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The Student Persistence Initiative: Text Nudging RCTs

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December 2017



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Student Persistence Initiative

About the Student Persistence Initiative (SPI)

A collaboration between CUNY OIRA and the non-profit organization ideas42

- **CUNY OIRA**
 - Institutional Research, Policy Research, and Assessment
- **ideas42**
 - Uses behavioral sciences to target barriers to success
 - 5 stage process: Define, Diagnosis, Design, Test, Scale
- **Utilizes Nudge Campaigns**
 - College Melt
 - Freshmen Mindset
 - Credit Momentum
 - FAFSA Renewal (Campaigns 1 and 2)



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FAFSA Renewal Campaign (1) Design

Goal: Boost FAFSA renewal rates for continuing students who received aid in the past

- **Population**

- Continuing students who filed their FAFSA applications in the past, but had not yet renewed their 2016 - 2017 FAFSA
 - Eligible students randomized into a treatment group and a control group

- **Overall Design**

- Behavioral nudges to remind/encourage renewal
- Email and text message campaigns
- Institutional **S**tudent **I**nformation **R**ecord screening
 - Participants who renewed were systematically removed



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FAFSA Renewal Campaign (1) Design

2 Phase Messaging Campaign

- **Phase 1**
 - Spring 2016
 - 9 emails sent bi-weekly
 - Treatment group received SPI and school emails
 - An individual in the treatment group was on average **3.27%** more likely to renew than an individual in the control group
- **Phase 2**
 - Summer 2016
 - 9 text messages sent weekly
 - Treatment group received SPI text messages
 - All else equal, assignment to the treatment group increased a student's odds of renewing the FAFSA by **13.68%-18.68%** over the control group



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FAFSA Renewal Campaign (2) Design

Goal: Boost FAFSA renewal rates for continuing students who received aid in the past

- **Population**

- Continuing students who filed their FAFSA applications in the past but had not yet renewed their 2017 - 2018 FAFSA
 - Participants randomized into a treatment group and a control group

- **Overall Design**

- Spring 2017
- 9 emails and 10 text messages sent weekly
 - Combined campaign of both email and text messages
 - Treatment group received SPI text messages, SPI emails, and school emails



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FAFSA Renewal Campaign (2) Results

Final Results:

- **General:**
 - The renewal rate was over **9 percentage points (31.24%)** greater in the treatment group than in the control group
 - **BMCC:** The renewal rate was **10.48 percentage points greater (38.18%)** in the treatment group than in the control group
 - **BCC:** The renewal rate was **6.66 percentage points greater (19.79%)** in the treatment group than in the control group
 - **HCC:** The renewal rate was **8.81 percentage points greater (28.06%)** in the treatment group than in the control group



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FAFSA Renewal Campaign (2) Example

Sample Text Messages

- ***{First Name}, you must renew your FAFSA each year. This year it's easier -- you can use the same tax info as last year! Go to <bit.ly/{linkTBD}> today***
 - Corrects misperception
 - Confirms renewing is less work
- ***Renew your FAFSA and do it right the first time! Stop by the Financial Aid Lab (Colston Hall Room 503) and get help renewing today.***
 - Removes the burden of responsibility
 - Encourages use of financial aid labs
- ***Renew your FAFSA today! Many people renew in 30min or less at <bit.ly/{linkTBD}>. Tip: use the IRS data retrieval tool to renew quickly.***
 - Provides time estimates
 - Encourages action



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Recommendations

Lessons Learned:

- **Anecdotal Texting Advice:**
 - Use phone numbers with regional area codes
 - Heed character limits
 - Use bit.ly for mobile-friendly links
 - (1/2) (2/2)
 - Only text people who need to be texted
- **Interactivity: How do you want students to engage?**
 - Two-way texting
 - One-way texting
- **Platform: Choose based on your needs**
 - Signal Vine
 - Mozeo
 - MailChimp