Mindset Messaging: Advisor communication about student challenges + opportunities for growth

Growth Mindset in Advising

- Growth mindset – the belief that the ability to learn is malleable and expandable through effort, strategy and help-seek – is linked to student motivation, persistence and learning.¹ ²
- Subtle cues within organizational messages can shape college students’ beliefs about intelligence and learning and cultivate a growth mindset.³
- As advisors help students navigate challenges towards a degree, day-to-day interactions can help foster a growth mindset among students, shaping their beliefs about themselves and their abilities.
- But, we know little about how infusing growth mindset language into messages from advisors might influence students’ mindset and their sense of confidence, motivation, and belonging at their university.

Research Questions

- How do students interpret and anticipate responding to messages that emphasize a growth mindset compared to an appreciative message? ⁴
- How do these reactions relate to students’ perceived support from advisors, their confidence, and their sense of belonging? ⁵
- Do nontraditional students – adult learners, part-time students, and/or transfer students – have distinct reactions compared to their peers? ⁶

Data & Methods

- Focus groups were held with 20 undergraduate students at a large, public university in the Southwest.
- Students were majoring in either psychology or general studies and reflected a range of social and academic backgrounds.
- Students read and reacted to two hypothetical response emails from advisors about possibly withdrawing from a challenging class – one with appreciative language and another with growth mindset language.
- Transcripts of the focus groups were coded using multiple layers of coding.
- Descriptive, emotional, and in vivo codes related to students’ reactions were examined with special attention to the reactions of nontraditional students.
- Students were hungry for more feedback on campus resources and options.
- “Email one [growth mindset email makes me feel more motivated and encourages me to talk with you.] Like you don’t want to discourage me by it.”
- “Email one (growth mindset email) makes me feel more motivated and encourages me to talk with you.”
- “Email two [appreciative email] makes me feel more appreciated and tells me that you care.”
- “Email two [appreciative email] makes me feel more appreciated and tells me that you care.”
- “Email two [appreciative email] makes me feel more appreciated and tells me that you care.”

Do subtle differences have an impact?

- “It’s like all students struggle with challenging courses, but it’s like you can learn from it rather than being discouraged by it.”
- “Every time I talk with [Advisor], I feel happy to talk with them.”
- “If I go to my advisor, I feel that they actually care. They’re willing to strategize with you about campus resources and options.”
- “Email one makes me feel more confident, especially the hard work paying off thing. It makes me want to keep working.”
- “Email one makes me feel more confident, especially the hard work paying off thing. It makes me want to keep on working.”
- “Email one makes me feel more confident, especially the hard work paying off thing. It makes me want to keep working.”

Aim 1. How do students react to the messages?

- Students liked that both messages were encouraging, informative, and provided links to resources.
- Students preferred the growth mindset message by 2:1, highlighting:
  - Knowing all students struggle made them feel less alone
  - Many liked reframing challenges as opportunities to learn
  - Students were hungry for more strategizing with advisors
- But, students liked the warmth in the appreciative message and that their advisor was happy to talk with them.
- More students said they would take an action – by clicking links or following up with the advisor – in response to the growth mindset message.

Aim 2. How does micro-message impact perceived support from advisors, confidence, and belonging?

- Students generally felt more supported by the growth mindset message and the offer to strategize.
- The growth mindset also had a small advantage in terms of fostering a sense of belonging and a big advantage in students’ confidence.

Aim 3. Do reactions to messages differ for traditional and nontraditional students?

- Findings suggest that nontraditional students may be more divided in their reactions – both in terms of their overall preference and re: which email made them feel most supported.
- Future research should explore this pattern and better understand how micro-messages impact nontraditional students’ sense of support, confidence, and belonging within advising interactions.

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Implications

- Micro-messages within communication from advisors are a day-to-day way to build connection with students and shape their challenges, abilities, and sense of belonging.
- Students value the effort advisors put into communicating with them by email including detail, resources, and words of affirmation.
- Growth mindset language can help students reframe challenges as opportunities, feel less alone, and see advisors as key partners in student success – something students crave in advising relationships.

Next Steps

- As advisors increasingly rely on digital communication using different tools, evolving best practices for effective communication is an important direction for future research.
- More work is needed to contextualize student reactions to micro-message within in-person and online advising relationships and support more generally.
- Future research should unpack student perceptions along a wider range of student characteristics and experiences across institutional contexts and explore how strategic micro-message might improve student outcomes.

References


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Contact Us

Sarah Kyte, Ph.D. | skyte@email.arizona.edu | studentsuccess.arizona.edu/
Liz Collins, M.Ed | smartch@email.arizona.edu | cala.arizona.edu/feas/hediving