

Low-Cost RCT of Bottom Line – A Program To Promote College Enrollment and Completion For Disadvantaged Students

Project Summary:

The goal of this low-cost randomized control trial (RCT) is to evaluate the impact of [Bottom Line](#), a program that provides one-on-one guidance to help low-income, first-generation students get into and graduate from college. Bottom Line was founded in Boston in 1997 and currently operates in Massachusetts, New York and Illinois. The program serves students through two linked programs: Access and Success. In the Access program, high school students work one-on-one with full-time trained counselors to identify colleges where they are likely to be successful, apply to those schools, complete financial aid applications, and confirm the best available option. If a student chooses to attend one of Bottom Line’s 36 “target schools,” he or she is invited to join the Success program, which begins the summer between high school and college. This program provides the student with continued individualized personal, academic, financial and career counseling for up to six years of undergraduate studies.

Prior evaluation studies suggest that the program produces sizable effects on college enrollment and persistence. These studies include, for example, a cutoff-based experiment (also known as a regression-discontinuity study), whose preliminary results suggest that students who receive Bottom Line’s services are substantially more likely to persist to their junior year of college compared with very similar students who do not receive these services (Castleman and Goodman, in progress).

The purpose of the low-cost RCT is to determine whether these highly-promising findings can be reproduced in a more definitive study – a large, multi-site RCT that measures college enrollment, persistence, and completion over a seven year period.

Over the past few years, Bottom Line has been able to serve fewer than half of the students who applied to take part in the program, and available slots were allocated on a “first-come, first-served” basis. The low-cost RCT will take advantage of this oversubscription, by using random assignment (i.e. a lottery-type process) to allocate program slots, rather than the first-come, first-served approach. Eligible high school students at three different sites in Massachusetts and New York will be randomly assigned to a group that receives Bottom Line (including the Access program and, in many cases, the follow-on Success program) or to a control group that does not. The study will then measure college enrollment, persistence, and completion outcomes for all randomly-assigned students using administrative data from the National Student Clearinghouse. Nearly 1,400 students will be tracked up to seven years to determine the program’s short-term, medium-term, and long-term impacts.

Research Team:

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Study Cost: \$159,000

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