

Using Goals to Motivate College Students: Theory and Evidence from Field Experiments

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Will college students who set goals for themselves work harder and achieve better outcomes? In theory, setting goals can help present-biased students to mitigate their self-control problem. In practice, there is little credible evidence on the causal effects of goal setting for college students. We report the results of two field experiments that involved almost four thousand college students in total. One experiment asked treated students to set goals for performance in the course; the other asked treated students to set goals for a particular task (completing online practice exams). Task-based goals had large and robust positive effects on the level of task completion, and task-based goals also increased course performance. Further analysis indicates that the increase in task completion induced by setting task-based goals caused the increase in course performance. We also find that performance-based goals had positive but small effects on course performance. We use theory that builds on present bias and loss aversion to interpret our results. Since task-based goal setting is low-cost, scaleable and logistically simple, we conclude that our findings have important implications for educational practice and future research.