The Effects of Student Coaching in the United States

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: United States

Sample: 13,555 students across 8 different postsecondary institutions

Target group: Higher education and universities Students

Outcome of interest: Dropout and graduation

Intervention type: Information Training

AEA RCT registration number: https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/1489

Partner organization(s): InsideTrack

Despite substantial increases in college attendance rates in the United States, college completion has not kept pace. Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the effectiveness of providing individualized coaching to university students on their persistence in university courses. Students who were randomly assigned to a coach were more likely to persist in university during the time they received coaching and were more likely to still be attending university one year after the coaching had ended.

Policy issue

Despite substantial increases in college attendance rates in the United States, college completion has not kept pace. Between 1970 and 1999, the percentage of 23-year-old high school graduates with some college experience increased by 31 percent, while degree attainment by this age increased just 4 percent.

College students may have a difficult time completing a degree for a variety of reasons: they may lack access to information about course or graduation requirements, may need support developing academic skills or nonacademic school skills such as time management, or may not feel integrated into the university community. Traditional college counseling programs attempt to increase graduation rates, but the set of programs vary widely and many may be overextended in their efforts to provide support for all students. College mentorship (such as individualized student coaching) and learning communities—a cohort of students in similar courses who live close together—may complement traditional counseling programs by helping students develop better study skills, better integrate into the campus community, and navigate graduation requirements. However, little is known about the effectiveness of such programs in increasing graduation rates.

Context of the evaluation

In 2014, at the time of this study, InsideTrack was the largest provider of one-on-one student coaching in the United States. Since 2000, the company's professionally trained coaches have worked with more than 250,000 students nationwide. InsideTrack works in both two- and four-year postsecondary institutions including public, private, and proprietary colleges and universities.

A tutor coaches her student in a library in the United States.

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Details of the intervention

In partnership with InsideTrack, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the effectiveness of providing individualized coaching to university students on their continued enrollment and ultimate graduation.

When developing an agreement with a school, InsideTrack offered new clients the option of conducting an impact evaluation. Universities first determined the criteria for and number of students they wished to reach. The schools then provided InsideTrack with a list of potential students which InsideTrack randomly divided into treatment and control groups. For those in the treatment group, InsideTrack then randomly assigned each to a personal academic coach.

InsideTrack coaches worked with students over two semesters, contacting them regularly through phone, e-mail, text messages, and social networking sites. Coaching sessions consisted of a mix of general information and institution-specific details such as course requirements and syllabi. Coaches used this information to individualize sessions with timely content relative to students' specific coursework and to improve students' success in school. Sessions included helping students develop a clear vision of their goals, guiding them in connecting their daily activities to long-term goals, and supporting them in building skills such as time management, self-advocacy, and study skills.

InsideTrack provided researchers with data on the performance of 13,555 students from 17 randomly assigned cohorts in the 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 school years. Overall, 8,049 students received coaching services and 5,506 served as the control group. While the groups differed in access to InsideTrack's individualized coaching sessions, all other services such as support from academic councilors and access to tutoring on campus remained available to both groups of students. Researchers measured

college retention rates after 6, 12, 18 and 24 months for all students and graduation rates for students in the three cohorts for which degree completion data was available.

Results and policy lessons

Students who were randomly assigned to a coach were more likely to persist in university while they received coaching and were more likely to still be attending university one year after the coaching had ended.

Coaches were able to contact 98% of students in the treatment group at least once and 77% of students at least five times. Six months into the program, students in the coached group were 5.2 percentage points more likely to be enrolled relative to 58 percent of students in the control group, a 9 percent increase in student retention. The results persisted even after students no longer received calls from their coaches. After 18 months, 32.9 percent of students in the coached group remained in school—15 percent more than the 28.6 percent of students in control cohorts.

Coaching also led to higher rates of degree completion. In the three four-year colleges for which graduation data were available, 35.2 percent of coached students completed their degree relative to the 31.2 percent of students in the control group.

While previous studies have found positive impacts on credit accumulation and other academic outcomes from student counseling programs paired with financial incentives, these results indicate that regular contact with a college counselor can have lasting effects on its own. InsideTrack's coaching program also proved more cost-effective at increasing student retention and graduation than strategies to increase financial aid, which are much more costly to implement.

Baker, Rachel B. and Eric P. Bettinger. 2014. "The Effects of Student Coaching: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Advising." Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis 36(1): 3-19.