

# Tripping at the Finish Line: Experimental Evidence on the Role of Misperceptions on Secondary School Completion

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## Abstract

Even in contexts where access to education is not the main barrier for educational achievement, completion rates can be low. In Argentina, more than 90 percent of teenagers are enrolled in upper secondary school, but only 50 percent graduate on time. I conducted a field experiment in Salta, Argentina, to test if lack of information about how inputs translate into outputs may prevent students who attend classes until the last day of high school from getting their diploma. To measure the relative importance of this treatment, I conducted a returns-to-education information intervention in a separate treatment arm. Providing information about the probability of graduation conditional on current standing and discussing intermediate steps to translate effort during the senior year of high school into graduation raises timely high school graduation by 5 percentage points, a 10 percent increase relative to the control group. Poor-performing students at baseline respond most to the treatment. The returns-to-education arm increases graduation rates by 10 percentage points. Both treatments increase the probability of university enrollment by 5 percentage points, or more than 30 percent relative to the control group). Together, these findings indicate that inaccurate beliefs about own future performance explain a significant share of the “graduation gap”.

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# 1 Introduction

Education is a key lever for both economic growth and intergenerational mobility in low-income, middle-income, and high-income countries (Krueger and Lindahl (2001), Chetty et al. (2014), Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018)). Even as barriers to education are have decreased over time in low and middle-income countries, a large educational achievement gap persists between children in these and higher-income countries (Glewwe and Muralidharan, 2016). In Argentina, for example, most teenagers who by law should be attending high school are enrolled in school (92.4 percent), but only 50 percent of the students who reach their senior year, and who attend until the last day of classes, ultimately receive their diploma on time. Potential reasons for this gap include lack of information or cognitive bias, which leads students to exert levels of effort which, unbeknownst to them, are insufficient to complete their degree. Such information gaps or cognitive biases are likely most salient for low-income households and households who do not have exposure to mentors or successful graduates who are able to provide accurate information. A key question for both policy and global welfare is therefore how to induce greater levels of education in these contexts.

Previous literature has found that incentivizing academic achievement (outcomes) often has no effect on performance (see Ganimian and Murnane (2016) for a meta-analysis), but incentives can improve educational performance when specific tasks (inputs) are targeted. Fryer (2016) and Fryer (2011) suggest that a potential explanation for students' failure to transform effort into academic achievement could be a lack of adequate knowledge about the education production function. In this paper, I study this channel.

I conduct a randomized controlled trial in 61 high schools in the city of Salta, Argentina, to understand whether providing information on *how* inputs translate into outputs can improve the high school graduation rate. Many of the students in this area are at risk of this failure to convert enrollment and attendance to graduation and, in this setting, a consequence of not getting a high school diploma is drastically lowered chances of obtaining a high-quality job.<sup>1</sup> I estimate the impact of two interventions on the likelihood of graduation for students currently enrolled as high school seniors. The first intervention provides information on how to get a high school diploma—that is, on the intermediate steps needed to effectively transform effort into educational achievement. The second intervention is a stan-

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<sup>1</sup>At the onset of this project, I conducted qualitative interviews with the main agencies in Salta hired to recruit employees for medium and large firms located in the city. Recruiters stated that even for jobs that require minimum skills, such as cashiers and shelf stockers, employers require completion of secondary school. Employers are also starting to ask for young people attending any level of education beyond high school to compensate for their lack of experience and as a “signal of responsibility and commitment,” see (Spence, 1973).

dard provision of an estimate of the economic returns to education —used as a comparator, and providing a new test, given the mixed evidence of its efficacy in existing studies (Jensen (2010) and Nguyen (2008) show positive, Bonilla-Mejía et al. (2019) null, and Loyalka et al. (2013) negative effects).

My study has three arms: *Production function*, *Returns to education*, and *Control*. Both information treatments were introduced through a brief presentation in a single visit to each school and reinforced with reminder messages. In the *Production function* arm, the presentation contained information about the intermediate steps to improve academic standing and on-time graduation, and I included statistics on the previous cohort’s graduation rates based on their academic standing at the beginning of their senior year. This piece of information was meant to generate a mapping between each student’s academic standing (known by the student at the time of the intervention) and their chances of graduation. In the *Returns to education* arm, students were shown information containing employment levels and wages by levels of education, using the same format as in the other treatment arm. In the *Control* group no information was provided. I combine a baseline survey, hard copies of individual academic records collected from each school, and administrative data of each school to analyze the impacts of these interventions. The participants included almost 1800 senior students attending public high schools.

I find that both treatments have a positive and significant effect on graduation rates. Specifically, the *Returns to education* treatment increases the probability of graduation by 10 percentage points (almost 20 percent with respect to the control group), and the *Production function* treatment increases graduation by 5 percentage points (10 percent). That is, the new information treatment introduced in this paper has 50 percent effect of a known information intervention. Compared to Jensen (2010), the effect of *Returns to education* is two times the one from that study, while the effect of *Production function* is similar in magnitude. The students with the greatest increase in the probability of graduation in both treatment arms are those with the worst academic standing at the beginning of their senior year. In addition, an increase in observable effort can be observed among those students (measured as the probability of attendance to retake exams and the probability of passing those exams).

Empirical evidence shows that individuals tend to overestimate the probability of important outcomes (see for example Feld et al. (2017), Heger and Papageorge (2018), Machado et al. (2018)), leading to suboptimal decisions, especially for unskilled individuals (Choi et al., 2014). To test this channel as a potential explanation for the low graduation rates, in the baseline survey, I asked students for their perceptions of the likelihood that they will graduate. I compare that subjective measure with the estimated probability of graduation

based on observable characteristics of the students (as an objective measure) to create an indicator of confidence. In the *Control group*, students with a high level of confidence tend to be among those with the worst performance. After the presentation of the interventions, I again asked the students about their chances of graduation. I find that students' self-reported estimations of graduation are more accurate after receiving information about graduation probability in the *Production function* treatment arm. Importantly, higher effects are found for overconfident students when they receive the *Returns to education* treatment arm. These results indicate that a single but targeted intervention for different types of students could help in other settings to facilitate dismantling a detrimental cognitive bias (overconfidence).

This paper contributes to the existing literature on how information can affect educational choices. The literature includes explorations of the provision of information on economic returns to education in contexts with low attendance rates (mainly due to economic constraints), with results showing an increase in school achievement (Jensen (2010); Loyalka et al. (2013)). The literature also finds that providing information about relatively higher wages for unskilled labor may dissuade students from going to high school (Loyalka et al., 2013) or may not have an impact on college enrollment (Bonilla-Mejía et al., 2019). In addition, the economics literature on low school achievement has focused mainly on economic constraints such as tuition and other fees, clothes, books, and so forth. Although interventions that reduce those costs do increase attendance, they do not necessarily increase achievement (Ganimian and Murnane, 2016). Furthermore, interventions with non-monetary incentives also fail to increase educational achievement (Fryer, 2016).

In addition, I contribute to the literature that wants to understand why people do not use services, infrastructure, or adopt new technologies that can improve their wellbeing when they become available to them. This concern, known as “the last mile problem” (although the term has roots in other fields, Soman (2015)), is present in all contexts and may have long-lasting consequences on people’s life (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013): individuals forget to submit their taxes on time, low-income students do not use financial aid programs to attend college (Bettinger et al., 2009), farmers do not adopt fertilizer (Duflo et al., 2011), etc.. Consequences of these not optimal decisions are more detrimental in the context of no family or other forms of social support (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013) and may trip up those without such resources on their way out of poverty. I show that uncertainties about how to apply effort to achieve a desired outcome play a substantial role in students attending their last year of high school.

My main contribution is to provide evidence of how small but powerful pieces of information, provided on time, can improve students’ decisions in a high-stakes setting. While previous papers mostly focus on providing information about economic returns to education

or on monetary or non-monetary incentives to motivate students to invest more effort in education, I study students' lack of knowledge of the educational production function. My experiment aimed to provide information to students about *how* to transform inputs into outputs (graduation in this paper).

Also, I study whether students ignore or discount new information on finishing high school because of biased beliefs about the information they already have (DellaVigna, 2009). People tend to overestimate their own abilities, in particular, overconfidence in an educational context may lead students to study less (Nowell and Alston, 2007). I show how this biased belief in their own performance is detrimental to students' chances of graduation, and I demonstrate that those negative consequences can be ameliorated by providing accurate information about the high school diploma.

This paper is relevant for informing policy strategies to increase the demand for high school diplomas among teenagers, especially those who are disadvantaged and at risk of failing to complete high school on time.<sup>2</sup> I study a vulnerable population in a high-stakes setting, with a high probability of not getting the high school diploma and as a consequence with high chances of being classified as not in education, employment, or training (NEET), which represent an increasing concern in Latin America. Although access to the educational system is not restricted in many settings, youths' lack of information can cause them to invest less than the optimum level of effort in education, which in the medium run will limit their economic opportunities (no access to post-secondary education and lack of opportunities in a job market that uses possession of a high school diploma as a signal).

The remainder of this paper is divided as follows. In Section 2 I briefly describe the context in which I carried out this randomized controlled trial. In Section 3 I discuss the theoretical framework and predictions for graduation and mechanisms. Section 4 describes the experimental design, randomization, and details of the information interventions of this paper, section 5 shows the main results, along with their underlying mechanisms. Section 6 presents the main conclusions.

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<sup>2</sup>Discussions are currently occurring in many countries and international organizations such as UNICEF (Annual Report 2020 <https://www.unicef.org/reports/unicef-annual-report-2020>) on how to recover from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related closure of schools and the impacts on student achievement. Low high school diploma achievement was already a concern before the pandemic in Argentina. UNICEF has reported low school achievement (UNICEF-ARGENTINA, 2017), a referent from the private sector highlighted difficulties in hiring young people with a high school diploma (Diario La Nación, August 6 2021), and civil associations, along with the current National Director of High School level, have expressed concerns related to low completion rates (Diario La Nación, August 7 2021).

## 2 Context

In Argentina, education is compulsory up to the end of secondary school and secondary education is accessible for most students: there are free public schools in every district and transportation is sometimes free for students. As a result, the share of youths of secondary school age who are attending secondary school is 91.2 percent, with 74.7 percent attending public schools (CEDLAS and World-Bank, 2018). However, high school graduation rates remain low throughout the country. Less than half of the teenagers enrolled in high school actually graduate (UNICEF-ARGENTINA, 2017). Students drop out at different points during high school, but even those who complete the senior year (and attend until the last day of classes) may not obtain a high school diploma because they fail to fulfil all the mandatory requirements of the system. This is explained in the following subsection.

### 2.1 Educational System and Students' Academic Standing

Students may not graduate because they drop out at different points during high school, mainly owing to “the need to assume adult roles, such as working outside or inside the home, caring for younger or older family members, or taking care of other domestic chores; not being able to deal with school institutional guidelines”.<sup>3</sup> But another important explanation, which has attracted less research attention and is not even mentioned by the Director of Secondary Education at the national level, is that *students who attend until the last day of high school may still not obtain a high school diploma*. This topic has remained unexplored basically because there are no digitized data at the individual level that allow making conclusions about the magnitude of this issue.

To graduate from high school, students must pass a fixed number of subjects per year (10-12 per year).<sup>4</sup> The academic year begins in March and classes finish by December, but the year officially ends in February because in December and February there are examination dates for students to pass subjects they failed during the year to remedy their academic standing (which means to have a final score higher than 5—in a scale from 1 to 10—in each subject). If the student did not remedy their standing in all the subjects by the beginning of the next academic year, still they can be promoted (move to the next year) with at most two failed subjects—with a grade lower than 6 (if a student has three or more failed subjects,

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/preocupacion-por-que-la-mitad-de-los-alumnos-no-\\ termina-el-secundario-en-el-tiempo Esperado-nid07082021/](https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/preocupacion-por-que-la-mitad-de-los-alumnos-no-termina-el-secundario-en-el-tiempo Esperado-nid07082021/)

<sup>4</sup>There are no national or provincial exams to determine minimum levels of proficiency or to enroll to post public secondary education. According to a national law <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/normativa/nacional/ley-24521-25394/actualizacion> “All persons who pass secondary education can freely and unrestrictedly enter at the higher education level” to guarantee equal opportunities and conditions in access.

they must repeat the year). Those failed subjects must be passed at some point during the next years of high school to receive the diploma; I am going to call them *pending subjects*. All high schools have three examination dates on which to pass pending subjects each year (July, December, and February). Throughout high school, students can have at most two accumulated pending subjects (for example, they can have one from the second year and another from the third year).

Each student is fully aware of the number of pending subjects they have.<sup>5</sup> I use this concept throughout this paper to define students' type at the beginning of senior year: in good standing (zero pending subjects) or in bad standing (one or two pending subjects). During phone interviews, school administrators said that the main issue related to low graduation rates is the pending subjects; the administrators report that students either do not pass them or simply do not attend the examinations.

## 2.2 Educational Situation in Salta

The intervention was carried out in the city of Salta, the capital of the Argentinian province bearing the same name. In this setting, education and transportation are free for all students enrolled in all levels of formal schooling. In 2018, the province of Salta had the eighth-largest sub-national secondary school system in Argentina (among 24 provinces), but it was one of the country's worst-performing school systems (Ganimian, 2020): in 2017, only 28.7 percent of students in their senior year of high school had a "satisfactory" level in math.

According to self-reported data from an anonymous national survey of students collected at the end of the 2017 academic year (Aprender, 2017), almost 40 percent of senior students were in bad standing (had at least one pending subject) and had not remedied their status by the end of the academic year. This finding indicates that the chances of timely graduation for that cohort were low, and at the same time it reveals how common it is for students to have pending subjects at the beginning of the academic year.

At the onset of this study, qualitative field work was conducted to understand why students who had already invested at least 5 years of their lives attending high school were failing to obtain a diploma in the last year. Principals, other school authorities, and teachers were in accord in reporting that students do not make enough effort to pass pending subjects

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<sup>5</sup>In the grade reports that students receive by the end of the academic year, failed subjects are highlighted and pending subjects from previous years have a dedicated space. During the academic year, these reports are sent (via students) to the parents/guardians to be signed every quarter. Although forged signatures are possible, parents are aware of the dates on which they should receive a report. To verify parents'/guardians' knowledge of their high school senior students' academic status, interviews were conducted prior to the design of the intervention. The adults reported that they were fully aware of their children's academic status and pushed them to improve their situation, but "they are not able to enforce rules."

and they do not attend the examination periods to remedy their standing, and these issues get worse during the senior year.<sup>6</sup> Students in bad standing stated that they did not use the pass dates because they had other “important” matters but they would use the next one “for sure,” pass the exam, and receive the diploma on time (by the end of the senior academic year). Their confidence in being able to complete this process suggests cognitive dissonance regarding what they believe about their actions and effective effort to obtain the diploma. I use this insight in the next section to develop a theoretical framework that relates beliefs to effort.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

Previous literature in economics and psychology indicates that performance in education is inversely correlated with overconfidence. Those with better performance “know more about what they do not know” (Banks et al. (2019), Machado et al. (2018)). This indicates that unskilled students are more confident than the skilled ones. But what happens if they learn the true probabilities about the fact that they are confident about?

In terms of this paper, the question is how will students’ beliefs and therefore their behavior change if they are informed about their true probabilities of graduation? Ex ante the answer is not obvious. Some students will realize that there are things they do not know and will respond with more effort, while others could learn that they are too far away from the goal and will become discouraged. Still others may become motivated to achieve the goal, and others may obtain confirmation of what they already believe and will not change their effort. I formalize these insights in a model that relates effort with probability of graduation and beliefs. I show how the provision of information affects beliefs, but depending on students’ types and under certain conditions, the change could lead to no response or to an increase or decrease of effort that consequently affects the probability of graduation.

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<sup>6</sup>The last year of secondary education is a expected year for the students owing to several institutional and non-institutional activities, with students beginning to make arrangements in 11th grade. Some of these activities are the *Ultimo Primer Dia* (last first day of classes in the secondary level), *presentación de la promo* (every year students belonging to one class pick colors and a name that represent them in a way, they design and buy a t-shirt and hoodie personalized for each student, they introduce them to all the school by using music and a performance, and they invite their relatives to the school), commencement ceremony (regardless of whether they obtain a diploma, all senior students participate in a ceremony organized by the school where non-official diplomas are delivered to each student to celebrate their presence in the school after at least 5 years), *prom night* (a dinner organized and hosted by students, with the participation of school authorities, teachers, and students’ relatives), and other private events hosted by students after December.

### 3.1 A Model of Effort and Probability of Graduation

A student in the senior year faces the following maximization problem to find the optimal effort and receive the high school diploma:

$$\max_e \quad g(\beta e + \alpha)V - \delta e$$

The benefits are defined by the probability of graduation times the return to the diploma  $V$ . The probability of graduation is the translation of effort  $e$  into graduation. I assume that  $g(.)$  is a concave function, and effort follows a linear transformation  $g(\beta e + \alpha)$  where  $\beta$  indicates the rate of change of  $e$  and  $\alpha$  is a constant term. Both coefficients are added to introduce variation in the probability of graduation depending on students' types. The cost is a linear function of effort:  $\delta e$ .

The necessary and sufficient first-order condition that characterizes the optimal effort (assuming an interior solution) is given by:

$$g'(\beta e^* + \alpha)V = \delta$$

Note that there is certainty about the return to effort and education, so there is no room to change students' beliefs. In the next subsection, I expand this framework to allow for the possibility of misperceptions.

### 3.2 A Model of Effort and Probability of Graduation with Uncertainty about Returns to Effort or to Education

The low graduation rate at the end of the academic year may reflects the lack of knowledge of students on several dimensions. The misinformation could be about effort needed to pass subjects of senior year, or the amount of effective effort needed to pass *pending subjects*, or the misinformation could be about economic returns to education. Now, beliefs will play a crucial role in graduation. I will assume there are two states of the world and the students have a perceived probability ( $\hat{p}$ ) in which state of the world they are in: (1) the student knows exactly what to do, (2) in the other one, there is noise about the return to effort on pending exams. In addition, they have a perceived return to education  $\hat{V}$ .

I assume student's uncertainty is about the return to effort on pending exams, so I will incorporate the pending exams notion in a structural way. First, to get the diploma, the student must exert an amount of effort that indicates that she will pass all subjects,  $e$ . Formally, I assume there are two types of effort: (1) to pass each senior subject  $e_s$  and (2) to pass each pending subject  $e_p$ . The student has perfect information about her own standing

at the time of the intervention (how many pending subjects she has) and I will consider the number of senior subjects as a numeraire and  $n - 1$  as the number of pending exams (with  $n = 1$  the student has zero pending subjects). Then, to obtain the diploma, the total effort is:

$$e = e_s + e_p(n - 1)$$

I assume that studying for senior subjects does not make it easier to pass pending subjects. This implies that the effort by the type of subject (senior or pending), is complementary and subject-specific (effort has the same returns by subjects). This indicates that the probability of graduation follows a Leontief function:

$$g = \min\{g(\beta e_s + \alpha), g(\beta(1 + \nu_1)e_p + (\nu_2 + \alpha)\}$$

Notice that in the case of effort to pass the pending subjects, I add noise to the effective transformation of effort into graduation and in the constant term,  $\nu_1$  and  $\nu_2$ , respectively, with  $\nu_1 > 0$  and  $\nu_2 < 0$ . Now, to find how the student should assign her effort, I use the following equation:

$$\beta e_s + \alpha = \beta(1 + \nu_1)e_p + \nu_2 + \alpha$$

and the total effort needed to get the diploma to find the values of  $e_s$  and  $e_p$ :<sup>7</sup>

$$e_s = \frac{\beta e \nu_1 + \beta e + n \nu_2 - \nu_2}{\beta(n + \nu_1)}; \quad e_p = \frac{\beta e - \nu_2}{\beta(n + \nu_1)}$$

As a result, optimally, total effort should be allocated to equate effort across all senior and pending subjects to ensure the minimum passing grades (in each subject) to get the diploma. Now, I can define the two states of the world: (1) in the good one, students are certain about the returns to effort ( $\nu_1$  and  $\nu_2$  are equal to zero) and (2) a bad one, the return to effort is affected by noise:

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<sup>7</sup>To obtain these results:

$$\begin{aligned} \beta e_s(n - 1) &= [\beta(1 + \nu_1)e_p + \nu_2](n - 1) \\ \beta e_1 n &= \beta e_s + \beta(1 + \nu_1)e_p(n - 1) + \nu_2(n - 1) \\ \beta e_s \nu_1 + \beta e_s n &= \beta(1 + \nu_1)\bar{e} + \nu_2(n - 1) \end{aligned}$$

and,

$$\begin{aligned} \beta e_s - \nu_2 &= \beta e_p(1 + \nu_1) \\ \beta e_s + \beta e_p(n - 1) - \nu_2 &= \beta e_p(n + \nu_1) \end{aligned}$$

$$g_1 = g \left( \frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha \right)$$

and

$$g_2 = g \left( \frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + \nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha \right)$$

Given that the misinformation could be about the translation of effort into graduation, I consider both states of the world and  $\hat{p}$  the probability assessed by the student of what state of the world she is in, so the expected probability of graduation is given by:

$$E(\tilde{g}) = \left[ \hat{p}g \left( \frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha \right) + (1 - \hat{p})g \left( \frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha \right) \right]$$

Finally, considering that the returns to education are also perceived, I have the following maximization problem:

$$\max_e E(\tilde{g}) \hat{V} - \delta e$$

Given the assumptions about the functional forms, this problem has a unique solution given by  $e^* = e(\hat{p}, \hat{V})$ . To obtain the main predictions of this model, I apply the implicit theorem function to the first-order condition, but I first formalize the concept of under/overconfidence in this framework:

**Definition 1** Let  $p$  be the actual probability of the world in which the student is. The student is overconfident if and only if her subjective probability of graduation is higher than her objective probability. This is,

$$\hat{p}g_1(e^*(\hat{p}, \hat{V})) + (1 - \hat{p})g_2(e^*(\hat{p}, \hat{V})) > pg_1(e^*(\hat{p}, \hat{V})) + (1 - p)g_2(e^*(\hat{p}, \hat{V}))$$

**Remark 1.1** With

$$g_1(e^*(\hat{p}, \hat{V})) > g_2(e^*(\hat{p}, \hat{V}))$$

and  $\hat{p} > p$ , the student is overconfident.

## Role of the Treatment Arms

I consider the effect of two separate treatments. The first arm consists of a shock to the beliefs about what state of the world the students are in. The second one consists of a change in the perceived returns to graduation. I organize the results in two propositions.

**Proposition 1** (*Production Function*) The partial effect of changes in the assessed probability of the world is ambiguous, and depends on whether the student is over- or underconfident.

Formally,

$$\frac{de^*}{d\hat{p}} \leq 0$$

**Proof.** See Appendix B.C for a full derivation. ■

The result of this derivative is *undetermined*, and it depends on the curvature of the  $g(\cdot)$  function and the values of its parameters. This formalizes the fact that without further information about students, the direction of the change in behavior (how much effort they are going to exert) is not obvious. Some students will realize that they are in a better state of the world and will respond with more effort, others will confirm that they are in the state of the world they believe in, so no response in effort is expected, while others could learn that they are in the bad state and might become discouraged while others in the same position may become motivated and increase effort.

**Proposition 2** (*Returns to Education*) *Optimal effort is increasing in the perceived returns:*

$$\frac{de^*}{d\hat{V}} > 0$$

**Proof.** See Appendix B.C for a full derivation. ■

This result does not depend on the type of student, and it will be the same regardless of a student being under- or overconfident. An increase in perceived returns to education should lead to an increase in effort.

### 3.3 Predictions from a Parameterized Model

To illustrate the potential predictions of this model, I use a particular functional form that fulfills the assumptions made so far:

$$g(x) = x - \omega x^2$$

and the hand-picked values are specified in the footnote of Figure 1. The idea of this example is to show that under certain conditions, both under- and overconfident students can *increase* their effort when they update their beliefs in the right direction: the underconfident students learn that is more likely that they are in the good state and the overconfident that they are in the bad state.

The *Production function* arm can change perceptions of the state of the world ( $\hat{p}$ ) of students by making them map their academic standing with the average graduation for that standing and the effort that it implies to achieve the diploma. Given that effort depends on the number of pending subjects the students have, the result will vary based on their

baseline situation. The *Returns to education* is not expected to change beliefs about the perceptions of own ability, but to incentivize effort subject to how students react to the true values of earnings and employment.

Notice that the number of pending subjects at the beginning of the senior year is endogenous, meaning that students have some knowledge about the cost of effort they have to expend to pass subjects. I assume that the perceived cost of effort is negatively correlated with the academic standing of students (which could be correlated with ability (Spence, 1973)). Importantly, I assume that *Production function* only modifies the perception of  $\hat{p}$ , and *Returns to education* only modifies the perception of  $V$ .

### 3.3.1 Effects of the Production Function Treatment

**Prediction 1** *Students with zero pending subjects are not likely to update their beliefs. The difference between states will be null, and as a consequence, their effort under the Production function treatment will remain the same as before.*

For this subset of students (in good academic standing at the beginning of the senior year), the main content of the intervention is not useful given that remedying the academic standing of students with pending subjects is given higher weight. Figure 1, Panel A, shows that there are no differences between the states of the world .

**Prediction 2** *Students with pending subjects are more likely to update their beliefs under the Production function treatment.*

The treatment is more likely to affect the effort of these students given that their beliefs about the probability of graduation could change with the information provided. The question then becomes how they will adjust the weight in each potential state of the world Under different cost structures, different results can be observed, and they also depend on the parameters of  $g(\cdot)$ . An explanation is presented in Figure 1 Panel B, which shows that the difference in marginal benefits will be greater according to the parameters in a good or bad state of the world. First, notice that the dashed gray line (expected self-perception of graduation) will move according to the perceived values of  $\hat{p}$  and the updates after the intervention. Second, to explain the predictions I consider the extreme cases of  $\hat{p}$ —an overconfident student ( $\hat{p} = 1$ ) and an underconfident student ( $\hat{p} = 0$ )—before my intervention.

- **Prediction 3** *Underconfident students will increase their effort after receiving the Production function treatment.*

According to my definition of confidence, the probability of graduation for an underconfident student is higher than their perception. This student thinks they are in a

bad state, when in fact they are in a good one. In the graph, the marginal benefit of graduation for this type of student is on the black line, after the intersection of curves with a lower marginal cost. At baseline their equilibrium is at  $e_{lc}^{u*}$ , where  $lc$  indicates that they perceive lower costs, and  $u^*$  indicates the baseline equilibrium. With the intervention, they learn that they have a better standing (their  $\hat{p}$  will increase), meaning that their effort will increase too, as can be observed in the graph. Notice that the level of increase depends on the magnitude they update  $\hat{p}$ .

- **Prediction 4** *Overconfident students will increase their effort after receiving the Production Function treatment.*

According to my formal definition of confidence, overconfident students think that  $\hat{p} = 1$  (they perceive they are in the good state of the world). Following the previous explanation, and for this particular case, this type of student thinks they are on the left hand side of the gray line (before the intersection of states). Notice these students have a high cost of effort, so the initial equilibrium is  $e_{hc}^{o*}$ , where  $hc$  indicates higher costs and  $o^*$  indicates the baseline equilibrium for an overconfident student. After the provision of information, students learn that  $\hat{p} < 1$ . If they update correctly, the equilibrium will move to the right, meaning that their effort will increase under this scenario *too*.

### 3.3.2 Effects of the Returns to Education Treatment

**Prediction 5** *An increase in perceived returns to education should increase effort and, as a consequence, graduation.*

Under this treatment, previous literature Jensen (2010) and Nguyen (2008) indicates that students with low perceived returns to education should update educational achievement (in this case, graduation) in the correct direction (up).

**Prediction 6** *A decrease in perceived returns to education should decrease effort and, as a consequence, graduation.*

Following the previous reasoning, those students who perceived high returns to education at baseline should decrease their effort.

### 3.3.3 Mechanisms

The chain of causality in my model is explained as follows. First, students receive one of the two pieces of information, and then, depending on the information received, there are two different mechanisms that explain a change in graduation due to a change in effort:

- *Production function*: Students update their beliefs about the right state of the world they are in, and they correct the level of effort to obtain a high school diploma.
- *Returns to education*: Students receive truthful information and update their priors on perceived returns to education, which motivates students to achieve a diploma.

In the next section, I show the experimental design I use to estimate the effect of two different pieces of information on high school graduation.

## 4 Experimental Design

To answer my research questions, I conducted an RCT in Salta, Argentina, from August 2019 to November 2019. The details of the population and the design of the experiment are discussed below.

To characterize my sample, I show some statistics for the control group in Table 1. Only 50 percent of the students in their senior year finish high school in a timely manner. They overestimate their probabilities of graduation in the baseline survey and in the endline question. On average, students had 0.9 pending subjects at the beginning of the year and they do not tend to improve this situation; by the end of the academic year the average remains high (0.8 pending subjects). The percentage of students with at least one pending subject is 55.27 percent and the average number of pending subjects for those students is 1.6.

### 4.1 Ethical considerations

This research project required IRB approval. Given that some minors (according to the Argentinian law, individuals aged less than 18 years old) are included in the sample, consent from parents and students was sought following the instructions of the IRB office at Brown University, the school principals, and authorities from the Ministry of Education of Salta. In addition, material prepared for students was approved by the Ministry of Education (contents for the online platform, survey instrument, and presentations) without their being informed in advance which information treatment arm to which a school would be randomly assigned.

### 4.2 Sample

The eligible population for this study is students attending their senior year at public high schools in Salta.<sup>8</sup> While some schools can have more than one shift, I only considered

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<sup>8</sup>From hereon, Salta refers to the capital city and not the province.

the morning and afternoon shift due to logistic/budget constraints. Power calculations were conducted using information from the academic year 2018. There were 2933 enrolled students in the senior year across 63 school-shifts. The unit of randomization is at the school-shift level given that randomization at the individual or class level would be more likely to contaminate the control group.

### 4.3 Timeline

At the beginning of this project, by mid-October 2018, initial contacts were made with authorities of the Ministry of Education of Salta, and the office in charge of supervising my intervention was the Directorate of Secondary Education. They have overseen all the stages of the intervention. In addition to having their approval, I needed the direct approval of each school’s principal and vice-principals, who were more aware of the specifics of each shift: school festivities, exams, and trips.<sup>9</sup>

This process finished in the first quarter of 2019 (see Figure 2). At the same time I requested from the directorate access to five “representative” schools to collect individual data about school performance and graduation. This administrative data were not available, so I followed their recommendation to collect data that was stored in secured rooms at each school building. The main intentions were to compute statistics at the individual level for use in the *Production function* treatment arm and to confirm that the graduation rate is in fact approximately 50 percent, in large part owing to the pending subjects issue (see more details in Appendix A).

In two out of those five schools, I tested the survey instruments on groups of 11th graders to assess time required and to change questions if necessary to facilitate students’ understanding. Several edits were made to the survey instruments at this point; revision was crucial because school principals allotted just one hour at each school to avoid disruptions to usual schedule. The day of the visit was coordinated with the vice principal at each school. The visits were conducted between August and November 2019, before the beginning of the final exams to pass subjects. During the visits I collected the baseline survey data and I conducted the interventions with the help of research assistants from the Department of Economics at Universidad Nacional de Salta. I planned to collect the school academic records by the end of February 2020, after the end of the formal academic year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Argentina by March 2020 and the national government imposed a strict lockdown that included the closure of schools. The government’s decision halted the data collection process until March 2021.

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<sup>9</sup>Each school has one principal and if the school has more than one shift there is a vice principal per each shift. From hereon, I use the term “school” to refer to “school-shift”.

A summary of the main milestones of the project follows below:

October 2018	<b>Negotiations started with the Ministry of Education.</b>
November/December 2019	<b>Qualitative analysis started:</b> To understand the reasons behind low graduation rates, I conducted semi-structured interviews with senior students and schools' authorities. This step was extremely important, given that the issue with the pending subjects and connections with the self-confidence of students was detected in this way.
January 2019	<b>Approval was obtained and IRB procedure started</b>
March/June 2019	<b>Meetings with schools principals</b>
August/November 2019	<b>Launch of the information interventions and collection of the baseline survey</b>
February 2020 to March 2021	<b>Data collection of main outcomes:</b> Academic information at the individual level is not digitized and contains relevant information such as graduation. The process was interrupted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the entire process to analyze results was delayed. In the meantime, I started negotiations with the main post-secondary institutions in Salta to obtain information about university enrollments.

## 4.4 Data

### Baseline Survey

To get access to schools to collect baseline questionnaire data and to implement the interventions, the research team visited all schools in the sample to demonstrate how to access a free online platform with math content (designed by professors at Universidad Nacional de Salta - UNSa). This aspect of the intervention serves as a “placebo” for the schools in the control group. Before the presentation on the online platform, all students took a survey designed for this study.

A description of the baseline data collection process follows. At least 2 days before the

intervention date, the research team visited and delivered to school administrators envelopes containing consent forms for parents of students attending the senior year. At a date and time agreed with the school administrators, the team met with all students of the school in a room.<sup>10</sup> A description of the activities conducted during each visit day is shown in Figure 3.

At the meeting with students, the research team was introduced by school administrators. Then, tablets were given to students, a short presentation (containing slides with pictures) was shown to instruct students on their use, and the students were asked to fill out the questionnaire. At the same time, a brief explanation of the questionnaire was provided.<sup>11</sup> Afterward, the research team showed a presentation introducing the online platform. If applicable, the information treatments were then conducted. After the presentation, the research team asked students to answer an additional question about their perceptions of their own graduation. This question was intended to test for any changes in students' perceptions after hearing the information presented.

As mentioned in the previous section, visits to the school lasted at most one hour. During that time the baseline survey was collected, the platform was introduced, and the information interventions were presented (if applicable). Given that a single presentation, including statistics and unknown facts for the students, could not have been enough to change students effort, I sent SMS and/or email two weeks before each examination date (to pass pending subjects and failed subjects during the senior year) to briefly reinforce the treatment received.<sup>12</sup> As was shown in previous papers, reminders can help to boost information interventions (Damgaard and Nielsen, 2018).

## School Academic Records

I collected information about academic performance after the end of the 2019 academic year. The end was in February 2020 (during the February examination period). As shown in Figure 2, this process was heavily delayed by almost one calendar year because of the closure of schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those individual records contained data on performance during the entire school year and graduation, as well as information about the pending subjects (if any) and attendance on examination dates for pending and failed subjects during the senior year. An example of an individual record is in Figure C1, Appendix C.

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<sup>10</sup>No authority knew beforehand which treatment was randomly selected for each school.

<sup>11</sup>In schools where a high attendance of more than 80 students was expected, questionnaires were delivered in paper format.

<sup>12</sup>Cellphone numbers and email addresses were collected during the baseline survey. See the reminders in Appendix A.

## Administrative Records

I also collected information on university enrollment and formal employment. I obtained university enrollment information (for the next academic year of my treated cohort, 2020) from the main universities of Salta (Universidad Nacional de Salta and Universidad Católica de Salta, UCASAL) and formal employment information from SIPA (Sistema Integrado Previsional Argentino), which is an integrated database setup jointly by the social security administration, ANSES (Administración Nacional de Seguridad Social), and the national tax authority, AFIP (Administración Federal de Ingresos Públicos).

## 4.5 Experimental treatments

The treatment assignment was randomly determined at the school level stratifying by number of students and geographic area of Salta. All school visits included the presentation of a free online platform with math content (see Appendix B), and its use is not part of this analysis. Information interventions considered in this study are described below.

*Control:* No information treatment was provided.

*Production Function:* Using data from a subset of students of the previous cohort (2018), I computed the mean of a dummy variable that indicates the rate of on-time graduation (by December 2018, after the December examination period) by pending subjects and no pending subjects at the beginning of the senior year of that cohort. The overall on-time completion rate for this subsample was 50 percent. Having pending subjects is not necessarily the main cause of failure to obtain a diploma—students can fail to pass additional subjects in their senior year—but providing this information would highlight the role of pending subjects in getting a diploma and the importance of using examination periods. The provision of this information should highlight aspects of the production function of high school graduation that students do not fully know or understand, such as how much effort should be devoted to pass pending subjects and subjects from the senior year. A full description of the treatment is in Appendix A.

Suggestions about *how* to improve academic standing were provided to all students (because at the time of the visit the status of each student was unknown). All of these suggestions were *intermediate steps* to effectively transform inputs into outputs. The information provided included the following: request mock exams (*modelos de examen*) from teachers<sup>13</sup>, ask for study material from classmates or

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<sup>13</sup>These exams should be available for every subject and all years, as was requested by the Directorate of

students from younger cohorts (given that the teachers employed by the schools and the required academic material can change over time), talk with teachers in advance to ask them for studying recommendations, or ask which teachers will be a part of the committee in each subject.<sup>14</sup>

*Returns to Education:* Students might not be aware of the disadvantages of not finishing high school and the impacts on their labor market prospects. The provision of this information should incentivize students to obtain a diploma on time (in order to attend college or find a job in the formal sector). This piece of information is akin to Jensen (2010). In my case, I use data from the National Household Survey (second semester of 2018), restricting the sample to Salta and individuals aged 18-30 who are not currently attending any level of education and are employed. I computed Mincer equations considering, in addition to the maximum level of education achieved, age, gender, and marital status to compute average monthly wages and formal employment.

A description of the randomization and participation results are provided in Figure 4. Only one school principal with two shifts (out of 64 schools) refused to participate, even though I had the authorization from the Directorate of Secondary Education. After several conversations, the reasons were not disclosed and authorities of the Ministry of Education preferred not to force the school principal to participate. Another school was excluded from the analysis due to serious administrative complications in the implementation (following Karing (2021)).

Students' participation differed between the intervention treatment arms. A higher percentage of students, their parents, or both, decided not to participate in the *Production function* treatment. This selection into participation could have had detrimental impacts on the analysis of this treatment arm, but the protocol of the visits to the schools allowed me to discard selection in participation. No school authorities knew beforehand which treatment was assigned to their school. The research team itself only knew which treatment should be implemented 30 minutes before the arrival to each school.

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Secondary Education for all public high schools since 2018. Given that compliance of all the teachers could not be verified before the intervention, this information was included in the presentation, highlighting the fact that it was mandatory for teachers to prepare that material.

<sup>14</sup>Usually, the committee for each subject/year is formed by three to five teachers depending on the number of students enrolled for that particular exam period. Also, exams are mostly written exams to have proof of the performance of the student in case any dispute arises.

## 4.6 Measuring Students' Confidence in Graduation

To measure students' self-confidence about graduation, I use two sources of data: the baseline questionnaire and administrative data that provide information about the graduation of each student. I use a question that asks about the self-estimated probability of graduation as a *subjective measure* (see Figure C3, which was used in the questionnaire) and a set of observable characteristics of the students and their households to predict the probabilities of graduation, *objective measure*. For this last step, I first only consider observations in the control group and then extrapolate the predictions to the entire sample.

Given the graduation difference that I observe at baseline for students with zero pending subjects versus those with one or two pending subjects, I estimate different predictions for each group. I use a lasso approach to select the covariates in each regression and avoid searching. The candidate variables selected were individual and household characteristics: area of the city dummies; student age; student gender; if the student has children or is pregnant; average grades during the first two quarters of the senior year; if the student has a job or takes care of a family member; if the student repeated at least one year in secondary school; if their parent/guardian has some post high school education; if the student does not live in an overcrowded dwelling; if the household has a computer, a washing machine, air-conditioning, or heating; and pairwise interactions between all previously listed students' characteristics. Missing values were recoded to the sample mean and separately dummiied out. These missing dummies are also used to construct pairwise interactions. In addition, I added graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school level, along with strata fixed effects.

Figure 5 shows in Panel A the distribution of the estimated probabilities for students with zero pending subjects, and in Panel B the distribution of the difference with respect to the self-estimation of students' graduation. Figure 6 shows the same distributions for students with at least one pending subject. According to my definition of confidence, students with a positive difference are classified as underconfident (objective measure is higher than the subjective one) and those with a negative difference as overconfident.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Description of the Control Group and Balance Checks

Table 2 shows the general characteristics of the students included in my sample and verifies randomization balance by using the baseline survey and administrative records. The first column of the table displays means and standard deviations of baseline characteristics in

the control group (students who attended classes the day of the visit of the research team and gave consent for participation). Columns 2 and 3 present coefficients from the following regression specification:

$$y_{is} = \beta_0 + \beta_{PF} ProductionFunction_s + \beta_{RE} ReturnsEducation_s + \delta_s + \epsilon_{is} \quad (1)$$

where  $y_{is}$  is the outcome of interest for student  $i$  who attends school-shift  $s$ , the dummy variables  $ProductionFunction_s$  and  $ReturnsEducation_s$  indicate which information treatment school  $s$  received,  $\delta_s$  indicates the strata fixed effects (Bruhn and McKenzie, 2009), and  $\epsilon_{is}$  are robust standard errors clustered at the school level. To control for previous differences in graduation, I add graduation rates at the school level from the previous cohort (senior students in 2018). Each row shows results from a separate regression. Columns 4 and 5 show p-values of the tests if  $PF = RF$  and  $PF = RF = 0$ , given that the comparison of the two information treatments is of special interest.

Table 2 Panel A shows that the average number of students that participate in each school visit is almost 31 and there are no significant differences between treatment arms. Panel B shows students characteristics. On average they are 18 years old. Sixty percent of participants are female, and 6 percent have children (all students) or are pregnant (if female). At the time of the visit, 73 percent of the students had an email address and 86 percent reported having access to a cellphone. Eighty-seven percent of the students live with their mother and only 58 percent live with their father.

Panel C shows some household characteristics. Seventy-six percent of the students report having a computer (desktop or laptop), and 85 percent state that they have some internet access (via their household, cellphones, school, or public places). On average, students' households have 1.74 persons per room. Thirty-five percent of the students have at least one parent or guardian with at least some college. Forty-five percent of the students state that they are working—either for a family business or independently—and 20 percent state that they take care of a family member. There are no statistically significant differences in these measures between the two treatment arms.

Panel D includes information about past academic performance of the participants in high school (self-reported). Thirty-eight percent of the students state that they have repeated at least one year during high school, and 55 percent had at least one pending subject at the time of the visit.

Panel E shows the variables that indicate expectations. Ninety-five percent of the participants stated that they want to attend college the next academic year and also 84 percent are interested in looking for a job after the end of the school year. At the time of the school visit, students perceived that their chances of on-time graduation were 78 percent. None of

these variables exhibit statistically significant differences between treatment arms.

## 5.2 Empirical Strategy and Main Results

To estimate the effect of the information treatments, I use the following specification:

$$y_{is} = \beta_0 + \beta_{PF} ProductionFunction_s + \beta_{RE} ReturnsEducation_s + \delta_s + x'_{is}\omega + \eta_{is} \quad (2)$$

This equation is the same as equation (1) but is augmented to control for additional individual characteristics given by  $x'_{is}$ . To avoid specification searching covariates, they were selected using double lasso (Belloni et al., 2014). Also notice that  $y_{is}$  here represents the main outcome of interest: graduation. I interpret the results through the lens of the model depicted in Section 3.

Table 3, column 1, shows that graduation for all students who were selected to participate in either treatments arm increases and the effects are statistically significant: (1) students in the *Production function* treatment arm are 5 percentage points more likely to graduate (10 percent with respect to the control group) and (2) those in the *Returns to education* are 10 percentage points more likely to obtain a diploma (20 percent with respect to the control group). I find that the differences associated with these treatments are statistically significant.

The effect of *Returns to education* is twice that found in a subgroup of less poor students in Jensen (2010) (the author does not find an impact for poor students). A potential explanation for the higher impact in the current study could be related to the fact that the target population was students who were closer to receiving their high school diploma. Additionally, my setting had fewer economic barriers: enrollment and transportation to school are free. The *Production function* effects are the same in magnitude as in Jensen (2010) but they apply to the entire sample in my study. This outcome shows that the treatment—simply talking about the probabilities of graduation (conditional on academic standing) and intermediate steps to transform inputs into outputs—is effective in increasing educational achievement, by only using data available in schools.

According to my hypothesis, not all students will experience the same impact from the *Production function* treatment. In Table 3, columns 2 and 3 show the treatment effects by academic standing, with students separated according to whether they are in good standing (zero pending subjects) or in bad standing (at least one pending subject). As expected, I observe no significant effect on students in good standing and the magnitude is close to zero. This is *Prediction 1* in my model. A likely reason for this finding is that these students

already know how much effort they should devote to study to succeed. This is not the case for those students in bad standing. The information provided should help them to realize where to put the effort needed to obtain a diploma. For this subset of students, I observe an increase of 7 percentage points (more than 30 percent with respect to the control group). This is *Prediction 2* in my theoretical framework. With respect to the *Returns to education* arm, both groups are found to have positive and statistically.

### 5.3 Mechanisms for Production Function and Returns to Education

#### Perceptions on Graduation and Updating

To understand the drivers of these results, I tested the role of self-perception of graduation on actual graduation (Table 4) by using the answers to the questions about chances of graduation before and after the interventions. An important part of the *Production function* treatment was to make students aware of the correct shape of the production function of the high school diploma based on their academic standing at the beginning of the senior year. As previously mentioned, at the time of the intervention, the standing of the students was their private information and the goal was to allow students to create a *mapping* of their situation with regard to graduation rates of similar students from the previous year.<sup>15</sup>

The question about the self-perception of timely graduation was included in the baseline survey, conducted before the intervention treatments, and it was then repeated at the end of the visit. Under the theoretical framework shown above, perceptions of graduation should only change if students updated their beliefs about the level of effort needed to obtain their diploma. This is only possible if they receive information about the actual probabilities, the effort that is required, and all the intermediate steps needed to successfully transform effort into graduation. Table C1 shows that individuals who received the *Production function* treatment became more accurate with respect to their own chances of graduation: the variable decreases by 2 percentage points from the baseline response.<sup>16</sup> I observe that in the experimental outcome they become more accurate, but this result could not be transmitted into effective effort to remedy their standing. As expected by the design of the treatments, the most striking and significant differences are observed in the *Production function* arm.

I analyze graduation by academic standing and its relationship with my definition of con-

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<sup>15</sup>Students' academic records are not digitized, and it was not possible to target the information in a separate way. Instead, all the information was shown to all students.

<sup>16</sup>Notice that the students in the control became less accurate (more optimistic about their chances of graduation). A reasonable explanation for this result is that the visit to the school from a member of a university in the United States and members from Universidad Nacional de Salta (UNSa) could have per se generated an optimistic response among students, given that there is almost no formal connection between secondary and post-secondary levels.

fidence in Table 4. Although differences exist between the underconfident and overconfident students (in both treatment arms), the differences with the largest magnitude are observed in the *Production function* arm for students in bad standing. *Prediction 3* and *Prediction 4* of the theoretical framework, and under the particular case analyzed in Section 3, are verified. There are positive and statistically significant effects (at the 5 percent level) for both under- and overconfident students, with a difference of 20 percentage points (but nonsignificant) in favor of those underconfident students.

This outcome indicates that even though after the presentation of that treatment students classified as overconfident became statistically more accurate (Table C1), but that effect fades away until the end of the academic year.

## **Effort**

Table 5 measures the role of effort devoted to the study time of pending subjects. I analyze the effect of the information treatment on three variables that indicate direct measures of effort to pass pending subjects: (1) enrollment to examination period, (2) attendance to examination period, and (3) passed pending subjects before the end of the academic year (February 2020). The first variable indicates the degree of effort because according to high school rules, only students who explicitly register for the examination dates with a secretary are allowed to take the exam.<sup>17</sup> The second variable indicates if the students did in fact attend the examination, and the third variable is a dummy that indicates if the student passed at least one pending subject. I did not restrict the last two variables to enrollment or attendance, respectively.

Table 5 Panel A shows positive impacts of the information treatments on these outcomes. In particular, for those who received the *Returns to education* treatment, the effect is statistically significant at the 1 percent level for columns 2 and 3.

Panel B shows the effect of the information treatments according to confidence. As discussed above, underconfident students are those with a greater response to the treatment shown by exerting more effort; the difference in the *Production function* between the two types of students is more than 40 percentage points (significantly different at the 1 percent level). The *Returns to education* treatment arm also has differences in favor of the underconfident students, but they are lower; only in column 2 is the difference with respect to the overconfident students significant (at the 10 percent level).

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<sup>17</sup>This is formed by the committee of teachers who are going to be in charge of preparing the exam. If no student is enrolled, the committee is not formed.

## Perceptions of Labor Market Outcomes

In the baseline survey, I asked students to form a perception of expected earnings (employment and earnings, by level of education). They could have a positive misperception (meaning they overestimate the returns to education, relative to the true values) or a negative one (underestimation of returns to education). I was not able to collect the same information after the intervention (and check for updates in perceptions) because this section was very time consuming for the students and I had limited time to conduct the interventions.

According to previous findings (Jensen (2010), Nguyen (2008)), students who underestimate actual returns are those who are going to be positively affected by the returns to education treatment. I test this hypothesis by creating a variable of “expected returns” using the perceived earnings and probabilities of employment by level of education collected in the baseline survey. Then, considering the “actual” expected returns, I create two dummy variables: Misperception (+) when the student perceives that the expected return is higher than the actual return and Misperception (−) when the student perceives that the expected return is lower than the true value.

Table 6 shows the impact of these misperceptions at baseline on graduation, considering the returns to two levels of education: complete secondary and complete college. I focus here on the students who received the *Returns to education* treatment. Both those who misperceived expected earnings (for complete secondary and complete college) in a negative way and those whose misperceptions were positive at baseline have positive magnitudes, confirming *Prediction 5* but not *Prediction 6*. The magnitude of the effects is higher for students with a positive misperception, although the difference in coefficients is not statistically significant.

When I provide information about the true returns to education, students weight their prior beliefs with the new information, and they could subsequently decide which piece of information to assign a higher weight. Based on previous results in the literature, students with a negative misperception are expected to update their beliefs upward and graduation will increase. But the aggregated result depends on the percentage of students who assign a higher weight to their prior beliefs or to the new information, which may explain why I cannot verify *Prediction 6* in my results.

## Time Preferences

The *Returns to education* treatment implies a forward-looking behavior on the students’ side, given that they have to wait a considerable amount of time to see if the information provided actually improves their labor market outcomes.

Following this argument, I consider the role of time preferences on timely graduation. By using a set of questions in the baseline questionnaire following a standard Becker DeGroot Marschak procedure (see Bursztyn and Coffman (2012)), I computed the discount factor for each student. I then took the median and separated students based on whether they were above or below the median. Results are shown in Table 7. As expected, the effect in the *Returns to education* treatment arm is greater and also statistically significant for students above the median. Although the difference with respect to students under the median value is not statistically significant, it shows that this is a relevant individual characteristic to consider when providing information like this to teenagers.

It can also be observed that the magnitudes for both groups of students that received the *Production function* are lower, similar, and nonsignificant. This result is consistent with the information that was provided, that arm do not imply a forward looking behavior.

## 5.4 Heterogeneous Effects: Socioeconomic Status and Gender

In the baseline questionnaire, I did not include a question about family income due to the low response rate to that question in the pilot surveys. To generate a proxy for economic status, I use an index constructed by using variables indicating the ownership of air-conditioning, heating, a washing machine, a desktop or laptop, and whether the student's family lives in an overcrowded dwelling<sup>18</sup> and if at least one parent or guardian has some post-secondary education. If the index is less than or equal to 3, I classified the student as "poor" and "least poor" otherwise.<sup>19</sup>

Table 8 shows that in the control group, students classified as poor have a lower graduation rate at 45 percent, which is 14 percentage points lower than the least poor students. In column 1, I demonstrate that contrary to previous findings (Jensen, 2010), less poor students are positively affected by both treatments: students in the *Production function* treatment arm are 8 percentage points more likely to graduate than the control group, and those in the *Returns to education* treatment arm are 14 percentage points more likely to graduate than the control group. Both results are statistically significant at the 5 percent level, and the difference of the magnitudes is also statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

Table 8 also shows the impacts by gender. Columns 3 and 4 show that female students are more likely to graduate than male students in the control group. However, both information treatments have a positive impact on both genders, with higher impacts observed for male students. I observe positive results of both treatments for both genders, and the differences are not statistically significant.

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<sup>18</sup>This variable indicates that on average students live in a household with less than two people per room.

<sup>19</sup>For the control group, the median value of this variable is 3 and the mean is 3.12.

## 5.5 Other outcomes

One of the objectives of this paper was to analyze the effects of information treatments beyond secondary school. Given certain data limitations (explained below), I only consider whether the student is enrolled in a university in the academic year after my interventions were conducted (2020) or enters formal employment from the last quarter of 2020 to the first quarter of 2021.

### University enrollment

University enrollment indicates that a student wants to invest more in their human capital, so exploring the effects of my information treatments on enrollment is key to determining their medium-run effects. To construct this variable, I requested individual enrollment data for the 2020 academic year from the Universidad Nacional de Salta (UNSa) and the Universidad Católica de Salta (UCASAL). These are the most important universities in Salta; the first one is public and free, and the second one is private.

An important fact to highlight is that enrollment in the public university is open and unrestricted by law, meaning that there are no general barriers to access. There are no entrance examinations or quotas, and students' performance during high school does not affect their selected degree. It is important to stress that the only requirement is a high school diploma, although students with pending subjects can enroll provisionally. It was not possible to obtain information on other tertiary educational centers, so my measure only includes universities.

In addition, it is not very likely that students from Salta (attending a public high school) would move to another province to attend college. Even if they were to attend a public university in a different location, they would have to consider the cost of moving and housing, which are very expensive compared with UCASAL. There are no available data at the national level that would allow me to test the percentage of students who move to another province to study at the post-secondary level. Given these facts, my results represent a lower bound of the effect of the information treatments on a superior level of education.

Table 9 column 1 shows that only 13 percent of the students in the control group are enrolled in university, and both treatment arms increase the probability of enrollment by 5 percentage points (almost 40 percent). These effects are statistically significant at the 10 percent level. The difference between treatments is not statistically significant, but they both represent a substantial improvement in higher education access. Bonilla-Mejía et al. (2019) present an experiment aimed to improve college enrollment in Colombia by providing information on returns to education for senior students and no effects were found. A potential

explanation for my results is that the settings are completely different regarding access to post-secondary education.

### Formal Employment

Formal employment is an outcome of interest after high school completion. To construct this variable I use administrative records of the students by using their national IDs. This is not public information but participating students (and parents, if the student was minor) gave me consent to check their employment status.

The system only allows access to information from the 6 previous months at the time of the inquiry.<sup>20</sup> Given the strict quarantine imposed by the government in Argentina in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to include information from the last quarter of 2020 (when some restrictions were lifted) to the first quarter of 2021. The output formal employment is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the participant was registered as a formal employee for at least one month out of those 6 months.

Column 2 of Table 9 shows the results for both treatment arms. As expected, the level of formal employment for the control group is small; only 3 percent of the students in that group have a formal job at the considered time. However, both treatment arms generate a negative and statistically significant impact on formal employment. A potential, but not conclusive, explanation is that students' reservation wage increased after receiving the treatments.

One key caveat is that the sample size in this analysis is lower than the original sample because I did not find information for all students in the administrative data—there were errors in IDs in the data I received from the high schools. To test for potential issues of attrition, I create a dummy variable equal to 1 if a student was not found and 0 otherwise. Then I run the main specification and I do not find differences across treatment arms.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper analyzes the effect of information interventions to improve high school graduation by correcting students' mistaken perceptions by using a novel intervention and a traditional one. The first intervention, and the main contribution of this paper, is aimed at making students aware of their chances of graduation based on their academic standing at the beginning of the senior year and it teaches them how to effectively transform inputs into outputs (*Production function*). The second intervention shows information about the returns to education based on the achieved educational level (*Returns to education*). Targeting which information

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<sup>20</sup>See Subsection 4.4.

could be helpful to students is of great importance.

Perceptions about students' probabilities of graduation and returns to education could be modified by collecting the correct information that targets each mistaken belief. As reported in previous papers, overconfidence could be a detrimental personality trait in an educational setting. Overconfidence in graduation is widespread in my sample, but I provide evidence that a piece of information, returns to education, could help more than other types of information to ameliorate the consequences of this negative cognitive bias.

In contrast to previous studies, the experiment is conducted in a unique setting. Many of the main economic barriers to high school education are not present, but high economic instability is observed. I observed positive and significant effects in both treatment arms on timely graduation, and the magnitudes are more significant than those found in other studies. I also found positive and significant impacts on college enrollment, while previous studies aimed at driving demand for post-secondary education did not find this effect.

The findings of this study have substantive policy importance: graduation rates can be improved in low-income settings using an inexpensive intervention by filling information gaps that are more likely to be present in low-income households. Small bureaucratic hurdles, that those with substantial parental or other forms of social support can easily negotiate, may trip up those without such resources. In these contexts, the provision of small pieces of information offers an excellent opportunity to improve graduation rates, as shown in this paper. Students who are positively affected by this intervention now have a previously unavailable chance to achieve economic mobility.

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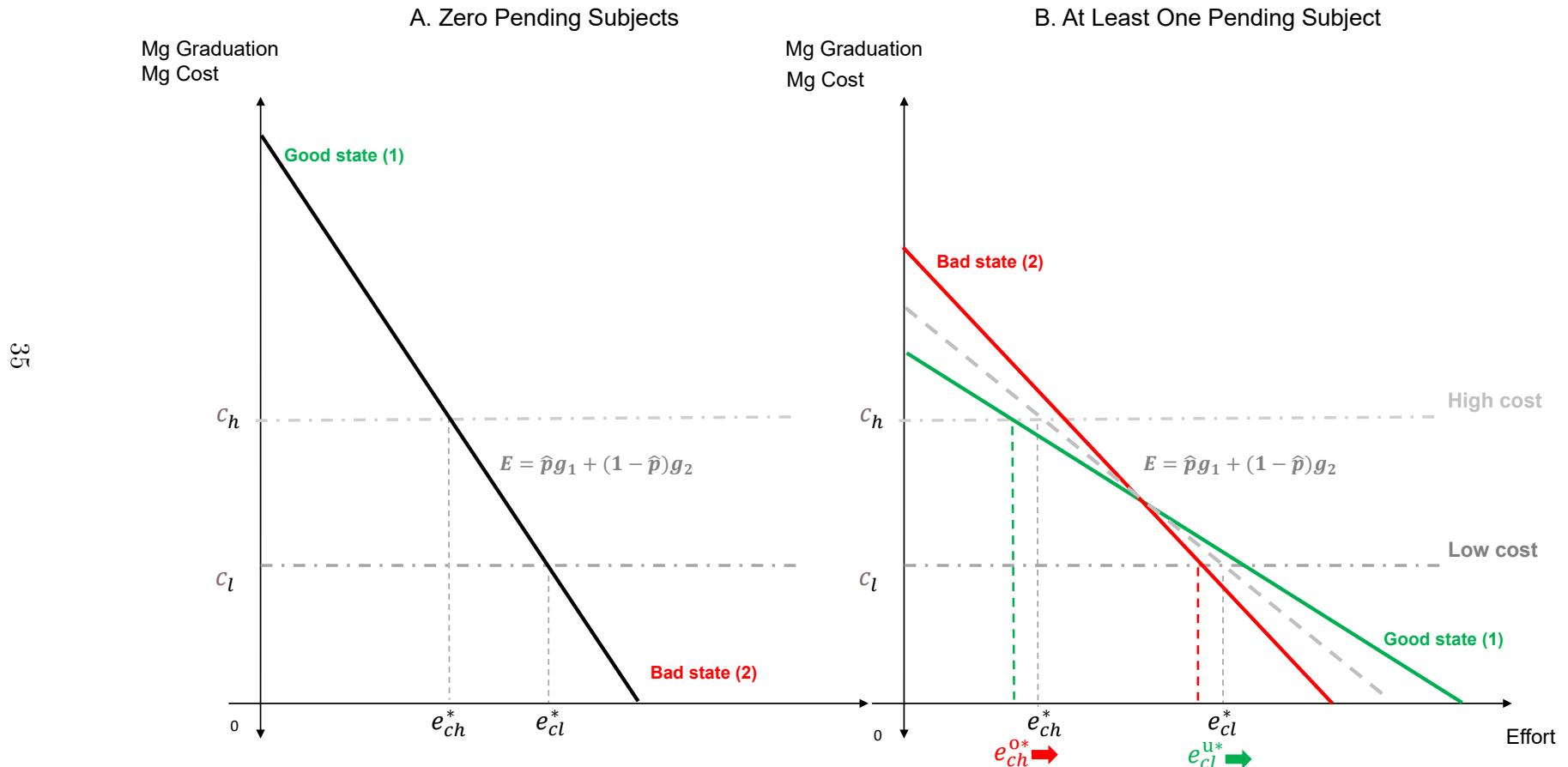
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# Figures

Figure 1: Marginal Benefits and Marginal Costs



*Notes:* Values selected:  $\beta = 1$ ,  $\alpha = 1$ ,  $\omega = 0.1$ ,  $\nu_1 = 0.8$ , and  $\nu_2 = -0.4$ . Panel A, students with zero pending subjects, shows that a change in  $\hat{p}$  does not alter the equilibrium points for the two different cost structures. In Panel B, students with pending subjects, the marginal benefits of graduation are more salient in each state, with a change in  $\hat{p}$ , students' effort will increase no matter their type.

Figure 2: Timeline, Intervention and Data Collection

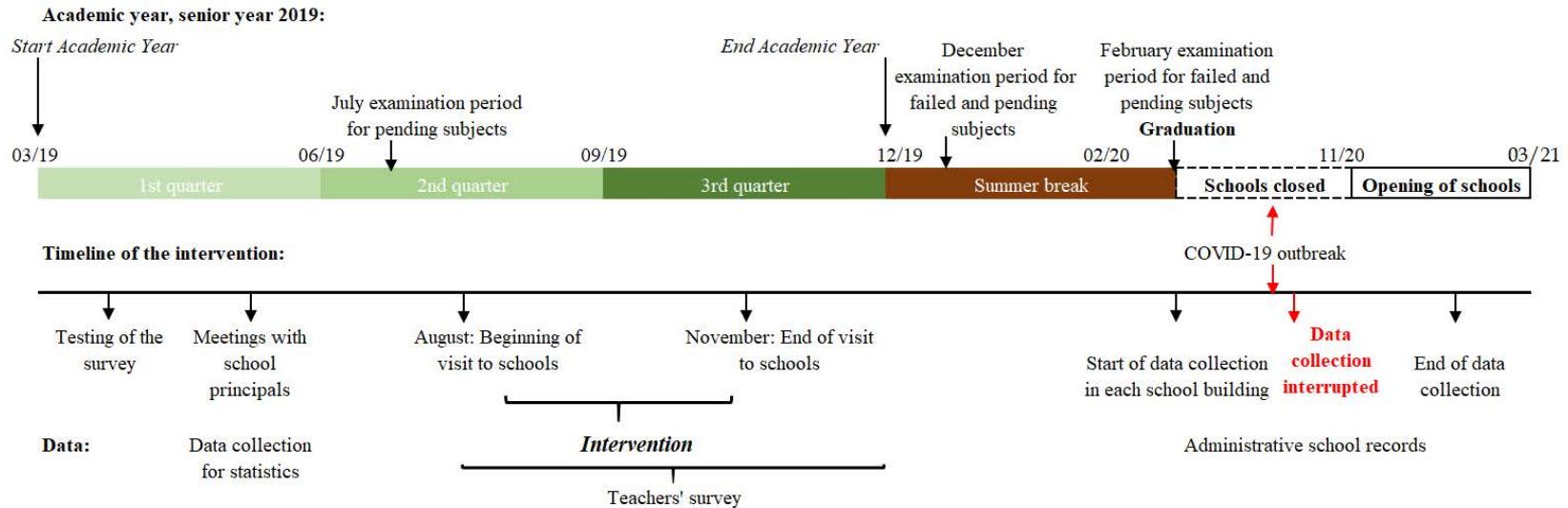
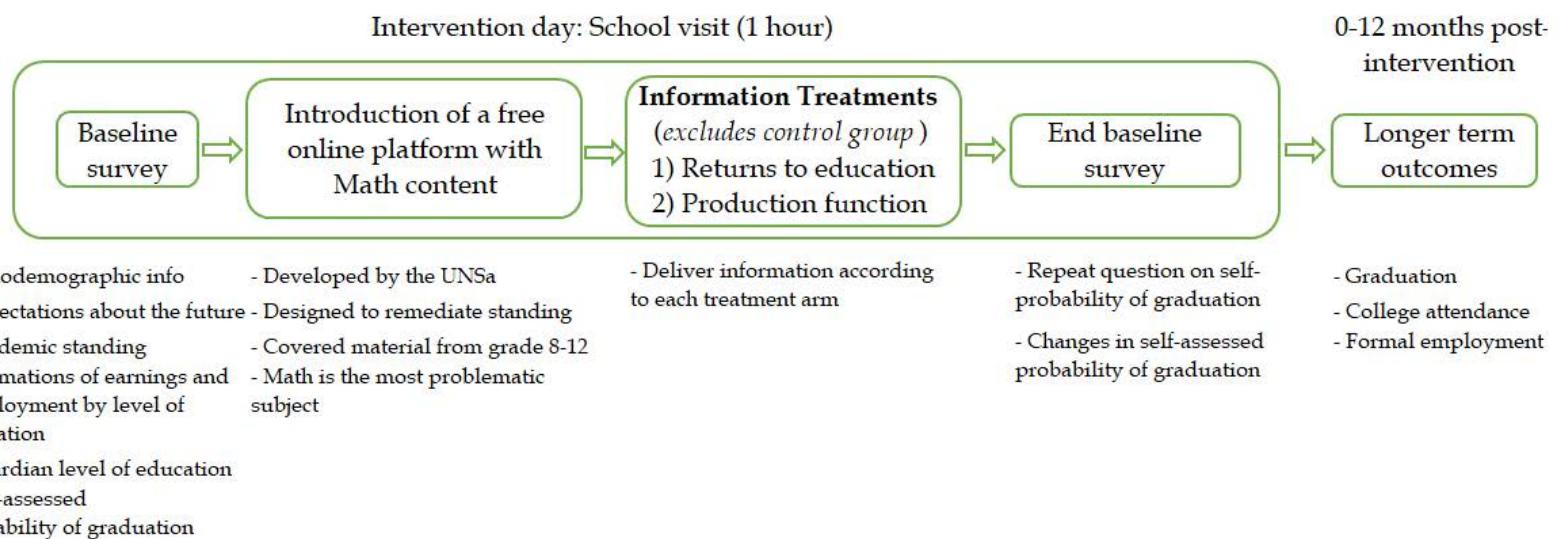
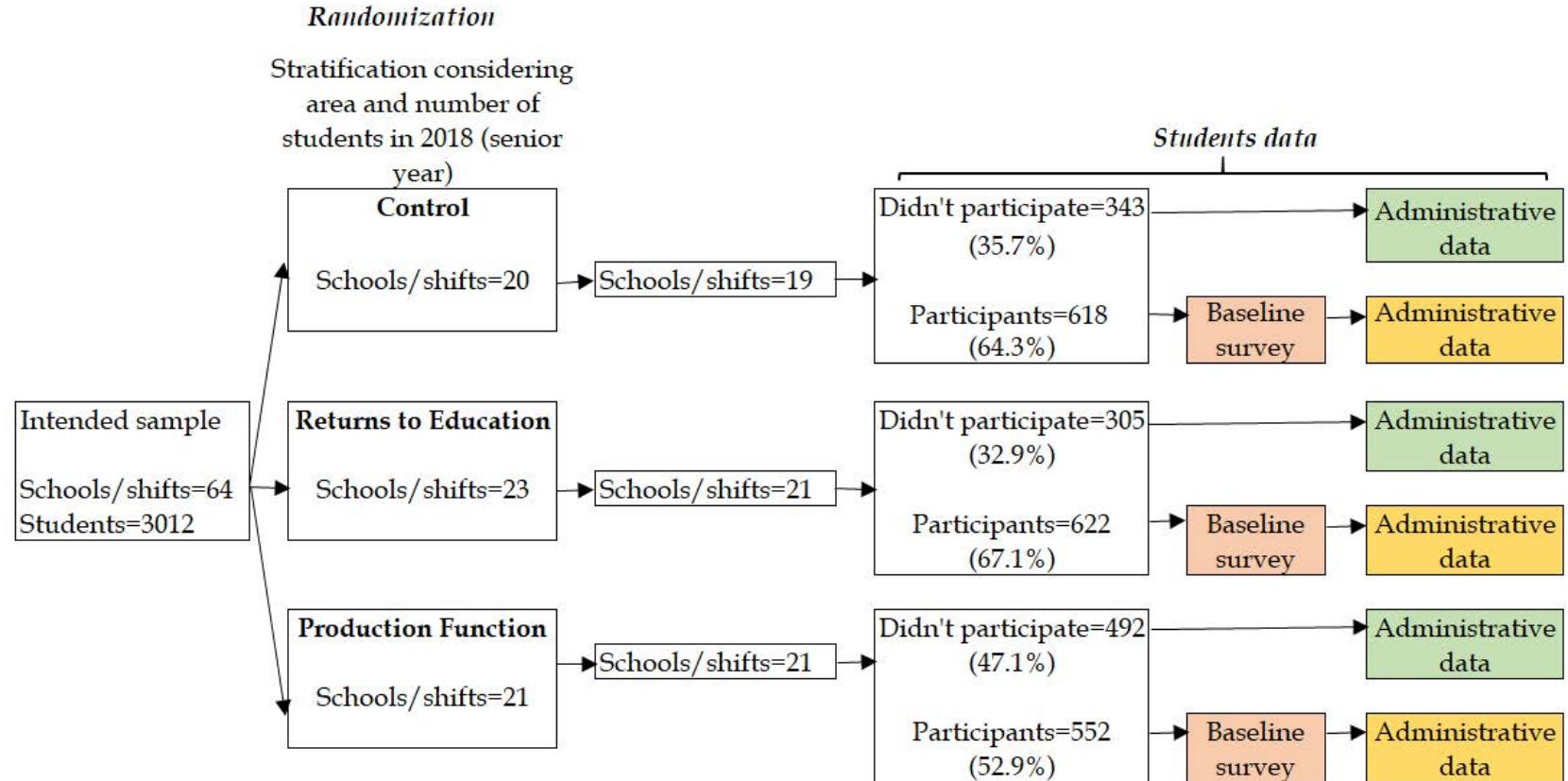


Figure 3: The Intervention Day



*Notes:* At the start of this intervention the questionnaire was tested in several rounds. Several corrections were made to improve students' understanding. The main change was related to the question used to ask probabilities of own graduation. A higher variability in responses was found using Figure C3 in Appendix C, so the question was asked in that way.

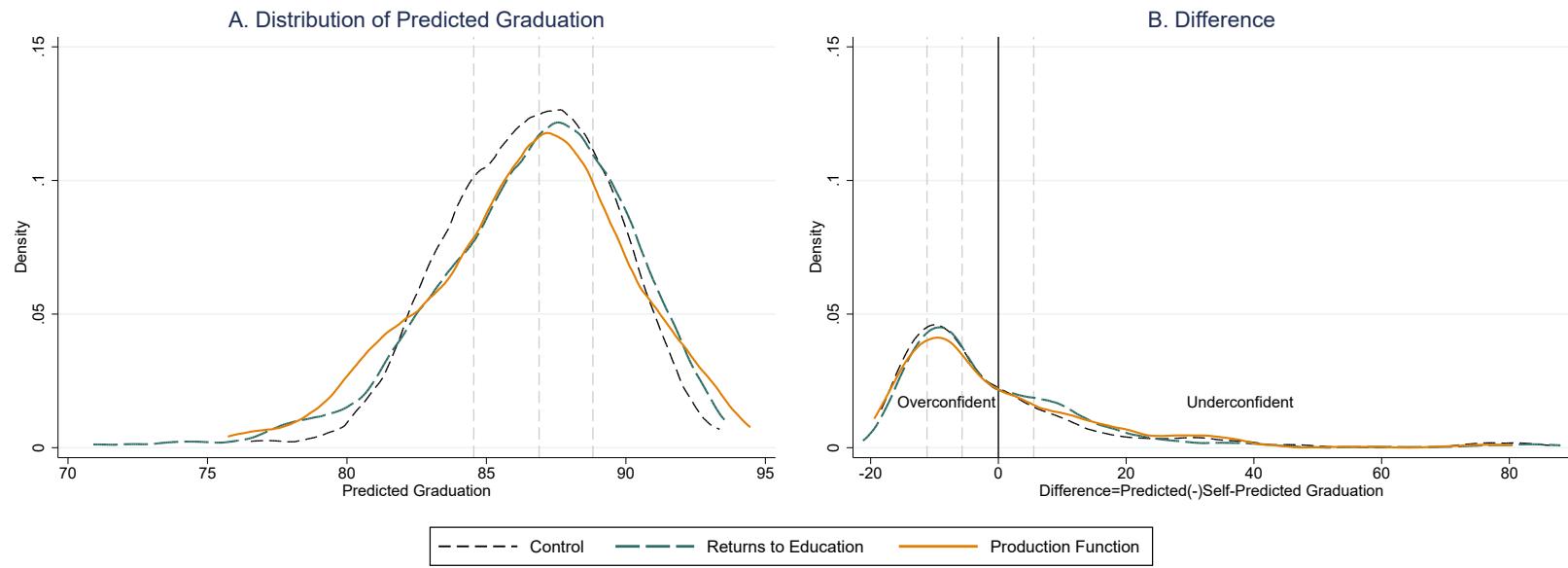
Figure 4: Randomization Design and Sample



Notes: The first two columns of the diagram show the intended sample. The rest of the diagram shows the participation values.

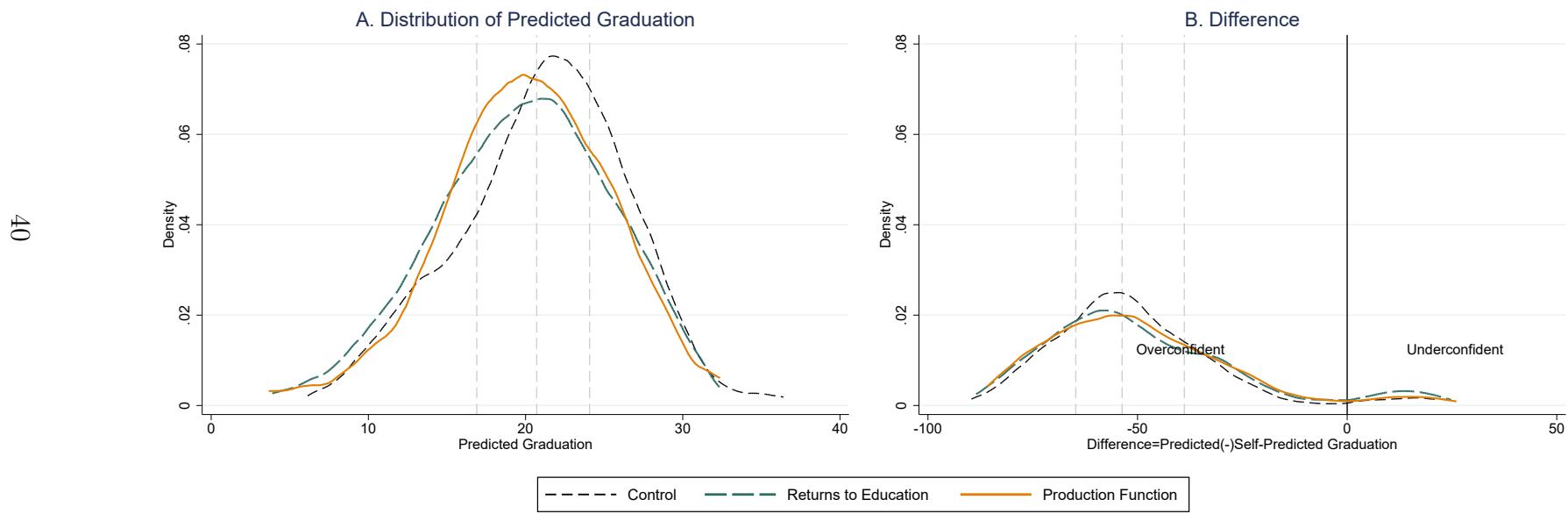
Figure 5: Distribution of Predicted Graduation and Difference with Self-estimation by Treatment Group: Students with Zero Pending Subjects

63



*Notes:* Kernel density estimates. Vertical dashed lines indicate 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles of overall distribution, respectively.

Figure 6: Distribution of Predicted Graduation and Difference with Self-estimation by Treatment Group: Students with at Least One Pending Subject



*Notes:* Kernel density estimates. Vertical dashed lines indicate 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles of overall distribution, respectively.

## Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics from Control Group

	(1) Full Sample	(2) N	(3) Underconfident	(4) N	(5) Overconfident	(6) N
Graduation (by February 2020)	0.504	617	0.612	103	0.482	514
Students' Graduation estimation at baseline	0.784	615	0.569	101	0.826	514
Students' Graduation estimation at endline	0.842	601	0.740	101	0.863	500
Number of pending subjects	0.887	617	0.272	103	1.010	514
Number of pending subjects (if any)	1.604	341	1.867	15	1.592	326

*Notes:* Column 1 reports the number of non-missing observations of variables among all students in the Control group.

Table 2: Randomization Verification

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Control Mean	Regression Returns to Education	Coefficients Production Function	P-Value		
			Joint test R=PF	Joint test R=PF=0	N	
<i>A. Sample Frame (School-shift)</i>						
Number of Students	30.9 [16.8]	0.1 (5.31)	-4.66 (4.53)	0.296	0.441	61
<i>B. Student Characteristics</i>						
Age	18 [0.968]	-.028 (0.145)	0.022 (0.12)	0.69	0.921	1776
Gender	0.598 [0.491]	-.001 (0.029)	0.016 (0.034)	0.611	0.861	1786
Pregnancy/Has children	0.06 [0.237]	-.002 (0.013)	-.002 (0.013)	0.975	0.987	1700
Has email	0.725 [0.447]	0.003 (0.04)	0.036 (0.033)	0.282	0.387	1767
Has cellphone	0.857 [0.35]	-.006 (0.025)	-.015 (0.02)	0.705	0.753	1771
Lives with mother	0.87 [0.336]	-.007 (0.02)	-.024 (0.02)	0.38	0.458	1786
Lives with father	0.58 [0.494]	-.003 (0.021)	-.037* (0.021)	0.094*	0.132	1786
<i>C. Household Characteristics</i>						
Has computer	0.761 [0.427]	0.027 (0.026)	0.011 (0.025)	0.505	0.585	1777
Has internet access	0.845 [0.362]	-.006 (0.024)	0.019 (0.02)	0.211	0.384	1777
Persons per room	1.74 [0.919]	-.069 (0.05)	-.025 (0.05)	0.386	0.381	1759
Parent has some higher education	0.335 [0.473]	-.01 (0.048)	-.023 (0.036)	0.705	0.776	1786
Student works or helps in the family business	0.454 [0.498]	-.009 (0.026)	-.012 (0.025)	0.917	0.882	1786
Student takes care of family members	0.196 [0.397]	0.048* (0.025)	0.009 (0.022)	0.122	0.151	1786
<i>D. Student Academic Performance</i>						
Has repeated a year in high school	0.384 [0.487]	-.057 (0.061)	-.064 (0.047)	0.893	0.401	1786
At least one pending subject from previous years	0.553 [0.498]	-.037 (0.035)	-.058 (0.037)	0.529	0.305	1786
<i>E. Expectations</i>						
Wants to attend college	0.951 [0.215]	-.028* (0.016)	-.024* (0.012)	0.789	0.11	1786
Wants to work after school	0.874 [0.333]	-.03 (0.019)	-.034* (0.018)	0.792	0.158	1786
Perceived probability of obtaining the diploma	0.784 [0.22]	0.003 (0.012)	0.009 (0.013)	0.597	0.77	1783

Notes: Column 1 reports the number of non-missing observations of variables among all students in the control group. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels, respectively.

Table 3: Impacts of Information on Graduation by Pending Subjects

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Graduation		
	Graduation All	Zero Pending	At least One Pending
Production Function	0.0528** (0.0241)	-0.0136 (0.0271)	0.0730*** (0.0271)
Returns to Education	0.103*** (0.0255)	0.0422* (0.0224)	0.125*** (0.0319)
P-value: PF = RE	0.038**	0.010**	0.124
P-value: PF = RE = 0	0.000***	0.016**	0.000***
Mean (Control)	0.50	0.87	0.21
N	1786	833	953

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects. Eligible controls include area of the city dummies, student age, student gender, if the student has children or is pregnant, average grades of classes during the first 2 quarters of the senior year, if the student has a job or takes care of a family member dummy, if the student repeated at least one year in secondary school, if her/his parent/guardian has some superior education, if the student does not live in a crowded dwelling, if in the household there is a computer, a washing machine, an AC, heating, and pairwise interactions between all previously-listed students. Missing values are recoded to the sample mean and separately dummied out. These missing dummies are also used to construct pairwise interactions. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table 4: Impacts of Information on Graduation by Pending Subjects and Confidence on Graduation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Graduation All	Zero Pending	At least One Pending
Production Function × Overconfidence	0.0300 (0.0287)	-0.0372 (0.0234)	0.0630** (0.0276)
Production Function × Underconfidence	0.0820* (0.0450)	0.0184 (0.0591)	0.262** (0.131)
Returns to Education × Overconfidence	0.0920*** (0.0298)	0.0184 (0.0260)	0.123*** (0.0346)
Returns to Education × Underconfidence	0.115** (0.0461)	0.0786 (0.0544)	0.182** (0.0836)
Overconfidence	-0.109** (0.0478)	0.0975** (0.0410)	0.155*** (0.0579)
P-value: PF × Overconfident = PF × Underconfident	0.381	0.376	0.139
P-value: RE × Overconfident = RE × Underconfident	0.696	0.358	0.549
P-value: PF × Overconfident = RE × Overconfident	0.020**	0.025**	0.089*
P-value: PF × Underconfident = RE × Underconfident	0.406	0.301	0.579
Mean (Control, Underconfident)	0.61	0.72	0
N	1786	833	953

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects.. See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table 5: Impacts of Information on Performance Conditional on Having Pending Subjects in December 2020

	(1) Enrollment for Examini- nation Period	(2) Attendance to Examini- nation Period	(3) At least 1 pending subject passed by the end of senior year
<i>Panel A. No Interactions</i>			
Production Function	0.030 (0.065)	0.055 (0.036)	0.062 (0.041)
Returns to Education	0.042 (0.074)	0.13*** (0.039)	0.16*** (0.039)
P-value: PF = RE	0.859	0.048**	0.041**
P-value: PF = RE = 0	0.832	0.005***	0.000***
Mean (Control)	0.62	0.44	0.28
<i>Panel B. Interactions with Students' Confidence</i>			
Production Function $\times$ Overconfidence	0.027 (0.066)	0.034 (0.038)	0.041 (0.041)
Production Function $\times$ Underconfidence	0.020 (0.12)	0.46*** (0.13)	0.45*** (0.13)
Returns to Education $\times$ Overconfidence	0.033 (0.072)	0.11*** (0.041)	0.15*** (0.040)
Returns to Education $\times$ Underconfidence	0.11 (0.12)	0.38*** (0.13)	0.24** (0.11)
Overconfidence	-0.087 (0.066)	0.21* (0.11)	0.11 (0.082)
P-value: PF $\times$ Overconfident = PF $\times$ Underconfident	0.958	0.002***	0.001***
P-value: RE $\times$ Overconfident = RE $\times$ Underconfident	0.449	0.058*	0.431
P-value: PF $\times$ Overconfident = RE $\times$ Overconfident	0.931	0.031**	0.018**
P-value: PF $\times$ Underconfident = RE $\times$ Underconfident	0.514	0.518	0.099*
Mean (Control, Underconfident)	0.71	0.21	0.14
N	853	853	853

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects. See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table 6: Impacts on Graduation by Perceptions on Expected Earnings by Level of Education

	(1)	(2)
	Graduation: Perceptions by Level of Education	
	Complete Sec- ondary	Complete College
Production Function $\times$ Misperception (+)	0.0511 (0.0312)	0.0772* (0.0449)
Production Function $\times$ Misperception (-)	0.0717 (0.0438)	0.0336 (0.0300)
Returns to Education $\times$ Misperception (+)	0.116*** (0.0346)	0.126*** (0.0440)
Returns to Education $\times$ Misperception (-)	0.101** (0.0425)	0.101*** (0.0348)
Misperception (+) by Level of Education	0.00367 (0.0336)	-0.0164 (0.0424)
P-value: PF $\times$ Misperception (+) = PF $\times$ Misperception (-)	0.711	0.433
P-value: RE $\times$ Misperception (+) = RE $\times$ Misperception (-)	0.777	0.646
P-value: PF $\times$ Misperception (+) = RE $\times$ Misperception (+)	0.024**	0.163
P-value: PF $\times$ Misperception (-) = RE $\times$ Misperception (-)	0.542	0.043**
Mean (Control, Misperception (-))	0.48	0.52
N	1609	1593

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects.. To compute the dummy variable Misperception (-) by level of education (level showed at the top of each column), I consider that a student is accurate or is underestimating employment and earnings are being underestimated. See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table 7: Impacts on Graduation by Time Preferences

	(1) Graduation
Production Function $\times$ Above Median	0.0349 (0.0364)
Production Function $\times$ Below Median	0.0394 (0.0371)
Returns to Education $\times$ Above Median	0.117*** (0.0347)
Returns to Education $\times$ Below Median	0.0438 (0.0487)
Above Median Discount Factor	-0.0208 (0.0402)
P-value: R $\times$ Very Patient = R $\times$ Not Very Patient	0.238
P-value: PF $\times$ Very Patient = PF $\times$ Not Very Patient	0.928
Mean (Control, Not Very Patient)	0.56
N	1562

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects.. To compute the dummy variable Above Median Discount Factor I classified the students under that category if the discount factor was higher than the median value of the variable discount factor today vs. one week . See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table 8: Impacts of Information on Graduation by Poverty Level and Gender

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Poor students	Less poor students	Female students	Male students
Production Function	0.0787*** (0.0289)	0.0421 (0.0302)	0.0522 (0.0323)	0.0747** (0.0299)
Returns to Education	0.144*** (0.0303)	0.0523 (0.0390)	0.0982*** (0.0352)	0.112*** (0.0284)
P-value: PF = RE	0.020**	0.726	0.112	0.238
P-value: PF = RE = 0	0.000***	0.327	0.020**	0.000***
Mean (Control)	0.45	0.59	0.57	0.40
N	1109	677	1061	725

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects. To classify students as Poor or Less Poor I created an index variable that includes ownership of household items and a dummy variable that indicates if at least one parent or guard has some college education. In total the index includes 6 dummy variables, if the score is lower or equal to 3 the student is classified as poor. See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table 9: Impacts of Information on Other Main Outcomes

	(1) College Enroll- ment	(2) Formal Employ- ment
<i>Panel A. No Interactions</i>		
Production Function	0.052* (0.027)	-0.014* (0.0087)
Returns to Education	0.054** (0.024)	-0.022*** (0.0076)
P-value: PF = RE	0.909	0.227
P-value: PF = RE = 0	0.059*	0.012**
Mean (Control)	0.13	0.032
<i>Panel B. Interactions with Students' Confidence</i>		
Production Function $\times$ Overconfidence	0.035 (0.027)	-0.0080 (0.010)
Production Function $\times$ Underconfidence	0.092* (0.049)	-0.040** (0.016)
Returns to Education $\times$ Overconfidence	0.047* (0.024)	-0.026*** (0.0088)
Returns to Education $\times$ Underconfidence	0.074 (0.046)	-0.0086 (0.022)
Overconfidence	0.024 (0.033)	-0.00091 (0.018)
P-value: PF $\times$ Overconfident = PF $\times$ Underconfident	0.160	0.098*
P-value: RE $\times$ Overconfident = RE $\times$ Underconfident	0.556	0.485
P-value: PF $\times$ Overconfident = RE $\times$ Overconfident	0.606	0.021**
P-value: PF $\times$ Underconfident = RE $\times$ Underconfident	0.637	0.064*
Mean (Control, Underconfident)	0.13	0.035
N	1786	1348

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and strata fixed effects. College is a dummy variable equal to 1 that indicates if the student is formally enrolled in at least one college of Salta during 2020 (Universidad Nacional de Salta and Universidad Católica de Salta). Formal employment is a dummy variable equal to one if the student was employed in the formal sector at least one month during the last quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

## A Appendix: Information Treatment Arms

### Information Interventions

I show the specific content introduced to the senior students that participated in each treatment arm. For both treatment arms, I discussed why it is important to finish high school, highlighting the fact that they already spent almost 5 years attending this level and that only a small fraction of the students that enter their senior year drop out at some point during the year (Anuarios Estadísticos, Ministerio de Educación de la Nación). See Figure A1.

Each information intervention was delivered after the free online platform was introduced to the students (Appendix B). In total, the presentation lasted 40 minutes.

Figure A1: Why to Obtain the Diploma

## Terminar el secundario

- Están a un paso de terminar este nivel, ¿por qué es importante obtener el título?
- Es una señal positiva, independiente de sus planes futuros

*Si querés trabajar, tus chances de conseguir empleo son mayores.*

*Si querés asistir a un terciario/universidad, el título es el principal requisito.*

Notes: Common slide showed to all the students who received any of the intervention treatments.

Translation: Finish high school, you are really close to finish this level of equation, but why it is important? It is a positive signal that does not depend on your future plans: If you want to work, your chances to get a job are higher or if you want to attend a higher level of education the high school diploma is the main requirement.

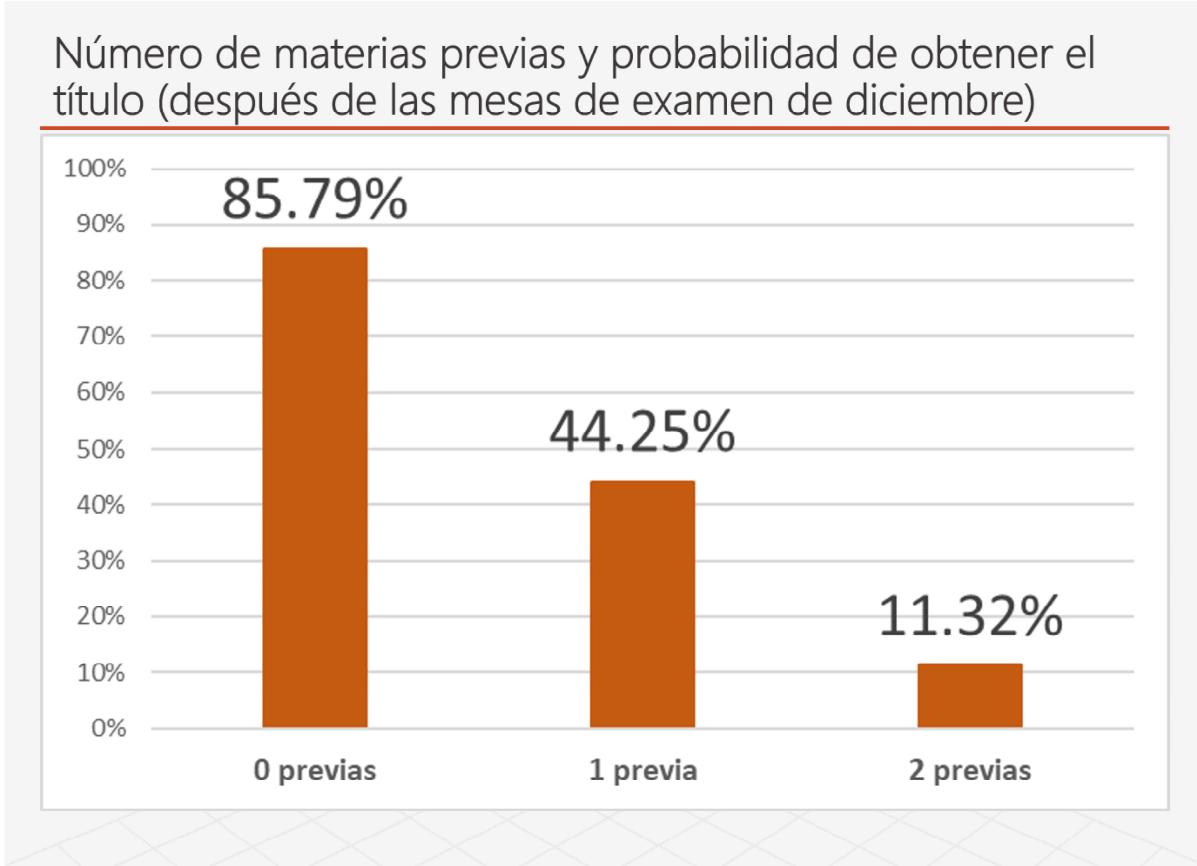
### Production Function

I showed information about graduation rates from the previous cohort (senior students in the 2018 academic year). It was intended to emphasize the pervasive effects of the pending subjects that the students do not pass during their senior year on the probability of obtaining a diploma and also how important it was to pass the subjects during the senior year. To construct these statistics, I asked the Directorate of Secondary Education for access to the academic records of “representative” schools. They asked school principals for permission before sending me a list of the schools with contacts who could give me access to the records. As mentioned previously, there was no previous information available about the correlation

between pending subjects and graduation.

Based on the sample I collected, I elaborated the statistics that were shown to the students (see Figure A2). Each student was aware of their own situation, but during the presentation I could not observe their academic standing (number of pending subjects). The idea of showing these numbers was to help them create a mapping of their situation at the beginning of the senior year and how similar students performed in terms of graduation. Given that this could have been shocking news for the students in any standing, I talked about the intermediate steps needed to transform inputs into outputs and I discussed how to remedy their situation: first, I opened a discussion of the options together (Figure A3), and then I showed a summary of the most relevant tips to effectively obtain a diploma on time.

Figure A2: Statistics Shown to the Students



Notes: Own estimations based on a sample of representative schools in the capital city of Salta including students from the senior year during 2018.

The key messages were (1) to devote more time and effort to study the senior year subjects and (2) to attend the examination periods (for those with pending subjects). The

senior year includes several social activities (prom night, private parties, graduation trip, etc.). In interviews with the school principals and in some focus groups with students from the previous cohorts, these activities were mentioned as major distractions from academics.

Figure A3: The Role of Pending Subjects

## Algunos comentarios...

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Las materias previas tiene un rol importante a la hora de obtener el título:

- ① *Un mayor número de previas, disminuye las chances de recibir el título a tiempo.*
- ② *Además, durante 5to año se suman materias desaprobadas, lo que reduce aun mas la chance de obtener el título.*

## **¿Como se puede remediar esta situación?**

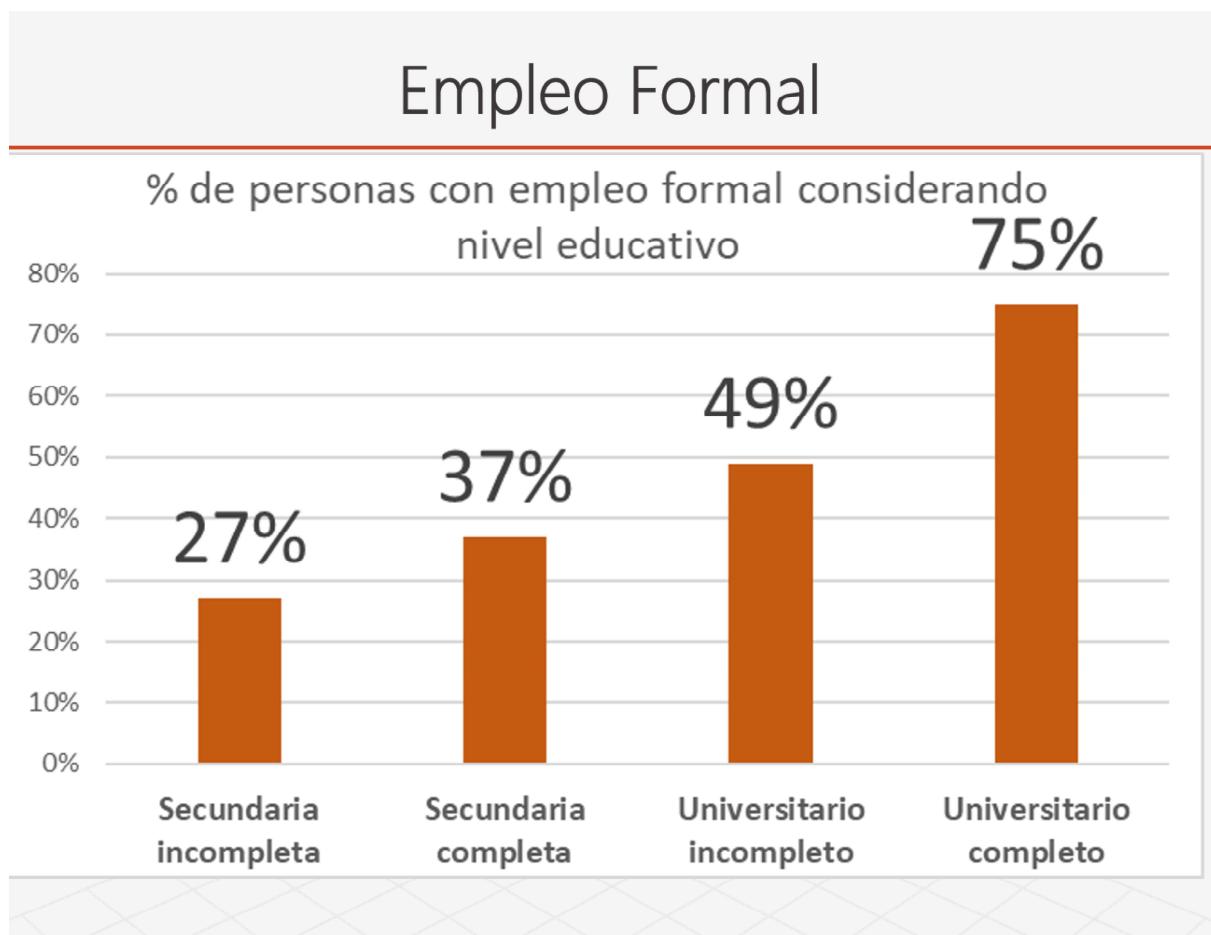


*Notes:* In this part of the presentation, I highlighted the role of the pending subjects and passing senior year subjects on timely graduation. Then I opened the discussion with a question, "How can this situation be remedied?"

## Returns to Education

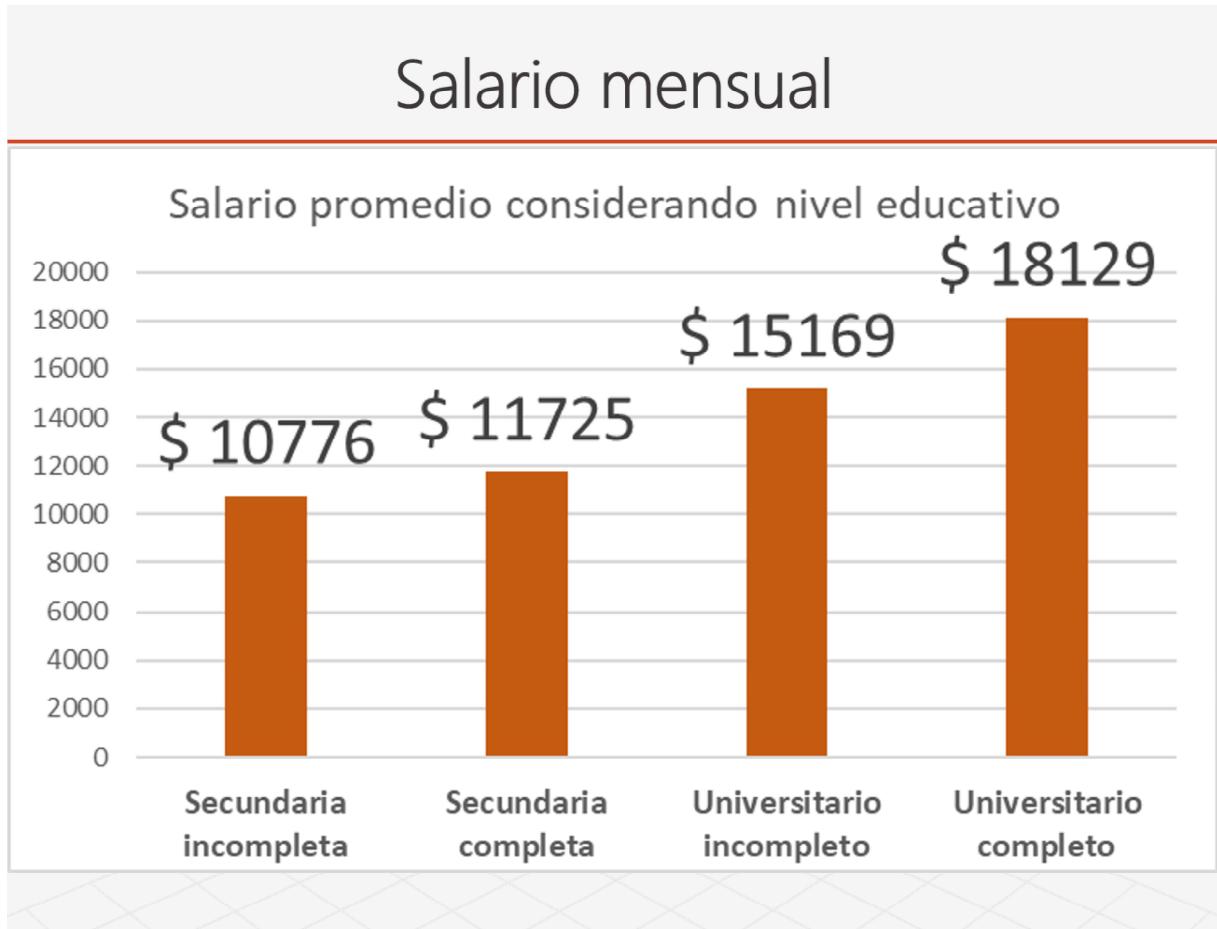
In this presentation I used data from the National Household Survey 2018 (Encuesta Permanente de Hogares) to compute the averages of formal employment and earnings to be shown to the students. I only considered individuals from the province of Salta, between 18 and 30 years old. The statistics were computed according to the level of education and are shown in Figures A4 and A5.

Figure A4: Formal Employment by Level of Education



Notes: Own estimations based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares, 2018 (this survey only covers urban areas). Mincer equation was estimated considering age, gender, and marital status.

Figure A5: Monthly Wages by Level of Education



*Notes:* Own estimations based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares, 2018 (this survey only covers urban areas). Mincer equation was estimated considering age, gender, and marital status. After the presidential primaries of August 2019, the dollar became unstable but on average during October 2019, the exchange rate was \$1US  $\approx$  \$64ARG.

## Reminders

Given that the intervention only included a single visit to each school, reminders via cellphone or e-mail were sent between 1 and 2 weeks before the December examination period. This step was determined in the protocol approved by the Brown IRB and specified in the pre-analysis plan. The length of text messages was limited to 150 characters in Spanish (imposed by a private firm used to send the messages). To ensure a comparable reception of the reminder, the e-mail was also shorten. Both messages were sent if a student self-reported a valid cellphone number and/or e-mail address.

## Returns to Education Reminders

- SMS

Hi! Remember that a higher level of education increases the chances of finding a quality job and a higher salary!

Team UNSa-Brown

- e-mail

Hi! In our visit to your school we showed you information about the labor market in Salta. Remember, a higher level of education increases the probability of finding a quality job and a higher salary!

Team UNSa-Brown

## Production Function Reminders

- SMS

Hi! If you failed subjects this year or have pending, remember, it is important to attend the available exam dates and pass them!

Team UNSa-Brown

- e-mail

Hi! In our visit to your school we showed you that it is important to pass pending and subjects you failed this year as soon as possible. If you have failed subjects, remember to attend the available exam dates and study to pass them!

Team UNSa-Brown

## B Appendix

### B.A Statistical Power

To compute the statistical power, I used data from the previous cohort (2018, subsample of five schools), and I focused only on the information interventions. Given the small number of clusters, I was not able to include the interaction of the treatments. By considering three arms (control, returns to education, and production function), with a graduation rate in the control group of 50 percent, alpha=0.05, average cluster size of 47 students, ICC=0.05 (computed using data from that subsample), I am able to make comparisons between the two main treatments by estimating an effect of 3.5 percentage points in graduation rate with a statistical power of 76 percent.

### B.B Free Online Platform: MOODLE

The Directorate of Secondary Education of Salta required that I provide some useful information to all students; otherwise, I would encounter resistance from school principals reluctant to give me access to their schools. So, to provide something in exchange for their participation, I designed a free online platform with math content for all the years of high school. This platform could help to improve the academic standing of students in at least that subject.

At the onset of the project I had two rounds of meetings with principals, vice principals, and senior-level math teachers to hear their opinions about my agreement with the directorate and to incorporate their feedback. The agreement was that the software would use material sent directly from math teachers. I partnered with the Department of Mathematics in the Faculty of Economics at Universidad Nacional de Salta to unify the content and create new material useful to all students from public schools. In addition to this material, professors of mathematics at UNSa, offered office hours to senior students from the participant schools (online).

As mentioned above, the platform is not a part of the intervention, but rather enabled me to conduct the baseline surveys in all schools. After being introduced, we first explained the contents of the platform and then gave instructions on how to obtain free access (with a code that was determined for each school, for security reasons). Figure B1 shows the homepage of the platform, with all the content year by year. Figure B2 shows a representative image of the content available by topics for the senior year. Figure B3 shows pdf files with the available material.

We also showed how to post questions (public or private) with the commitment on our

side to reply to each question within 48 hours. Students were allowed to upload pictures for assistance with exercises involving mathematical notation.

Figure B1: MOODLE Platform: Homepage

The screenshot shows the Moodle homepage for the 'Matemática Nivel Secundario' course. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Página Principal' and 'Matemática'. On the right, it shows the user is identified as 'Estudiante' and has the option to 'Volver a mi rol normal'. Below the header, there is a main content area with a large banner titled 'Bienvenido al Aula Virtual de Matemática Nivel Secundario' featuring a colorful geometric logo. To the left is a sidebar with 'NAVEGACIÓN' and 'ADMINISTRACIÓN' sections. The main content area also includes sections for 'ÚLTIMAS NOTICIAS', 'EVENTOS PRÓXIMOS', and 'MATEMÁTICAS' with a cartoon illustration. At the bottom, there are navigation arrows and a footer bar.

*Notes:* Screenshot of the platform designed by the Department of Mathematics at Faculty of Economics (UNSa).

Figure B2: MOODLE Platform: Senior year overview

The screenshot shows the Moodle platform interface for the 5th year of Secondary Education. At the top, there is a header bar with the URL "moodleeco.unsa.edu.ar/moodle/course/view.php?id=198", the course name "e Economicas", and a login message "Usted se ha identificado como [redacted] Estudiante (Volver)". Below the header is a decorative banner with the text "5° AÑO" and a globe, calculator, and money icon. Underneath the banner is a list of course modules: "Foro de Consulta", "Números", "Álgebra", "Geometría", and "Estadística". At the bottom of the page is a navigation bar with icons for back, forward, and search.

*Notes:* Screenshot of the platform designed by the Department of Mathematics at Faculty of Economics (UNSa).

Figure B3: MOODLE Platform: Senior year specific content

The screenshot shows a Moodle course navigation interface. The top navigation bar includes links for 'Página Principal', 'Matemática', '5º Año de Secundario', and 'Álgebra'. The left sidebar, titled 'NAVEGACIÓN', lists 'Área personal', 'Páginas del sitio', 'Mi perfil', 'Curso actual' (expanded to show 'Matemática', 'Participantes', 'Insignias', 'General', '1º Año de Secundario', '2º Año de Secundario', and '3º Año de Secundario'), and 'Área de administración del sitio'. The main content area is titled 'Álgebra' and contains a sub-section 'Álgebra 5º'. Below this, there is a folder icon with four sub-items: 'Algebra\_5\_FuncionesRacionalesIrracionalesPartes\_Conceptos.pdf', 'Algebra\_5\_FuncionesRacionalesIrracionalesPartes\_Ejercicios.pdf', 'Algebra\_5\_LmitesContinuidad\_Conceptos.pdf', and 'Algebra\_5\_LmitesContinuidad\_Ejercicios.pdf'.

*Notes:* Screenshot of the platform designed by the Department of Mathematics at Faculty of Economics (UNSa).

## B.C Full Derivatives: Model with Uncertainty

The maximization problem the student faces is:

$$\left[ \hat{p}g\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) + (1 - \hat{p})g\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \right] \hat{V} - \delta e$$

with FOC:

$$\left[ \hat{p}g'\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) \frac{\beta}{n} + (1 - \hat{p})g'\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta \right] \hat{V} - \delta = 0$$

**Proof.** Production Function

$$\begin{aligned} & \hat{p}g'\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) + \hat{p}g''\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) \left(\frac{\beta}{n}\right)^2 \frac{de^*}{d\hat{p}} - g'\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta + \\ & + (1 - \hat{p})g''\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \left(\frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta\right)^2 \frac{de^*}{d\hat{p}} = 0 \end{aligned}$$

$$\frac{de^*}{d\hat{p}} = \frac{-g'\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) \frac{\beta}{n} + g'\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta}{\hat{p}g''\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) \left(\frac{\beta}{n}\right)^2 + (1 - \hat{p})g''\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \left(\frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta\right)^2} \geq 0$$

the second derivative of  $g(.)$  is negative, but the sign of the numerator cannot be determined without additional assumptions on the  $g(.)$  function and the parameters of relevance. Consider, for example, the case of Figure 1, with  $g(x) = x - \omega x^2$ :

- For underconfident students, it can be observed that  $\frac{de^*}{d\hat{p}} > 0$ .
- In the case of overconfident students, we have  $\frac{de^*}{d\hat{p}} < 0$ .

■

**Proof.** Returns to Education

$$\begin{aligned} & \hat{p}g'\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) \frac{\beta}{n} + (1 - \hat{p})g'\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta + \\ & \hat{p}g''\left(\frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha\right) \left(\frac{\beta}{n}\right)^2 \frac{de^*}{d\hat{V}} + (1 - \hat{p})g''\left(\frac{(1 + \nu_1)\beta e + (n - 1)\nu_2}{n + \nu_1} + \alpha\right) \left(\frac{1 + \nu_1}{n + \nu_1} \beta\right)^2 \frac{de^*}{d\hat{V}} = 0 \end{aligned}$$

$$\frac{de^*}{d\hat{V}} = - \frac{\hat{p}g' \left( \frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha \right) \frac{\beta}{n} + (1 - \hat{p}) g' \left( \frac{(1+\nu_1)\beta e + (n-1)\nu_2}{n+\nu_1} + \alpha \right) \frac{1+\nu_1}{n+\nu_1} \beta}{\hat{p}g'' \left( \frac{\beta e}{n} + \alpha \right) \left( \frac{\beta}{n} \right)^2 + (1 - \hat{p}) g'' \left( \frac{(1+\nu_1)\beta e + (n-1)\nu_2}{n+\nu_1} + \alpha \right) \left( \frac{1+\nu_1}{n+\nu_1} \beta \right)^2}$$

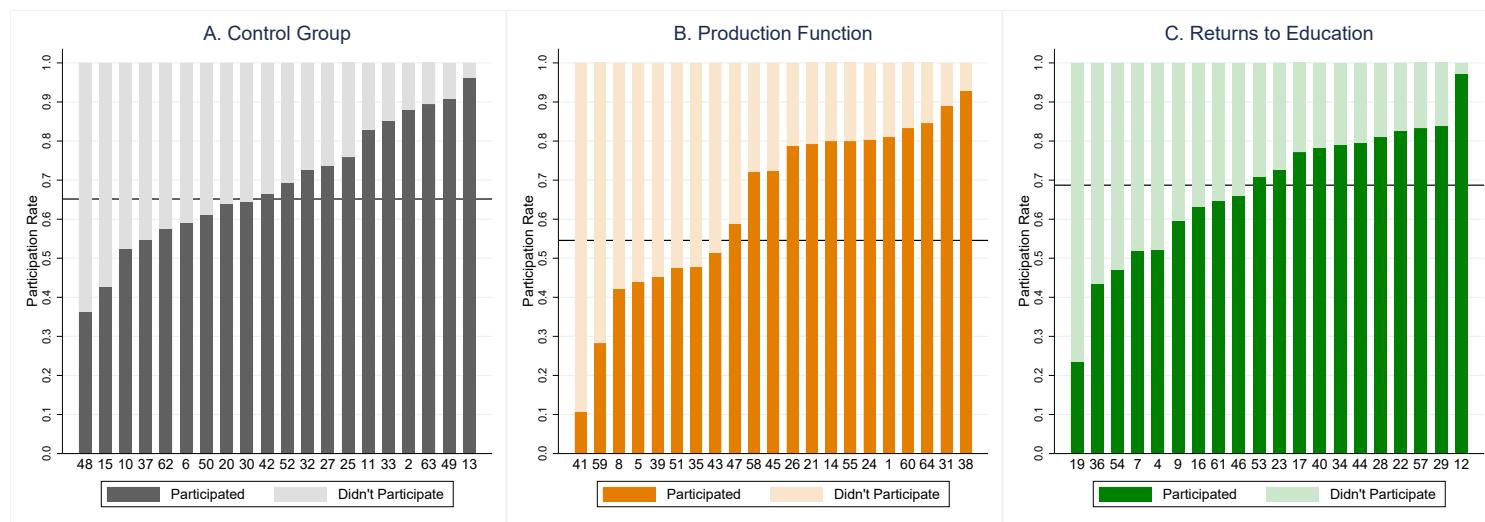
By assumption, the second derivative of the  $g(\cdot)$  function is negative, so the entire denominator is negative, the numerator is positive (also by assumption), so the entire expression is positive. ■

## C Appendix: Supplementary Figures and Tables

Figure C1: Student Academic Report. The format is similar in all secondary schools.

Establecimiento:	Localidad:						
Año:	División:	Turno:					
Orientación:							
Modalidad:							
Alumno/a:	D.N.I. N°						
Período de Actividades Educativas:	2019						
Espacios Curriculares	Trimestre			Calificación Final	Instancia de Examen Diciembre	Instancia de Examen Febrero	Calificación Definitiva
	1º	2º	3º				
Lengua y Literatura	4	6	6	6	-	-	6
Formación Ética y Ciudadana	3	3	4	4	17-12-19 F.62	18-02-20 AS-FP	Pendiente
Matemática	4	6	6	6	-	-	6
Educación Física	10	10	10	10	-	-	10
Lengua Extranjera	7	6	7	7	-	-	7
Química	5	3	2	3	13-12-19 AS-FSP	18-02-20 AS-F81	Pendiente
Psicología	1	8	6	7	-	-	7
Economía	4	5	4	4	17-12-19 F.69	18-02-20 AS-F86	Pendiente
Sistema de Inf. Contable	4	4	4	4	17-12-19 AS-F64	18-02-20 AS-F95	Pendiente
Administración	4	4	4	4	17-12-19 Y.F.72	18-02-20 AS-F85	Pendiente
Gestión de Proyecto	6	5	5	5	17-12-19 AS-F70	18-02-20 AS-F80	Pendiente
	6	6	5	5	06-2-20 AS-F88		
Observaciones:	Anotest 3 celulares 3(tres)						
Espacios Curriculares Pendientes:	S.T.C 4º CO 15-07-19 Absente F.49 17-12-19 (lunes) F.555 18-02-2020 F.18 Matemática 3º CO 17-07-19 Absente F.116 (lunes) 17-12-19 F.119 AS 13-02-2020 F.157						

Figure C2: Participation Rates at the School Level



Notes: Horizontal axis shows random numbers assigned to each school. In each panel, the horizontal black lines indicates the participation rate for the entire treatment arm.

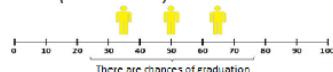
Figure C3: Question used to ask own probability of graduation

Probability: it is a number that indicates how likely an event is to occur, in general it is expressed as a percentage of 0 to 100. For example, what do you think is the probability that a 5th year student receives his or her high school degree? in December? after the exam dates of that month. 0 means no chance of receiving the title and 100 means that you will receive the title with certainty.

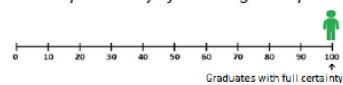
*Example 1: A student who does not study, frequently skips classes, has pending subjects and does not appear at the exam periods, who disapproves of all the subjects this year, has a 0% probability of receiving the diploma in December.*



*Example 2: A student who studies sometimes, sometimes skips classes, with some pending subject, has a chance to receive the diploma on time (in December).*



*Example 3: A student who always studies, never skips classes, does not have pending subjects, with grade 10 in all subjects this year, has a 100% probability of receiving the diploma in December.*



16- What are your chances of receiving a high school diploma in December? (after exams period) From 0 to 100. \_\_\_\_\_

*Notes:* First, a notion of probability was provided.

Table C1: Impacts of Information on Self-estimated Probability of Graduation (after-before intervention)

	Difference: Confidence Update	(1)	(2)	(3)
		Difference by Confidence		
		Over- confident Students	Under- confident Students	
Production Function	-2.049** (0.883)	-2.409** (0.950)	-0.276 (3.197)	
Returns to Education	0.546 (0.922)	-0.521 (0.892)	2.431 (3.199)	
P-value: $R = PF$	0.004***	0.075*	0.265	
P-value: $R = PF = 0$	0.008***	0.038**	0.503	
Mean (Control)	5.77	3.57	16.8	
N	1765	1429	336	

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and shift and strata fixed effects. See notes in Table 3 for a list of potential controls. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.

Table C2: Impacts of Information on Graduation by Pending Subjects

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Graduation All	Zero Pending	At least One Pending
Production Function	0.0607** (0.0250)	-0.00411 (0.0252)	0.0770*** (0.0279)
Returns to Education	0.108*** (0.0259)	0.0500** (0.0215)	0.127*** (0.0321)
P-value: $R = PF$	0.049**	0.012**	0.138
P-value: $R = PF = 0$	0.000***	0.012**	0.000***
Mean (Control)	0.50	0.87	0.21
N	1768	823	945

*Notes:* Robust standard errors clustered at the school-shift level in parentheses. All regressions include graduation from the cohort 2018 at the school-shift level, and shift and strata fixed effects. Eligible controls include area of the city dummies, student age, student gender, if the student has children or is pregnant, average grades of classes during the first 2 quarters of the senior year, if the student has a job or takes care of a family member dummy, if the student repeated at least one year in secondary school, if her/his parent/guardian has some superior education, if the student does not live in a crowded dwelling, if in the household there is a computer, a washing machine, an AC, heating, and pairwise interactions between all previously-listed students. Missing values are recoded to the sample mean and separately dummied out. These missing dummies are also used to construct pairwise interactions. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote statistical significance at the 10, 5, and 1 percent levels respectively.