Dissertation Summary
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Job Market Paper: How Much Does Merit Aid Actually Matter? Revisiting Merit Aid and College Enrollment When Some Students "Come Anyway"
(With Robert Rosenman)

Merit aid is an increasingly important component of college scholarships but policymakers are concerned that often merit aid is given to students who would enroll anyway. The objective of this research is to estimate the marginal impact of merit aid on students who are truly undecided about enrollment. As a baseline we use a regression discontinuity (RD) framework to test an institution-level merit aid program at a public research university and find that the merit aid program successfully increases the likelihood of enrollment. We then add to the RD a structure that accounts for students who would enroll (or not enroll) regardless of the financial aid offer, separately from the undecided students who may be enticed by aid. The simple RD approach does not estimate a marginal treatment effect, as claimed by previous studies, but an average treatment effect. This richer model indicates the merit aid is much more effective in convincing such students to enroll than simple RD methods would suggest. Additionally, it is possible to predict which kinds of students are unlikely to be swayed by financial aid, which may benefit university administrators and other policy makers in the future.

Is it the Visit or the Scholarship? An Analysis of a Special Campus Visitation Program
(With Robert Rosenman)

We analyze the impact of a campus visit program on enrollment. Previous research does not address the student's self-selection into visitation when estimating the visitation effect. Using data from a public research university, we exploit a natural experiment – some students who express an interest in visiting do not get the opportunity due to insufficient space – and financial aid information to decompose the effect into its component parts of visiting campus and receiving a scholarship. We find evidence to suggest campus visits are effective tools for boosting enrolling and that the primary impact comes from visiting, not the scholarship. The marginal effectiveness is stronger for nonresidents and minorities compared to state residents and white students.

Credit Constraints, Educational Investment, and Consumption
(With Ben Cowan)

We analyze how students choose their levels of human-capital investment and college consumption amenities in the face of credit constraints. Our model suggests that increasing the limit on low-interest borrowing causes consumption spending gaps between rich and poor students to decrease. The model predicts that only a subset of students experiences any gains in human capital investment. We then exploit variation in federal student loan programs around 2008 to analyze our theoretical hypotheses. We find that students in the first and second terciles of the income distribution increase consumption amenities spending and educational investment relative to their higher income peers. The human capital effects are larger in absolute levels, but not relative to the consumption amenities effects. Our results suggest that credit constraints play a significant role in US higher education, but finds no disproportional distributional effects for spending on consumption over education.