



Experimental Estimates of College Coaching on Postsecondary Re-enrollment

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BACKGROUND: Although college attendance has increased significantly over the last few decades, fewer than half of all adults ultimately obtain a postsecondary degree. This project addressed whether college coaching improved re-enrollment rates for non-traditional students, in this case, those who have attempted but dropped out of college. We connected former students with coaches from InsideTrack, a college counseling service provider, who worked with students on topics as: personal finances; non-academic interference with school, such as existing work commitments or family support needs; belonging and a sense of "fit" and fulfillment at their prior institution, and poor academic performance, which is often related to college adjustment, effectiveness and lack of clarity regarding future goals.

RESEARCH DESIGN: We reached out to over 150,000 former California students who received state aid to attend a community college of California State University between 2014 and 2018. Roughly 8,000 students responded and affirmatively opted-in to receive coaching, provided they had not earned a degree, and one-half were randomized to the coaching offer. This occurred in two distinct waves, with initial outreach occurring in early 2020 (wave 1) and late 2020 (wave 2).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Roughly half of all students assigned to the treatment group engaged with their college coach at least once, and only 30 percent had two or more contacts.
- The offer of coaching led to no observable changes in short-term re-enrollment rates.
 - Almost all estimates on re-enrollment – as well as other outcomes such as persistence or FAFSA submission – are less than one percentage point and statistically insignificant.
- We find no evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects by student race, parental education, gender, or whether a student's prior initial enrollment was in a two- versus four-year institution.
 - The only suggestive evidence of positive treatment effects was a 3 percentage point increase in enrollment for students in the first cohort who were not enrolled in college in the academic year in which random assignment occurred, but this group was relatively small in size.

CONCLUSION: We did not find any evidence that the offer of college coaching increased re-enrollment rates for young adults who have previous tried college but left prior to earning their degree. Although our experimental results are internally valid, it is important to note the context that students in both cohorts were navigating re-enrollment during COVID. Many participants experienced major disruptions to their circumstances due to the pandemic, and InsideTrack coaches noted that compared to their prior experiences there was a general shift in their work toward supporting students' well-being and basic needs. Conversations between coaches and prospective students identified a long list of challenges to transitioning back to college, such as: prior withdrawals and poor academic performance limited their ability to access financial aid when they attempted to re-enroll; students had trouble receiving support from administrative offices on campus to solve their existing issues, and; working with students across the state, rather than with an individual institution, compounded the work required of InsideTrack's coaches to help students solve these issues and reintegrate into campus life.