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Proposal Details

Personal Information

Name	Ms. Mina Dadgar
Informal Name	Mina
Institution / Affiliation	Teachers College, Columbia University
Unit / Department	Economics and Education
Title	PhD Student
Preferred Mailing Address	Community College Research Ctr 525 West 120th St, Box 174
City	New York
Country	United States
State	NY
Zip/Postal Code	10027-0000
Email	dadgarm@gmail.com
Phone	212-678-3000
Fax	

Faculty Advisor

Name	Prof. Thomas Bailey
Informal Name	
Institution / Affiliation	Teachers College, Columbia University
Unit / Department	
Title	Professor of Economics and Education
Preferred Mailing Address	Community College Research Center 525 West 120th Street, Box 174
City	New York
Country	United States
State	NY
Zip/Postal Code	10027
Email	tb3@columbia.edu
Phone	212-678-3000
Fax	

Financial Representative

Name	Mr. John Hernandez
Informal Name	
Institution / Affiliation	Teachers College, Columbia University
Unit / Department	
Title	Director of Grants and Contracts
Preferred Mailing Address	525 West 120th Street, Box 021

City	New York
Country	United States
State	NY
Zip/Postal Code	10027
Email	hernandez@tc.edu
Phone	212-678-3379
Fax	

Project Description I

Title:

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Balancing work and study: Evaluating the effects of community college students' term-time employment and credential type.

Statement of the research problem and national importance:

Today, community colleges are the main provider of higher education for traditionally under-represented groups (Hoachlander et al., 2003; Levin, 2007). However, most students who initially enroll at a community college leave college without earning any credential. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 34.5% of all students who enrolled in community college in 2004 received a credential of any type by 2010 while about twice as many four-year college students received a credential during the same time period (Radford et al., 2010). Recent qualitative research has documented that despite aspirations to earn a credential, community college students face several barriers to obtaining one. Specifically, students point to inadequate financial resources as the key barrier to degree completion (Johnson and Rochkind, 2009), which is not surprising given that community college students, on average, receive much less financial support from their parents compared to students attending four-year colleges (Kalenkoski and Pabilonia, 2010; Orozco and Cauthen 2009). In addition to direct tuition costs, these self-supporting students incur high indirect costs of forgone earnings by choosing college attendance over full-time employment. One way to reduce the cost of college attendance is to allocate a few hours away from studying towards paid employment. Another way is to pursue credentials that take less time to complete, and thus allow for a faster return to the labor market. In fact, many community college students seem to be following both of these strategies. Today, community college students work long hours in paid employment, especially when compared with their counterparts at 4-year colleges. For example, according to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2007, about 40% of full-time community college students worked 20 hours or more per week compared to 20% of 4-year students (Planty et al., 2009). At the same time, an increasing number of community college students are receiving short-term certificates, certificates that require less than a year of full-time enrollment to complete, in place of long term certificates which take one year or more to complete (Complete College America, 2010). According to national data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS), the award of short term certificates has more than doubled, from 2000 to 2009; while the award of long-term certificates has increased by only twenty four percent during the same period (IPEDS, author's calculations).

However, despite community college students' intensity of employment, and their increasing tendency to pursue short term certificates over other credentials, little is known about the consequences of these decisions. Taking advantage of a longitudinal administrative dataset from the State of Washington with matched transcript records and employment information from the state Unemployment Insurance (UI) records, this dissertation will study two related questions. In the first section of the study, I will evaluate the academic consequences of community college students' term-time employment by using the exogenous increase in supply of retail jobs available to students during the fall quarter. In the second section of this study, I will evaluate the labor market returns to different types of community college credentials, including short term certificates, which to date, have not been rigorously evaluated. I will utilize a "value-added model" to estimate increases in earnings that result from receiving a specific type of credential. By estimating the returns to different types of community college credentials this study proposes a more direct approach to measuring the contribution of community colleges to their student's labor market success, thus directly addressing the grant's current year's focus topic. In particular, this study proposes to answer the following questions:

i. What kind of jobs do community college students hold before, during, and after college? How do intensity and industry of employment vary by student demographic characteristics and socio-economic status? What is the effect of community college students' term-time employment intensity on GPA and credits earned? Are the causal effects of student employment different from regression results that only control for observable differences among students? Do students who work more while enrolled also pursue shorter credentials compared with students who work less?

ii. What is the labor market value of different types of credentials? Do returns to different credential types vary by student demographic characteristics? Do colleges with higher graduation rates have systematically different returns to credentials compared with colleges that have lower graduation rates?

Review the literature and establish a theoretical grounding for the research:

Both education and economic theories provide useful frameworks for studying the consequences of student employment. Tinto's (1975) social integration model hypothesizes that a few hours of on-campus work can help integrate students into the campus life and increase retention, while long hours of work, especially off campus work, can have the opposite effect. The human capital theory in economics comes to a similar conclusion (Becker 1962). According to this theory, both training received through formal college education and through work-experience contribute to the accumulation of human capital, which determines lifetime earnings. In addition, as time spent on a given task, such as studying, increases, the benefits of additional time spent on that task decreases because there are diminishing marginal returns to the time allocated to that task. Therefore, at some point, as more time is diverted from studying to working, it results in a decreasing amount of human capital (Ben-Porath, 1967).

Empirical literature on the academic consequences of student employment is mostly descriptive. This literature generally finds a positive association between working a few hours, perhaps 12 to 15 hours, per week and academic outcomes, but a negative association for working more (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, pp 104-105; Orozco and Cauthen 2009). However, these estimates are likely to be biased since students who work only a few hours per week are likely to differ from those who work more on unobservable characteristics such as ability and motivation. Failing to adjust for pre-existing differences in students' characteristics will result in selection bias. A handful of studies have attempted to adjust for this selection bias by using exogenous variation in student employment intensity. Kalenkoski and Pabilonia (2010) use net college cost and parental transfers to instrument for students' employment intensity while Desimone (2008) uses fathers' education and religion as an instrument. Both studies find negative effects of an increase in employment intensity on students' first semester GPA, but the magnitude of the effects is much smaller than those found in the descriptive literature. It is likely, however, that these quasi-experimental studies are biased because their instruments fail to meet the necessary exclusion restriction, the requirement that the instrument affect the outcome only through its affect on the treatment (Angrist, Imbens and Rubin 1996). For example, parents who are more educated or who invest more in their children's education are likely to have children with higher college achievement regardless of the students' employment decision. A parent's religion may also be related to their children's ability and college achievement if religion is correlated with socioeconomic status or other demographic factors.

Steinbrickner and Steinbrickner's (2003) study is exceptional in finding truly exogenous variation in college students' work decision. The authors use data on students at Berea College, in Kentucky, all of whom are required to work at least ten hours per week and are randomly assigned to jobs during their first semester at college. Because different jobs offer work beyond the required hours while others do not, the authors are able to use the initial job assignment as an instrument for hours worked. They find a large and negative effect for an increase in hours worked on first semester GPA, which is about ten times larger than the effects found by Kalenkoski and Pabilonia and Desimone. These large differences in results could be due to Steinbrickner and Steinbrickner's improvement in methodology, or it could be because the authors use a single college sample that is not representative of college students nationally. Therefore, the evidence on the academic consequences of college students' employment remains inconclusive.

Regarding labor market returns to different types of degrees, human capital theory predicts that both the length of education and its quality contribute to human capital accumulation which determine post-college wages (Becker, 1962). Therefore, according to this theory, the length of a credential is important in determining the credential's labor market value. The empirical literature on the returns to higher education mainly focuses on education received at four year institutions, not community colleges (Belfield and Bailey, forthcoming). Kane and Rouse (2005) attempt to fill this "regrettable gap in the literature," by providing one of the first descriptive, yet carefully controlled estimates of the returns to community college education. Relying on data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72), the authors find a return of 4-6 percent for every thirty credits completed at a community college. A handful of other descriptive studies provide insight about the

possible value of community college certificates. Drawing on several different sources of national data, Bailey, Kienzl and Marcotte (2004) found a lower return to earning certificates versus completing a year of community college without obtaining a certificate for men while the opposite was true for women. Also relying on national data, Grubb (1993, 1997, and 2002) found a positive return to certificates, but in a later review of the literature in 2002, he concluded that there was no consistent evidence of significant positive returns to certificates. Jacobson, Lalonde and Sullivan (2005) provide the first causal estimates of the returns to community college credentials including associate degrees and certificates using administrative data from the State of Washington. The authors limit their sample to displaced workers and take advantage of an individual fixed effects identification strategy. They find large and positive returns to certificates in technical fields which exceed the returns to some Associate Degree awards. However, it is unclear whether their sample of displaced workers is representative of the larger community college population or not. In addition, the authors do not distinguish between returns to short-term and long-term certificates in their estimations. The proposed study attempts to fill the gap in the literature, by providing causal estimates of the returns to community college credentials, especially short term certificates, since despite the relative increase in the numbers of these awards, their labor market value is still unknown.

Describe the research method that will be used:

The first research question I address is:

What is the effect of students' employment intensity while attending community college on academic outcomes including quarterly GPA and credits earned?

The simplest way to evaluate the link between community college students' term-time employment intensity and academic outcomes would be to regress a measure of academic success, such as GPA, on hours worked while controlling for all the differences between students who choose different levels of work intensities. Unfortunately, differences in characteristics, such as ability and motivation, cannot be observed and controlled for; therefore, it is necessary to find an exogenous source of variation in how much students work. I take advantage of the seasonal differences in the supply of retail jobs available to college students, and the fact that over twenty percent of the students in my sample work in retail jobs in a given quarter. One possible identification strategy would be to simply use the fall quarter, which includes the holiday shopping months of November and December, as an instrument to predict the increase in hours worked. However, a possible shortcoming of this strategy is that any systematic differences in relative performance of students in the fall quarter that is not attributable to an increase in hours worked is a potential source of bias. To remedy this, I combine the instrumental variable (IV) estimate with a difference in differences (DID) estimation. A similar IV-DID strategy has been used by Dobbie and Fryer (2009) to estimate the effect of high school quality and by Scott-Clayton (forthcoming) to evaluate the effect of merit-based aid. I estimate this model using two stages. The first stage is a DID equation that is based on two comparisons. First, I compare academic outcomes between students who work in retail during the fall quarter (retail*fall quarter) with outcomes of students who work in retail during the spring and winter quarters (retail). Second, I compare academic outcomes during the fall quarter versus the other quarters for all students who do not work in retail. I use the exogenous change in work intensity that I obtain from the first equation (Hit) to estimate its effect on GPA (or credits earned) in a second equation. Thus the coefficient β in the second equation represents the causal link between hours worked and quarterly GPA. In addition, I will control for all observable student characteristics represented by (Xit) which include age, race, gender, a measure of socio-economic status, as well as family and marital status.

1st stage:

$$\text{Hit} = \alpha + \phi(\text{retail*fall quarter}) + \pi(\text{retail}) + \mu(\text{fall quarter}) + \Omega \text{Xit} + \epsilon_{it}$$

2nd stage

$$\text{GPA}_{it} = \alpha + \beta \text{H}(\text{hat})_{it} + \gamma(\text{retail}) + \omega(\text{fall quarter}) + \psi \text{Xit} + \epsilon_{it}$$

I will compare the results of this causal estimate with results obtained from simply regressing quarterly GPA and credits earned on hours worked and observable covariates in order to estimate the selection bias that arises from failing to adjust for unobserved pre-existing differences among students.

My second research question is:

What is the labor market return to different types of credentials awarded by community colleges, including short-term certificates?

A similar selection problem arises in addressing the return to different types of credentials. Without a causal identification strategy, even in carefully controlled studies, there may be unobserved differences among students who earn a credential and those who leave college without earning a credential. To address this selection problem, I construct a measure of value added in earnings by estimating the *increases* in post-college earnings for students who have earned different types of credentials (or have left college without earnings any credentials) while controlling for pre-college earnings. Value added measures have been widely used in K-12 evaluations of schools as a way to address the selection problem associated with differences in student characteristics across schools. Several states have based school accountability on a measure of student value added in performance on test scores (Ladd and Walsh 2002). However, unlike test scores, which are arguably only a proxy for student learning, increases in earnings after students leave college is considered a direct measurement of labor market success.

The equation below represents the simplest value added model that I will be estimating, where C_{it} represents a vector of dummy variables for each type of award including certificates of less than one-year (short-term certificates), certificates of one-year or more (long-term certificates), associate degrees, or transfer to a four year college. $Y_{it}(\text{after})$ represents average earnings after college exit while $Y_{it}(\text{before})$ represents average earnings before college attendance. As before, I will control for all observable differences among students (X_i).

$$Y_{it}(\text{after}) = \alpha + \beta C_{it} + Y_{it}(\text{before}) + \phi X_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

Because most community college students work at some point before initial college enrollment, constructing a value added measure of earnings is particularly feasible for this population. In fact, eighty percent of the students in my sample have valid earnings in at least one of the six quarters before their college entry. I will exclude students who did not have earnings in any of the six quarters before attending college so that my estimate is a true “value-added” measure.

Understanding the labor market value of different credentials is of great interest to students, community college administrators, as well as state and national policy makers. This is especially true for short term certificates which in recent years have rapidly grown in numbers but have not been rigorously evaluated. I will conduct additional analysis to inform the IPEDS data collection about how colleges perform differently when a measure of value added is used compared to the Student Right to Know (SRK) graduation rates, using the 34 colleges in my sample.

Uploaded Appendix Document(s):

Project Description II

Will you use NCES target dataset? No

Please check all NCES datasets that apply

Explain why each dataset best serves this research. Include a variable list for each dataset used.

Will you use NSF target dataset? No

Explain why each dataset best serves this research. Include a variable list for each dataset used.

Will you address the NPEC focus topic? Yes

If yes, please briefly describe:

This study will inform NPEC's focus topic in several ways: First, by calculating a value-added measure of earnings, I will obtain a direct measure of how much community colleges contribute to their students' labor market success. Second, I will examine whether the institutions in my sample award credentials that are of different in labor market value, in order to understand the potential variation in the value of credentials across institutions. Furthermore, I will compare how the institutions in my sample, rank based on the Student Right to Know (SRK) graduation rates versus the labor market value of their awards. Finally, I will evaluate the extent to which introducing changes to the calculation of the Student Right to Know (SRK) graduation rates would impact how well those graduation rates predict labor market returns for their students. In particular, I will examine how including part-time students changes the predictive power of the SRK graduation rates.

Project Description III

Provide a timeline of key project activities:

I have already received all data from the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (WSBCTS), and have completed cleanings the data and constructing most of the variables I need. I have also started an in-depth review of the literature. My plan for completing the research activities is as follows:

Summer 2011: Complete descriptive analysis of community college students' employment activity. Complete the in-depth review of the literature.

Fall 2011: Complete preliminary causal analysis; oral defense of research proposal to dissertation committee; submission of research proposal for the 2009 AIR Annual Forum; Present preliminary results at the ASHE conference on November 2011; write-up preliminary results to be included in the mid year progress report to AIR due on December 18, 2011

Spring 2012: Complete data analysis; write up research findings to share with staff at the Washington Community and Technical College System; present findings at the AAFP conference in March 2012; Present research findings at the AIR forum in New Orleans in May 2012

Summer 2012: Revise paper based on feedback received; submit two copies of the final report to the NCES and AIR (by June 2012)

List deliverables such as research reports, books, and presentations that will be developed from this research initiative:

Presentation at the 2011 AIR Forum

Presentation at the 2011 ASHE Conference

Presentation at the 2011 AAFP conference

Submission of manuscript to a leading education journal such as Economics of Education Review, Journal of Higher Education or Review of Higher Education

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Describe how you will disseminate the results of this research:

In addition to presenting the results at the Air forum in May of 2012 in New Orleans, I will submit proposals for presentation of this research at the following conferences attended by educational researchers and policy makers:

Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE): November 17-19, 2011

Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP): March 24-26, 2011

I have budgeted \$1000 for travel costs to attend these meetings which includes \$400 for the cost of hotel for two night for each meeting (\$100 per night) and \$300 for the cost of traveling to each event (\$600 total).

I will also share my research findings with the Washington State Board of Community and Technical colleges to receive feedback and also to inform them of consequences of their students' employment and the labor market value of their credentials. The working paper based on this work will be available on the website of the Community College Research Center. I expect that this work will result in a publication in one of the leading journals that are read by policy makers and researchers.

Provide a reference list of sources cited:

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IRB Statement

Statement of Institutional Review Board approval or exemption:

The proposed research will use transcript records from the Washington System of Community and Technical Colleges (WSBCTS) which has been matched with the Washington Unemployment Insurance Records. To ensure confidentiality, the data has been striped on any identifying information and stored at a secure server at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College. CCRC has already received IRB exemption for the use of this data, and as one of the research assistants, I have been given access to this data. Upon learning about this grant decision, I will consult with the IRB office at Teachers College to learn if I need to complete any additional steps.

Statement of Use of Restricted Datasets

As mentioned before, I will be using restricted-use data from the Washington System of Community and Technical Colleges (WSBCTS) which has been matched with the Washington Unemployment Insurance Records. The data-sharing agreement has already been finalized, and I have full access to the data required for completing this study.

Specifically, I will use the 2001-2002 cohort of first-time students that has been matched with administrative employment data from Washington State Unemployment Insurance (UI) records. The transcript data has information on quarterly course taking and GPA, as well as date and type of credential attained, and students' demographic information. The 2001-2002 cohort includes information on earnings and industry of employment for 6 quarters before initial enrollment and 29 quarters after enrollment.

Biographical Sketch

I am a fourth year doctoral student in Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and hold a Bachelors degree in Economics, and a Masters Degree in Public Affairs, both from the University of Texas at Austin. My research interests include quantitative evaluation of higher education initiatives, as well as evaluation of national, state and institutional policies that promote educational attainment of low-income and minority students. Through my coursework at Teachers College and Columbia University's Economics Department, as well as my research assistance position at the Community College Research Center, I have gained both contextual knowledge and the quantitative skills necessary for analyzing issues related to higher education access and success. Some of the relevant courses that I have completed include: Economics of Higher Education, Econometric Theory, Causal Inference, and Advanced Micro-economic Theory. In addition, I have been a teaching assistant for several graduate level courses at Teachers College and at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs including Causal Inference, Economics and Education, and Economics for Policy Analysis. For the past three years, I have combined my PhD studies with a part-time position as a Senior Research Assistant at the Community College Research Center (CCRC). Working at CCRC, I have learned about the most important barriers to community college student's success, and the relative lack of rigorous research that could inform policies to improve retention and graduation. In addition, with access to state transcript data files, I have had an opportunity to apply my quantitative knowledge in econometrics and STATA programming to study how community college can help their students succeed. For example, I have used transcript data from the State of Virginia to analyze the effectiveness of the lowest levels of remedial courses in mathematics using a Regression Discontinuity design. The findings from this research have been presented at the American Education Finance Associations' 2010 meeting and will be submitted for publication. Through many years of practice, I have become an advanced user of STATA, the statistical software that I will be using for my dissertation research. In fact, as a Teaching Assistant for causal inference, one of my main responsibilities has been to help graduate students write STATA codes.

While working at CCRC has given me an informed sense of the urgency for rigorous research that can improve community college student outcomes, my personal commitment to this research topic is motivated by the fact that I was once a community college student until I transferred

my credits to the University of Texas at Austin, where I subsequently earned a BA and an MPA degree.

Additionally, my work experience before starting my PhD degree, sharpened my skills and interest in program evaluation. After earning a Master's degree in Public Affairs, I worked for Mathematica Policy Research Inc. as a Research Analyst for two years, where I worked on evaluation of programs in education, early childhood, and workforce development. Subsequently, I worked as a consultant for the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Education, where I designed and wrote sections of an online manual with the objective of helping college access programs such as TRIO and GEAR-UP develop an evaluation framework as well as indicators to assess and monitor their own performance. During the summer and the fall Semester of 2010 I accepted a part-time contract position as an Adjunct Research Assistant to help the City University of New York's collaborative program evaluate the effectiveness of their dual enrollment program using CUNY's institutional Research Database. The results from this research has been accepted for presentation in the Association of Education Finance and Policy's 2011 meeting.

Budget Requirements

Salary/Stipend: \$11000.00
Tuition and fees: \$7225.00
Travel: \$700.00
Other travel related expenses: \$1000.00
Other research expenses: \$75.00
Total Request: \$20000.00

Funding History

I have been a recipient of Teachers College merit based scholarship and Teachers College departmental scholarship, which have covered the cost of my tuition so far. All Teachers College funding will end by May of 2011 when AIR funding begins. My remaining direct college expenses include \$ 4,000 in fees required for filling my dissertation as well as \$3,225 for the one remaining course that I will need to complete without my college's financial support.

This research proposal has not been submitted to any source of external funding, other than this AIR dissertation grant application.

Letter of Support from Dissertation Faculty Advisor

- [Letter of Support](#)