The Impact of an Informative Letter Campaign on Retention of First-Year Students at the University of Ottawa

As university funding has become increasingly tied to student performance, universities have become more and more concerned about retention of students. Retention of first-year students is of particular importance, since more students drop out after first year than after subsequent years of study. For this reason, universities are constantly seeking to identify new strategies to reduce dropout rates.

To this end, in the summer of 2018 the Faculty of Social Sciences at uOttawa carried out an experiment to test the effect of an informative letter campaign on the retention of first-year students. The campaign involved sending an informative letter – i.e., a letter that made it clear that encountering difficulties of various sorts during first-year was commonplace – to 75% of students who had just completed first year, in the hopes of encouraging them to register in second year. Students were randomly-allocated to one of three groups: 50% received one version of the letter; 25% of the remaining students received an alternative, “psychologically boosted” letter; and the remaining 25% of students, the control group for the experiment, received no letters.

Since an econometric analysis carried out by Directed Research student Emma Sheppard indicated that the informative letter campaign had been quite successful, the university decided to expand the experiment to include other faculties as well.1 Thus, there is now a much bigger sample of data available to evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy. The purpose of this project will be to carry out an analysis similar to that of Sheppard (2018) using the new data for the summer 2019 informative letter campaign, to see if similar positive results are obtained. The results of the analysis will have a direct impact on uOttawa’s future student retention policies. As the underlying data are confidential, the work will need to be carried out in the offices of the Vice-Dean of Undergraduate Studies, FSS 3001. Access to the data will be provided by Philippe Busser (pbusser@uottawa.ca), the Assistant to the Vice Dean.

Required skills:

- Descriptive statistics
- Introductory econometrics or equivalent
- Familiarity with an econometric software package, e.g., Stata
- Good writing skills, in either official language

Supervisor:

Professor Victoria Barham
Dean
Faculty of Social Sciences
FSS 4031
E-mail: doyenfssdean@uottawa.ca

References


1 See Sheppard (2018).