



# Evidence in Action

## *A K20 Center Research Brief*

### Impact of Campus Visits on College Enrollment

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#### Introduction

Smith et al. (2022) examine how exposure to college campuses influences postsecondary enrollment for students from low-income school districts. Prior research shows that students' aspirations, engagement, and familiarity with college environments strongly influence whether they enroll in postsecondary education. Rural students, in particular, face barriers such as geographic isolation, limited college-planning resources, fewer nearby institutions, and lower levels of "college knowledge."

The authors note that college visits are widely viewed as an important element of college decision-making. Such visits help students imagine themselves as future college students and shape perceptions of campus culture, academic environments, and belonging. While formal college campus tours have been studied previously, less is known about the role of informal or non-recruitment campus experiences, such as academic field trips. Additionally, existing research has not sufficiently examined when college campus exposure matters most during a student's academic career.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how the type of campus visit (formal vs. informal) and timing of visits (middle school vs. high school) relate to postsecondary enrollment outcomes for students participating in the GEAR UP program.

#### Methodology

##### Research Design:

The study used a quantitative, correlational design employing logistic regression analyses. The researchers analyzed administrative service records and postsecondary enrollment data to examine whether participation in different types of campus visits, and the timing of those visits, predicted whether students enrolled in postsecondary education.

##### Sample:

- Number of participants: 2,274 students
- Grade levels: Students entered the GEAR UP program in 7th grade and were followed through high school graduation



### Student characteristics:

- Students attended schools where more than 50% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and the gender composition was comprised of 1,216 male students and 1,058 female students

### Setting:

- 11 rural school districts in western North Carolina were used in the sample. Districts classified 50% of the students qualified for free or reduced-lunch.

### Program context:

- Appalachian State University initiated the GEAR UP partnership grant. Cohort 1 (Class of 2020) served as the analytic sample

Students included in the final sample remained continuously enrolled in participating GEAR UP schools from middle school through graduation.

### Intervention Descriptions:

The intervention consisted of GEAR UP-sponsored college campus experiences, offered alongside other college access supports. Two distinct campus-based services were examined:

#### 1. Traditional College Visits

- District-sponsored visits to colleges and universities
- Facilitated by college admissions offices or campus departments (e.g., academic programs, financial aid, residence life)
- Designed to provide students with information about enrollment options, institutional characteristics, and campus life
- Intended primarily for students closer to graduation, though offered across grade levels

#### 2. Educational Campus Field Trips

- District-sponsored field trips occurring on college campuses
- Not designed to recruit students to the host institution
- Focused on exposing students to academic experiences and career exploration
- More commonly offered during middle school, but available throughout middle and high school

These visits were intended to increase college exposure, foster a college-going mindset, and normalize postsecondary education for rural students.



### **Dosage:**

Dosage information available:

- No limits were placed on how many visits students could attend within a year
- Most students attended one visit per year
- Visit time varied due to PSI restrictions or limitations

### **Data Analysis:**

Researchers used logistic regression analyses to determine whether participation in campus visits predicted postsecondary enrollment.

Analyses examined:

- The number of each type of visit per year
- The timing of students' first campus visit
- Demographic variables, including gender and race

Model selection techniques were used to identify which visit types and years were most strongly associated with enrollment outcomes.

### **Results**

Both Traditional College Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips were positively associated with postsecondary enrollment.

Traditional College Visits showed a stronger and more consistent relationship with enrollment than Educational Campus Field Trips.

- Students whose first visit occurred in middle school (7th or 8th grade) had higher enrollment rates
- Early exposure appeared particularly important for Educational Campus Field Trips
- Female students were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than male students

Educational Campus Field Trips were most impactful when they occurred early, especially during middle school. Overall, the findings suggest that both early exposure and continued engagement across grade levels are important for supporting these students' postsecondary enrollment.



## **Application into Practice**

This intervention highlights how structured exposure to college campuses can support postsecondary enrollment for low-income students when implemented across middle and high school.

Schools and districts seeking to apply these findings should consider:

1. Beginning college campus exposure in middle school, including non-recruitment academic experiences
2. Offering multiple opportunities for campus visits across grade levels, not just in senior year
3. Differentiating visit types, using educational Campus Field Trips for broad exposure, and Traditional College Visits for focused enrollment decision-making
4. Coordinating with higher education partners to ensure sustained access over multiple years
5. Monitoring participation patterns, especially for male students, who showed lower enrollment rates

## **Work Cited**

Smith, M. C., Gosky, R. M., & Li, J.-T. (2022). Campus visits as predictors of postsecondary enrollment in low-income, rural school districts. *Journal of College Access*, 7(1), Article 10. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol7/iss1/10>