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# Providing Guidance to Others Could Boost Your Own Success

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*Have you given someone advice lately? Turns out, it might help you as much as it helps them.*

*Wharton's Behavior Change for Good Initiative, which is working to learn how behavioral science can teach people to be healthier, better educated, and more responsible with their finances, recently published research that made our Wharton Global Youth Program team do a double-take. It's not every day that researchers here at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania – in this case postdoctoral student Lauren Eskreis-Winkler and professors Katherine Milkman and Angela Duckworth – conduct a large-scale field study involving high school students. Our favorite demographic!*

*The study, titled “Advice-giving with CLRN (Character Lab Research Network)” gathered data from the experiences of nearly 2,000 high school students attending seven diverse high schools in the U.S. The investigation examined the benefits of asking individuals, specifically teenagers, to give advice to others (like telling a younger student how to stop procrastinating), and then measured the impact that this giving had on the advisor's grades. “Advice givers earned higher report card grades in math and a self-selected target class over an academic quarter,” the study concludes. “This psychologically wise advice-giving nudge, which has relevance for policy and practice, suggests a valuable approach to improving achievement: one that puts people in a position to give.” In other words, giving advice helps you do better in life.*

*This Knowledge@Wharton interview with Eskreis-Winkler takes a closer look at the study, which was published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (check out the Related Links in the side toolbar to read the research in more detail). Not much previous research has looked at the benefits of giving advice and sharing information, but instead at the results of receiving advice. Turns out, it might be better to give than to receive.*

**Knowledge@Wharton:** Does this research start from the point that we are all experts about ourselves?

**Lauren Eskreis-Winkler:** Exactly. I think people do know in many ways what works best for them. It remains an open question as to why advice-giving works, but one of our primary hypotheses — and we've gathered some evidence for this — is that it really builds your confidence.

If you imagine you are constantly trying to lose weight and repeatedly failing to achieve that goal, it saps you of your confidence. The notion that suddenly you're put in a position where someone asks if you have useful information and presumes that you do, that could raise your confidence. The act of giving advice forces you to focus on the things that you already know how to do versus things you don't, the things that are in your control versus the things that aren't. For all of these reasons, we think that advice-giving probably is a confidence booster that raises people's motivation, giving them what they need to achieve their goals and to realize what's holding them back.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** Maybe it's something that's often been a source of shame or embarrassment, whether it's losing weight or stopping smoking. Then you're taking that problem that is a source of bad feelings and making it into a source of good feelings because you're being looked to as an expert. Is that correct?

**Eskreis-Winkler:** Exactly. We also studied this in kids in school, even the kids who aren't necessarily feeling bad about themselves. I think it's a totally novel experience in today's educational world that you'd go up to a 15-year-old in school and say, “Hey, we think you have really useful knowledge. Could you share it with someone else?” The whole structure of education is that these kids are the recipients. They're sitting in class taking notes, receiving knowledge. In

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general, it was just a very novel experience for a kid, regardless of the degree to which they're failing or not failing, to be suddenly appointed as an adviser — to just make them feel that, "Wow, I have something to give to somebody else."

**Knowledge@Wharton:** How did you design this experiment with high school students, and what were the results?

**Eskreis-Winkler:** This was a large-scale, randomized controlled trial that was run with close to 2,000 high school students. The scale of this was only made possible by partnering with the Behavior Change for Good Initiative and the Character Lab, both at the University of Pennsylvania. They really made this research frictionless and facilitated these partnerships. Typically, I think it's very hard for researchers to test questions like this at scale.

We recruited about 2,000 students and randomized them to one of two conditions. Either they're in the treatment, which is that they give advice to younger students, or they're in the control condition, which is practice as usual and they didn't receive anything in particular. The program was online, so teachers took their students to the computer lab and students signed in. There was this very aesthetically pleasing, graphically designed program that students walked themselves through. They were asked to be coaches. We said, "Help us help other students." Then the treatment — they went through a series of exercises that tried to elicit their advice.

There were some multiple-choice questions that asked them to advise on optimal study locations. There were some open-ended questions where they were writing notes of advice to younger students. The whole experience was short, but it was meant to make them feel like bona fide advisers. They had information to give, and we were getting it, and we were actually going to give it to younger students.

The hypothesis was that this act of stepping into the adviser role would raise the students' confidence, increase their motivation. It was a pretty high bar, but we were hoping and expecting that it would, in turn, raise the students' achievement levels. We collected the students' grades over the academic quarter to see whether this intervention, which was delivered to students at the beginning of the third quarter, would increase their grades. And it did. We specifically pre-registered and predicted in advance that it would raise their grades in a target class. This is a class in which students self-report that they're most motivated to improve. Math is a subject that's notoriously difficult to change student achievement and a subject in which many students lack confidence. We thought this advice-giving intervention would be effective in math, and we did find that the students' target grades and their math grades improved relative to students in the control condition.

"The student who has two pages of math problems and really doesn't want to do them tells me that he will put a candy at the end of the page. Each time he goes through the problems, he eats a candy." — Lauren Eskreis-Winkler, Wharton Postdoctoral Researcher

**Knowledge@Wharton:** How much did their grades improve?

**Eskreis-Winkler:** It was a couple of points. The grading scale was between 50 and 100, so students who are at 50 are failing out of their classes, and 100 is the best you can do. On average, students improved one or two grade points, so it's not like a huge effect. But I think it's really noteworthy given the cost of the intervention. It's a marginal cost of zero. Any school district could implement this. Unlike many very intensive, costly programs like tutoring that often have very small, if any, effects, this program is costless not only in money but also in time.

Students had a very brief interaction with the program. I think one interesting direction moving forward would be to look at whether booster sessions help. If you're an advice-giver not just once, but many times, or if you interact not just with a computer module, but with an actual younger student, could all these things increase the efficacy of the program and lead to much stronger effects?

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**Knowledge@Wharton:** It's kind of like a mentoring program in that the older students shared what they've learned with the younger students.

**Eskreis-Winkler:** Yes, and all of the advice really focused them on motivation: "What do you do to stop procrastinating? What would you tell a student who's really not so motivated in school?" ... It was really focusing students on what do you do when you get home and don't want to do your homework? How do you get yourself to do it? Students have these ingenious strategies that, I think, sometimes they lack the motivation to put into action, but they have really great ideas about what they should be doing.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** Was there one from the student study that really stood out to you?

**Eskreis-Winkler:** I've come across a host of different things students say. They're very effective at rewarding themselves. The student who has two pages of math problems and really doesn't want to do them tells me that he will put a candy at the end of the page. Each time he goes through the problems, he eats a candy. I think they're very in tune to rewards and incentives. There are also very creative strategies. One kid who I often quote, a seventh grader, told me very dramatically that he imagines his house is burning down, and if he doesn't finish his homework in time, the fire is going to consume him. Just really imaginative.

I think psychologists have known for a long time that very young children engage in imaginative play, and they're incredibly creative. Talking to students about how they motivate themselves just reinforced that that never goes away. I think maybe we channel that imaginative and creative play in specific ways, and this is definitely one of those ways.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** What are the implications here, not just for high school students or educators but also in different settings? If I'm a business manager, could I use this? If I'm an individual employee and my company is not going to do this, could I try it?

**Eskreis-Winkler:** Yes, absolutely. We expanded because we were interested in that exact question. We wanted to know not just with regard to academic achievement, but a host of self-regulatory goals — like people struggling to lose weight, to control their tempers, to save money, to motivate themselves in the job market. We explored all four of those domains.

We recruited people who self-identified that they really struggle to save money, that they really struggle to lose weight, they struggle to control their tempers, and unemployed individuals who are struggling to get a job. In all of these domains, we tested whether people were more motivated by giving advice or receiving advice from an expert source.

For example, the people who were trying to lose weight either gave advice or received advice from nutritionists at the Mayo Clinic.... [People] overwhelmingly said that they were more motivated by giving advice than by receiving advice.

What was especially interesting is that afterwards, we recruited people who didn't go through the two activities but who were predictors. They were yoked to somebody who had given advice and received advice. They had to predict which would be more motivating. Overwhelmingly, the effect flips. People say, "Well, of course, somebody who can't save money is going to be more motivated by getting advice from someone at America Saves than by giving advice." So, people completely mis-predicted the phenomenon. We find that it's really not confined to kids in school. Generally, when you're struggling with motivation, when the problem is not knowledge, you really do seem to benefit more from giving advice than from receiving it.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** Instead of looking outward, you need to look inward.

**Eskreis-Winkler:** I think that's absolutely right. People think that they're not achieving because they're lacking

something, and often that something is information. It's like, "I don't have it within me. I have to go to a teacher or an expert or somebody else who can give me what I lack." To the degree to which you're lacking confidence, it seems like just being repositioned into the role of a giver versus a receiver can give you everything you need.