The Balancing Act of Community College

Graduation rates at community colleges, which serve the nation's most vulnerable students, are frustratingly low. Many students are struggling to manage their time as they balance their education with multiple other commitments, like family and work, leading them to violate standards of "satisfactory academic progress" (SAP), which must be met in order to stay eligible for federal financial aid.

In partnership with the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), we sought to understand why students struggle to balance their commitments and develop a light-touch intervention to help them do so. CCP recommends two hours of independent work for every one hour of class, but students are hardly aware of this rule of thumb, and most do not follow it. As a result, students have difficulty planning ahead for the out-of-class time they will need for studying and homework. Students also struggle with attending their classes or getting there on time. We emphasize that students are hardly to blame for struggling with these issues – many of them are extremely constrained by time and finances, and we commend their determination to earn a college degree. The aim of our efforts was to make it easier for them to succeed.

Highlights

➤ Many students struggle with balancing education and life, leading them to violate SAP standards

➤ CCP recommends two hours of independent work for every one hour of class, but the recommendation is largely unknown

The Method of Choosing Classes

Using our proprietary diagnosis and design process, we found that the problem of managing one's schedule was driven by two underlying issues. When transitioning to college, students have a hard time setting up a schedule that maximizes their success. Students first sit down to choose their classes in the context of the "SOaR" (Student Orientation and Registration) session in the summer before their first semester. The SOaR session contains a massive amount of information for new students, as well as a difficult computer interface they must navigate for registration. Due to the nature of this interface, students place classes in a schedule that appears empty, but in reality will be filled with study time and other commitments. In the context of SOaR, these commitments seem ambiguous and far away. Even when accounting for them, students can be overconfident about their ability to successfully navigate a busy schedule.

Highlights

➤ Students register for classes without accounting for study time and other commitments

➤ Students can be initially overconfident then have a hard time following through on schedule later on

As the semester grows nearer, students may realize that one or more classes are in direct conflict with other commitments. However, by this point, many classes are full or difficult to switch into. When the semester begins, students (like the rest of us) have a hard time following through on their intentions. Students are forced to study at difficult and inconsistent times and places, as their schedules allow. They are navigating a public transit system that can be unpredictable. When they are able to satisfy their busy schedules in the beginning of the semester, their strategies may fail as their academic workload increases. Often, it is difficult for them to tell how their busy lives are affecting their academic performance until they receive a grade that is fatal to their chances of passing a class.

Helping Students Create and Follow a More Holistic Plan

Based on our insights, we wanted to pursue designs that made changes to the registration system, such as allowing students to place study time on their official calendar, or register for attendance-tracked study halls that would encourage students to "lock-in" a commitment to spend time doing out-of-class work. Due to the project timeline and technological constraints, we instead designed a light-touch, two-pronged program that aimed to help students build a schedule that would allow them to make it to class and spend the right amount of time on homework.

The intervention began during the SOaR session, implemented within a randomly selected half of the approximately 150 sessions. We introduced a plan-making activity that prompted students to consider all of their various commitments before picking class times and to note those commitments on a weekly schedule. We also collected cell phone numbers and consent to text these students, as well as some information on their expectations about and motivations for attending college. Out of the 850 students given the options, over 90% of them opted-in to the text stream.

During the semester, we attempted to reinforce students' initial plans by sending their handwritten calendar back to them and texting them two to three times per week with study tips (at custom times based on when they told us they'd be studying), motivational messages they had written to themselves, and general messages informed by psychological research on prompting student success.

One unexpected consequence of this "potpourri" approach is that many students came to see the text line as a place to get help with whatever questions they had for the college. Because the texting platform was two-way, we fielded hundreds of questions, from almost 40% of the students receiving texts, both related and unrelated to the messages we were sending out.

Our intervention resulted in differences between the treatment and control groups among full-time students at CCP, but these differences were not statistically significant. Among the full-time students in the treatment group who received our plan-making design and text messages, GPAs rose by 0.17 points (from 2.1 to 2.27) and Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) violations dropped 16% (from 31.3% to 26.4%). Though these differences were not statistically significant, improvements for the treatment group on these and several other indicators of academic success are suggestive of a positive effect of this intervention. A future experiment with a larger pool of students may be able to provide more rigorous evidence of the impact of this intervention.

Lessons for the Future

This projects highlights the challenges faced by students who try to juggle a college education with the rest of their busy lives. Using behavioral science as our lens, we were able to design a low-cost, scalable intervention that attempted to support students in selecting an academic schedule that fits manageably into their lives and following through on that schedule, ultimately allowing them to avoid SAP violations and stay eligible for federal financial aid. Though the experiment did not generate significant results, we hope that it serves as motivation for future research on ways to help students design schedules that fit their busy lives.

This work suggests that managing student expectations about the transition to college is important, and that structuring intake processes that provide appropriate guidance for this transition is vital for student success. The surprising student response to our outreach via text message also suggests that students need more easily-accessible and intuitive sources of help.

Further streamlined and integrated into college processes, our intervention could have tremendous influence on student success. At a time when community colleges are searching for low-cost ways to improve persistence and graduation rates, helping students build the right schedule upfront and finding ways to help them stick to it has the potential to help millions of students.

Highlights

➤ Managing student expectations about transition to college is important

➤ Students need and desire appropriate guidance through easily-accessible and intuitive sources of help, such as text messaging