

COMMENTARY

Student Coaching and College Persistence

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College graduation rates in the United States lag far behind college attendance rates and this gap is growing, particularly at broad-access four-year and two-year schools. There are a number of theories as to why students do not complete college: schools fail to provide key information about how to be successful or students fail to act on the information that they have; students are not adequately academically prepared; students lack important non-academic skills such as time management and study skills and schools do not provide enough structured support in these areas; students do not feel integrated into the school community; students struggle in balancing school with career and personal demands. With such a long and varied list of potentially serious obstacles and an increasingly tight fiscal environment, we're faced with a difficult policy question: what cost-effective levers can colleges employ for boosting graduation rates?

In [this study](#) we conducted that was recently published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* we look at one strategy for addressing the concerns above and increasing persistence in college: individualized student coaching. We present evidence from a randomized experiment conducted in conjunction with [InsideTrack](#), an independent student coaching service. Over the course of two separate school years, InsideTrack provided coaching to randomly assigned students attending public, private, and proprietary universities. Most of the participating students were non-traditional college students enrolled in degree programs.

InsideTrack coaches contacted students regularly, via phone, email, and social networking sites. The coaches aimed to help students develop a clear vision of their goals, to guide them in connecting their daily activities to their long term goals, and to support them in building skills, including time management, self advocacy, and study skills. InsideTrack coaches are trained to help students navigate college decisions and they receive extensive feedback on the content and tone of their interactions with students. Coaches sometimes have access to course syllabi, transcripts and additional information on students' performance and participation in specific classes. They work with students for an average of two terms.

We find that students who were randomly assigned to a coach were about 10% more likely to persist during the treatment period and about 15% more likely to be attending the university one year after the coaching had ended. This latter finding is especially important, as many previous studies have found that the effects of other interventions dissipate after the end of treatment. Coaching also proved a more cost-effective method of achieving retention and completion gains when compared to previously studied interventions such as increased financial aid.

The mechanisms through which InsideTrack coaching affect student behavior aren't well understood, but informed speculation can lead to some promising policy implications. InsideTrack coaches focus primarily on personal struggles and obstacles rather than academic details, which is a different strategy from many existing advising models. The proactive nature of the intervention might also have an effect on students who wouldn't respond to other kinds of support.

Finally, many of the students in the study were taking classes online; InsideTrack coaches provided some of the only personal interaction and contact these students had with their school. The structure of InsideTrack coaching also has implications. InsideTrack is an outside company that partners with schools; perhaps the economy of scale achieved with such a set-up could be replicated in other domains. Individualized student coaching addresses many of the challenges that prevent college students from persisting, and what we learned from this study could be applied in a variety of creative ways.

*The [full study](#) (gated) is in Eric Bettinger and Rachel P. Baker, *The Effects of Student Coaching: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Advising*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2014, vol. 36, no. 1, 3-19. An earlier ungated version is available [here](#).*

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