

Getting your capability on: The impact of a pre-orientation intervention

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Abstract

Australian universities have a suite of interventions to support first-year students. While many papers explore interventions that support students after they commence their studies, less is known about how proactive pre-orientation engagement interventions build and affect a student's definition of success. This paper follows 3518 commencing students from Semester 1, 2023 at the University of Southern Queensland. It looks at how the personalised onboarding of 939 of these students positively impacted their course withdrawal rates post-census date and overall final grade point average. The evidence gathered during this study demonstrates that early engagement with students by telephone is an effective communication method to support a student's success.

Rationale

The Student Success Advising (SSA) team engages with commencing students prior to orientation to help build their capabilities in the transition to higher education to support them in the complex interactions between institutions and students (Larsen, Horvath & Bridge 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). One aspect of this early intervention suite is the 'Readiness' questionnaire that prepares students to transition into the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) by providing personalised support based on student's responses to the questionnaire (Larsen, Horvath & Bridge 2019; McIntosh & Brown 2016). By using the approach of tailoring specific questions developed from the Five Senses of Student Success model (Lizzio, 2006), the SSA team endeavours to motivate students and reveal their capability to undertake study, overcome challenges, and build their definition of success. The 'Readiness' questionnaire takes into consideration student's physical, emotional and online study environments, and addresses enablers and barriers known to impact students' success across recognised institutional structures and the hidden curriculum in their first year of study (McIntosh & Brown 2016; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Success can mean different things to different students at different times in their learning journey, and early engagement plays a significant role in creating a students' definition of success (McIntosh & Brown 2016). This paper analyses two success indicators and answers the following questions: "Do the coaching questions formulated in the onboarding questionnaire at UniSQ encourage the student to be more aware of their transition to university, therefore improving their grade point average (GPA)? How do the insights from the questionnaire provide evidence-based learnings into how the student will behave in their first year of study in relation to course withdrawal rates at specific times during the semester?"

Approach/Methodology

The SSA team makes telephone contact prior to the start of the first study period to commencing students, who are defined as new to university or new to program. All SSA team members are trained to be familiar with the 'Readiness' questionnaire and model possible responses before the first call, to ensure that conversations are free flowing, friendly and

encouraging. During the telephone conversation, the SSA team inputs data related to the student's response to the 'Readiness' questionnaire into the Client Relationship Management (CRM) system. This data is then compared to student data such as course completion and grades to analyse GPA and course withdrawal rates. For this paper, an Analysis of Variants or ANOVA test was used to compare the differences between multiple groups and Chi-Square tests were applied to investigate if the variables were determined by chance or due to a relationship between the expected and observed data.

Outcomes and Insights

Of the 3518 students who commenced studying in Semester 1, 2023, 939 were successfully contacted by telephone and completed the 'Readiness' questionnaire. The contacted students exhibited a mean higher GPA of 5.157 compared to those students who received a personalised email (n1096, GPA 4.893), and compared to those students not contacted (n1483, GPA 4.816), ($P < 0.001$). Moreover, of the 576 commencing students who withdrew from a course post census, students who engaged in a 'Readiness' conversation (n98) were less likely to withdraw from a course than those not contacted (n478), (P -value < 0.001).

After analysing these GPA and course withdrawal rates, the team identified the following outcomes and insights. Firstly, telephone engagement focused on the above transition in approach prior to commencement has a positive impact on student success indicators, such as GPA. This also demonstrates that telephone and/or email outreach prior to the start of the study period can have an impact on withdrawal rates post census date (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). The ongoing evaluation of interventions similar to that undertaken here will be used to inform the SSA team's continuous improvement practices by enabling the identification of more targeted cohorts and more efficient data management processes. These evidence-based learnings support the value of proactive interventions for pre-orientation transition in contact with students.

Questions

1. How does your institution inspire, support and encourage commencing students? Does it work and how do you know?
2. What systems or institutional capabilities would your university need in order to review or establish a 'Readiness' questionnaire or similar tool?

References

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