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A Close-Up Look at Student Coaching

March 9, 2011, 10:35 pm

By [Eric Hoover](#)

In recent years, various two- and four-year colleges have incorporated personalized coaches into their retention strategies. But how well does “success” coaching work?

A new independent study finds that students who received coaching were considerably more likely to stay enrolled—and to graduate—than students who did not get such help. Moreover, the study found that one-on-one coaching was a cost-effective strategy.

The study, by Eric P. Bettinger, a professor at Stanford University’s School of Education, and Rachel Baker, a doctoral student at Stanford, involved reviewing the academic records of nearly 14,000 students from eight postsecondary institutions that use [InsideTrack](#), a student-coaching firm. The researchers compared the academic records of randomly selected groups of students: those who received coaching and those who did not. They found that the coached students were more likely, by 3-4 percentage points, to persist after 18-24 months (a 15-percent increase) than non-coached students.

Moreover, among three colleges for which the researchers had completion data, coached students had higher graduation rates, by four percentage points, than non-coached students. The study was published Thursday by the National Bureau of Education Statistics.

On Wednesday, I caught up with Mr. Bettinger to ask him about his findings.

Q: Retention is a puzzle that’s been studied, studied, and studied some more. How is this research different from what’s come before?

A: I think one of the key things is the randomized-experiment nature of this. A lot of times, studies look at effects of student services and they have been very descriptive in nature, based on methodologies that are not as reliable. This is one of the first studies using randomized assignment. Also, many of the programs out there use passive programming. Schools might have a service that they provide, but students would have to go search for that service. This program is designed to go after students, to find ways to help those students, and to help them customize the experience. The idea here is that by contacting those students earlier and more aggressively, you can help identify their needs earlier on and help those students find solutions.

Q: InsideTrack’s model is based on the premise that many, if not most, barriers to student success involve life outside of college. What do these results tell you about this form of mentoring?

A: In the results we have right now, we don’t have much that can shed light on that, in part because the only data we were allowed to really work with on this is data that verified that these were randomized experiments. It’s a really open question as to which parts of their service are the most effective, but we can say that their service as a whole is generating some kind of positive effect.

Q: But we don’t yet know what kinds of students might get the greatest benefit from coaching, right? Or what kinds of coaches are the most effective?

A: That’s the part that’s a little bit of a black box. Hopefully, that’s the next paper. But we can look at what the effects are for males and females. If we look in broad literature, we struggle to find a way to help males stay enrolled and engaged in school. The effects here were clear. Active outreach towards male students, happening on a one-one basis, in the privacy of their e-mail account or cellphone, was really effective for these kids in this study.

The second thing, in terms of the age distribution, is that InsideTrack has a population of students who are over the age of 30, and their effects are basically the same, regardless of age, as for traditional-age students. Whatever they’re doing, they’re helping traditional students, and they’re also helping nontraditional populations.

Q: In the paper, you write that in higher education, “we assume that [students] know how to study, how to prioritize, and how to plan.” What do you mean? How do you see that assumption playing out?

A: Well, I think about the logic of college-access programs. In those programs, we’re trying to help students see the options out there for college. As these programs have evolved, we’ve often turned them into single-stop shopping. Advisers help students with every aspect of the

college-application process, but in college, we stop that. We stop that very abruptly. We expect that they should be able to go look for resources, to lobby for benefits and services they need. We expect that they have the initiative and courage to introduce themselves to professors, and seek out services that might help them. Very rarely do we have a process that will coach them through the entire process.

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mycantarella 25 minutes ago

In my book *I CAN Finish College*, one of the key messages to students, borne of my 20+ years as a dean and senior administrator, is that students need to find someone to talk to and should feel entitled to that support. When they try to go it alone, isolate and duck issues they are most likely to encounter or make worse their difficulties. Coaching is one strategy, but students also underuse existing resources from advisers and counselors to deans and faculty. Some of those who are tasked now with interacting with students and dealing with the issues that land on the table that are unexpected--like the student who is struggling in class and the reason is that she is being abused at home--are not prepared with counseling or coaching skills. A valuable lesson for me as a dean was a workshop for new departmental advisers where one of the psychology faculty members was peppered with questions about how to identify and deal with issues like depression. The ranks of "coaches" can be increased and enhanced by strengthening the skills of those who are already on the front lines. But we also have to destigmatize the seeking of help especially by those who most need it and may be affected by what Claude Steele has identified as "stereotype threat". My book tries to break through that particular barrier in getting students to seek support.

Marcia Y. Cantarella, PhD

Author, *I CAN Finish College: The Overcome Any Obstacle and Get Your Degree Guide*.

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