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.

WHAT COULD LEAD YOUR STUDENTS TO POOR DECISIONS?

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

Present Bias
Prioritizing short-term gratification over long-term payoff

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

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

Other examples
• Orientation and onboarding
• Financial aid verification
• ESL student experience
• Course registration
• Graduation application
• Academic probation requirements
• Credit under-loading
• Professional credential preparation
• Honors requirements
• Study habits
• Time allocation
• Help-seeking behaviors

Possible Motives

Design Toward Interaction

The University of Central Florida switched from sending reminder text messages about registration to a question along with the reminder, resulting in a response rate increase of 27%.

Break Tasks into Manageable Steps

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

Frame Trade-Offs in Concrete Ways

Ivy League University found that framing student loans as a monthly expense, rather than a one-time cost, helped lower student debt by $100 million over four years.

Normalize Going Behaviors

At a social norms campaign that combated binge drinking habits, 28% of female students at Boston University who logged in drank less by 20%.

Sources: