Incentives and Services for College Achievement: Evidence from a Randomized Trial

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High attrition rates, delayed completion, and poor achievement are growing concerns at colleges and universities. This paper reports early findings from a randomized field experiment designed to improve achievement and increase completion rates. The results reported here are for approximately 1600 first-year students who participated in the Student Achievement and Retention Project at a large Canadian university. Those assigned to the Student Fellowship Program (SFP) were offered $5,000 merit-scholarships for attaining a 3.0 to 3.5 Grade Point Average in first year, while those assigned to the Student Support Program (SSP) were offered advising and supplemental instruction. A third treatment group combined both interventions. The initial results show significantly higher first term grades in the SFP and SFP/SSP hybrid with no effect on the number or type of courses taken. These effects dissipate when looking at final, full-year grades, suggesting short-term gains only. The estimated effects are concentrated among females and those with pre-existing good study habits.