

PROJECT SUMMARY/ABSTRACT

Title: Nudges to the Finish Line: Experimental Interventions to Prevent College Late Departure

Study Topic: Scalable Strategies to Support College Completion

Purpose: Recent evidence suggests that many college students who withdraw from their institution complete most of the credits they need to graduate before stopping out. Complex information about course sequences that lead to a degree and limited access to advising may contribute to this phenomenon. The purpose of our proposal is to investigate whether low-cost, behaviorally-informed nudges that provide personalized information to students about how they can finish their degree improve college completion rates at open-enrollment institutions.

Setting: Our partnerships include the following postsecondary systems and universities: City University of New York, with almost 270,000 degree-seeking students; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, with 1.5 million students statewide; Virginia Community College System, with over 250,000 students enrolled each year; Ohio University, with nearly 40,000 students; and University of Washington–Tacoma, with almost 5,000 students. These partners represent a range of institution types, student groups, and geographic contexts in which we will conduct this study.

Sample: In the Development phase of the project we will target actively or recently enrolled students at broad access two- and four-year institutions who have completed at least half of the credits typically required for graduation at a 2- or 4-year college, respectively. In the Efficacy phase, we will target students who exhibit risk factors for late departure that emerge from our analysis of the Development phase. Our samples will consist of 4,000 students at 8 institutions in the Development phase, and 25,500 students at 17 institutions in the Efficacy phase.

Intervention: Students will receive personalized text messages containing information, nudges, and guidance about concrete steps they can take to earn their degrees. In some partner sites, students will also have access to dedicated advisors who will provide further customized support. The text campaign content will provide customized guidance about courses students need to complete to finish their programs; generate positive social norms around using campus-based resources, and provide planning and implementation prompts to help students plan and execute steps necessary to earn their degree.

Control Condition: Students in the control group will receive business-as-usual outreach and support that is available at partner institutions.

Research Design and Methods: We will randomly assign students to treatment arms within partner schools using a block-randomization procedure, where we will block students based on their dropout risk profile. We will then rank students by risk profile, create matched pairs of students, and randomly assign students within pairs to treatment or control.

Key Outcomes: Our short-term outcomes of interest are whether students re-enroll and total credits they earn in the post-intervention term. Our primary outcome is whether students complete a degree within 100 percent and 150 percent of normal time from their enrollment start.

Data Analytic Strategy: Given random assignment, we will report average treatment effects on college persistence and completion using linear regressions that compare the outcomes of treatment and control group students. Our models will control for randomization blocks and student-level covariates. We will also explore heterogeneity by student and school attributes.