

THE PARADOX OF CHOICE AND COLLEGE SUCCESS

By Barry Schwartz

There is a set of assumptions that most Americans make that is so deeply ingrained in us that we aren't aware of them. Freedom is good, we believe, the more the better. But we can't have freedom without choice. The more choice we have, the more freedom we have. And since the more freedom we have, the better off we are, the more choice we have, the better off we are.

These assumptions make good logical sense. But research over the last 15 years or so has demonstrated that they aren't true. Though choice is good, there can be too much of a good thing. And when there is, it leads to paralysis, to bad decisions, to a loss of self-control, and to dissatisfaction with even good decisions. Though none of this research has been done specifically in connection with the academic experiences of college students, it is easy to see how current low college completion rates are exacerbated by the amount of freedom of choice that college students have.

There is no question that options for college students have exploded in recent years. Core requirements have diminished, the number of possible majors has increased, and the variety of paths through those majors has increased as well. What can we expect all this "liberation" to produce?

First, paralysis. When employees are offered many options for 401(k) investment, they are less likely to sign up (and get matching money from their employer) than when there are only a few. And when students are offered many topics for an extra-credit essay, they are less likely to write one than when they are offered only a few.

Second, bad decisions. Senior citizens choosing Medicare Part D prescription drug plans are more likely to make sub-optimal choices when there are many plans to choose from than when there are only a few. And those college students writing extra-credit essays write worse essays when they have many topics to choose from than when they have only a few.

Third, a loss of self-control. People who make a series of merely hypothetical choices regarding trivial things (e.g., a red decorative candle versus a green one, or a hoodie sweatshirt versus a crew neck) give up more quickly on a challenging subsequent problem than do people who have merely rated the attractiveness of the same set of trivial items rather than choosing among them.

Finally, large choice sets reduce satisfaction, with even good decisions. When the choice set is large, people regret the choices they make, pine over missed opportunities offered by rejected alternatives, develop such high expectations about how good the chosen option will be that the actual results simply can't live up to those expectations, and then blame themselves when the choice turns out to disappoint.

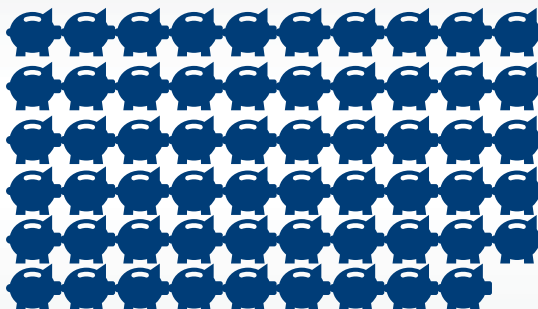
OVERWHELMED BY CHOICE

2 401(k) Plans Offered



75%
Participation

59 401(k) Plans Offered



60%
Participation

So now imagine an 18-year-old faced with an enormous cafeteria of possibilities in the college curriculum. Paralysis. Bad decisions. Loss of self-control (self-discipline). Dissatisfaction with the results of past decisions.

Freedom and choice are surely good, but there can be too much of a good thing. The last thing we want to do if our aim is to increase college completion rates is to offer students a set of possibilities that will paralyze them, weaken their self-discipline, and undermine the satisfaction they get from the work they have already done. Smart institutions aiming to increase completion will offer students choice, to be sure. But the choice will be within well-defined limits, or constraints, so that the path to success is clearly marked. Paradoxically, the more opportunities we give students to do exactly what they want, the less likely they are to do anything at all.

Smart institutions aiming to increase completion will offer students choice, to be sure. But the choice will be within well-defined limits, or constraints, so that the path to success is clearly marked.

Dr. Barry Schwartz is the author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, a book in which he discusses the “culture of abundance” and its negative impact on consumer satisfaction. In addition to being an accomplished researcher and sought-after presenter, Schwartz is the Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.