A few years ago, Zoe Cohen noticed a troubling sign in her "Physiology of the Immune System" course: A larger number of students than usual had failed the first exam. Cohen had changed up the way she taught the course that year, part of a broader push toward active learning at the University of Arizona, where she is an assistant professor. The different style was probably a big adjustment for her upper-level students after years of taking lecture-based courses, she thought.

Cohen wanted to help those students. But the course is a large one, with between 160 and 200 students, and she didn't want to increase her workload. So she came up with a low-touch way to intervene: sending a personalized, supportive email. For a small investment of time, Cohen was able to signal to students that she cared. And she thinks the move even boosted recipients' performance in the course.

Cohen's email is an example of a classroom-based "nudge," or intervention that encourages, but does not mandate, a certain behavior. Nudges have caught on as a way to help students through the many complex processes of higher education. Cohen's effort fits into the broad spirit of this work, which is: "Let's all stop waiting for students to come and ask for help," said Lindsay C. Page, a scholar who has designed and tested a number of successful nudges. After all, said Page, an assistant professor of education and a research scientist at the University of Pittsburgh, colleges often have a good sense of which students could use a bit of support, sometimes before the students themselves know.

Cohen had the option, she told me, to give an adviser in her department a list of struggling students to email. But she wondered if a message that came directly from her and took a more encouraging tone might be more effective.

So Cohen crafted an email explaining that "the student didn't do as well as expected on the exam, however, it was still early in the semester, and that changing habits now could turn their grade around," as she wrote in an article for The Evollution, an online news site run by Destiny Solutions, a software vendor. She sent the message from her own email address, and personalized it using each student's name.
The message didn’t offer any additional support to its recipients. Rather, it asked whether they knew why they hadn’t performed well, and whether they’d taken advantage of existing resources, like office hours and study groups.

The professor braced herself for backlash. Perhaps students would blame their performance on Cohen’s teaching style. "The fact is," she said, "I got zero of that." Instead, more than half of the 20 students Cohen emailed wrote back expressing their appreciation for her message and taking responsibility for their grades.

Cohen has continued sending the email to students who fail the first exam. And while she doesn’t have a clear sense of whether or how the message has changed recipients’ behavior, she has noticed that the growth in scores between the first test and the final grade is larger for this group than for the overall class, which she sees as an encouraging indicator.

That tracks with the nudging literature, said Page, the researcher who tests behavioral interventions. She pointed me toward one study [8] in which a group of researchers conducted a randomized control trial where the treatment group got similar messages from an instructor and earned higher grades in the course than the control group.

Cohen is also probably right to think that the nonjudgmental tone of her email made a difference, Page added. Other research has pointed to the importance of the language used in these efforts.

In one study [9] being prepared for submission to a journal, researchers tested a revised version of a university’s letter informing students they were being put on academic probation. Students who got the new version, which made an effort to destigmatize probation and clarify its impermanence, reported feeling less shame and more determination than those who got the old version. They also went to see their advisers at higher rates, and a higher proportion of them were no longer on probation the following year.

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