
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

STUDENTS

Fine-Tuning the 'Nudges' That Help Students Get to and Through College

By *Beckie Supiano* | JUNE 22, 2016

Behavioral interventions are a growing — and attention-grabbing — piece of higher-education research. They locate and tackle the cognitive, emotional, and social factors behind why people don't follow through on their intentions. On Wednesday, ideas42, a nonprofit organization focused on this kind of research, often called "nudging," released a report detailing a bevy of experiments it has done to help students get to and through college. We spoke with Alissa Fishbane, a managing



ideas42

Alissa Fishbane is a managing director at ideas42, a nonprofit organization that studies how people make decisions and take actions. In a conversation with The Chronicle, she discusses her group's latest findings on behavioral interventions that colleges can use to help students stay on track.

director at ideas42, about the state and potential of this work. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

Q. What is it about higher ed that makes it ripe for behavioral interventions?

A. Behavioral science is about understanding how people make decisions and take actions. And if you think of the life of a student throughout college, it's just a series of decisions and actions that they need to take throughout the entire time. So how can we take a look at all of those steps in the process, and construct things from that perspective of understanding human behavior?

Q. You point out many hurdles students face, from the application process all the way to postcollege loan repayment. Is there one that stood out to you as especially problematic, or maybe underexamined?

A. When we think about why students are unable to stay in school, there are often a lot of reasons, some of them structural. But when we took a look at San Francisco State [University], for those students who had the academic standing to stay but were still not staying, we explored some of those more structural reasons, and we weren't seeing a lot of evidence for those.

Instead, what we were seeing was that students began to develop negative perceptions of themselves and their abilities, because college can be a very daunting experience, and it can be very challenging to find your social home. It's something you experience yourself and don't realize that someone else is going through it at the same time. And so you start to think, Well, it's me; I'm not college material.

We were very fortunate to build on the work of researchers who've done this work around social belonging before, and we created a short video where we reframed the experience for students. We had older students speaking about how they struggled when they came to school and what they did to overcome those challenges.

So a three-minute video, a couple of follow-up questions after the video during an orientation session, and once-monthly texts were able to give at-risk students an enormous 10-percent bump in retention. These were students that had been identified as potentially at the highest risk of dropping out, all low-income, first-generation, and/or underrepresented students.

Q. One of the critiques that I sometimes hear of behavioral work like this is that it might make college too easy, that part of what having a degree signifies is that a person can navigate these bureaucratic hurdles. How do you respond to that?

A. We're not making college classes easier. We're simply saying there are these bottlenecks that I don't think anyone intended to create for students. How do we focus the college experience on the parts that really support growth and learning, and how do we reduce the hassles and burdens and tough things that are going on that are just taking away from that experience?

Q. How do you decide which behavior to try to encourage? You have one example of a college that's trying to reduce what students are borrowing, and another example of one that wants to encourage students to know that they can borrow and thinks that that will help them stay in school.

A. The key here is no one set out to increase or decrease borrowing per se; they set out to understand how students make decisions, with the goal of helping them make the best decisions for them. Because if we don't understand how

we frame information and provide information to students, we're unintentionally impacting their decisions. By better understanding that, then we can start to better-design how we structure loan offers, how we engage with students to help them in their loan decisions.

Q. How do you decide which form of communication to use with students? There's been so much excitement around text-messaging interventions, but there are other examples with email, or the one you mentioned before with video. How can you tell which medium makes the most sense, or is it just whichever medium the college was already using?

A. A little bit of both. There are some schools that only send emails.

It's not just the type of communication, but how can we best reach students. Sometimes in our projects we actually thought changing the system is a far better way to support students in some of their choices, whether it's the registration systems or others, but that's not done quite as easily, right?

We should think of these solutions — sometimes they may be solutions, but sometimes they're a demonstration that there is a behavioral problem — to give us the evidence needed to say, OK, now let's go back and actually change the systems or structures themselves, rather than kind of attacking it with a communication solution.

Q. Interesting. So part of what your work is doing is just helping to pinpoint where these pain points for students really are?

A. Ultimately some of them can be the solutions themselves. But let me give you an example not in our study. You know the H&R Block study [which tested various ways of helping families file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid]? You could take that study and say, OK, now we should provide that

assistance for all families. Or you could take that study and say, OK, it's clear that there are problems in filling out this form, what can we do to make it easier for families?

You could apply that here. Some things, we've already created a fix, and it's fine to just do that. If it's something overly complicated, though, why not fix it from the beginning?

Q. As these kinds of interventions become more popular, do you worry that students will be getting so many behavioral nudges that they just start tuning them out, and is there anything you can do to mitigate that?

A. There's two things. One is, How do we improve the communications that already exist? It's not always creating new communications. We've shown that in a number of studies — we just changed what was in the emails themselves to address specifically the behavioral bottleneck that we identified.

The second is, Yes, you can imagine some scenarios where there is a lack of communication where there needs to be some. What's really exciting is the potential to start looking at the system holistically. How do you create those communications so that departments are working with each other? You could imagine a much more streamlined, coordinated way to talk to students throughout their experience.

Beckie Supiano writes about college affordability, the job market for new graduates, and professional schools, among other things. Follow her on Twitter @becksup, or drop her a line at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com.

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