

Economists find setting goals could improve student performance

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Balancing the need to provide an affordable, accessible education with a commitment to transforming students' lives and preparing them for the future is an ongoing challenge in higher education. New research from economists at Purdue University's Krannert School of Management finds that task-based goal setting can help on both fronts as a low-cost and logistically simple approach to improving students' course performance.

In "Using Goals to Motivate College Students: Theory and Evidence from Field Experiments," a working paper coauthored by Krannert economics professors Victoria Prowse and David Gill along with Damon Clark of the University of California-Irvine and Mark Rush of the University of Florida, the researchers move beyond existing studies that focus only on increasing student effort through performance-based financial incentives.

"Policies and interventions such as scholarships and financial aid that require meeting a GPA threshold are typically expensive and often produce mixed results," says Prowse, Purdue's Magner Chair. "There are concerns that [college students](#) exert too little effort, which can have negative consequences on their learning, graduation prospects and even their future employment."

While traditional economics holds a narrower view of capital that focuses primarily on labor, Prowse and her colleagues take a more progressive, behavioral view that examines human capital as a component that includes the knowledge and skills possessed by an

individual.

"That perspective brings education very much into the realm of economics," Prowse says. "It opens the door to new ways of restructuring classrooms, developing mentoring programs and refining teaching practices to counter individual behavioral biases and improve the human capital of our students."

Toward that end, the researchers pose a simple question: Do college students who set goals work harder and achieve better outcomes?

Their results came from a pair of [field experiments](#) conducted with nearly 4,000 college students enrolled in an on-campus, semester-long course at a U.S. public university. The first group of students set goals for the course based on their performance on the midterm, final exam and overall letter grade. The second group set task-based goals for the number of online practice exams they completed prior to the midterm and final.

"Performance-based goals are more about measuring outputs, while task-based goals focus more on inputs—the specific activities, work and effort a student is putting into a course," Prowse explains. "Our results show that although performance-based goals do have a positive impact, the effects on course outcomes are small and statistically insignificant."

In contrast, having students set task-based goals proved more effective. "Students who increased the number of practice exams they completed produced significantly larger and more robust positive effects," she says. "Our results suggest that if task-based goals are chosen appropriately, they can be used to improve educational performance and encourage students to make greater investments of human capital."

The study also takes into account the level of self-control exhibited by

students. "Students might intend to put forth the required level of effort, but when it actually comes time to go to class or study, they fall short," Prowse says. "Setting goals can act as commitment device to help them increase their efforts."

Academic advising services are a particularly promising vehicle for promoting the benefits of task-based [goal](#) setting, she says.

"American colleges already offer a panoply of student services, from counselors and mentors to campus centers and student success programs," she says. "Goal setting is integral to all these services, so emphasizing particular tasks can easily be incorporated as part of a larger initiative to improve [student](#) performance."

Goal setting also is logistically simple enough for instructors to incorporate it into their existing teaching arsenal, whether it is in a traditional classroom, an online platform or even part of a project-based, capstone course.

"It is something we can do without additional infrastructure or cost in virtually any academic environment," Prowse says. "As a result of this study, I began using task-based goal setting in my own courses and have seen firsthand that it works."

More information: "Using Goals to Motivate College Students: Theory and Evidence from Field Experiments," [papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm ... ?abstract_id=2856767](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2856767)

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