

# Avoid FIGHT OR FLIGHT reactions by redesigning the onboarding experience

The typical new community college student encounters a wide range of stressful situations during onboarding. Unfortunately, these stressors often elicit “fight-or-flight” responses that threaten students’ enrollment and long-term success at the institution.

College leaders can guide students to make optimal enrollment decisions and ultimately increase the likelihood of enrollment and completion by leveraging lessons from behavioral economics to redesign the onboarding experience. Apply the strategies below to avoid five common fight-or-flight student reactions by eliminating unnecessary stress during onboarding, preventing early attrition, and creating a clear path to success for students on your campus.

Nationally, over 50%  of community college applicants drop out before the first day of class. 

Stressor	FIGHT	Recommended Redesign	Guiding Behavioral Economic Theory
<p><b>1</b></p> <p>A new applicant receives <b>conflicting information</b> about college onboarding steps from the institutional website, available printed materials, and staff instructions.</p>	<p>The student becomes agitated due to the clear lack of coordination across different divisions of the institution. Doubting the staff’s ability to help her enroll at the institution, the student becomes increasingly argumentative.</p>	<p><b>Present students with unified onboarding messages.</b> Ensure your website and printed materials align with staff instructions. This will build trust among new applicants and reduce confusion about next steps for enrollment.</p>	<p><b>Cognitive depletion:</b> Attention is depleted with heavy use. When attention capacity is exhausted, people are likely to act impatiently.</p>
<p><b>2</b></p> <p>A student is recruited into <b>special at-risk programs</b> immediately during intake.</p>	<p>The student doesn’t believe he is eligible for at-risk programming and feels insulted by the referral to special resources. He claims the advisor doesn’t understand his life and ignores the advisor’s remaining advice.</p>	<p><b>Demonstrate the relevance and benefits of programs before recruiting participants.</b> Students are more likely to accept support if the benefits of participation are clearly explained and context is provided about the popularity of the program.</p>	<p><b>Descriptive social norming:</b> Behavior is influenced by perceptions, whether correct or incorrect, of how other members of a social group act. Stating social norms encourages all people to act in accordance with them.</p>
Stressor	FLIGHT	Recommended Redesign	Guiding Behavioral Economic Theory
<p><b>3</b></p> <p>Onboarding requires <b>multiple visits</b> to student services offices to complete.</p>	<p>The student perceives each visit to a student services office as an unanticipated setback to her goal of enrollment. She begins to wonder if she will ever be able to take college courses.</p>	<p><b>Articulate clear enrollment steps, but don’t oversimplify the process.</b> Give students a comprehensive list of the steps required to complete enrollment. This helps them understand their tasks before classes begin and avoids unforeseen delays.</p>	<p><b>Goal setting:</b> People are less overwhelmed by a process when they clearly understand all related steps in it, with no surprises. Setting goals can help people overcome procrastination and set a reference point.</p>
<p><b>4</b></p> <p>Financial aid and career counseling are <b>optional steps</b> in the enrollment process that seem “nice-to-have” but are not required.</p>	<p>The student understands that securing aid and participating in career counseling are important, but he doesn’t think he has time before the first day of class. He tells himself he’ll complete those tasks later, but then forgets.</p>	<p><b>Remember students do optional...with the right framing.</b> Frame financial aid and career counseling as mandatory by including them in onboarding guides and discussing during advising. Students are likely to complete steps when they’re presented alongside other mandatory steps.</p>	<p><b>Procrastination and planning fallacy:</b> People tend to be overly optimistic about their ability to finish tasks on time. They believe the future will unfold as planned, but rarely leave sufficient time to meet key deadlines. People are more likely to complete optional tasks with strong guidelines.</p>
<p><b>5</b></p> <p>A student must <b>choose a program of study</b> during a short, 20-minute advising appointment.</p>	<p>The context in which the student is asked to choose a program of study seems casual, so she doesn’t give much thought to the decision. She chooses a forensic science major based on the episode of CSI she watched that day.</p>	<p><b>Set the right environment for informed decision making.</b> Signal to students that their selection of an academic program is important by encouraging them to complete personality diagnostics, network with industry experts, and research career projections for top program choices.</p>	<p><b>Choice architecture:</b> A person’s decision is influenced by the characteristics of the environment or context in which the decision is made. This can include the number of choices presented or simply the manner in which the choices are described.</p>