

Older Schoolmate Spillovers on Higher Education Choices

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Abstract :

How do students choose where to apply to higher education? Answering this question is crucial for designing effective policies to improve students' long-term outcomes. This paper examines within-high school across-cohorts spillovers in higher education choices. Specifically, we analyse how students' applications and enrollments are influenced by the higher education trajectory of the previous graduating cohort from the same high school. We exploit admission cutoffs randomly generated by the French centralised admission system and compare high schools with a marginally admitted student to a college-major to high schools with a marginally rejected student. Using exhaustive administrative application data, we find that students are about 6 percentage points (+19%) more likely to apply to the same college-major as a marginally enrolled older schoolmate, and 2 percentage points (+45%) more likely to enrol. These effects are large: they correspond roughly to 45% of the magnitude of spillovers across siblings. We explore two potential mediating factors for these within-high school spillovers: (i) teachers, and (ii) older schoolmate role models. We find suggestive evidence that both effects play a role. Students with the same "principal" teacher as the previous cohort's marginally admitted student are significantly more likely to apply to and enrol in the same college-major compared to students with a different principal teacher. Similarly, students with the same gender or same socio-economic status as the older schoolmate are significantly more likely to apply to and enrol in the same college-major. These results highlight the important role of students' high school environment in shaping their higher education choices.