

# Barriers to Success: How Limited Pre-College Access Impacts Underrepresented Students

Valerie Contreras and Samuel Luby

## ABSTRACT

Ethnic minorities represent a significant yet underutilized talent pool in the United States. Many minority students disengage from the academic pipeline before reaching college due to inadequate preparation and encouragement at the pre-collegiate level. Limited access to high-quality curricula further contributes to the disproportionate underrepresentation of minority students in higher education. Pre-college programs (PCPs) seek to promote equity by bridging educational gaps for students in underrepresented communities. However, socioeconomic barriers, limited social capital, and restricted exposure to collegiate opportunities hinder their effectiveness. This study conducted a literature review to examine first-generation students' experiences, comparing the benefits of PCPs with the challenges of inaccessibility. Findings indicate that financial constraints prevent many minority students from enrolling in PCPs, while alternative pathways—such as vocational training or military enlistment—often appear more viable. Additionally, access to stable, low-skill employment discourages college enrollment among students from low-income backgrounds. These findings underscore the need for increased resources that support college and career readiness initiatives in minority-serving high schools. Moreover, greater federal investment in PCPs is essential to improving accessibility, ensuring that underrepresented students receive the preparation necessary for postsecondary success.

## INTRODUCTION

Attending college is an excellent opportunity to improve one's socioeconomic status as it facilitates generational mobility and promises economic rewards. Education can open doors to jobs that require specific skills and qualities that can be developed through college; hence, minorities tend to gravitate toward these opportunities in hopes of improving their quality of life. However, historical efforts that created barriers against equal education continue to plague minority students to this day. Before World War II, minority students recorded personal experiences of their relationships with fellow students and faculty at white institutions. Minorities were subjected to unfair treatment and humiliation. While some professors encouraged safe spaces for these students, most were hostile, especially toward academic inequity. These alarming dynamics are revealed through autobiographies of students of different races and ethnicities besides white. Their unfortunate reality acted as catalysts that would affect access to higher education for their posterity. Contemporarily, pre-college programs (PCPs) aim to promote equity by bridging the gap in access to quality education for students in underrepresented communities. Research on PCPs suggests that their long-term success lies in their ability to accelerate students' professional development. These programs provide exposure to college preparedness, STEM fields, and a culture of academic excellence. Significant disparities arise because access to these opportunities and outreach for underrepresented students is often costly. Previous research has not explored the deceitful and often misleading nature of PCPs. This literature review was conducted to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of PCPs concerning the encouraged participation of minorities and the lack thereof.

## METHODOLOGY

This literature review used a bottom-up approach to identify relevant studies on the effectiveness of PCPs and the personal experiences of first-generation college students from underrepresented communities. The selected literature was carefully analyzed and critically evaluated for its applicability to this research project.

## FINDINGS

General trends across various studies highlight the need for improved access and renewed purposes of PCPs.

A study conducted by Eric P. Bettinger on the effectiveness of Advise TX, a pre-college program, aimed to raise the rates of college enrollment among low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented high school students in Texas. The results supported the notions:

- Continue funding at federal, state, and institutional levels.
- Renew efforts to promote bachelor's degrees and financial aid

A Literature review by Erick M. Hines explored the barriers that hinder first-generation students from enrolling in pre-college programs. Their research showed that pre-college facilitators were strong determinants in encouraging first-generation Latino and Black males to enroll in college.

Examples are:

- Strong family relationships
- Mentorship
- Purposeful extracurricular activities

Personal accounts from first-generation college students explored these themes:

PCPs provide opportunities and exposure to diverse experiences  
Improvement of cultural capital  
Empowering and motivational factors of socioeconomic circumstances  
Students were humble and felt responsible, proud, and accomplished

## DISCUSSION

The findings emphasize the need for sustained, and ideally increased, federal funding for PCPs. Existing research supports the notion that students who participate in PCPs during high school demonstrate academic progress. However, students from under-resourced schools often face significant setbacks and may encounter additional challenges related to community stressors such as crime, violence, and poverty. First-generation, low-income students are particularly disadvantaged, as they are less likely to receive exposure to college preparation opportunities. Therefore, PCP programs should develop curricula that not only prepare students for college but also support them throughout their higher education journey.

A key strength of this study is its accurate analysis of students' perspectives and experiences. However, a notable limitation is the lack of statistical exploration regarding how the high cost of private programs contributes to accessibility barriers, beyond the challenges posed by under-resourced schools. Even in schools with adequate resources, low-income students may struggle to afford private programs, further widening disparities. These gaps in knowledge necessitate additional research and analysis.

Further research is needed to fully address the research question, particularly in examining the financial inaccessibility of PCPs for low-income students. This issue extends beyond marginalized communities to include broader financial constraints faced by under-resourced areas.

## REFERENCES



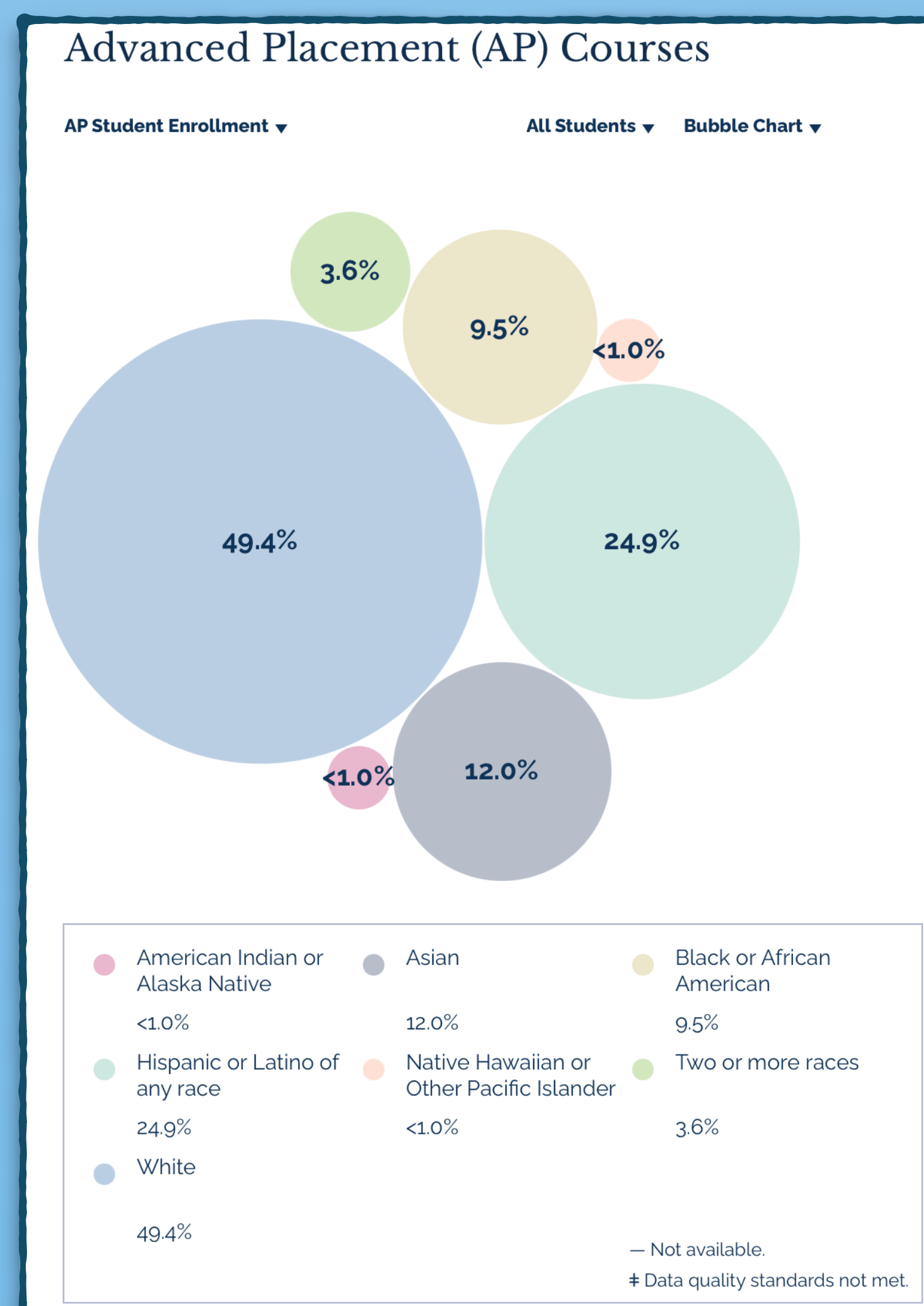
**Table 4.** Intent-to-treat first-year college fall enrollment results for two-year versus four-year enrollment.

	Two-Year enrollment				Four-Year enrollment			
	Full sample	Black	Hispanic	Low-Income	Full sample	Black	Hispanic	Low-Income
Treatment	0.024* (0.012)	0.009 (0.019)	0.034* (0.013)	0.020* (0.012)	-0.007 (0.010)	0.006 (0.016)	-0.006 (0.009)	0.006 (0.010)
Covariate Block Fix	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control N	0.380	0.383	0.374	0.365	0.237	0.277	0.184	0.175
R <sup>2</sup>	0.034	0.016	0.041	0.038	0.077	0.057	0.060	0.055
N	38,124	6,659	21,852	19,677	38,124	6,659	21,852	19,677

Notes: \*p < 0.10; \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01. Each cell reports the coefficient on treatment assignment in 2011/2012 for each sample using a linear probability model. Standard errors are reported in parentheses and are clustered at the school level. Covariates include gender, race, age, whether the student was on free/reduced price lunch, whether free/reduced price lunch was missing, and whether the entire school was on free/reduced price lunch.

Pre-college advising increased two-year college enrollment by 2.4%. These estimated effects correspond to a 6.3% increase for the full sample, a 9.1% increase for Hispanic students, and a 5.5% increase for low-income students.

**“High poverty in segregated Black and Latino high schools accounts for the majority of dropouts in roughly 1400 schools nationwide.”**  
– Nikole Hannah-Jones, 2014



Data collection from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. White students are statistically more exposed to academically rigorous courses compared to underrepresented students.