

Scaling academic planning in community college

A randomized controlled trial

The need

Nationwide, only about 35 percent of community college students complete a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree from any institution within six years. Academic planning is widely considered to be a promising strategy for improving persistently low completion rates at community colleges. But students often lack a formal academic plan to guide their choice of coursework and achieve their education goals, in part because most community college counseling departments lack the resources to advise all students.

To address the low community college completion rates in California, a state law was passed in 2012 that requires all first-time community college students, as of fall 2014, to submit a comprehensive academic plan listing their education goals, their intended major, and the courses required to achieve their academic goals. But the law does not offer guidance on how to operationalize the mandate. In response, the South Orange County Community College District (SOCCCD) explored ways to effectively scale academic planning while ensuring all students had counselor input and approval for their academic plans—a requirement that goes beyond those in the 2012 law. The district decided to offer group counseling sessions to guide students in developing an academic plan on the online planning tool, known as My Academic Plan, or MAP. For the study, a student's MAP was considered complete when it was created using the online planning tool and approved by a counselor by the end of the semester of the intervention (fall 2014).

Study overview

Working with the California Community College Alliance at the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West, Saddleback College, one of the two colleges at SOCCCD, conducted a randomized controlled trial to investigate the effectiveness of different types of counseling sessions on student outcomes, including scheduling a counseling session, attending a counseling session, completing an academic plan through the MAP system, and re-enrolling in the semester following the intervention.

Students were randomly assigned to one of three study groups

A sample of 1,763 Saddleback College students who were new to the district in fall 2014 (and who had not yet completed an academic plan) were randomly assigned to one of three groups—two intervention groups and a control group. As part of the district's integrated data system, students in the two intervention groups were offered guaranteed counseling sessions and received targeted and personalized reminders, referred to in the study as *nudges*. Nudges were sent via emails, text messages, and robocalls to encourage students to attend their assigned counseling session and complete their academic plan. The three study groups were:

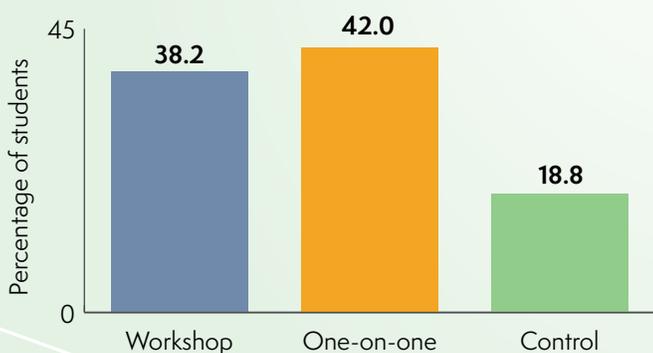
- ♦ **Intervention group 1: One-on-one counseling.** Access to MAP with targeted nudges and guaranteed *one-on-one* counseling session.

- ◊ **Intervention group 2: Group counseling.** Access to MAP with targeted nudges and guaranteed *group* counseling workshop.
- ◊ **Control group.** Access to MAP with an initial nudge, but no follow-up nudges and *no* guaranteed access to counseling (that is, the “business-as-usual” approach on campus which requires students to schedule an appointment or wait in line for a one-on-one counseling session).

Examining the impact and cost effectiveness of the interventions

The study compared academic plan completion rates and re-enrollment rates for each intervention group with those of the control group. It also looked at the relative cost effectiveness of the three approaches and whether the percentages of students who persisted at the college the subsequent semester differed for each group.

Figure 1. Percentage of students who completed a MAP during the semester of the intervention



Note: The total sample size was 1,763. There were 1,085 students in the workshop group, 193 students in the one-on-one group, and 485 students in the control group. Statistical tests were conducted using t-test statistics generated by ordinary least squares regressions.

Source: Visher, M., Mayer, A. K., Johns, M., Rudd, T., Levine, A., & Rauner, M. (2016). *A study of a technology-based approach to academic planning in community colleges*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2017204.pdf.

Findings

Both interventions increased academic plan completion rates

Both the workshop and the individual counseling approaches, coupled with nudges and guaranteed access to counseling, increased students’ academic plan completion rates by at least 20 percentage points compared with the control group. The study found no substantive differences between the effects of the workshop and one-on-one counseling sessions on student completion of the academic plan.

A majority of students—62 percent in the workshop group, 58 percent in the one-on-one group, and 81 percent in the control group—still failed to complete an academic plan within the semester of the study intervention.

Workshop counseling was the most cost-effective counseling intervention

The average per-student cost was \$27 for the workshop group, \$46 for the one-on-one group, and \$24 for the control group.

Practice and policy implications

Any community college in the nation interested in scalable, efficient, and cost-effective means of streamlining students’ academic planning process may find this study’s results useful. This randomized controlled trial at Saddleback College offers evidence that targeted nudging and guaranteed access to group or one-on-one counseling sessions significantly increased the likelihood that students will complete an academic plan, compared with students in the control group. But the relatively high numbers of students across all three study groups who failed to complete an academic plan suggest

that additional intervention is needed to ensure that all students engage in academic planning.

The operational challenges of providing all students with an approved academic plan based on one-on-one guidance from a counselor are formidable. The median ratio of students to counselors is 441 to 1 in the nation's community colleges. Given this national context, it is noteworthy that, in the study, group counseling was not significantly different from one-on-one counseling in terms of academic planning outcomes and was estimated as less expensive than the one-on-one counseling option. That said, the Saddleback College study results are no guarantee that other institutions will get the same results with the same approach.

This study was not designed to answer the critical question of whether the process of developing

an academic plan improves students' chances of successfully attaining academic goals and transitioning to a career. Additional research, likely including further randomized trials, is needed to confirm this conclusion.

References

Visher, M., Mayer, A. K., Johns, M., Rudd, T., Levine, A., & Rauner, M. (2016). *A study of a technology-based approach to academic planning in community colleges*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2017204.pdf.

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