H precollege alumni choose to enroll at Michigan State University compared to their peers: in fall 2018, 10% of Michigan 4-H precollege alumni enrolled at Michigan State University, compared to 5% of Michigan youths overall.

Graduation rates also show that Michigan 4-H precollege alumni are more likely to earn a degree or certificate within 6 years after high school: 41% of Michigan 4-H precollege program alumni have done so, compared to 35% of Michigan youths overall.

Limitations

Though tracking program alumni through NSC presents a quick, cost-effective means of measuring program outcomes, these data are correlational and do not allow attributions of causation. That is, while we can say that past Michigan 4-H precollege program participants are more likely to enroll in college than other Michigan youths, we cannot say that their 4-H program participation *caused* this difference. Efforts to share these data with staff and program stakeholders must be clear in this distinction.

These data also tell only one side of the story, not yielding any information on the processes or means that lead to increased college enrollment. Additional data collection can help elucidate this connection. For instance, by combining NSC tracking data with follow-up surveys (e.g., Ratkos & Knollenberg, 2015), Extension professionals can better capture and measure the impact of precollege programs.

Conclusion

NSC tracking demonstrates a unique opportunity for a cost-effective method to collect medium-term impact data on precollege programs. By leveraging existing data sources such as NSC tracking, we can more efficiently and effectively demonstrate the impact of precollege programs.

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