

Social Programs That Work Review

Evidence Summary for InsideTrack College Coaching

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **PROGRAM:** A mentoring program for college students.
- **EVALUATION METHODS:** A well-conducted multisite randomized controlled trial with a sample of 13,555 students.
- **KEY FINDINGS:** The program was found to produce a 14% increase in the likelihood of college persistence two years after random assignment (for the full sample), and a 13% increase in the likelihood of graduating college four years after random assignment (for the subsample of schools with graduation data).

I. Evidence rating: **SUGGESTIVE TIER**

The standard for Suggestive Tier is:

Programs that have been evaluated in one or more well-conducted RCTs (or studies that closely approximate random assignment) and found to produce sizable positive effects, but whose evidence is limited by only short-term follow-up, effects that fall short of statistical significance, or other factors. Such evidence suggests the program may be an especially strong candidate for further research, but does not yet provide confidence that the program would produce important effects if implemented in new settings.

II. Description of the Program:

InsideTrack is a widely-implemented mentoring program for college students designed to prevent them from dropping out of school. A college-educated mentor (“coach”) contacts students at the beginning of a semester and invites them to participate in the voluntary program. Students who sign up are contacted regularly for up to two semesters by a coach, who helps identify and address perceived obstacles to students’ course completion (e.g., work schedules, family responsibilities, financial obligations). Coaches maintain caseloads of 75-150 students. InsideTrack costs approximately \$1,121 per student per academic school year (in 2017 dollars).

[Click here for InsideTrack’s website.](#)

III. Evidence of Effectiveness:

Evaluation Method: A multi-site randomized controlled trial of InsideTrack, with follow-up two to four years after random assignment

This program was evaluated in a randomized controlled trial, which randomly assigned 13,555 students through 17 lotteries at eight postsecondary educational institutions during the 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 school years. Students were randomly assigned to either a group that was invited to receive InsideTrack or a control group that was not, but could receive schools' usual services (e.g., academic counseling and tutoring). The educational institutions determined which students were eligible to participate in the study and their eligibility criteria varied widely (e.g., by full vs. part-time status, or year in school). Many sample members were nontraditional students (e.g., their average age was 31). Participating educational institutions included two- and four-year public and private colleges, as well as proprietary colleges.

The study measured the program's effects on persistence in college for all students randomized to the InsideTrack group, regardless of whether they accepted the invitation to participate in the program. Since an unspecified number of InsideTrack group students declined the invitation – and thus presumably received no benefit from the program – InsideTrack's effects on those who actually participated were likely larger than the effects estimated in the study (and summarized below).

Effects of InsideTrack on the full sample two years after random assignment – i.e., one year after coaching ended:

Compared to the control group, InsideTrack students were 14% more likely to still be enrolled in their school (i.e., 27.5% of InsideTrack students were still enrolled vs. 24.2% of the control group). This effect was statistically significant at the 0.05 level, and was largely consistent across the various schools and lotteries.

Effects of InsideTrack for the subsample of three schools with data on degree completion four years after random assignment—i.e., three years after coaching ended:

Compared to the control group, InsideTrack students were 13% more likely to have earned a degree from their school (i.e., 35.2% of the InsideTrack students had done so vs. 31.2% of the control group). This effect was statistically significant at the 0.10 level, but not the 0.05 level.

Discussion of Study Quality:

- The study had low-to-moderate sample attrition: Enrollment data were collected for 82% of the original randomized sample at the two-year follow-up, and degree completion data were collected for 76% of students in 2003-2004 lotteries (i.e., those for which four years of follow-up data could have been collected). For neither outcome does the study report whether attrition rates were similar for the InsideTrack versus control groups.
- The study appropriately sought outcome data for all students assigned to the InsideTrack group, regardless of whether or how long they actually participated in the program (i.e., the study used an intention-to-treat analysis).

- The program and control groups were highly similar in their observable pre-program characteristics (e.g., gender, age, SAT scores).
- The study evaluated the program as implemented on a large scale across a variety of colleges, thus providing evidence of its effectiveness in diverse, real-world implementation conditions.
- Study limitations:
 - › The key outcomes – academic persistence and degree completion – were measured using official records that each school provided to InsideTrack, which in turn provided them to the research team. Although the researchers took a number of precautions to ensure that InsideTrack had not modified the data, it would have been preferable if the researchers had been given direct access to students’ school records.
 - › There were a few deviations from pure random assignment, as follows. After InsideTrack randomly assigned students at each school to two groups, Inside Track appears to have reassigned a few students in order to ensure the two groups were balanced on key characteristics (e.g., gender, age). InsideTrack then asked the school to choose which of the two groups would receive the program. These deviations from pure random assignment, although unfortunate, do not appear to have undermined the validity of the study’s findings since the InsideTrack and control groups were still highly similar in their observable pre-program characteristics.
 - › Data on degree completion are only available for students in three of the five lotteries conducted during the 2003-2004 school year (i.e., the lotteries for which InsideTrack could conceivably have collected four years of follow-up data). The study does not say why these data could not be obtained and reported for the other two lotteries.

Thoughts on what more is needed to build strong evidence:

An additional well-conducted randomized controlled trial – or further data collection and analysis of this trial – addressing the study limitations noted above.

IV. References:

Bettinger, Eric P., and Baker, Rachel. “The Effects of Student Coaching in College: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Mentoring.” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 16881, March 2011. [Click here for the full study report.](#)

<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/10/coaching-2/#comment-75654>-- Accessed April 6, 2011. This linked comment from the study author provides important information not discussed in the study report, including precautions taken to help insure the data provided by InsideTrack were valid.