

Title: "Choosing to Learn: The Importance of Student Autonomy in Post-Secondary Education"

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Abstract

Despite strong evidence that student autonomy enhances motivation and achievement, few practical interventions promoting autonomy in higher education have been developed and empirically tested. Here, we demonstrate the effectiveness of two autonomy-supportive policies for increasing classroom attendance and mastery of course material. First, in a randomized controlled field study, we explored the effect of allowing students to choose whether to make their attendance mandatory (i.e., a component of their grades). We found that nearly all students used the opportunity as a pre-commitment device and were subsequently more likely to attend class than students whose attendance had been mandated by the instructor. Second, in a multi-year cohort study, we explored the effect of allowing students to opt out of a challenging, high-effort assessment stream, finding that students given greater autonomy invested more effort into their assignments and attained greater proficiency with the material. We discuss other opportunities for applying choice architecture to improve learning, motivation, and well-being in higher education.

Bio

Danny Oppenheimer is a professor at Carnegie Mellon jointly appointed in Psychology and Decision Sciences who studies judgment, decision making, metacognition, learning and causal reasoning, and applies his findings to a diverse array of domains, such as charitable giving, consumer behavior, education, electoral outcomes, and how to trick students into buying him ice cream. He is the author of over 50 peer-reviewed articles and books including "Democracy Despite Itself: Why a System that shouldn't work at all works so well" and "Psychology: The Comic Book Introduction". He has won awards for research, teaching, and humor, the latter of which is particularly inexplicable given his penchant for truly terrible puns.