

Advising Students To and Through College: Experimental Evidence from the Bottom Line Advising Program

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Introduction

Beginning with the high school class of 2015 and continuing with the high school class of 2016, Professors Ben Castleman (University of Virginia, Curry School of Education) and Andrew C. Barr (Texas A&M University) began a study of Bottom Line's combined College Access and Success programs to attempt to demonstrate that the Bottom Line model of a third party partnering with students is making a significant improvement on the college graduation challenge facing the nation. We are pleased to present their first report that shows empirically—**Bottom Line's direct service model is having an important impact on student success.**

This is the first in a series of ongoing reports we will issue, documenting the impacts of Bottom Line on students' progression to and through college. Future reports will focus on persistence and success outcomes as well as students' academic, social, and employment experiences in and out of college. To learn more about Bottom Line or to support our work, please visit us at www.bottomline.org.

Evaluation Overview



In their report, Barr and Castleman document the impact of participating in Bottom Line on fall college enrollment patterns for the high school class of 2015, and they use extensive survey data to investigate how Bottom Line is impacting students on a more holistic set of outcomes related to employment, course taking, and overall satisfaction.



Only a few intensive college advising programs have been rigorously evaluated through randomized controlled trials (RCTs)—the gold standard in the field of impact evaluation.



In a randomized controlled trial (RCT), every student who is eligible for the program is given an equal chance of being selected to participate. Much like with a lottery, individual characteristics don't determine who is selected. Instead, a computerized coin flip randomly assigns some students to the program and other students to a control condition.



The primary set of data used to inform the results was from the National Student Clearinghouse. We also used student surveys:

- A survey of both treatment and control group students during the spring of their senior year in high school.
- A survey of students again in the middle of the fall semester after high school.

*“The Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF) commends Bottom Line for conducting a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate its College Access and Success programs. An RCT is widely regarded as the most credible method of evaluating the effectiveness of a social program, and Bottom Line has partnered with an experienced, independent researcher to carry out the study. It will produce a definitive answer about whether the program achieves its goals and helps low-income students become the first in their families to attend college and earn a degree. **We are pleased to fund the RCT and applaud the leadership of Bottom Line for its interest in assessing the true impact of its work.**”*

—Jon Baron, LJAF Vice President of Evidence-Based Policy

The Results



Students who were offered Bottom Line advising were 6% more likely to enroll in college than their control group counterparts, and 10% more likely to enroll at a 4-year institution. These impacts represent a 7% and 14% relative increase over the control group outcomes, respectively.



Bottom Line students attended colleges and universities with 6-year graduation rates that were 4% higher and average loan default rates that were 1% lower than the comparable rates at the institutions attended by the control group. These impacts represent an 8% and 10% relative improvement over the control group outcomes, respectively.



Bottom Line advising led to large enrollment increases for students who were not receiving help from another advising organization; participants whose GPAs were below the median of the Bottom Line applicant pool; and for female students. These 4-year impacts represent 16%, 23%, and 17% relative improvement over the control group outcomes, respectively.



Bottom Line advisors are helping students make more informed decisions about where they apply and enroll, which in turn leads to substantially higher rates and quality of enrollment. Once on campus, students are engaging in practices that prior research suggests may position them for ongoing college success.



Bottom Line students were nearly

20%

more likely

to have met with someone to review their financial aid award letters than were control group students. This pattern of results suggests that Bottom Line advising is helping students make informed decisions about the affordability of college options they pursue.



Nearly

60%

of Bottom Line students rated their advisor as very important with college applications and decisions, compared with just over 20% of the control group rating "another college access organization" as very important.



Bottom Line students were

7%

more likely

to report they were living on campus, enjoying higher rates of participation with student groups, and feeling more comfortable on campus than students in the control group. These student decisions may contribute to an increased probability of success in college.

Bottom Line

Students who were offered Bottom Line advising were

14%

more likely

to enroll at a 4-year institution, and attended institutions with higher mean graduation rates and lower cohort default rates.



"Initial results from our evaluation indicate that Bottom Line advising has a substantial positive effect both on overall enrollment, and in particular on the quality of students enrollment."

For the complete report, please visit www.bottomline.org.