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Shaping the Future of Student Support through Technology

A presentation by Ben Castleman, assistant professor of education and public policy at The University of Virginia

Ten Ways Technology and Behavioral Science are Shaping the Future of Student Support

Ben Castleman, author of "The 160-Character Solution: How Text Messaging and Other Behavioral Strategies Can Improve Education," visited InsideTrack to present on his area of expertise. Castleman, also an assistant professor of education and public policy at The University of Virginia, shared his extensive knowledge of best practices and insights for the role of technology and behavioral science in student support services.

A room full of more than 100 coaches nodded eagerly as he talked about research that confirmed much of what they sensed as they support students across the country. These coaches leverage technology, nudging students daily through InsideTrack's multichannel uCoach® Technology and Analytics Platform. The following are 10 of the most memorable revelations from Castleman's workshop.

Concerns about privacy are somewhat overblown

Institutions are understandably hyper-aware of student privacy. Concerns about "Big Brother" type data collection slow adoption of new technology and customization. Castleman's research skirted many of these concerns by using automated text messages to drive FAFSA completion and retention, independent of specific institutions. The result? Fewer than 4 percent of students or parents opted out of customized, automated text nudges.

Failure to adapt casts institutions as luddites

Castleman pointed out that customization and automation are the norm. Our InsideTrack coaches observe that students and parents are in fact surprised to find their institutions do not utilize the same customization technology as Amazon, for example. When institutions don't adopt commonly accepted practices, students wonder if they can offer the cutting-edge, quality education needed to equip them for the 21st century.

Captivate limited cognitive bandwidth

Students only have so much cognitive attention. Daily life eats up much of our ability to process and absorb the daily barrage of information and to-do lists. This doesn't mean students are lazy or irresponsible; it means student support must be empathetic and adaptive to the reality of today's students. A well-timed nudge can help a student follow through with their intentions and make progress. "Text-based messages captivate, simplify, nudge, and connect," Castleman said, "whereas email and other channels tend to overwhelm."

Simplify, simplify, simplify

Access to simplified information, especially when customized to the individual, leads to better decisions. Inundating students with long, complicated messages deters engagement and triggers analysis paralysis that leads to poor decision making or inaction. Castleman said "hardworking, talented students face so much unnecessary complexity on the road to college, and every school is different."

Give students credit and a seat at the table

An empathic view of student behavior is the cornerstone of the InsideTrack coaching methodology. Castleman talked about the power of "precommitment" to help students align their present and future selves. We can enlist students to customize their own interventions and help them resist impulses to quit or procrastinate. For example, at the beginning of the semester, a coach asks a student: "what words should I use to motivate you when you feel overwhelmed?" Later, the coach or an automated system, can deliver the student's own words back to them at just the right time for a truly personalized experience.

Shift the status quo

The following is a summary of the default human response to complexity:

- Stick with the status quo
- Use a simplifying strategy
- Put off a decision or action
- Question one's belonging

Castleman warned that "when faced with complexity, people default to no choice at all." Rather than fighting against human nature, behavioral science seeks to harness the momentum of existing patterns. To shift the status quo, start by meeting people in their status quos. Then set to work to change cultural status quos. For example, make certain beneficial behaviors compulsory. Castleman suggested including college applications in high school curricula or having all students take the SAT or ACT as "no brainer" case studies to shift the status quo to dramatically increase the number of college-bound students.

Big data to influence mindset

Castleman wove the themes of belonging and growth mindset into his examples and student stories throughout the workshop. He said we can use big data and automated, multichannel communication to deploy effective "wise interventions" that cultivate growth mindset and instill in students a sense of belonging in students. It's increasingly possible to identify and address these psychological barriers to achievement and attainment at scale.

Be proactive, respond quickly

"We need to send relevant information proactively and get over the 'if we build it, they will come' mentality," Castleman said. The more personalized and salient the information, the more likely it is to drive engagement and elicit a response from students. Student support teams must have the ability to respond almost immediately when students reach out. Doing so encourages future engagement and drives students to action.

Beyond text

Students have shared stories with us of entire conversations using emojis and GIFs. In our own coaching operation, teams increasingly communicate with each other and students using embedded media. Tailoring communication across multiple channels includes more than simply adjusting length and tone. Incorporating images, media, and a playful spirit can convey important information and build rapport with the students who need it most.

The 160-character solution ... for now

The biggest takeaway from the workshop with Castleman was that no new technology or communication channel will be a silver bullet. "Saturation, not complexity, will be the biggest challenge," he predicted. By the time student support professionals in higher education get onboard with SMS, it will likely be too late and students will have moved on to other channels. As noise increases on SMS, it's likely students will soon view and use it much as they do email or voice calls today. The channel isn't what matters, it's our collective ability to adapt and meet students where they are that counts. "Let's be ready for the twilight of SMS," Castleman advised. "This channel is becoming saturated, but that's OK as we can apply these principles in other emerging channels."

Ben Castleman is an Assistant Professor of Education and Public Policy at the University of Virginia. He is a senior advisor to First Lady Michelle Obama's Reach Higher Initiative and is the Faculty Director of the University of Virginia-US Army Partnership on Veterans' Education.

His research has appeared in top public policy and economics journals, including The Journal of Labor Economics, The Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, and The Journal of Human Resources. Ben's research has been generously supported by numerous philanthropic foundations and has received extensive media coverage, including The New York Times, National Public Radio, Time Magazine, and the Washington Post.