

# **Discussant Comments for *Tuition Policy Changes and Academic Outcomes: The Impact of the Colorado ASSET Legislation***

This paper explores how expanding in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants affects the postsecondary behavior of Hispanic non-resident alien students who went to high school in the state of Colorado. The policy caused a substantial decrease in tuition costs of up to 60%. The authors find that while there is essentially no effect on the cohort of students already enrolled in college prior to the legislation, they find that the target population was more likely to enroll in college and took more credit hours after the legislation went into effect. This is one of the first papers to examine how tuition changes affect college application, as most other papers have focused on outcomes observed for students who attend college such as enrollment and graduation. This research is interesting not only for its implications for undocumented immigrants, but also in the broader context of increasing college access for disadvantaged populations who may experience low economic mobility.

The primary limitation of this paper appears to be with data availability. The authors have data for the years 2008-2014, yet the policy change first affected the cohort enrolling in the fall of 2013. Thus the treated cohort is limited to just the 2013 cohort with more abundant control cohorts. If it was possible to obtain more years of data, I think that some interesting additional analyses would be possible. For example, did this reduction in tuition induce students to switch from a two-year to a four-year university? More importantly, how did this policy change affect graduation?

As someone quite interested in increasing postsecondary access for low-income students, I've been thinking a lot recently about a question posed by Bryan Caplan of George Mason University. The question is which would you prefer - a Stanford education with no proof, or a Stanford degree but no corresponding education. The fact that the answer isn't immediately obvious begs a lot of questions about our education system and to what degree it's purely signaling.

I bring this up because low-income students who take out loans for a couple years of college but don't persist to graduation may actually be worse off than their peers who did not attend college once tuition and the opportunity cost of lost wages is accounted for. For this reason I think that graduation is an important outcome to study beyond just application and enrollment. In a similar vein this paper examines 2nd year persistence, but I think it would be equally interesting to examine persistence to year 3, 4, etc.

The authors also examine the effects of the policy on the likelihood of an application being accepted. I think

that this isn't necessarily the outcome that we should be interested in. If anything, we would expect the reduction in tuition to encourage more students to apply, and these students are more likely to be marginal students who would be less likely to be accepted. I'm actually somewhat surprised that you find positive results on application acceptance. I think a better outcome would instead be the number of applications, as this measures whether the policy is inducing students to apply who may have been discouraged by the cost of attending college.

Some additional analyses that I would find interesting would be to scale these effects in terms of cost. If you could obtain the tuition costs for in-state and out-of-state students for each college, you could look at the population of students who were accepted to colleges and use the policy as an instrument for tuition costs to see how price affects enrollment. I would also be interested in the elasticity of college enrollment with respect to price.

I have a few stray observations that may be helpful as well. First, I would be interested in the results that used all other students as a control group, as opposed to just Hispanic resident students. Second, I'd be interested to know how well publicized the change was. The effects are rather large, so it'd be good to know if this was due to a marketing campaign Colorado. Third, you mention that Metropolitan State University implemented a similar policy change prior to the state, but that excluding this university does not change the results. I would expect the results to be attenuated when including them, so it would be nice to know if this is the case. Finally, I'm curious as to whether your credit hour results are for a full year or a single semester, because they seem high for a single semester.