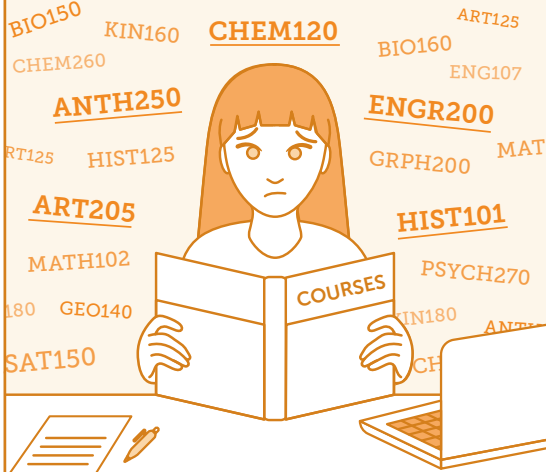


WHAT “HIDDEN MOTIVES” COULD LEAD YOUR STUDENTS TO POOR DECISIONS?

You may find yourself scratching your head when students make choices contrary to their own self-interest, such as under-loading credit hours or prioritizing social activities over study time. The victims are ultimately the students themselves, putting them at risk of performing poorly in school and even dropping out. But what is the culprit here? We investigate the subconscious cognitive biases that may be holding your students back and identify potential behavioral nudges to solve these “crimes” against student success.

Cases



Maya is **overwhelmed by the course catalog** and doesn't know which courses to take, so she waits until the registration deadline and then chooses at random.

Possible Motives

Cognitive Depletion

Overwhelming amounts of information fatigue our ability to make decisions

Other examples

- Orientation and onboarding
- Financial aid verification
- ESL student experience

Nudging Leads

Design Toward Interaction

Do you plan to return next term? Reply Y/N

The University of Central Florida switched text messages about registration from a reminder to a question. Response rates shot up to **70%**.

Break Tasks into Manageable Steps

MIT students completed assignments more accurately and on time with more accurate intermediate deadlines than with a single terminal deadline.

Frame Trade-Offs in Concrete Ways

Indiana University started sending annual loan letters to students that showed:

Total owed	\$12,000
First Month Due	\$138.10

By framing student loans as a monthly expense, the initiative helped lower student debt by \$100 million over four years.

Normalize Good Behaviors

After a social norms campaign that corrected misperceptions about students' drinking habits, the number of University of Arizona students who binged 5+ drinks fell by **28%**.

Possible Motives

Inertia

Tendency to do nothing when faced with choices that are difficult to understand

Other examples

- Course registration
- Graduation application
- Academic probation requirements

Possible Motives

Present Bias

Prioritizing short-term gratification over long-term payoff

Other examples

- Credit under-loading
- Professional credential preparation
- Honors requirements

Possible Motives

Planning Fallacy

Chronic underestimation of the time required to complete a task, which leads to procrastination

Other examples

- Career search
- Orientation and onboarding
- Financial aid application

Possible Motives

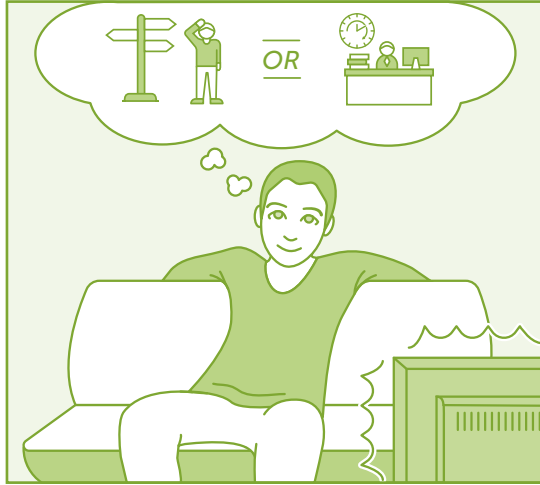
Social Norming

Interpreting the actions of others—especially a large group—as the right actions

Other examples

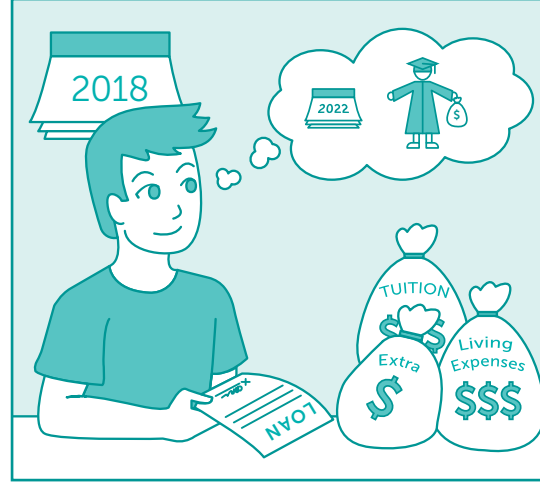
- Study habits
- Time allocation
- Help-seeking behaviors

Cases



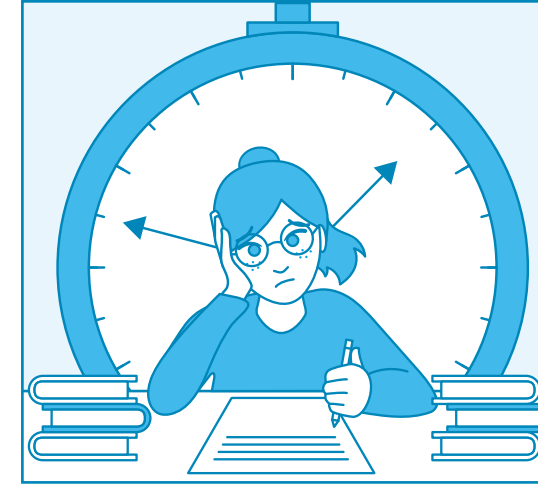
Ahmed hasn't decided which major to declare and **doesn't feel like locking himself into a choice**. He doesn't realize that not taking courses that count toward a major will extend his time to degree.

Cases



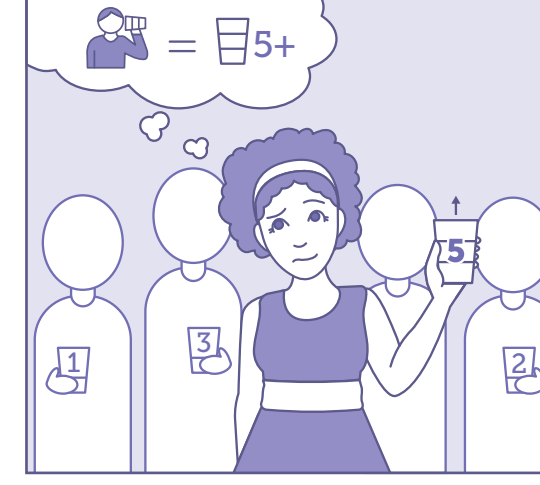
Cedric sees that his loan offer is more than the cost of tuition and living expenses, but he decides to take out the maximum amount he's eligible for because **he won't have to pay it off until after graduation**.

Cases



Teresa **doesn't think that the capstone project will take that long to do**, so she saves it for the last week of class. She has to stay up multiple nights to get it done.

Cases



Regan **thinks that her fellow college students consume more alcohol than they actually do** and increases her own intake to match that perception.

Sources: EAB Interviews; Johannessen, Koreen, Carolyn Collins, Beverly Mills-Novoa, and Peggy Gilder, 1999, "A Practical Guide to Alcohol Abuse Prevention: A Campus Case Study in Implementing Social Norms and Environmental Management Approaches," Campus Health Service, The University of Arizona; Ariely, Dan and Klaus Wertenbroch, 2002, "Procrastination, Deadlines, and Performance: Self-Control by Precommitment," *Psychological Science* 13(3): 219-24.