

Summary

Community colleges in the United States provide an affordable postsecondary education that prepares students to either transfer to four-year institutions or transition directly into the workforce. Of course, higher educational attainment increasingly leads to greater career success—but for students to reap that benefit they must perform well academically and make steady progress toward their degree.

A key success factor in making that progress is registering for courses in a timely way. But at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, fully one third of continuing students registered for classes during the final month of the registration window for the Fall 2014 semester. And this problem is not unique to Sinclair – it exists at most community colleges. Sinclair is committed to addressing it. Why? Because when students wait to register they may not be able to get into the courses they need to progress toward their degree or that fit with their work or family obligations. By contrast, registering early makes it much more likely students will get the courses they need, and it also helps the college administration accurately project and then meet specific course demand.

Sinclair students face a host of behavioral barriers that can delay their registration. Registration tends to be communicated through conventional channels, such as emails (which have relatively low open rates) and campus advertisements (which often fail to reach many students). The administration’s messaging about registration also emphasizes the start of the semester – a date that is extremely late in the process. The consequences of waiting to register are also not evident to students. Finally, when students do attempt to register, the complexity of choosing courses and the hassles involved in that process – such as needing to meet with an academic advisor to remove any “holds” – make it more likely they will procrastinate.

ideas42 partnered with Sinclair to develop behaviorally-informed solutions to increase the number of students who register early – defined as registering at least one month before the end of the registration period. We designed two interventions, an advising intervention and a messaging intervention. We measured the impact of each intervention on the number of students who register early and those who register overall as compared to a control group who received neither. The advising intervention defaulted students into appointments with academic advisors, which were scheduled based on students’ schedules (either in-person during daytime hours or, for the first time, via phone during evening hours). Students were notified of these appointments by email and text message, and were reminded to register after the appointment. This messaging intervention sent 22 pairs of behaviorally-informed emails and text messages (a new channel) over the course of 12 weeks.

Both the advising and messaging interventions led more students to register early for the Fall 2015 semester. The registration rate for students in each intervention was 7-9% higher than students in the control. The advising intervention, but not the messaging, increased the overall number of students who registered, which is also an important effect. The advising intervention also resulted in more students engaging with advisors beyond the length of the intervention, highlighting the possible impact of targeted, opt-out appointments in increasing service take-up. Overall, we found that low-cost behavioral interventions that leverage existing systems can help increase early registration, retention, and take-up of services.

Highlights

- ▶ At Sinclair Community College, low-cost behavioral interventions helped increase early registration, retention, and take-up of services
- ▶ Registering early has benefits for both students and administration

Defining the Problem

A significant number of Sinclair Community College students delay registering for courses until shortly before the semester begins, which can affect their academic performance and progress. Students who register for classes late in the process may get closed out of classes they need, miss deadlines that prohibit their full enrollment, or fail to buy their books before classes start. This is consistent with Sinclair's historical registration and administrative data, which indicates that late registration is associated with decreased retention and academic performance. Additionally, as the registration period goes on the administration's ability to respond to student demand for courses is diminished.

Highlights

- ▶ Late registration is associated with decreased retention and academic performance

The Sinclair administration is keenly aware of the consequences of students registering late and is aggressive in promoting registration through email communications, flyers, television monitors and banners in central campus locations, and staffed tables in high foot-traffic locations. These efforts to inform students about registration do not go unnoticed: many students know that registration is taking place and that it is important to do it early. For some students, like those taking classes full time, this awareness translates into earlier registration, but for many others it does not.

Diagnosis

Based on interviews with Sinclair students, faculty, and administrators, as well as our own data analysis, an exploration of existing registration materials, and a review the behavioral literature, ideas42 found that four main behavioral barriers impede early registration: (1) registration may not be salient for many students, (2) existing messaging about registration may inadvertently promote registering late, (3) students may not perceive the consequences of delaying registration, and (4) hassles in the registration process can further delay registering.

School is often just one of many priorities competing for students' time and attention, and behavioral research shows that people with many mental demands have a harder time focusing and completing tasks. Part-time students, for example, tend to be on campus less often so they may not regularly remember that registration is ongoing, and they do not have the benefit of constant reminders.

Highlights

- ▶ Students respond to urgency, such as an upcoming deadline or a critical class in a degree path
- ▶ Registration processes are often filled with hassles that make it hard to register or cause students to delay the act of doing so

Even for students aware of registration, unintended messages may dissuade them from registering early. For example, the administration's messaging stream highlights the beginning of the upcoming semester (a week after the registration window officially closes) as the last day to register. With no other dates emphasized, students are likely to remember only this date and wait to register until the date approaches.

Though students have heard about the importance of registering early for classes and the risks of waiting, few have in fact experienced the consequences of registering late. Certain groups of students, like those in nursing and other selective majors, know that not registering for a certain class can quickly derail their academic progress. But students in more flexible programs do not feel this same urgency. For example, only 24% of liberal arts students registered within the first month for the Fall 2014 semester. Moreover, Sinclair's mission and commitment to serve as many students as possible contributes to students' perception that there are no real penalties for registering late.

Finally, the registration process itself is complex and filled with hassles, making it harder to register earlier or leading students to delay registering. To register, students must determine which classes they need to take in order to progress academically and fit them into their work schedules in a way that simultaneously works with their family obligations. As students move through the registration process, many face hassles that further complicate registering, such as errors and holds that can only be resolved in a meeting with an academic advisor. Students with clearer choices, like those with a pre-defined sequence of courses that meet their degree requirements, tend to register earlier at higher rates. This finding is consistent with the behavioral literature, which suggests that small annoyances or obstacles can have a disproportionately large impact on behavior, even when stakes are high.

Intervention Design and Testing

To address the behavioral issues preventing students from registering early, we worked with Sinclair to pilot a system of “opt-out” appointments with academic advisors to help with registration and to redesign their existing email stream to include more frequent, behaviorally-designed emails and add text messages for the first time.

The advising intervention scheduled students for opt-out appointments with an advisor, either in person during the day (for students taking summer classes on campus), or on the phone in the evening (for everyone else). Because students were not able to actually register during the appointment, the intervention also included post-appointment reminders to register as soon as possible.

The design of the advising intervention addressed a number of the behavioral barriers involved in registration. An opt-out appointment with an advisor to discuss registration not only makes registration salient, it does so in a way that tends to prompt action. It also initiates a conversation with someone who can address some of the most significant registration hassles, like system holds or figuring out what classes to take. The reminder to register then provides a clear moment of action to complete registration.

The messaging intervention sent 22 pairs of emails and text messages to students over a 12-week period, roughly corresponding to the first three quarters of the registration window. The control group received the three existing registration emails, which are roughly timed to align with the beginning, middle, and end of the registration period. The content of the redesigned messages leveraged behavioral principles such as social norms and reciprocity to prompt registration.

The content and increased frequency of the emails and texts addressed the identified behavioral barriers. The messages provided new deadlines for students to remember and act and highlighted both the potential benefits of registering early and the costs of waiting. The increased frequency of messages and the new text messages sought to make registration more salient for students who were hard to reach with traditional on-campus and email communications.

To test the effectiveness of the advising and messaging interventions in getting students to register for the Fall 2015 semester before the last month of the registration period – an early registration – we conducted a 2x2 randomized controlled trial with 17,900 Sinclair students. We split our sample into four groups receiving only the advising intervention, only the messaging intervention, both, or neither, in order to tease apart the specific

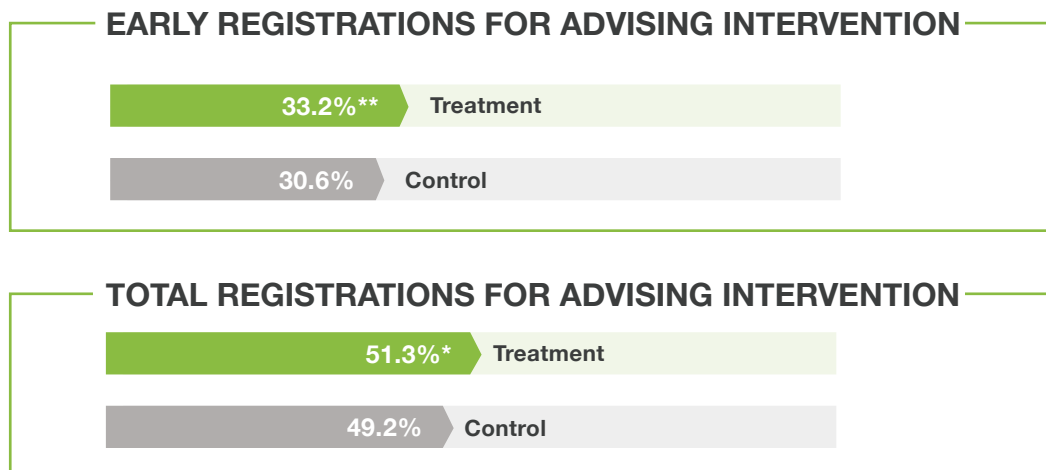
Highlights

- ▶ Opt-out appointments instead of opt-in initiate conversation and engagement
- ▶ A multi-channel communication stream of emails, text-messages, and advising appointments help increase early registration and retention

impact of each intervention and their combined effect. Overall, we found that low-cost behavioral interventions can leverage existing systems to increase earlier registration, retention, and uptake of services.

Both the advising and messaging interventions were effective in increasing early registration. Students in the advising intervention registered early at an 8.5% higher rate than students who did not receive that intervention (from 30.6% to 33.2%),¹ and those in the messaging intervention registered at a 6.9% higher rate than those who did not receive it (from 33.1% to 35.4%).² These findings confirm the effectiveness of both behavioral interventions at increasing the number of students registering early. Students who received both interventions registered at approximately the same rates as those who received just one, suggesting no additive benefit of both.

The advising intervention also led to an increase in overall registration rates and take-up of advising. The overall number of students who registered for courses in Fall 2015, regardless of when they registered, was 4.2% higher for students in the advising intervention than for those who did not receive it (from 49.2% to 51.3%).³ The messaging intervention, on the other hand, did not show an increase in overall registration. The more intimate human component of speaking with an advisor or hearing her voice in a voicemail, as opposed to the less personal nature of digital messaging, may have led students to sign up for courses even when they were not planning to do so or had thought it was too late. Moreover, despite the similar early registration rates of both interventions, the mechanism by which they influence students appears to be different and potentially important as evidenced by overall registration rates.



* = significant at 95% level ** = significant at 99% level

Participating in the advising intervention also led students to engage with advisors beyond the duration of the intervention. Compared to students who did not receive the intervention, advising intervention students had some interaction with an advisor (an appointment, phone call, email, etc.) at a 33% higher rate (from 28.2% to 37.6%).⁴ Our results suggest that providing opt-out appointments for certain services, in this case academic advising, may be sufficient to increase future take-up of those services.

At the scale of the entire population of continuing students at Sinclair (approximately 18,000 students), we estimate that the advising intervention would cost only \$13 for each additional student to register early or \$16 for each additional student to persist to the next semester. As mentioned earlier, there is no additive effect of the interventions, so we would recommend pursuing only the advising intervention to increase both early registration and retention.

Lessons for the Future

Like their counterparts at other schools, Sinclair students face a number of behavioral barriers that can delay their registration, such as hassles or messages that facilitate procrastination. The results of our advising and messaging behavioral interventions in registration bolster the behavioral approach to understanding and mitigating problems related to degree completion. Moreover, because these interventions leveraged existing touch-points and systems, they may scale more rapidly across postsecondary institutions. We encourage practitioners to leverage the findings of this project, particularly the advising intervention, to help students succeed in college.

Notes

¹ This 2.6 percentage point increase in early registration is statistically significant ($p=0.01$)

² This 2.3 percentage point increase in early registration is statistically significant ($p=0.00$)

³ This 2.1 percentage point increase in overall registration is statistically significant ($p=0.04$)

⁴ The 9.4 percentage point increase in use of advisors is statistically significant ($p=0.00$)