



Mindset Messaging:

Advisor communication about student challenges + opportunities for growth

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Growth Mindset in Advising

- Growth mindset – the belief that the ability to learn is malleable and expandable through effort, strategy and help-seeking – 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?
- How do these reactions relate to students’ perceived support from advisors, their confidence, and their sense of belonging?
- Do nontraditional students – adult learners, part-time students, and/or transfer students – have distinct reactions compared to their peers?

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 one 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.

Infusing theory into advising language

Growth Mindset

Dear Morgan,

[description of withdrawal policy]

As you decide, know that all students struggle with challenging coursework at one time or another and that the most challenging classes can be opportunities to develop better learning strategies. I'm glad that you reached out to ask about the policy and I would encourage you to go even further and take advantage of some of the resources on campus that can help your hard work pay off the most. In this and all of your future classes. In particular, in addition to your professor's office hours, check out the tutoring center homepage, peer mentoring, and the writing center.

Let me know if you have any questions and feel free to come in for an advising appointment before making a final decision. I'm happy to strategize with you about campus resources and options.

Best,
[Your Advisor]

Emphasis on:

- ✓ Hard work
- ✓ Strategy
- ✓ Help-seeking

Appreciative Advising

Dear Alex,

[description of withdrawal policy]

As you decide, know that many students struggle with challenging coursework at one time or another and that these challenges can be overcome just like ones you may have faced in the past. I'm always happy to answer questions about policies and I would encourage you to go even further and take advantage of some of the resources on campus that can help you to be successful in the classroom in this and all of your future classes. In particular, in addition to your professor's office hours, check out the tutoring center homepage, peer mentoring, and the writing center.

Let me know if you have any questions and feel free to come in for an advising appointment before making a final decision. I'm happy to talk with you about it more.

Best,
[Your Advisor]

Emphasis on:

- ✓ Warmth
- ✓ Affirming past successes
- ✓ Encouragement to seek out challenges⁴

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”
-Freshman, Psychology major

“Especially as they said most students will struggle at this at one point or another. You can feel very lost and almost ashamed that you did fail a class, or you’re struggling in a class”
-Sophomore, General Studies major

“I think this one is more specific in saying we can plan it out with you. Like you don’t have to figure this out. We’re not just going to give you the information and have you figure it out yourself.”
-Junior, Psychology major

“The word strategize makes it like they’re already prepared to help you with the next steps.”
-Senior, General Studies major

“This one is actually something to develop better learning strategies for the future, which will help overall in anything.”
-Sophomore, General Studies major

“That’s what the advisors for. It can provide opportunities for information... You might get the E or the W, but let’s strategize on how you’re going to fix that on your transcript. Versus, ‘Oh, let’s just talk about it.’ Happy to talk is still good, but strategize is what the advisors are for.”
- Junior Transfer Student, General Studies major

“Email one [makes me feel more confident]. Especially the hard work paying off thing... It makes you want to keep working”.
-Freshman, Psychology major

“At least in email one [growth mindset email] you’ve actually got a plan to help them, so that gives me confidence that I can probably do it”
-Freshman, Psychology major

Aim 1. How did 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-messaging 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.

“Just like the ones you have faced in the past, I feel like that has a negative connotation, because it’s just about the past.”

-Sophomore, General Studies major

“I liked that they explained what the W means, that’s just cause as a freshman, I had no idea what that would mean... I really like the second to last paragraph about reassuring that it’s okay and then they provided some of those resources. They’ve obviously spent some time writing this out... I think I would’ve pictured more of a, ‘You have until December 30th to drop it, or else you will fail.’ I think that’s more of what I would’ve expected... I like that it’s linked because it’s easy to access because sometimes it is really hard to find the resources.”

-Senior, Psychology major

“At the end it’s like, I’m happy to talk with you. Instead of I’m happy to strategize with you. It’s personal... you can tell that they like to talk to students and they’re willing to help because they want to.”

-Part-time & returning student, General Studies major

“I think if I needed to really crunch down and get to work, I think email one [growth mindset] would be better, but if I was just freaking out over a little thing, email two [appreciative advising] would be better for me.”

-Junior, Psychology major

“I’d be more supported with the opportunities to develop and the strategies, because it’s almost like they want to help you figure it out... If I go to my advisor, I want her to be able to help me figure out how to move forward from it.”

-Junior Transfer Student, General Studies major

“Email one [growth mindset email makes me feel more supported]. I do like it gives me more of a sense of they’re being compassionate towards me, they’re actually caring. They’re willing to strategize and dedicate their time to meeting with me and it just makes me feel like they’re dedicated and that they care.”

-Freshman, Psychology major

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 by 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 strategizing – 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-messaging 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-messaging might improve student outcomes.

References

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