

Finishing the Last Lap: Experimental Evidence on Strategies to Increase College Completion for Students At Risk of Late Departure

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Project Overview

Nearly half of students who enter college do not graduate, and many students drop out after spending significant time in school. To date, most efforts to increase college completion have focused on supporting students before or soon after they enter college. Initiatives targeting students at risk of leaving late into college, by contrast, have received comparatively little attention, despite the fact that they may offer a cost-effective strategy for increasing degree attainment and reducing completion disparities by race and income.

In partnership with Persistence Plus, a Boston-based company that designs and delivers mobile student supports using behavioral science principles, we developed the Nudges to the Finish Line (N2FL) intervention, a low-cost, randomized intervention to increase completion among students who have earned substantial credits but remain at risk of dropout. We implemented the pilot year of N2FL during the 2016-17 school year at nine broad-access, public higher education institutions in New York City, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Washington State. The intervention prompted students to identify goals associated with finishing their degree, encouraged them to connect with campus-based academic and financial resources, reminded them of upcoming and important deadlines, and addressed feelings of stress, anxiety, and other psychological hurdles that impede student progress.

Data & Sample

We partnered with a diverse array of non-selective, public two- and four-year institutions during the pilot year of N2FL. All of our partner institutions accept 75 percent or more of the applicants that apply. Students at participating institutions were eligible to participate in the study if they were pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree and had completed at least 50 percent of the credits typically required for degree completion at the start of the fall 2016 term. We recruited 3,804 students to participate in the study during the pilot year.

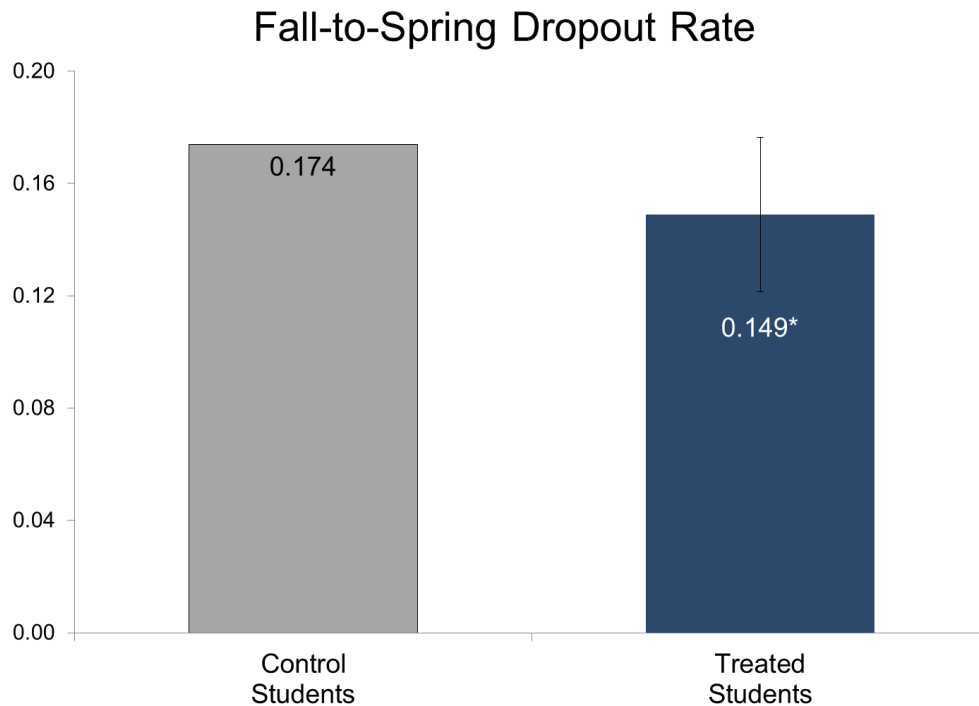
We use student-level administrative records maintained and provided by our institutional partners to evaluate the impact of the intervention on students' academic progress and performance. We examine impacts on the probability of re-enrollment, credit attainment, grade performance, and degree completion.

Research Design

To evaluate the effects of message outreach on academic progress and performance, we randomly assigned eligible students within each institution to either a treatment or control group. Students in the treatment group received automated messages approximately three times per week for the duration of the academic year. Students assigned to the control condition maintained access to the support structures typically available on their campus but did not receive any text messages offering additional support and guidance.

Findings

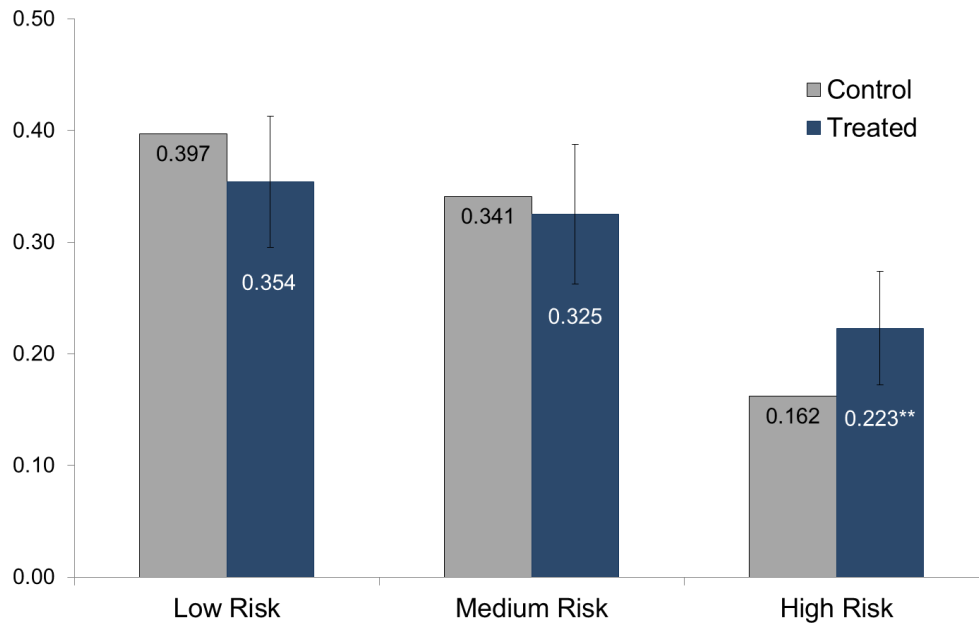
Results from the pilot year indicate that many students who are within reach of college graduation stand to benefit from additional outreach and guidance. In our preferred sample, which excludes two institutions where implementation issues arose, the intervention decreased fall-to-spring dropout by 14 percent, from 17.4 to 14.9 percent.¹ Among students at high risk of dropout based on their background and prior enrollment experiences, outreach increased degree completion after one year by 6 percentage points, an increase of 38 percent over the control group mean.²



¹ We elaborate on these implementation issues in the full working paper and present results for both the full sample and the sub-sample that excludes these two institutions.

² We defined “high risk” as students with at least a 33 percent chance of dropout according to prediction models we developed using historical data from partner institutions

Completion Rate in 2016-17 by Treatment Status and Risk of Dropout



Conclusion

These findings, though preliminary, compare favorably to interventions that target students at earlier points in the college process and that are more resource-intensive. The results suggest the return on investment to providing high-risk students within a few semesters of graduating with low-cost support may be large, although it remains unclear whether the impacts on attainment we find after one year represent brief or lasting gains. We will examine this question in the future by tracking students over multiple years. Over the next two years we will also expand the study to include 25,000 students at approximately 20 institutions. This will allow us to examine effects on persistence and completion over a longer time horizon and at scale for this student population.