

Experimental Evidence on Supplemental Instruction in Difficult College Courses

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Draft version: June 2017

Keywords: Program and Policy Evaluation; Higher Education, Education and Inequality

Abstract

Numerous post-secondary institutions around the world provide supplemental instruction in difficult introductory courses including economics as a means of addressing college accessibility, retention and completion. Proponents make two claims: (1) participation raises the students' grades substantially; and (2) students sub-optimally participate because of behavioral biases. Consistent with a model of bounded rationality, we find that well-timed informational reminders increase participation in a large randomized experiment. Reminders increased participation at a cost less than \$1 USD per additional session attended. For every additional SI visit, the average grade increases by about 0.03 grade points or 0.03 standard deviations [95% CI 0.024 - 0.042 SDs]; a smaller effect than often claimed by proponents. Nevertheless, SI is relatively inexpensive and students can attend multiple sessions, thus implying it can be a cost-effective intervention for improving academic performance in difficult introductory courses. Moreover, we find no differential treatment effect across racial and ethnic subgroups, suggesting that SI can help all students. (JEL C21, I23, I24)

The authors thank the Office of Supplemental Instruction at this large, urban public university for their support in conducting this experiment and for sharing their deep program knowledge and data. The data was provided under a confidential agreement and thus cannot be made available. Manzella appreciates funding received from the Dan E. Sweat Dissertation Fellowship designed to support research that addresses urban, community, or education policy issues. Beneficial comments were received from participants at the Eastern Economic Association 2016 and 2015 conferences and anonymous referees. This research was undertaken prior to Manzella joining the Census Bureau, and the views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

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