

Text-based nudges to high school seniors boost financial aid filing, college enrollment

October 29 2019



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High school seniors who receive texted reminders—or "nudges"—from their school counselors are 17 percent more likely to complete the college financial aid application process and 8 percent more likely to enroll in college directly after graduating than their peers who are not nudged, according to a new study published today in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American

Educational Research Association.

In contrast with other recent studies that have found no positive results from nudging, the text-based outreach in this case was framed for students as coming from their school counselor. If students replied to the text, they were able to communicate directly with their school counselor, who could provide guidance and support. In other recent studies, text nudges to students came from organizations such as the Common Application and the College Board, with whom students had no personal connection or affiliation.

The authors—Lindsay C. Page (University of Pittsburgh), Benjamin L. Castleman (University of Virginia), and Katharine Meyer (Brown University)—designed and implemented an intervention in Texas in spring 2015 that involved eight school districts in the Austin and Houston areas. These districts together served over 17,000 [high school seniors](#) (class of 2015) across 66 high schools.

Students in 39 of the participating schools were randomly selected to receive weekly text messages from their school counselors during spring 2015 (the second half of their final high school year). The messages provided information about the importance of completing federal and state financial aid application forms, a customized update on each student's status in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, and access to one-on-one assistance from school counselors.

"Our results suggest that text-based nudging may be more successful when the outreach is coming from a trusted source that a student or family would expect to hear from," said Page, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh. "If the outreach is coming from an individual or organization with whom the student has no obvious relationship, it may be seen as less credible and end up being less

effective in shaping student behaviors."

"The financial aid application process can be confusing and challenging to navigate," Page said. "We find that proactive text-message outreach, when combined with support from known and trusted sources, can be an inexpensive, efficient, and effective tool to help ensure that more students and families are taking advantage of available financial resources."

The authors note that school systems have access to a good deal of student data, including students' FAFSA status information in some settings. Educators could use such data to customize messages to more efficiently promote positive behavior through approaches such as text-based nudges.

"While nudges are not a cure-all to the challenges that many students face in transitioning to higher education, they can help move the needle in the right direction," said Page. "At the same time, policymakers need to address how to reduce the barriers that cumbersome application procedures create, and work to ensure that financial aid programs are better funded to meet student need."

"The FAFSA is the key gateway to college financial aid support, and completing the FAFSA on time is a crucial step to making sure a [student](#) ends up enrolling in college," Page said. "Furthermore, filing the FAFSA as early as possible can lead to higher award packages and give students and families time to respond if they are asked by the Education Department for additional documentation to verify their income."

The authors found that FAFSA filers who were selected for income verification were significantly less likely to enroll in college immediately after high [school](#). In addition, they found some suggestive evidence that the nudging intervention helped to alleviate the detrimental effect of the

verification requirement, at least in part.

While nudges boosted immediate college enrollment by 8 percent, the effect was concentrated among those enrolling in four-year colleges. Students who received the text messages were 20 percent more likely to enroll in four-year colleges—and 9 percent less likely to enroll in two-year colleges—than their peers who did not receive the nudges.

"It is possible that the negative effect of the intervention on two-year enrollment comes from nudges helping students who apply to four-year colleges from having to consider what might be 'backup' options," said Page. "If students follow through on the financial aid process in the spring prior to college enrollment, then they may be less in need of a less expensive option for starting [college](#)."

More information: Lindsay C. Page et al. Customized Nudging to Improve FAFSA Completion and Income Verification, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2019). [DOI: 10.3102/0162373719876916](#)

Provided by American Educational Research Association

Citation: Text-based nudges to high school seniors boost financial aid filing, college enrollment (2019, October 29) retrieved 28 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-text-based-nudges-high-school-seniors.html>

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