Improving University Success in South Africa

ideas 42

Insights from using applied behavioral science

Even when scholarship programs give students support across their academic, wellness, and career needs, it's not always simple for students to access that support. We talked with students in South Africa to learn about the behavioral barriers making it hard to use existing resources. We then designed and tested new ways to help students connect with the support they need to succeed in higher education.

Problem

The government of South Africa has attempted to make higher education more inclusive through financial scholarships to low-income students. But student success and thriving remain inaccessible to many; despite the government's support, students who live in the context of poverty can take up to 10 years to complete their university degree, and 33% of graduates between the ages of 15-24 were unemployed in the first quarter of 2022.[i] This illustrates that providing only financial support for low-income students may not be enough to ensure they graduate or transition into meaningful careers.

Wraparound support is critical because students encounter many challenges while enrolled in higher education. For example, they may struggle with academics for the first time, or experience challenges with their mental health and emotional well-being when adapting to life at university. Scholarships that only provide financial support and do not incorporate resources to help students overcome a diversity of challenges may not provide the holistic support students need to complete their degrees. Conversely, scholarship programs that do provide wraparound support can help ensure all students who are enrolled in higher education institutions are able to thrive and are a big step towards enhancing inclusion in universities. However, accessing supportive services can remain challenging for students as it requires them to identify that they are struggling, know how to access support, and be willing to ask for help. Many barriers—both structural and behavioral—can prevent students from seeking out help when they need it. Leveraging behavioral insights to encourage students to make broad use of the supportive resources available to them can help to ensure student success.

Highlights

▶ To succeed in higher education, students need holistic support: for mental and emotional well-being, academic mentorship, and more.

▶ After interviewing students enrolled in a holistic scholarship program we identified specific behavioral barriers keeping students from the resources they need.

▶ We then designed and tested two behavioral strategies (onboarding materials and a mid-semester message) aimed at making it easier for students to get the support they need to thrive.

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[i] Statistics, South Africa. (2022). *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 1: 2022*.

We partnered with a scholarship program in South Africa that helps low-income, high-achieving students enrolled in the country's top universities navigate common barriers to graduation and more easily transition into employment by offering holistic financial, academic, wellness, and career support. After students are onboarded to the program (toward the end of their first year in university) they can engage with programmatic staff who use a case management approach to intervene and provide support. Based on individual student needs, programmatic staff assist students in accessing a variety of supportive resources. Some examples of resources available to students include private tutoring, counseling sessions with a psychologist, and workshops on time management and effective study habits.

Despite the program's high graduation and job placement rates, through conversations with staff, we learned that many students who could benefit from support were not reaching out to access these resources, and those who did reach out often waited until it was too late for the support to be useful. We partnered with the scholarship program to further improve its effectiveness. By studying how people make decisions and take actions in the real world, applied behavioral science enables us to identify the right problem to solve, uncover the root causes of the problem, design targeted solutions to overcome these root causes, measure the impact of our solutions and, if effective, establish proven best practices. With this in mind, we worked with the program team to diagnose the behavioral barriers that prevent students from using the supportive resources available to them, and to design and test solutions to improve help-seeking behavior, with the ultimate goal of supporting more students to succeed at university, graduate on-time, and start their careers.

Solution

Through interviews with students, we heard that unequivocally, students have positive experiences with the scholarship program. Students perceive program staff to be empathetic, reliable, and nonjudgemental, and feel supported by the program in their university journey. Students are also aware that the program offers case management support, and can help them to access supportive resources across a variety of domains. However, even when students trust the program and know these resources exist, they may fail to use them as their behaviors are also influenced by the broader university and cultural context in which they live. The interviews illuminated three key barriers that prevent students from seeking support, related to how they perceive themselves, how they perceive others, and how the process of seeking support is complicated and time-consuming. See an overview of the behavioral barriers identified on the following page.

BEHAVIORAL BARRIERS

1 Students don't feel that *someone like them* should need support or can reach out for support.	**2** Students don't think it's a *norm among peers* to use the program's supportive resources.	**3** Students are busy and the process of *seeking help is complicated* and time-consuming.
WHY DOES THIS BARRIER EXIST?		
▸ Students have excelled throughout their lives and were accepted into the program for achievement, so they have formed strong **identities** as high-achievers. They may feel **cognitive dissonance,** the mental discomfort of holding contradictory beliefs as true, when they need help. ▸ Students have had to overcome various challenges associated with living in poverty to make it to university, so they may feel **overconfident** that they can overcome any new challenges on their own.	▸ Using support is largely an invisible behavior. As students don't see their peers using program resources offerings, there is no **social proof** (i.e., visible behavior of others)that people like them use support services. ▸ Program communications reinforce that students are resilient high-achievers. Although this messaging may motivate students, it can also lead them to feel they must continue to perform well as a form of **reciprocation** to the program.	▸ Students have **limited attention** and **tunnel**, or intently focus, on the most pressing tasks. Many don't consider whether they could benefit from support; especially during exams when they're under added **stress**. ▸ Students perceive many **hassles** in seeking support: e.g., taking additional steps, interacting with university administration, etc. Short-term costs of hassles lead to **present biased** actions, where students defer from seeking support even when doing so is in line with their long-term goals.

Drawing on insights from the behavioral barriers, we worked alongside programmatic staff to design and test a package of solutions that help students seek program support. First, we sent students **WHATSAPP MESSAGES** at pertinent times in the semester. The content of the messages included quotes from existing or previous scholarship students, where they explained their own positive experiences with seeking academic or mental well-being support. The messages aimed to **reset norms** and provide **social proof** that other students struggle and reach out for help. The messages were sent at key moments (e.g., several weeks before exams) to capture students' **limited attention.**

Second, we designed a series of materials to be distributed during onboarding to new students, including:

▸ An **EXERCISE** that reinforced that the program is there to support students, with no need for **reciprocation**, and that prompted students to reflect on how the program could help them, combating barriers related to **identity** and **overconfidence**. The exercise was accompanied by a **CERTIFICATE** for students to hang on their walls to remind and encourage them to seek help by capturing their **limited attention**.

▸ A **PLANNER** for students to use throughout the term with carefully placed reflection prompts that helped students overcome **present bias** and plan ahead, reflect on their **identities** and whether they needed support at key moments, reinforced positive **norms** and beliefs around help-seeking and reduce **hassles** by providing key information on how to seek help.

▸ A **LETTER** for students to give to their families and communities that explained it's common to face academic and mental health challenges during university. In this way, the letter aimed to decrease some of the **external pressure to be high achievers and the *cognitive dissonance* students felt when they struggled.**

Certificate

I'M COMMITTED TO **DRAWING ON THE SUPPORT I NEED** TO BECOME A LEADER.

I'm more likely to succeed with help from others

Asking for help is a skill to be developed

The programme can support me

_____   _____
Student Signature   Date

_____
Programme Manager

We worked with the program team to implement the solutions and evaluate their effectiveness during the fourth term of the 2022 academic year.

The onboarding materials were delivered to new students at the program launch, and the WhatsApp messages were delivered to a random sample of all other students enrolled in the program during the term. We conducted surveys and qualitative interviews to understand students' experiences with the materials and measure changes in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.[ii]

Planner Page

WEEKLY PLAN | November 7 - 13

TO-DO LIST		MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY

Tuesday 8: Tests are coming up soon. Now is a good time to consider if you could benefit from a study group, tutor, or other academic support.

Saturday 12: Exam period starts this week. Good luck!

Time slots: 6:00, 7:00, 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, 13:00, 14:00, 15:00, 16:00, 17:00, 18:00, 19:00, 20:00, 21:00, 22:00, 23:00, 24:00

"_If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together._"
—African Proverb

[ii] The onboarding materials were delivered to first-year students at two universities and evaluated using a pre-post approach (n = 91). The communications were delivered to a random sample of all other students across all universities and evaluated using a randomized controlled trial approach (n = 748). We interviewed a subset of students who received the materials at onboarding (n = 14).

Results

Students who received the WhatsApp messages were ***significantly more likely to use academic support services,***[iii] ***by 6.6 percentage points on average, and 50% more likely to reach out to the program team to request support for their mental well-being.*** The materials delivered to students at onboarding also show promise of changing behavior. For instance, students who put the certificate in a visible place and who shared the letter were significantly more likely than students who received the materials but did not use them to seek support for their mental well-being, by 23 percentage points (for those who displayed the certificate) and 26 percentage points (for those who shared the letter).[iv]

Results also demonstrate that the solutions helped to reset norms and perceptions around help-seeking. For example, students who received the WhatsApp messages were ***significantly more likely to report that they knew other students from the scholarship program*** who reached out for support with mental well-being, by 20 percentage points on average. And furthermore, after receiving the materials during onboarding, students were on average ***13 percentage points more likely to report feeling that they could use the program's academic resources*** with no strings attached. One student said, "You know, they (the certificate and exercise) reminded me that there is no shame in asking for help. If anything, it makes more sense to ask for help than just to struggle on your own."

Finally, our findings also illuminated one area where the solutions could be improved for further impact. Although the WhatsApp messages and planner provided general information to help students seek support, students desired even more specific guidance on how to access resources and felt it would have made seeking help easier and more likely.

Takeaway

All university students deserve to use the supportive resources available to them. However, as demonstrated by our findings, entrenched behavioral barriers can prevent students from seeking support, thereby limiting their abilities to excel in university and transition to meaningful careers. In our work, we found that taking a behavioral approach to design solutions can improve student outcomes. Given the positive results and low-cost nature of the solutions, we recommended that the scholarship program integrated the solution package as part of their standard program offerings. Additionally, insights and solutions gleaned from this work may also be valuable for other scholarship programs in South Africa and beyond, as well as for practitioners working outside the university context to support young people's success (e.g., job placement programs), since young people may face similar barriers in those contexts as well. Ultimately, this work extends the evidence for how behavioral science can, even with light-touch designs, make students' success meaningfully easier.

[iii] Academic support services include: having a 1:1 meeting with the program team to troubleshoot academics, attending a workshop for their academics, going to a private tutor or attending the university's writing center.

[iv] The relative strength (i.e., size) of this difference in means certainly suggests that the materials may be effective at changing behavior. However, there may be underlying differences in students which also contribute to this result, causing use of materials to be correlated with behavior (e.g., students who are likely to hang certificates on walls may also be more likely to seek help).