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# Evidence in Action

## *A K20 Center Research Brief*

### **An Evaluation of the Educational Impact of College Campus Visits: A Randomized Experiment**

*Swanson, E., Kopotic, K., Zamarro, G., Mills, J. N., Greene, J. P., & Ritter, G. W. (2021)*

#### **Introduction**

Swanson et al. (2021) situate their study within a robust body of literature on college access, emphasizing that persistent gaps in postsecondary enrollment and success cannot be fully explained by financial, informational, or academic preparation barriers alone. While many interventions address tangible barriers such as financial aid, college knowledge, and tutoring, disparities by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status remain substantial.

The authors highlight experiential and socioemotional barriers – such as limited exposure to college environments, lack of belonging, and difficulty envisioning oneself as a college student – as underexplored yet consequential obstacles. Drawing on theories of cultural capital, sense of belonging, and “possible selves,” the study argues that early, authentic exposure to college life may shape students’ aspirations, confidence, and preparatory behaviors.

The research objective was to examine whether structured college campus visits during eighth grade could positively influence students’ college knowledge, socio-emotional skills, college-related behaviors, and early academic preparation, beyond what is achieved through providing written college information alone. The study is particularly significant for low-income, rural, and first-generation students, who often have fewer opportunities to experience college environments firsthand.

#### **Methodology**

##### **Research Design**

The study employed a multi-site randomized controlled trial. Within participating middle schools, eighth-grade students were randomly assigned to either one of the following::

- a treatment group, which received a college information packet plus three structured campus visits, or
- a control group, which received the same college information packet only.



This design enabled the authors to estimate the causal impact of campus visits above and beyond informational support.

### **Sample**

The sample included 1,478 eighth-grade students across 16 schools in Arkansas over two cohorts (2017-2018 and 2018-2019). Schools primarily served low-income and historically underrepresented populations:

- More than half of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch
- Approximately two-thirds of the students were first-generation college students
- Many schools were located in rural communities

### **Data Analysis**

Data sources included the following:

- Student surveys administered before randomization and after the intervention
- Administrative transcript data capturing ninth-grade course enrollment

The authors estimated intent-to-treat effects, comparing outcomes for students assigned to the treatment versus control groups, while accounting for school-by-cohort differences.

### **Results**

The findings indicate that college campus visits in eighth grade produce meaningful, though modest, benefits for students.

Students who participated in campus visits demonstrated the following behaviors:

- Greater knowledge about college, suggesting that experiential, on-campus learning reinforces information more effectively than written materials alone.
- Higher college self-efficacy and grit, reflecting stronger confidence in their ability to succeed in college and persistence toward long-term goals.
- More frequent conversations with school staff about college, an important behavioral step in navigating post-secondary pathways.
- Increased likelihood of enrolling in advanced science or social studies courses in ninth grade, indicating early shifts in academic preparation.

The intervention did not substantially change students' stated plans to attend a four-year college, but it did reduce intentions to attend technical school, suggesting that exposure to a four-year campus may influence how students conceptualize post-secondary options.

Overall, the results suggest that early, repeated exposure to college environments can shape how students think about college, talk about college, and prepare academically for college, even before high school begins.



## Application into Practice

Schools seeking to replicate this intervention can do so by using existing partnerships and modest resources:

1. **Partner with a Nearby College or University**
  - A flagship, regional, or local institution can host visits; the intervention does not require a selective or residential campus.
  - Emphasize exposure, not recruitment.
2. **Target Students Early (Middle School)**
  - Implement the program in eighth grade when students are beginning to make high school course decisions, but they have not yet solidified postsecondary plans.
3. **Structure Multiple Visits Across the School Year**
  - Plan three visits that include the following options:
    - A campus tour and college-readiness workshop
    - Hands-on activities with academic departments or student services
    - A community-building experience (e.g., attending an event or scavenger hunt)
4. **Include Interaction with College Students and Staff**
  - Encourage middle school students to ask questions and hear personal stories, reinforcing the idea that college is attainable.
5. **Pair Experiences with Accessible, Clear Information**
  - Provide students with written materials outlining high school preparation steps, college options, and career pathways.
6. **Minimize Barriers**
  - Coordinate transportation, meals, and scheduling to ensure equitable participation and reduce burden on families.

This intervention is relatively low-cost, scalable, and adaptable, making it a viable strategy for districts who aim to strengthen college-going cultures.

## APA Citation

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