

Boosting New York Transfer High School Graduation Rates

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Helping more students follow through on their intention to graduate

Queens Community House (QCH) provides attendance outreach and counseling services to students at multiple NYC transfer high schools, which offer unique flexibility and support to help students who have fallen behind on their credits succeed. Even so, students often struggle to graduate within their expected timeframe, often because they do not attend class enough to pass. QCH partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to uncover behavioral barriers keeping students from attending and graduating, and to develop behaviorally informed strategies to encourage students to obtain services and supports aimed at enhancing their attendance and success.

Summary

In New York City, transfer high schools are small, full-time high schools designed to reengage students who have dropped out or fallen behind in credits. Queens Community House (QCH) provides supportive services to students at transfer high schools, with one goal being to help them attend class and graduate. ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) worked with QCH and one transfer school, Voyages Preparatory High School (Voyages Prep), to uncover insights and develop strategies to boost attendance rates.

Voyages Prep and QCH staff work together to create a uniquely supportive environment for students. QCH counselors provide: daily calls or text messages to ensure students come to school, regular check-ins, home visits, socio-emotional counseling, and career and college guidance. A significant part of their role is helping students navigate challenges in both school and life so they can graduate in a timely manner. Teachers provide complementary academic support.

Still, many students miss class and do not graduate on time. While it may appear that students with chronic absences don't care about graduating, we found the opposite: a majority of students at Voyages Prep want to graduate from high school (91.66% of students who completed our survey). In fact, 80% want to go to college and feel that graduating from college is an important part of their identity. Instead, we learned that many students at Voyages Prep face an intention-action gap. Most know what they need to do to graduate: come to class and complete key assignments. Even so, roughly 90% are chronically absent (they've missed 10% or more of school days) or severely chronically absent (they've missed 20% or more of school days) every year.

Highlights

- ▶ An intention-action gap affects many NYC transfer high school students: they want to graduate but may not attend class regularly, a requirement to graduate.
- ▶ Reminding students of their overarching goal to graduate through smaller, behaviorally informed goals and tools can serve to address some barriers to graduation.

Not only does missing class delay graduation—often significantly—chronically absent students are at greater risk of not graduating at all. Once students turn 22, they are no longer eligible to attend Voyages Prep. Instead, they will need to pass an equivalency exam—and most likely, find and attend adult education classes to prepare for it—in order to earn a diploma. Our work focused on helping students overcome behavioral barriers to going to class and thus increase their chances of receiving a high school diploma more quickly, and without the extra hurdles in the equivalency exam process.

In this collaboration, we applied a behavioral lens to QCH's services and communications in order to help counselors and teachers support more students on their journey to graduation.

Present bias makes it harder to graduate

To understand why students who want to graduate are not coming to class, we interviewed students and QCH counsellors, surveyed students, and analyzed data on attendance and use of QCH services. These activities confirmed that many students do experience an intention-action gap, and revealed that it may be a result of present bias, the human tendency to prioritize immediate rewards over long-term ones. This bias leads students to make attendance choices based on short-term rewards such as sleeping in, making money or spending time with friends at the expense of long-term rewards like graduating.

Notably, our work showed that even students with poor school attendance engage with QCH's services—a testament to the value of these services to students. For example, while severely chronically absent students rarely come to school, 80% of them have attended a counseling session with QCH. And 94% of students who are chronically absent have attended a counselling session. Even more impressively, students in these groups are attending just as many counselling sessions as their peers who attend school regularly. This finding challenges the assumption that students' low attendance reflects a lack of interest in education and the resources their schools provide. It also suggests that QCH is a pivotal channel for reaching all students at the schools it serves. We also found that students at Voyages Prep have a positive perception of themselves and believe they can graduate.

To address students' intention-action gap and their tendency to be present biased, we redesigned a weekly progress report students receive via email. Our redesign aimed to achieve the following behavioral goals:

- 1.** Remind students of their long-term goal of graduating
- 2.** Make the tie between attendance and graduating in a timely manner salient for students
- 3.** Focus students' attention on classes where they are falling behind
- 4.** Make two additional benchmarks salient: how many days remain in the trimester for improving their academic standing, and the date of their next big exam, which is an important opportunity for improvement
- 5.** Remind students of the concrete steps they can take to graduate
- 6.** Reinforce students' positive self-perceptions

Paired with the email, we redesigned the weekly reflection sheet students fill out to help them plan how they will improve their standings to achieve their goal of timely graduation. On the new sheet, students document their progress over the course of a month. This provides students with concrete, salient evidence of their efforts and achievements over time, and the steps still to be taken in order to succeed

We expect the redesigned materials will help reduce some of the behavioral barriers keeping students from timely graduation. However, there are larger structural and personal barriers that also get in the way of students fulfilling their intention to graduate. For example, some students are juggling full-time employment or caring for family members. Many students are dealing with mental health issues. These kinds of barriers can make it much more difficult to attend school regularly, engage with curriculum, and graduate.

While behavioral insights can't remove all of these barriers to graduation, they can certainly help address some of the surrounding barriers. Recognizing this, in addition to redesigning the program materials, we also developed program design and communication recommendations that QCH can use throughout its services to further support students. These recommendations draw on ideas42's past work helping students externalize their struggles in school,¹ and the power of goal-setting:

- 1. Creating 'roadmaps to success'** that document students' progress over time and clarify next steps. For example, tools such as assignment trackers show students how many assignments they have completed and how many they still need to complete to pass a class.
- 2. Highlighting and reinforcing students' positive self-perception** through value-affirmation activities,² particularly in moments or contexts when stereotype threat³ might affect them.
- 3. Incorporating information about students' progress and successes** in communications with parents so parents can provide positive reinforcement as well as encourage students to take the steps needed to progress further. For example, parents could receive weekly reports about students' progress in school, similar to the reports students receive.

Helpful services get more support from behavioral insights

It is often assumed that chronically absent students don't care about graduating or continuing their education. However, the Voyages Prep data and our research do not support these assumptions. Dismissing or failing to support "at risk" students can have significant long-term impacts on their well-being. High school graduates enjoy significantly higher earning potential over their lifetimes, and are also less likely to experience unemployment than those who do not complete high school.⁴

¹ Pages 33 and 34 of <http://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Nudging-For-Success-FINAL.pdf>

² Borman, Geoffrey D. "Advancing Values Affirmation as a Scalable Strategy for Mitigating Identity Threats and Narrowing National Achievement Gaps." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 29 (July 18, 2017): 7486–88. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708813114>.

³ Stereotype threat refers to the awareness of negative stereotypes about one's group and the effects of that awareness on students' performance and outcomes (in this case, transfer school students are often referred to as "overage, under-credited," clearly sending the message that they are "behind", and by implication, deficient).

⁴ Elka Torpey, "Measuring the value of education," *Career Outlook*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 2018. <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>

Voyages Preparatory High School implemented the redesigned email and reflection sheet when the new school year began in September 2019. Since then, counselors and teachers at Voyages Prep have seen more students stay after school to finish their work and more students proactively reaching out to their teachers for support. As a result, students are doing better in classes and, critically, passing state Regents exams at higher rates. QCH staff report that the students are “meeting more with teachers after filling out the reflections. They know what they're missing and what they need to do,” And one noted: “I don't think we made any other changes [besides the email and reflection sheet] to [encourage] students to follow-up with teachers. Students who did more reflection did significantly better on the Regents.” A Voyages Prep staff member added that “students seem to have a clear understanding of "the work I put in produced the results I got", and how to improve if they want to.”

By incorporating behaviorally informed strategies to help students follow through on their intentions to attend class and graduate, high schools and organizations that offer supportive services can amplify their impact and change more lives.

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