

# College Field Specialization and Beliefs about Relative Performance

An Experimental Intervention to Understand Gender Gaps in STEM

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## Abstract

Gender differences in beliefs about relative academic performance may explain some of the persistent gender gap in college STEM enrollment, yet there is little causal evidence isolating this mechanism. To test whether beliefs about relative performance are malleable and salient enough to change behavior, I run a randomized controlled trial with 5,700 undergraduate students across seven STEM disciplines. Treated students receive information about their performance relative to their classmates and to STEM majors. Absent intervention, men overestimate their own relative rank by more and are more likely to underestimate how other STEM majors perform, while women are more likely to overestimate others. The intervention shrinks gender gaps in biased beliefs by between a third and half. Treatment also closes the two-credit gender gap in STEM course taking during the subsequent semester by ten percent. These changes are driven largely by low-performing, overconfident men correctly updating their beliefs. The results suggest that biased beliefs about relative performance do contribute to gender gaps in STEM, and that low-cost information provision may improve efficiency by encouraging low-performing men to continue searching for their comparative advantage, rather than encouraging women to stick with STEM.

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# 1 Introduction

Despite considerable progress in educational attainment and labor market participation, women remain persistently underrepresented in many quantitative fields such as economics, engineering, and computer science. Although they represent more than half of all college graduates, women receive only a third of bachelor’s degrees in economics and approximately a fifth of degrees in engineering and computer science (author’s calculations using 2017 IPEDS data).

The gender gap in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education has implications for both equity and efficiency. The fields with the fewest women also tend to be the highest-paying ones, so differences in field specialization contribute to the gender pay gap. The median lifetime earnings for an economics or computer engineering major—fields where men are overrepresented—are roughly 40 percent higher than that of an English or psychology major—fields where women are overrepresented (Webber 2019). Furthermore, in a world where individuals specialize according to comparative advantage, removing barriers or frictions that are preventing efficient sorting across fields would increase overall productivity (Hsieh et al. 2019).

While differences in aptitude or performance explain little of the gap in specialization (Cheryan et al. 2017; Ceci et al. 2014), differences by gender in beliefs about performance—conditional on actual performance—may be responsible for differences in educational choices. Prior empirical work from multiple disciplines has documented systematic differences in men’s and women’s perceptions of their own performance or competence (Niederle and Vesterlund 2007; Beyer 1990; Beyer and Bowden 1997; Lundeberg et al. 1994; Marshman et al. 2018; Vincent-Ruz et al. 2018), while economic theory predicts that beliefs about field-specific ability are a determinant of field specialization (Altonji 1993; Altonji et al. 2016; Arcidiacono 2004; Arcidiacono et al. 2016). Research from the lab and the field has shown that information provision can debias beliefs and change behavior in a variety of settings (Wozniak et al. 2014; Bobba and Frischno 2019; Franco 2019; Gonzalez et al. 2017). Several recent field experiments have shown that it is possible to change the academic

decisions of college students with light-touch interventions, though cannot disentangle the mechanisms responsible (Li 2018; Porter and Serra 2019; Bayer et al. 2019). Together, these prior strands of work suggest that targeting beliefs about performance may be a promising avenue for intervention in the context of field specialization in college, but the causal evidence on this mechanism has thus far been limited.

In this paper, I provide the first experimental evidence isolating the effect of beliefs about relative performance on field specialization in college, with an emphasis on understanding differences by gender. I study approximately 5,700 undergraduate students in large introductory STEM courses across seven disciplines at the University of Michigan: biology, chemistry, computer science, economics, engineering, physics, and statistics. (Throughout the paper, references to STEM include economics.) The University of Michigan’s patterns in STEM degree receipt by gender largely mirror national trends, making it a promising setting to investigate gender gaps. In my primary experimental intervention, I provide students with information about their performance relative to their classmates and relative to STEM majors. In a second treatment arm, I provide a subset of high-performing students with additional encouragement emphasizing their STEM potential.

I collect survey data prior to the intervention and at the end of the semester to measure students’ beliefs about relative performance. These data allow me to investigate baseline differences in beliefs by gender independent of any intervention, as well as to understand how the provision of information changes students’ beliefs. The size and coverage of my sample allows me to document important heterogeneity in beliefs and revisions in beliefs for students at different performance levels, which prior work has largely lacked the power to do. I combine these survey data with administrative data on students’ course-taking behavior, my primary short-term measure of field specialization. In the future, I will observe major declaration and degree receipt, as well.

I find that absent any intervention, there are substantial gender differences in two key sets of beliefs about relative performance among control students in my sample. The first is students’ prediction of their relative rank in the course. At the beginning of the

semester, all students tend to be overconfident in their prediction of their rank, but control men on average overpredict their final performance by 4.5 percentile ranks more than women. Though students become more accurate over the course of the semester, male overconfidence remains. By the end of the term, control men still overestimate their performance by 4 percentiles more than women do; this is due more to overconfidence of low-performing men than underconfidence of women. I also find striking and persistent gender differences in students' accuracy in identifying the median course grade for students who go on to major in STEM. Men are about ten percentage points more likely to think the median course grade for students who go on to major in STEM is lower than it actually is, while women are about 20 percentage points more likely to think it is higher than it is. The patterns in this second type of belief, which no other study has measured, suggest male overconfidence and female underconfidence about their performance relative to others. A correlational exercise indicates that these two types of beliefs may account for approximately seven percent of the two-credit (half of a course) gender gap in STEM course-taking in the subsequent semester, even controlling for realized performance and a rich set of academic and demographic characteristics.

Providing information on actual relative performance and that of future STEM majors closes the gender gap in beliefs substantially. Among control students, the absolute value of men's error in predicting their own percentile is nearly three percentiles larger than women's; the treatment closes this gap by half. A signed version of this same outcome reveals that overconfident low-performing men correctly update their beliefs downwards, while high-performing men revise upwards. I detect no changes in women's beliefs about their class rank, even though they are also inaccurate (though less so than men). The intervention closes the gap in underestimation of the course median for STEM majors by about a third, again by correcting men's beliefs; they are five percentage points less likely to underestimate. The gap in overestimation of the median also closes by nearly a third, this time due to women correctly updating; they are five percentage points less likely to overestimate.

These changes in stated beliefs translate to moderate changes in observed behavior. Providing information closes the two-credit gender gap in STEM course-taking one semester later by ten percent. This appears to be driven exclusively by men, who take three percent fewer STEM credits in the semester following the intervention (though I cannot statistically reject that men and women change their behavior by similar amounts).

Finally, my results suggest that framing information about relative performance more positively and providing explicit encouragement to continue in STEM is not more effective at changing behavior than information alone for high-performing students. While I find suggestive evidence that high-performing men’s beliefs update more positively in response to the information-plus-encouragement intervention compared to pure information, I generally detect no differences by treatment arm, and the effects on course-taking behavior by arm look very similar. For this reason, the majority of the results I present combine my two treatment arms and reflect a general effect of information provision.

This work adds to a number of studies that document systematic differences in men’s and women’s perceptions of their own performance (Niederle and Vesterlund 2007; Beyer 1990; Beyer and Bowden 1997; Lundeberg et al. 1994; Marshman et al. 2018; Vincent-Ruz et al. 2018; Exley and Kessler 2019). These studies tend to find that men overestimate their own performance more than women do, at least for domains and tasks considered “male” (Coffman et al. 2019; Bordalo et al. 2019). Prior studies tend to rely on small samples and cannot say much about beliefs over the full distribution of realized performance. I measure relative confidence in two ways: students’ beliefs about their own relative rank in their course, and their beliefs about how a typical STEM major performs. The first measure confirms previous findings that men are especially overconfident about their performance and sheds light on interesting heterogeneity across the true performance distribution, with the lowest-performing students the most overconfident and the highest performers the most underconfident. No other studies have measured the second type of relative performance belief, which may be especially subject to information frictions and which may be especially salient for specialization decisions. I show that this type of belief in particular has large

differences by gender, is strongly correlated with academic behavior, and is moved significantly by the provision of information.

My findings support a long line of economic models theorizing that beliefs about field-specific ability are a determinant of college major choice (Altonji 1993; Altonji et al. 2016; Arcidiacono 2004; Arcidiacono et al. 2016), as well as empirical evidence that college students' learning and revision of beliefs about themselves is related to academic decisions (Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner 2011, 2012, and 2014; Zafar 2011). These studies combined with documented gender differences in beliefs point to a plausible mechanism keeping women out of STEM (though note that Zafar (2013) finds that differences in beliefs about ability are not a significant determinant of the gender gap in major choice). However, these studies rely on small samples and lack exogenous variation in beliefs. Without exogenous variation, the measures of beliefs could be picking up unobserved factors that are the true determinant of behavior. The small sample sizes limit what can be learned about potentially important differences in beliefs for different types of students.

This work also fits in with research from behavioral economics about information provision and belief updating. In lab settings, performance feedback has been shown to close the gender gap in competitiveness (Wozniak et al. 2014; Ertac and Szentes 2011). In experimental and quasi-experimental work in the field, numerous studies have found that providing individuals with information about their absolute or relative performance changes their subsequent effort and performance (Ashraf et al. 2014; Azmat et al. 2019; Azmat and Iriberry 2010; Bandiera et al. 2015; Dobrescu et al. 2019; Goulas and Megalokonomou 2015; Tran and Zeckhauser 2012). However, the direction of the effect and whether it differs by gender varies across studies. Furthermore, these studies generally do not measure how actual beliefs change, only behavior; combining the two provides more compelling evidence that beliefs influence behavior and by how much. A small handful of studies suggest that providing information about performance can change beliefs and affect outcomes other than performance (Bobbia and Frischno 2019; Franco 2019; Gonzalez et al. 2017). My study is the first to test this mechanism for college field specialization, and I measure the effects of

information provision on beliefs, performance, and subsequent academic choices.

Finally, this work complements several recent interventions that encouraged women to study subjects where they are underrepresented (Li 2018; Porter and Serra 2019; Bayer et al. 2019). These studies prove that it is possible to shift course-taking and major choice for women and other underrepresented groups with fairly light-touch interventions. However, due to the designs of these studies, they are not able to isolate mechanisms and compare across groups: the content of Li (2018)’s intervention bundles several mechanisms and varies by gender; Porter and Serra (2019) cannot isolate same-gender effects from general role model effects; and Bayer et al. (2019) only targets underrepresented groups. Furthermore, they are limited to a single field (economics), meaning we do not know whether they generalize to other STEM fields. My study isolates a mechanism—beliefs about relative performance—and compares men and women’s beliefs and behavior directly. By including students from seven STEM disciplines, I provide evidence that generalizes beyond economics.

Taken together, my experimental results suggest that beliefs about relative performance are a determinant of gender differences in field specialization in college, with male overconfidence the primary force. One-time information provision closed gaps in relative performance beliefs by between a third and a half, and closed gaps in STEM enrollment by ten percent. Though my intervention is low-cost, light-touch, and easily scalable, providing information alone does not eliminate gender gaps. Given how much changes in beliefs seem to correspond to changes in behavior, it would be difficult if not impossible to close the beliefs gap enough to fully close the behavior gap, and further research into other mechanisms is needed. Furthermore, the informational treatment worked by discouraging men rather than encouraging women, which has ambiguous welfare implications for the discouraged men and their peers. By continuing to follow the students in my study, I will examine how these short-term effects on course-taking translate to long-term effects on major choice and degree receipt.

The paper proceeds as follows. I introduce my setting and data in Section 2, describe my experimental design in Section 3, and lay out my empirical methods in Section 4. In section 5 I document baseline gender differences in beliefs about relative performance.

Section 6 includes the experimental results of my intervention. Section 7 contextualizes the results and Section 8 concludes.

## 2 Setting, Data, and Sample

The setting for this study is the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor (UM). UM is considered a highly selective institution (its acceptance rate was 23 percent in 2019) and is the state’s flagship. It is a large university, enrolling around 31,000 undergraduate and 17,000 graduate students. I focus on 5,715 undergraduate students enrolled in seven large introductory STEM courses in Fall 2019.<sup>1</sup> The courses span seven departments and subjects: biology, chemistry, computer science, economics, engineering, physics, and statistics.<sup>2</sup>

Students in these courses interact with an online platform called ECoach, which is a communication tool designed to provide tailored information and advice to students in large courses. Its intention is to substitute for the personalized one-on-one interactions between instructors and students that are not feasible in courses with hundreds of students. The intervention is delivered through this platform, as are the student surveys.

I use two main sources of data. The first is student administrative records from UM. These data contain all baseline demographic and academic characteristics for the sample such as gender, race, class standing, declared major, standardized test scores, high school GPA, and socioeconomic status. The data also contain students’ full academic trajectories while at UM: course-taking, major declaration, official grades, and (eventually) graduation. Because these are administrative data, they contain full information on academic outcomes for all students. Some students are missing information on pre-college characteristics such as high school GPA and parental education, which is collected as part of the application

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<sup>1</sup>A second round of the study was planned for the spring semester (referred to as the winter term at the University of Michigan) of 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple disruptions to the academic and personal lives of students, my research team and I canceled the planned second round of the study.

<sup>2</sup>The courses are: Biology 171 (Introductory Biology: Ecology and Evolution), Chemistry 130 (General Chemistry: Macroscopic Investigations and Reaction Principles), Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) 183 (Elementary Programming Concepts), Economics 101 (Principles of Economics I), Engineering 101 (Introduction to Computers and Programming), Physics 140 (General Physics I), and Statistics 250 (Introduction to Statistics and Data Analysis).



process. This is because some applicants, such as international and transfer students, do not submit this information.

The second source is a set of surveys that I administered to all students in my sample at two points in time: one survey before the intervention and one after the intervention. Students took the pre-intervention survey between September and November of 2019, and the post-intervention survey in December.<sup>3</sup> In two of the eight courses (biology and engineering), students received incentives in the form of course credit or extra credit for completing the pre-intervention surveys; an additional four courses (computer science, physics, statistics, and one of the economics sections) received indirect incentives (meaning they needed to complete the pre-intervention survey in order to access subsequent tasks that offered extra credit). For all courses, taking the pre-intervention survey was a necessary gateway in order to access most ECoach content.<sup>4</sup> Three courses (biology, computer science, and engineering) offered credit for the post-intervention survey.

## 3 Experimental Design

### 3.1 Intervention

My intervention consists of two treatment arms, which I refer to as information-only and information-plus-encouragement.<sup>5</sup> The two treatment arms are delivered as online messages and emails to students. The messages were sent a single time in the middle of the semester, at which point students had turned in several assignments and taken at least one exam. The messages were timed to align with the beginning of course selection and registration for the subsequent semester.

In the first treatment arm, which I refer to as the information-only intervention, I

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<sup>3</sup>The pre-intervention survey remained open to students throughout the semester, but I drop any responses from after the intervention.

<sup>4</sup>Students who did not respond to the pre-intervention survey could still receive emails sent from ECoach, so not taking the survey did not preclude students from receiving the intervention message.

<sup>5</sup>This study was pre-registered with the American Economic Association's registry for randomized controlled trials under RCT ID AEARCTR-0004644: <https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.4644-1.0>.

provide students with information about their performance relative to their classmates and relative to STEM majors. Specifically, the message includes a histogram showing the current distribution of grades in the course. Their own grade is highlighted and their percentile is labeled (e.g., “You’re at the 75th percentile”). The graph also includes a call-out informing students about the typical grade in the course for a STEM major (e.g., “STEM major median: B+”). All of the key information in the chart—the student’s score and percentile and the median for STEM majors—is repeated later in the message. The second part of the message gives further context about grades in the course, listing the course median for all students, students who go on to major in the field associated with the course, and (again) students who go on to major in STEM.<sup>6</sup> The final part of the message includes a list of links to set up advising appointments in various STEM departments (with the department the course is in appearing first). Appendix Figure A.1 shows an example of an information-only message.

The second treatment arm, which I refer to as information-plus-encouragement, was sent to a subset of high-performing students. It includes all of the same information as the information-only intervention. However, it is framed in more positive language calling attention to the student’s strong performance (“You’re performing like a STEM major!” rather than “Here’s how you’re doing”) and includes language explicitly encouraging the student to consider or stay in a STEM major. (Based on the student’s response to the pre-intervention survey item about their intended major, they are either urged to stay in their major or to consider a STEM major.) Appendix Figure A.2 shows an example of an information-plus-encouragement message.

In designing a second treatment arm, I wanted to test whether the framing of the information affected how students incorporated it. The findings of Li (2018), an experimental intervention that bundled relative performance information with encouragement and information

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<sup>6</sup>For biology, economics, computer science, and engineering, the associated major is just the field. The physics and chemistry courses tend to serve many more engineering majors than physics or chemistry, so the associated major is the subject *or* engineering. The statistics course serves students who ultimately major in many fields, so the associated major is statistics, economics, or computer science—the most common STEM majors for students who take the course.

about the field of economics, suggest that the encouragement aspect may be important for women in particular but cannot disentangle the various components.

Notably, students already know (or can easily see in multiple sources) their score in the course, but generally are not told their exact percentile. Information about historical course medians is available through an online system maintained by the university, but this system reports only overall course medians and not medians specific to certain populations like STEM majors. Furthermore, evidence from the pre-intervention survey suggests that students do not have accurate beliefs even about the information that is readily available; less than a third of students accurately identified the historical course median.

Students in the control condition also received messages reminding them of their current score, but containing no additional information about their relative performance. The control messages reminded students that course registration for the next semester was soon and contained the same advising links. I sent control messages to limit any confusion or spillover among control students; the intention was that they would not wonder why they did not also receive a message about their grades. Appendix Figure A.3 shows an example of a control message.

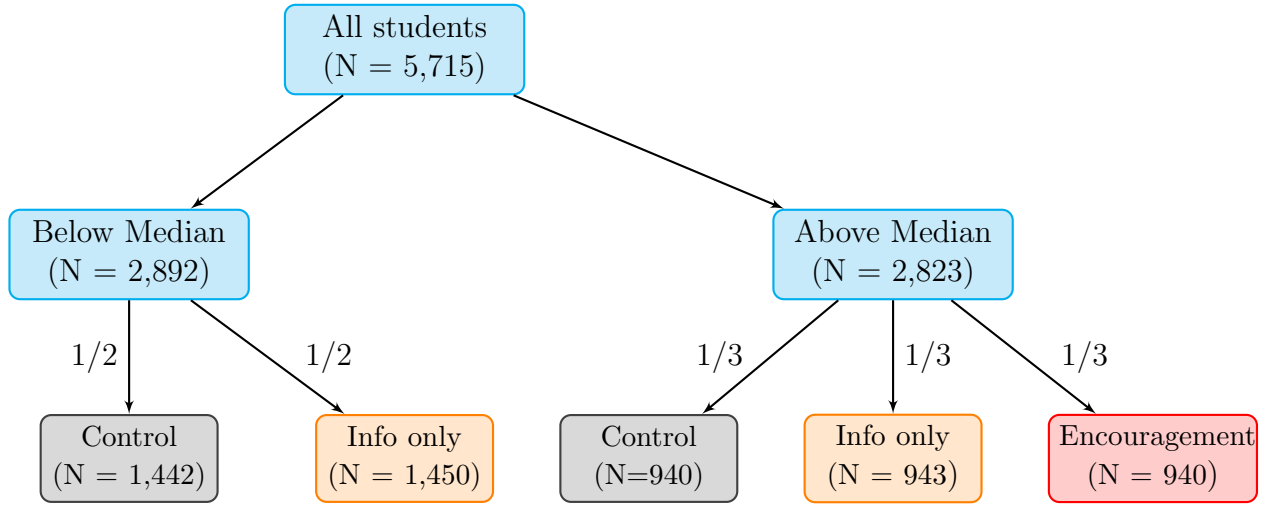
### 3.2 Treatment assignment

I assign treatment status at the student level, stratified by course, gender, and performance at the time of randomization (above versus below the course median). This results in  $8 \times 2 \times 2 = 32$  strata.<sup>7</sup> Within each of the 16 below-median strata, the probability of receiving the information-only treatment is 0.5. Students who are above the median are eligible for the second treatment arm; within the 16 above-median strata, the information-only and information-plus-encouragement treatment are each assigned with probability 1/3. I chose these treatment probabilities in order to maximize statistical power across the main and subgroup comparisons I was most interested in. In order to achieve a balanced sample in

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<sup>7</sup>Though there are seven courses with multiple sections each, the two economics sections operate independently (notably for grading), so I consider them separately for randomization.

Figure 1: Experimental Design



practice and not just in expectation, I re-randomize until each pre-treatment characteristic is balanced within strata (minimum p-value of 0.1). I account for this re-randomization and its implications for inference in my analysis. This method resulted in 2,382 control students, 2,393 students who received the information-only treatment, and 940 who received information plus encouragement. Figure 1 summarizes the experimental design.

Fifteen percent of my sample are enrolled in more than one of the included STEM courses. To account for this, I randomly choose (with equal probability) which of their courses they will be considered in for the experiment. Within that course, they are assigned to a treatment condition like everyone else. For their other courses, they receive no message (not even a control message).

### 3.3 Sample characteristics and balance

I begin with some basic facts about my sample of students, based on university administrative data. Table 1 shows demographic and academic characteristics for the sample by treatment status. This table also tests for balance on pre-treatment characteristics between control students and treated students. (Table 1 pools students receiving either treatment; a balance table that separates the two treatment arms is presented in Appendix

Table A.1. I also test for balance separately by gender in Appendix Table A.2).

The total experimental sample includes 5,715 students, of whom slightly under half (48 percent) are women. The majority of students (55 percent) are white. A large proportion (27 percent) are Asian, while smaller numbers identify as non-Black Hispanic (seven percent) or Black (three percent). This largely reflects the demographics of the university, though white and particularly Asian students are even more overrepresented in these STEM courses compared to the university as a whole. The majority of students are in their first or second year of college (42 and 40 percent, respectively).<sup>8</sup> The average UM student and the average student in my sample come from a socioeconomically advantaged background: 60.5 percent have a parent with a graduate or professional degree, and only 15 percent are first-generation (meaning neither parent has a bachelor’s degree). The majority (64 percent) have family incomes above \$100,000. Roughly half of the sample (52 percent) are Michigan residents.

The average cumulative GPA while at UM is 3.41 (students in their first semester do not yet have values for this variable). UM is a highly selective school, and this is reflected in the high average test scores (e.g., 710 out of 800 on the SAT quantitative section) and high school GPA (3.88 average). A large majority (83 percent) took calculus in high school. At the time of randomization, the majority of students (56 percent) had not officially declared a major. Of those who had declared, most were engineering majors (23 percent of the full sample). Nine percent were in a non-engineering STEM major, and 11 percent had declared a non-STEM major.<sup>9</sup>

I test for balance on each pre-treatment characteristic, as well as for the proportion of students missing information on each characteristic, with a t-test by treatment status, controlling for strata. I find one significant differences out of 36 tests. Treated students have an average ACT reading subscore that is 0.1 points lower on the 36-point scale, which is substantively small. I also test for whether the characteristics jointly predict treatment

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<sup>8</sup>Technically, UM measures class standing based on credits accumulated, so that, for example, some students classified as sophomores may be first years with enough credit (from previous courses, transfer, AP, etc.) to count as sophomores.

<sup>9</sup>Engineering is its own college and prospective engineers are admitted directly into the program as incoming first years. Many eventual science, humanities, social science, and other popular majors appear as undeclared during their first and second year, until they meet major prerequisites and apply for the major.

Table 1: Balance by Assignment to Treatment, Full Sample

	Control mean	Treatment mean	p-value	N non missing
Female	0.479	0.474		5,715
<i>Class standing (omitted: senior)</i>				
First year	0.433	0.417	0.317	5,715
Sophomore	0.387	0.403	0.551	
Junior	0.132	0.132	0.819	
<i>Race/ethnicity (omitted: American Indian or multiple race/ethnicities)</i>				
White	0.558	0.543	0.262	5,554
Hispanic	0.070	0.068	0.423	
Asian	0.254	0.289	0.159	
Black	0.038	0.025	0.200	
<i>Declared major (omitted: other)</i>				
Undeclared	0.560	0.559	0.606	5,715
Engineering	0.232	0.236	0.485	
Math, science, or economics	0.095	0.094	0.658	
<i>Academic and demographic characteristics</i>				
In-state	0.524	0.520	0.363	5,715
Prior college GPA	3.38	3.43	0.662	2,385
Math placement score	19.0	19.7	0.432	5,478
ACT English	32.3	32.6	0.885	3,151
ACT Math	30.9	31.3	0.990	3,151
ACT Reading	32.0	31.8	0.006	3,151
ACT Science	30.9	31.1	0.297	3,151
SAT Math	705	714	0.556	3,407
SAT Verbal	642	647	0.875	3,407
HS GPA	3.88	3.89	0.546	4,952
Took calculus in HS	0.814	0.838	0.427	5,104
<i>Max parental education (omitted: less than high school)</i>				
High school	0.071	0.070	0.271	5,641
Some college	0.064	0.051	0.403	
Bachelor's	0.253	0.241	0.431	
Grad or professional degree	0.588	0.617	0.603	
<i>Family Income (omitted: less than \$50,000)</i>				
\$50,000-100,000	0.182	0.189	0.213	4,374
Above \$100,000	0.625	0.643	0.542	
P-value on F-test of all X's		0.840		5,715
Total N	2,382	3,333	5,715	

Notes: "Treatment" includes students receiving either treatment arm. P-values based on a t-test of the characteristic by treatment status, controlling for strata. I also test for differences in missingness rates on all variables and find none. F-test tests for joint significance of all listed characteristics (except for female, which is blocked on) as well as missingness rates, controlling for strata.

status, again controlling for strata; the p-value from this F-test is 0.840.

Though not shown in Table 1, the highest proportion of students are in the statistics and chemistry courses (26.9 and 19.7 percent, respectively), and the lowest number are in engineering and physics (7.9 and 5.7 percent, respectively); these proportions reflect differing enrollments and course sizes. The full breakdown of the sample by course is available as Appendix Table A.3. Fifteen percent of students are enrolled in more than one of the seven courses, but are only considered in the experimental sample for a single course, which is chosen randomly (see section 3.2).

### 3.4 Take-up

Students could receive the intervention in two ways. The first was an email that was sent directly to their official university account. The second was from within ECoach, which students can visit at any time to view relevant information and other messages about the course. There were some minor formatting differences, but the content of these two formats—including the visual element, the histogram—was identical.

Among students who were sent a treatment message, 83 percent viewed it in some format. 57.5 percent viewed the message only as an email, three percent saw the message only within ECoach, and 23 percent viewed it in both formats. Women were more likely to view the message (in either form) than men: 85.5 percent of women compared to 81.2 percent of men ( $p = 0.001$ ).

I further examine whether certain types of students were more likely to read the intervention messages than others by regressing receipt of the message (in any form) on all pre-treatment characteristics, as well as the course the student is in and whether they were performing above the course median (included as Appendix Table A.4). Conditional on all other covariates, women, high-performing students, Black students, and those in the statistics, computer science, biology, and engineering courses were most likely to view the messages.

### 3.5 Survey response

Around three quarters of students responded to the pre-intervention survey, while slightly less than half (48.7 percent) responded to the post-intervention survey. Women were seven percentage points more likely to respond to each survey than men ( $p < 0.001$ ). I test for differential survey response by treatment status and find none. I show item-level response rates for the items used in my analysis as Appendix Table A.5. The item-level response rates to the post-intervention survey range from 41.3 percent (for beliefs about own performance) to 46.6 (for intended major).

I more thoroughly test for differences in survey response by pre-treatment characteristics in Table A.6.<sup>10</sup> I do this by regressing an indicator for post-intervention survey response on the full set of observed pre-treatment characteristics. Similar to the unconditional difference, women were six percentage points more likely to respond to the post-treatment survey. Higher-performing students (those in the top half of their course at the time of randomization) also had a six percentage point higher response rate; students with higher college and high school GPA also responded at higher rates. Students in the statistics and engineering courses have the highest response rates; recall that instructors in these courses offered extra credit for both surveys. Similarly, students declared as engineering majors were more likely to respond than any other major. The courses with the lowest response (the first economics section, which is the omitted category, and chemistry) had generally low engagement with ECoach. Younger students (first years and sophomores) were more likely to respond than upper-year students. This is consistent with students who are missing a measure of prior college GPA being more likely to respond, as this generally indicates that they are in their first semester of college. Asian students had the highest response rates: seven percentage points more than the reference group of American Indian or multiple race students. Finally, students missing an SAT score are 30 points less likely to respond, while students missing a value for high school GPA are 49 points more likely. These are somewhat

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<sup>10</sup>I focus on the post-intervention survey here, since I estimate treatment effects on post-intervention variables.



hard to interpret because students can be missing values for multiple reasons. Missing scores may indicate international or transfer students; additionally, the state of Michigan switched from requiring 11th graders to take the SAT rather than the ACT in 2016, so having one score over another may indicate cohort.

It is not surprising that different types of students were more or less likely to respond to the surveys. Survey response is independent of estimated treatment effects on my primary outcomes, which use administrative data, but could affect the internal and external validity of analyses using survey outcomes. To assess internal validity of analysis using survey outcomes, I run the same balance tests as in Section 3.3, this time conditional on responding to the post-intervention survey. These results, shown in Appendix Table A.7, indicate that all pre-treatment characteristics remain balanced when I limit to survey respondents (p-value from joint F-test = 0.953). The other potential concern is that any analysis done using survey data does not generalize to the full sample. To address this, I control for all pre-treatment characteristics in all analyses. Furthermore, I later run robustness checks where I estimate treatment effects on administrative data outcomes using only the sample who responded to the survey and use inverse probability weighting to adjust for survey response.

## 4 Empirical Method

### 4.1 Method for descriptive analysis

As motivating evidence for the hypothesis that gender differences in beliefs in relative performance are responsible for some of the gender gap in field specialization in college, my first set of results are a descriptive analysis of students' beliefs and how those beliefs are related to behavior. For the descriptive analysis, I restrict my sample to students assigned to the control condition in order to measure beliefs in the absence of any intervention. I use responses to the pre- and post-intervention surveys to understand how students update their beliefs over the course of a semester. I use the administrative transcript data to study how beliefs correlate with observed behavior. In all descriptive analyses, I limit the sample to

control students who responded to both surveys in order to avoid any confounding changes due to differential response over time.

## 4.2 Method for estimating treatment effects

To estimate the main effect of the intervention, I use the full sample of students and estimate the following specification:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treat_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i' + \delta_s + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $Treat_i$  indicates assignment to the either treatment,  $X_i$  is a vector of pre-treatment covariates (everything listed in Table 1), and  $\delta_s$  are dummy variables for all but one of the 32 gender-by-course-by-above-median strata. In this specification,  $\beta_1$  is the estimated treatment effect of the intervention for all students.

I am particularly interested in how the treatment differentially affects men versus women. To estimate effects by gender, I add in an interaction for female students:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Female_i + \beta_2 Treat_i + \beta_3 Female_i \cdot Treat_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i' + \delta_s + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Here,  $\beta_2$  gives the treatment effect for men, and  $\beta_2 + \beta_3$  gives the effect for women.

In most reported results, I pool the two treatment arms together and estimate a single treatment effect. The estimated treatment effects are therefore an average of the information-only and information-plus-encouragement treatments. To separately estimate and compare effects of the two treatment arms, I limit the sample to above-median students, who were eligible for the second treatment arm, and estimate:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Info_i + \beta_2 Encourage_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i' + \delta_s + \epsilon_i \quad (3)$$

where  $Info_i$  indicates assignment to the information-only treatment,  $Encourage_i$  indicates assignment to the information-plus-encouragement treatment, and everything else

is as above. I also estimate the effect of the two treatment arms by gender and with a specification analogous to Equation 2 (where I include indicators for each treatment and interactions between each treatment and gender).

In all analyses, I estimate intent-to-treat (ITT) effects, or the effect of being sent an intervention message. I estimate treatment effects on students’ beliefs about their relative performance using outcomes measured in the post-intervention survey. I estimate effects on short-term measures of field specialization based on administrative transcript data. I investigate additional mechanisms using outcomes and characteristics collected in the survey and available in administrative data.

All tables report robust standard errors and significance levels. In addition to standard inference, I also calculate p-values using randomization-based inference. In this approach, randomness in estimates comes from assignment of a fixed number of units (students) to treatment, rather than from sampling from a population. To implement, I re-assign treatment status 1,000 times, using the same procedure used in the original randomization. This accounts for the fact that my re-randomization procedure changes the distribution of test statistics (see Bruhn and McKenzie 2009). Under each “treatment” assignment, I calculate a test statistic of interest (a main effect, the effect for men, the effect for women, or the differential effect). This process generates a distribution of potential treatment effects that could be due to baseline differences between students assigned to treatment and control. For each effect, I calculate the share of the 1,000 simulated estimates that are larger in absolute value than the estimate observed under the true treatment assignment; this proportion represents the randomization-based p-value. Note that while the traditional sampling approach tests a null hypothesis of no average effect, randomization inference tests a sharp null hypothesis of no effect for any individual. A comparison of sampling or model-based p-values and randomization-based p-values is presented in Appendix Table A.8. Although they represent different conceptual approaches, the model- and randomization-based p-values produce virtually identical conclusions.

## 5 Control Students' Beliefs about Relative Performance

I begin by documenting systematic gender differences in students' beliefs about their relative performance, using responses to the student surveys at two points in time. This section focuses on control students only, to understand beliefs in the absence of intervention. This analysis is further limited to students who respond to both surveys, in order to avoid any confounding changes due to differential response over time. After showing raw differences in the beliefs of women and men, I perform a decomposition exercise to see how much these differences explain differences in course-taking.

### 5.1 Student beliefs about their own percentile

I measure baseline beliefs about relative performance in two ways. The first is how accurately students perceive their own relative rank in the course, measured by comparing what they predict their final percentile will be (in the pre- and post-intervention surveys) to their true percentile at the end of the course.<sup>11</sup> I do this at two points in time to see how beliefs change over the course of semester. I show this visually and also report the average errors in beliefs; I report both the absolute value of the error as well as a signed error to convey whether certain groups are over- or underestimating their performance.

Recall that students responded to the pre-intervention survey between September and November. Over 80 percent responded in September and nearly 90 percent took the first survey before the first exam in their course. When asked to predict their performance, they would have had limited performance feedback from assignments.

The control students in my sample begin the semester inaccurately predicting their performance. The average control student overpredicts their performance by 16 percentile ranks, meaning they expect to perform considerably better than they actually do. Because some students underpredict their performance (a negative error), the average absolute value

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<sup>11</sup>The survey item asks students to fill in a value from 1 to 100: "In terms of my final grade, I expect I will do better than \_\_\_% of my classmates in [course]." This survey item is not incentive-compatible, meaning students are not incentivized to give an accurate prediction. Note that doing so would itself constitute a treatment and could cause students to update their beliefs.

of a student's error is even larger in magnitude: 28 percentile ranks. There are significant differences by gender and performance. The average man assigned to the control condition overpredicts his final performance by 18 percentiles, while the average woman overpredicts by 13.5 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Low-performing (below-median) students tend to overestimate their performance (by 30 percentiles), while high-performing ones tend to underestimate, though to a lesser extent (average underprediction of 3 points). Low-performing men are the most overconfident (overpredicting by an average of 34 percentiles, compared to 26 for low-performing women) while high-performing women are the most underconfident (underpredicting by an average of six percentiles compared to less than a percentile for high-performing men).

Panel (a) of Figure 2 summarizes how accurate control students' beginning-of-semester predictions of their relative performance are by gender and realized performance. This graph plots realized performance (percentile rank in terms of final course grade) against predicted performance, grouping students into 50 equally sized bins by gender (roughly ten students per bin); the  $x$ - and  $y$ -values are the within-bin means. The fact that most plotted points fall above the 45-degree line confirms visually that most students start the semester overpredicting how they will do. The graph also makes clear that the lowest-performing students are the most overconfident, while the highest performers are the most underconfident. What is striking is that men's beliefs are consistently higher than the beliefs of women performing equally well. I formally test this in a regression of predicted percentile on true percentile, gender, and their interaction. The intercept for women is approximately eight percentiles lower, while the slopes are indistinguishable.

Even in the absence of any intervention, we would expect students to update their beliefs over the course of the semester as they learn about their performance through exams, assignments, and other feedback. At the end of the semester (right before final exams), control students' predictions are more accurate. The average student is still overpredicting, but by less: five percentiles compared to 16 at the start of the semester. Compared to an absolute value error of 28 percentile points at the beginning of the semester, the average control student's absolute error at the end of the semester is 19 points. The fact that the

change in the signed error is similar to the change in the absolute value of the error suggests that it is primarily the students who were initially overpredicting who updated. Though both men and women have updated, a gender gap in beliefs remains: the average man assigned to the control condition overpredicts his final performance by seven percentiles, while the average woman overpredicts by three. The gender gap among low-performing students is only slightly smaller compared to the beginning of the semester: below-median men are six percentiles more overconfident than women (15 vs. nine). The gender gap among high-performing students has mostly closed; the gap is now 4 percentile points ( $p < 0.1$ ).

These changes are reflected in Panel (b) of Figure 2. The plotted points are now clustered closer to the 45-degree line, and the points on the left (i.e., the lower performing students) shift more over the semester; this means that students became more accurate, particularly the ones who were previously the most overconfident. While the beliefs gap between the highest performing men and women has closed over time, lower performing men remain more overconfident than women performing similarly.

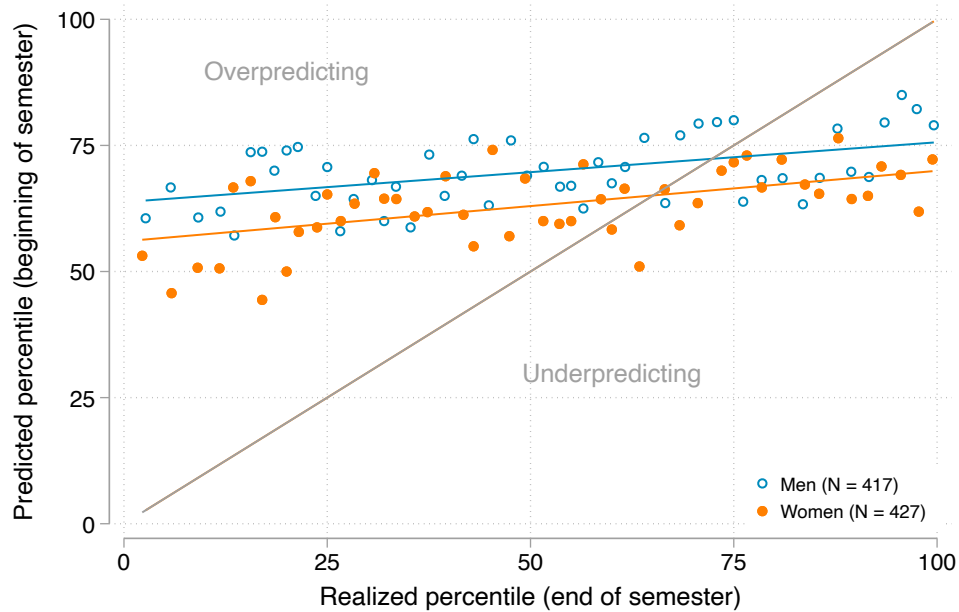
## 5.2 Student beliefs about other STEM majors

My second measure of beliefs about relative performance focuses on what students believe about STEM majors. I ask students what they think the median grade in their course is among students who go on to major in a STEM field; I can then compare their answers to the true median.<sup>12</sup> This measure captures how difficult students perceive the course to be, how well they think they must do to pursue STEM, and (implicitly) how they compare to other STEM majors.

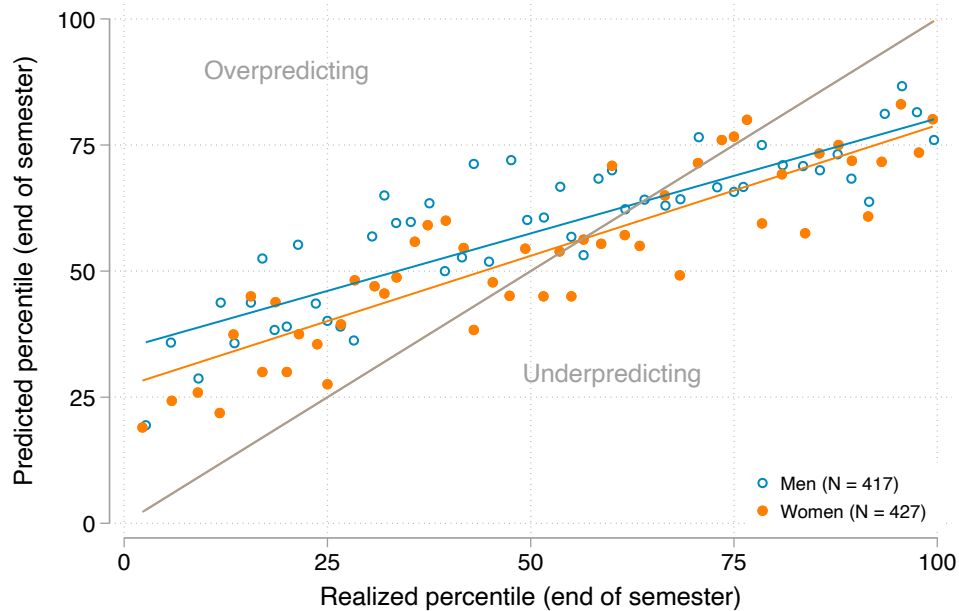
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<sup>12</sup>The survey item asked, “When thinking just about students who declare a major in math, science, engineering, or economics, what do you think was their median grade in [*course*]?” The true course medians for STEM majors for the seven courses are: B for Biology, Chemistry, and Physics; B+ for Economics and Statistics; and A- for Engineering and EECS. I calculate these using historical administrative data on students who took each course in the 2014-15, 2015-16, or 2016-17 academic year and who declared a STEM major within three terms of taking the course.

Figure 2: Control Student Beliefs about Own Percentile by Gender



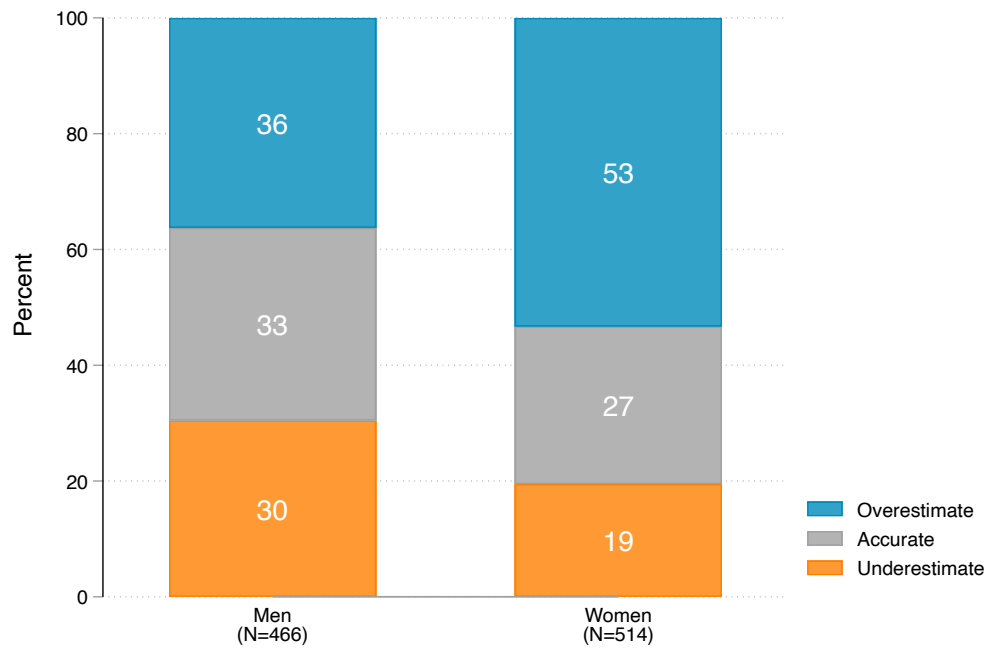
(a) Beginning of semester beliefs



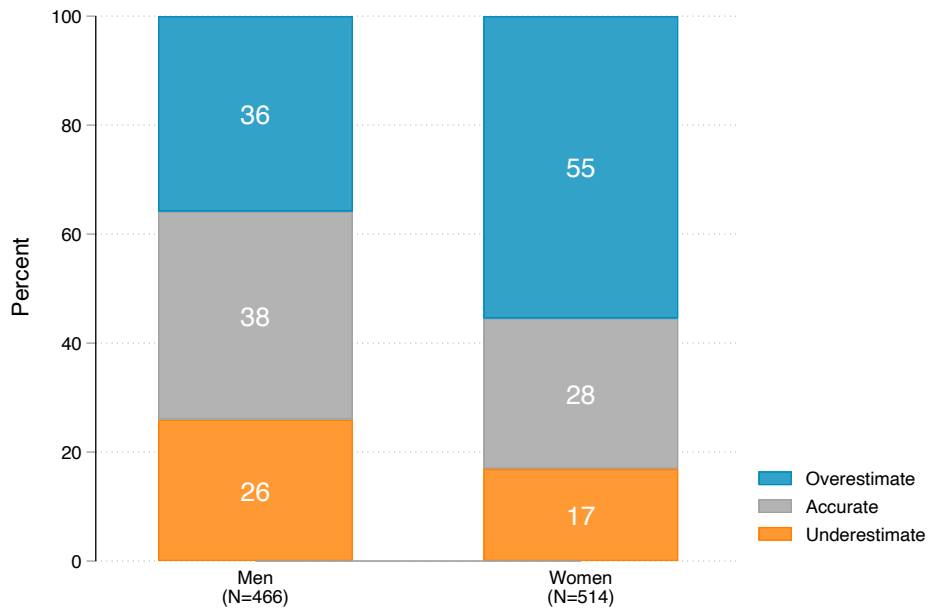
(b) End of semester beliefs

Notes: Sample restricted to control students who responded to the question about percentile beliefs on both the pre- and post-intervention surveys. X-axis measures students' realized percentile within the course, measured at the end of the semester. Y-axis measures what students predict their final percentile will be when asked on the survey. Figure is a binned scatterplot plotting the average values within 50 equally-sized bins of students.

Figure 3: Control Student Beliefs about Course Median for STEM Majors by Gender



(a) Beginning of semester beliefs



(b) End of semester beliefs

Notes: Sample restricted to control students who responded to the question about the median on both the pre- and post-intervention surveys. Overestimating means the student thinks the median is higher than it is (e.g., they median is a B and they think it is a B+), while underestimating means they think the median is lower than it is.



Panel (a) of Figure 3 summarizes how well students can identify the STEM major course median at the beginning of the semester, by gender. (I again limit the sample to control students who also answered the analogous end-of-semester survey item.) At the outset of the course, 33 percent of men and 27 percent of women accurately report the median. Men are much more likely to underestimate the median (30 vs 19 percent), while women are much more likely to overestimate (53 vs 36 percent). Note that in this case, underestimating means a student thinks their (potential) peers are doing worse than they actually are. In other words, this suggests that women may believe the bar for majoring in STEM to be higher than men do.

Control students' beliefs about the course median for STEM majors change little over the semester (Panel (b) of Figure 3). This is unsurprising; though they learn about their own performance and, to a lesser extent, that of their peers, they receive no direct information about STEM majors' grades in particular. By December, when they respond to the post-intervention survey, 26 percent of control men and 17 percent of control women underestimate the median; 36 percent of men and 55 percent of women overestimate. Low-performing men are the most likely to underestimate the median (32 percent), while high-performing women are the most likely to overestimate (69 percent).

Students also responded to questions about their beliefs on the overall course median and the course median for students who major in the subject affiliated with the course (e.g., the Econ 101 median among students who declare an economics major). Beliefs about the median grade for subject majors are similar to beliefs about STEM majors. For beliefs about the overall course median, all students are much more likely to underestimate, but the differences by gender are much smaller. Among control men, 55 percent underestimate, 33 percent are accurate, and 12 percent overestimate the overall median at the end of the semester. Among control women, the proportions are 50, 35, and 15 percent. The negligible gender differences in overall median beliefs imply that it is not the case that men and women have different beliefs about grades or grade inflation generally. Rather, they hold different beliefs about the selection into STEM, with women setting the bar for STEM higher.

### 5.3 Beliefs about relative performance and course-taking: a correlational exercise using control students

In the previous section, I find that men are more overconfident than women about their own place in the course distribution, even by the end of the semester when they have nearly full information about their performance; this is especially true for lower performing men. Men are also more likely to underestimate how STEM majors perform, while women are much more likely to overestimate. These two sets of findings about students' beliefs—about their own relative rank and about the performance of other STEM majors—work in the same direction, and suggest a story of relative male overconfidence and female underconfidence.

This may be part of the explanation for differential rates of STEM enrollment and persistence. In the semester following the course, control men took an average of two STEM credits more than women. (A single STEM course is usually four credits, so this represents half of a course.) This is consistent with men being more confident than women about their performance and confidence affecting course-taking. While suggestive, this relationship is correlational and does not account for the myriad factors which may differ by gender.

To investigate more systematically whether beliefs about relative performance are related to the gender gap in course-taking, I perform a decomposition following Gelbach (2016). This accounting exercise uses the omitted variable bias formula to partial out how much the addition of a variable to a regression changes some base coefficient—in my case, the coefficient on female, which represents the gender gap. An advantage of this approach relative to one that progressively adds covariates is that it is not sensitive to the order in which covariates are added.<sup>13</sup>

I apply the decomposition to a model where I regress the number of STEM credits in the semester following the course on a female dummy, all of the demographic and academic controls in Table 1, the student's final percentile rank in the course, their prediction of their final percentile, and dummies for whether they are under- or overestimating the median

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<sup>13</sup>The Gelbach decomposition is conceptually similar to a Kitagawa-Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition, and in fact is equivalent once interactions between the covariates and gender are included.

course grade for STEM majors. The results are presented in Table 2. Only control students who responded to both surveys are included in this exercise.

The full set of belief, performance, academic, and demographic variables account for roughly half of the observed gender gap in credits (2.15 credits in this sample). A student's declared major when they took the course explains by far the largest part of the gap: 32 percent. A student's score on the math placement test they take upon entering UM explains an additional seven percent of the total gap. Demographics, high school and college achievement, and student level together explain three percent. Students' beliefs about their own course percentile explain around two percent of the gender gap in credits, and beliefs about the course median for STEM majors explain an additional 5 percent. Together, the beliefs measures account for seven percent of the total gender gap, and 14 percent of the part of the gender gap that is explained by covariates. The decomposition suggests that students' beliefs about other STEM majors may be particularly important.

My results thus far demonstrate that women and men have systematically different beliefs about their relative performance in STEM courses, and that even conditional on true performance and a rich set of academic and demographic covariates, these beliefs are related to the gap in field specialization in college. My study is one of very few that can connect beliefs about consequential real-world performance to observed, real-world outcomes, and the largest scale study in the context of postsecondary specialization. Furthermore, I show that students' beliefs about the performance of other STEM majors is consequential for the STEM behavior gap; no other studies have measured this belief, which may be particularly subject to information frictions and particularly salient for specialization decisions.

Even accounting for a rich set of controls, this relationship remains correlational. It is possible that my measures of beliefs may be picking up some omitted factor that is actually responsible for behavior, and correlations between the covariates make the magnitudes hard to interpret. To isolate the causal role of relative performance beliefs, my experiment attempts to exogenously change beliefs and study how academic decisions change as a result.

Table 2: Decomposition of Gender Gap in STEM Credits by Relative Performance Belief and other Covariate Components (Control Students Only)

Female - male gap in STEM credits	-2.15 (0.28)		
Covariate	Gap explained by covariate	Percent of total gap	Percent of explained gap
Own percentile belief	-0.04 (0.04)	2%	4%
STEM median belief	-0.11 (0.05)	5%	10%
Realized percentile	-0.02 (0.02)	1%	2%
Demographics	0.02 (0.05)	-1%	-2%
High school achievement	-0.02 (0.10)	1%	2%
Math placement score	-0.15 (0.06)	7%	14%
College achievement	-0.04 (0.05)	2%	4%
Student level	0.00 (0.03)	0%	0%
Declared major	-0.69 (0.16)	32%	66%
Total explained	-1.05	49%	100%
Total unexplained	-1.10	51%	-
N	918		

Notes: Decomposition follows Gelbach (2016) and is implemented using b1x2 command in Stata. STEM credits measured in the semester following the one when students took the course. Own percentile belief is a student's 1-100 prediction of their own final course percentile, measured in the end of semester survey. STEM median belief measured as two dummy variables for whether a student is over- or underestimating the course median for STEM majors, measured in the end of semester survey. Demographics include race, parent education, family income, and in-state status. High school achievement includes ACT and SAT scores, high school GPA, and a high school calculus indicator. College achievement measured as prior GPA at UM. Sample limited to control students who answered both surveys.

## 6 Experimental Results

This project was pre-registered with the AEA trial registry (RCT ID AEARCTR-0004644), and I pre-specified all analyses. Any exploratory, non-pre-specified analyses are identified as such.

### 6.1 Effect of intervention on student beliefs

I begin by estimating treatment effects on students' beliefs, using measures of relative performance beliefs similar to those described in Section 5. The first measures the accuracy of students' beliefs about their own relative performance by subtracting the student's true percentile from what they estimate their percentile to be at the end of the semester. Here, I use mid-semester performance as the realized percentile, because end-of-semester performance could itself be affected by the intervention if students adjust their effort. (I test for effects on performance directly in Section 6.4.) I report both an absolute value measure as well as a signed measure that captures the direction of the error. Second, I measure the accuracy of beliefs about the performance of STEM majors by creating two indicator variables for whether a student is over- or underestimating the course median for students who go on to major in STEM.

I show estimated treatment effects on these beliefs outcomes in Table 3, for the full sample as well as separately for men and women. In this table, I combine the two treatment arms. Recall that all treated students received the same informational content; the only difference between the arms was whether the information was framed in a neutral or positive way.

The results for the absolute value of the error in the student's predicted percentile indicate that the average student correctly updates their prediction by approximately 1.5 percentiles. (A negative treatment effect means the error is getting smaller.) This appears to be driven by men updating: they correct their beliefs by 2.2 percentiles, while women's absolute error shrinks by a statistically insignificant 0.7 percentiles (though note I cannot

reject that men and women’s beliefs change by the same magnitude). The gender gap in this measure among control students is 2.7 percentiles (20.3 for men minus 17.6 for women), so the covariate-adjusted gap in the absolute value prediction closes by half.

When I look instead at the signed error in percentile beliefs, I find no average treatment effect overall or for either gender. However, the fact that the absolute value of the error changes implies that this null finding is masking belief updating that goes in both directions. I explore this further below.

The estimated effects on students’ beliefs about the median course grade for STEM majors indicate that the intervention also closed part of the gender gap in this second type of belief. Receiving the informational intervention made men 5.2 percentage points less likely to underestimate the median and made women 5.1 percentage points less likely to overestimate. The gender gap in underestimating among control students is 9.8 percentage points (with men more likely to underestimate) and the control gap in overestimating is 17.7 percentage points (with women more likely to overestimate). Comparing control and treatment gender gaps, the treatment closes the gap in both measures by roughly a third. Both changes suggest that men are becoming less overconfident relative to women.

In Table 4 I investigate whether beliefs change in the expected direction for the expected groups by further disaggregating students by whether they were below or above the course median at the time of treatment. Recall that lower-performing (i.e., below-median) control men were particularly overconfident in both types of beliefs and higher-performing (i.e., above-median) control women were particularly underconfident in terms of the STEM median measure. Table 4 also separately estimates effects of the two treatment arms for the above-median students; only above-median students were eligible for the second treatment arm of information paired with encouragement.

Table 3: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' Beliefs about Themselves and Other STEM Majors, Overall and by Gender

	Absolute value error in percentile beliefs (   Predicted - realized   )			Signed error in percentile beliefs (Predicted - realized)		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-1.485** (0.657)	-2.243** (1.007)	-0.743 (0.858)	0.592 (0.849)	0.536 (1.270)	0.647 (1.138)
P-value, women vs. men			0.259			0.948
Control mean	18.981	20.331	17.646	6.361	8.471	4.276
N	2,358	1,166	1,192	2,358	1,166	1,192
	Underestimating course median for STEM majors			Overestimating course median for STEM majors		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-0.033** (0.015)	-0.052** (0.022)	-0.016 (0.019)	-0.023 (0.018)	0.007 (0.026)	-0.051** (0.026)
P-value, women vs. men			0.220			0.111
Control mean	0.206	0.257	0.159	0.46	0.368	0.545
N	2,632	1,291	1,341	2,632	1,291	1,341

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. All beliefs outcomes based on response to post-intervention survey.

Table 4: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' Beliefs, by Gender, Mid-Semester Performance, and Treatment Arm

	Signed error in percentile beliefs (Predicted - realized)			Underestimating course median for STEM majors			Overestimating course median for STEM majors		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
<b>Below median students</b>									
Info-only effect	-1.349 (1.243)	-3.735** (1.881)	0.736 (1.665)	-0.065*** (0.023)	-0.088** (0.035)	-0.044 (0.030)	0.035 (0.026)	0.064* (0.037)	0.010 (0.036)
P-value, women vs. men			0.077			0.345			0.293
Control mean	17.437	21.442	13.765	0.26	0.318	0.209	0.372	0.281	0.451
N	1,058	497	561	1,215	569	646	1,215	569	646
<b>Above median students</b>									
Pooled effect	2.375** (1.160)	4.095** (1.710)	0.553 (1.543)	-0.003 (0.018)	-0.020 (0.029)	0.014 (0.022)	-0.078*** (0.026)	-0.043 (0.037)	-0.115*** (0.036)
P-value, women vs. men			0.123			0.353			0.168
Info-only effect	1.350 (1.366)	2.226 (2.037)	0.400 (1.761)	-0.001 (0.021)	-0.009 (0.034)	0.007 (0.026)	-0.077** (0.030)	-0.041 (0.043)	-0.113*** (0.042)
P-value, women vs. men			0.493			0.700			0.230
Info + encouragement effect	3.385*** (1.287)	5.347*** (1.842)	1.257 (1.790)	-0.006 (0.021)	-0.033 (0.032)	0.023 (0.026)	-0.073** (0.030)	-0.039 (0.043)	-0.109*** (0.042)
P-value, women vs. men			0.112			0.172			0.243
P-value, info vs. info+enc	0.105	0.085	0.619	0.819	0.450	0.570	0.910	0.968	0.927
Control mean	-8.111	-7.081	-9.232	0.134	0.181	0.086	0.577	0.475	0.681
N	1,300	669	631	1,417	722	695	1,417	722	695

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Only above-median students were eligible for the information-plus-encouragement treatment; all below-median treated students received information only. Effect of information-only treatment for below-median students and either treatment (pooled) for above-median students estimated from a regression of outcome on an indicator for receiving either treatment, an indicator for being above the course median at time of randomization, and their interaction. To estimate effects on men and women, a full three-way interaction between treatment, female, and above-median is added. Treatment effects of the information-only and info-plus-encouragement intervention for above-median students estimated only on the sample of above-median students using the same specifications as above, but with two separate treatment indicators. All regressions control for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. All beliefs outcomes based on responses to post-intervention survey.



I find that students' beliefs about their own percentile change in the expected direction. Low-performing men, who in the absence of intervention overestimate their percentile by 21.4 percentiles, update downwards by 3.7 percentiles. High-performing men show the opposite pattern: they underestimate their percentile by seven points absent the intervention, but receiving either treatment (pooled effect) causes them to update upwards by four percentiles. In other words, both low and high-performing men become more accurate in their predictions.

I find that low-performing men, who are most likely to underestimate the course median for STEM majors without the intervention, become 8.8 percentage points less likely to do so (a change of 28 percent relative to the control mean of 31.8); I detect no change for any other group. Similarly, high-performing women, who are most likely to overestimate the median, see the largest change in that measure. The pooled estimate suggests the intervention makes high-performing women 11.5 percentage points less likely to overestimate (a change of 17 percent relative to the control mean of 68.1).

I find limited evidence that the encouragement treatment arm was more effective than the purely informational treatment for high-performing students. The point estimates for above-median men suggest that the information-plus-encouragement message may have led to a larger positive update in percentile beliefs for this group, but it is only marginally significantly different from the information-only effect ( $p = 0.085$ ). Overall, my results do not provide strong support for a differential treatment effect, so for the remainder of the paper I combine the treatment arms and consider the effect of receiving any type of informational treatment. (I discuss estimated effects by treatment arm on my primary outcomes in the next section and show them in Appendix Table A.9.)

## 6.2 Effect of intervention on STEM persistence

As outlined in my pre-analysis plan, my primary outcomes are three measures of persistence in STEM, operationalized as a short-term, medium-term, and long-term measure. In this draft, I focus on the short-term primary outcome, enrollment in STEM courses, because only one semester has passed since the intervention. I will eventually be able to

measure major declaration (medium-term) and STEM degree attainment (long-term). I perform a prediction exercise to estimate how the observed short-term effects are likely to translate into long-term effects in Section 6.3.

The primary outcome I present is enrollment in STEM courses, which I operationalize as the number of credits a student enrolled in in the semester following the intervention, as well as a binary indicator for taking any STEM courses. I classify courses by two-digit Classification of Educational Program (CIP) code, which the University of Michigan assigns to all courses.<sup>14</sup> The following subjects (CIP codes) are considered STEM: natural resources and conservation (03), computer and information sciences (11) engineering (14), biological and biomedical sciences (26), mathematics and statistics (27), physical sciences (40), and economics (45.06; see footnote). This outcome comes from the administrative data; attrition or missingness occurs only if a student graduates or drops out. If a student does not show up in the data in a given term, I code them as taking zero credits and courses.

Table 5 reports estimated treatment effects on STEM persistence in the semester following the intervention. The first column shows that the average effect of the informational treatment was to decrease the number of STEM credits students took in the subsequent term by 0.18 credits ( $p < 0.1$ ), which represents a decrease of two percent relative to the control mean of 8.5. The second two columns, where I estimate effects by gender, show that the negative effect is driven entirely by men. The men in my sample decreased their STEM credits by 0.28 credits (three percent;  $p < 0.05$ ) while women decreased theirs by a statistically insignificant 0.079 (one percent). I cannot reject that men's and women's behavior change equally. The gender gap in STEM credits absent the intervention is two credits, so the treatment shrinks the gap by roughly ten percent.

I find a small, marginally significant average effect on the extensive margin of STEM: a decrease in the likelihood of taking any STEM courses by 1.4 percentage points (1.5 percent;  $p < 0.1$ ). The points estimates for men and women are identical to three digits and are statistically indistinguishable. For high-performing students, I test for differential effects on

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<sup>14</sup>The exception to using two-digit CIP code is economics (45.06), which I code separately from the rest of the social sciences (45).

STEM course-taking by treatment arm (Appendix Table A.9) but find none.

Table 5: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' STEM Course-taking,  
Overall and by Gender

	Number of STEM credits one semester post intervention			Took any STEM courses one semester post intervention		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-0.182* (0.095)	-0.276** (0.129)	-0.079 (0.140)	-0.014* (0.007)	-0.014 (0.009)	-0.014 (0.012)
P-value, women vs. men			0.303			0.975
Control mean	8.507	9.476	7.454	0.91	0.936	0.881
N	5,715	2,993	2,722	5,715	2,993	2,722

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Taken together, the estimated effects of the informational intervention on students' beliefs and subsequent behavior imply that men's overly confident beliefs about their relative performance are partially responsible for their higher rates of STEM persistence. By inducing them to accurately revise their beliefs about their relative performance, the experiment caused men to take fewer STEM credits. Women, on the other hand, revised their beliefs in a direction that should make them less underconfident about their relative performance, but did not change their behavior. Male overconfidence rather than female underconfidence appears to be a determinant of the gender gap in field specialization.

As a robustness check, I estimate treatment effects on STEM course-taking outcomes but limit my sample to students who responded to the post-intervention survey. The results, shown in Appendix Table A.10, produce very similar point estimates. As an additional robustness check, I re-estimate treatment effects on relative performance beliefs, adjusting

for survey response using inverse probability weights that reflect how likely a student is to respond to the survey based on their observable characteristics. In this exercise, survey respondents who closely resemble non-respondents are given more weight. The results are included as Appendix Table A.11. The point estimates are similar to the ones in Table 3. Both exercises confirm that differential survey response is not leading to a spurious conclusion about the relationship between changes to beliefs and changes to behavior.

A natural question arising from the negative effect on STEM course-taking for male students is which types of courses they took instead. As an exploratory analysis, I test for effects on credits taken in other subjects, which I separate out by non-economics social science, psychology, business and public policy, humanities and the arts, and all other subjects. The results, included as Appendix Table A.12, do not reveal a clear substitution pattern. Although the point estimates for psychology, humanities and arts, and other credits are positive, none are statistically significant.<sup>15</sup>

### **6.3 Effect of intervention on short-term STEM intentions and predicted STEM degree receipt**

In designing an intervention that targets students' beliefs about their ability to succeed in STEM, I ultimately am interested their choice of college major. Since only one semester has passed since the experiment, this outcome does not yet exist. I have so far focused on course-taking as a short-term proxy for major choice. The results for course-taking suggest that overconfident men take fewer STEM credits as a result of receiving information about their relative performance. Course-taking is an important precursor to major choice; here, I use additional outcomes and the effects on course-taking to speculate on major choice.

I pre-specified two outcomes capturing students' intent to major in STEM and their

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<sup>15</sup>I also investigate whether the intervention changed the difficulty of courses students take by estimating effects on an average course difficulty outcome. I calculate the proportion of students who withdrew from a course in the three previous academic years, then take the average of that proportion over the courses students took in the semester following the intervention. I find a very small negative but statistically insignificant effect for men (not shown). It's possible that the treatment shifted men into easier courses, but the evidence is weak.

interest in the field. Both measures are based on survey responses. The first is simply whether they stated in the post-intervention survey that they planned to major in a STEM subject. The second is an index aggregating stated intentions and interests, which I refer to as a STEM interest index. It combines items about their general interest in STEM, their intention to seek academic advising in a STEM field, and their intention to take subsequent STEM courses. The index is constructed following Kling et al. (2007), where I standardize each variable using the control group mean and standard deviation, impute missing values (for individuals with at least one valid index component) with the treatment-assignment group mean, and then take the unweighted mean across the standardized, imputed components.

I find small, negative, statistically insignificant effects on stated intent to major in a STEM subject for both men and women and weak evidence of a negative effect on STEM interest (included in Table 6). I find an overall effect on the STEM interest index of -0.066 standard deviations. The effect is larger and marginally significant for women but not men (-0.085 for women, an insignificant -0.045 for men).

As a complement to these pre-specified analyses, I estimate treatment effects on students' predicted STEM degree receipt. The basic idea is straightforward and intuitive, and follows Athey et al. (2019). A prior cohort of students (what Athey et al. 2019 call the “observational sample”) serves as the basis for predicting STEM degree receipt as a function of a set of demographic and academic characteristics, including the courses they take in all possible subjects. I save the estimated parameters from this prediction and apply them to the experimental sample to get their predicted probability of majoring in STEM. I can then estimate treatment effects on this predicted probability. This provides a sense of how substantively important the short-term treatment effects are and, with some assumptions, this provides an unbiased estimate of the ATE on the long-term outcome.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Along with a standard unconfoundedness assumption, the two additional assumptions required in order to get an unbiased treatment effect are as follows. (1) Surrogacy: the long-term outcome is independent of the treatment conditional on the full set of surrogates (i.e., pre-treatment X's and short-term outcomes). In my case, this means the treatment affects STEM majoring only through observed student characteristics and accumulated credits and not through any other channel. (2) Comparability: the conditional distribution of the primary outcome conditional on the surrogates is the same in the two samples. This would be violated if the relationship between course-taking and major choice changed over time, or if the treatment somehow

Table 6: Estimated Effects of Intervention on Students' Subjective Interest in STEM and Predicted Degree Receipt, Overall and by Gender

	Intent to major in STEM (binary)			STEM interest/intent index (std. dev. units)		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-0.019 (0.016)	-0.011 (0.020)	-0.026 (0.024)	-0.066** (0.031)	-0.045 (0.040)	-0.085* (0.047)
P-value, women vs. men			0.623			0.526
Control mean	0.733	0.788	0.682	0	0.11	-0.102
N	2,662	1,302	1,360	2,639	1,289	1,350
	Predicted probability of obtaining a STEM degree					
	All	Men	Women			
Treatment effect	-0.006 (0.006)	-0.008 (0.007)	-0.004 (0.009)			
P-value, women vs. men			0.745			
Control mean	0.594	0.677	0.505			
N	5,715	2,993	2,722			

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. STEM interest and intent outcomes based on response to post-intervention survey. Predicted STEM degree is a predicted probability, based on pre-treatment characteristics and subsequent course-taking. Prediction specification estimated on a historical sample of students taking the same courses as the experimental sample.

The bottom panel of Table 6 shows estimates for treatment effects on predicted long-term degree. The estimated effects for all students as well as for men and women are small and not statistically significantly different from zero. For men, the exercise predicts a decrease in STEM degree receipt of 0.8 percentage points, though the confidence interval includes an effect as large as -2 percentage points or even a small positive change. For women, the estimate is a statistically insignificant decrease of 0.4 percentage points; the estimates for men and women are not statistically different.

Though not strong evidence, the findings in this section are consistent with men being discouraged by the intervention. However, the magnitudes imply that any effects of the intervention on longer-term STEM persistence and major choice are likely to be small.

## 6.4 Mechanisms

Much of the prior research on relative feedback provision has focused on effort and performance as an outcome (Ashraf et al. 2014; Azmat et al. 2019; Azmat and Iriberry 2010; Bandiera et al. 2015; Dobrescu et al. 2019; Goulas and Megalokonomou 2015; Tran and Zeckhauser 2012). Understanding how students adjust their effort in response to feedback is interesting in its own right, as educators care about improving performance, and could also be an important mechanism through which the intervention changes students' behavior. I pre-specified two effort and performance measures as secondary outcomes: students' score on the final exam, and their final grade in the course.<sup>17</sup>

I estimate treatment effects on final exam and final course scores, both measured as percent scores out of 100 (included as Table 7). There is no evidence that the intervention affected performance for men, women, or students as a whole. Although the point estimates for both final exam and final course performance are negative for men (-0.013 and -0.141, respectively), the lower bounds of the 95 percent confidence intervals imply that men could

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changed the relationship.

<sup>17</sup>One course, EECS 183, had a final project in lieu of an exam, so I use scores on that for the final exam measure. One section of the economics course allows students to opt out of the final exam (they can drop their lowest score, so many choose not to take the final), so I do not include it in my analyses of final exam performance.

have at most decreased their final exam and course performance by less than a percentage point.

The intervention could change students’ beliefs about their ability to succeed in STEM, which could serve as an intermediate channel between their beliefs about their performance and their behavior. To measure this, I construct an index capturing students’ beliefs about their ability to succeed in STEM, which aggregates responses to items about their grades being “good enough” for STEM, a series of STEM-self-efficacy items, and items about identifying with being a “math person” or “science person”. Like with the STEM interest index, the construction of the success index follows Kling et al. (2007). The results are included as the last panel of Table 7. The effects of the intervention on this success index are small and insignificant: positive 0.013 standard deviations for men, 0.035 standard deviations for women, and no detectable difference by gender.

To further explore mechanisms, I report treatment effect heterogeneity along several additional dimensions.

One advantage of my setting relative to previous work is that I am able to study students in multiple STEM fields. Although the phrase “STEM” is often used to refer to academic fields with similar characteristics, there is considerable variation in key factors such as the proportion of women and the mathematical intensity across fields. The seven courses in my study vary in these ways as well as in course content, grading structure, and more. For each of five key outcomes (absolute value of percentile belief error; signed percentile error; underestimating the course median for STEM majors; overestimating the median; and number of STEM credits one semester later), I report estimated treatment effects by subject (shown in Appendix Table A.13). I estimate these using a single regression with subject-by-treatment interactions. I also test for joint significance of the subject interactions. I find mixed evidence that the treatment effect varied by course. There are significant differences by course in changes to the absolute value of the percentile error (p-value of F-test = 0.060), with students in the physics and engineering courses changing their beliefs by the most (11 and six percentiles, respectively). There is some evidence that students’



Table 7: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' Performance and Beliefs about Ability to Succeed in STEM, Overall and by Gender

	Final exam or project score (out of 100)			Final course score (out of 100)		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-0.167 (0.332)	-0.013 (0.454)	-0.334 (0.486)	0.004 (0.186)	-0.141 (0.252)	0.164 (0.275)
P-value, women vs. men			0.630			0.415
Control mean	80.917	81.666	80.107	83.974	84.62	83.273
N	5,323	2,785	2,538	5,648	2,961	2,687
	STEM success index (std. dev. units)					
	All	Men	Women			
Treatment effect	0.024 (0.025)	0.013 (0.035)	0.035 (0.035)			
P-value, women vs. men			0.656			
Control mean	0	0.116	-0.108			
N	2,687	1,317	1,370			

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Performance outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data. STEM success index is based on post-intervention survey responses and aggregates items about being “good enough” for STEM, self-efficacy, and STEM identity.

beliefs about the median changed the most in the subjects where they were previously the most incorrect. The courses with the highest baseline rates of students underestimating the median, computer science and engineering, have the largest reductions in students underestimating (7.5 and 11 percentage points, respectively), but I cannot reject that the subject of the course has no relationship with the size of the treatment effect. Similarly, two of the three courses with the highest baseline rates of students overestimating the median (biology and economics) have the largest estimated reductions in overestimating the median (7.5 and seven percentage points); again, I cannot reject that these estimates don't vary by course. Finally, while I find suggestive evidence that some courses had differential treatment effects on STEM credits (p-value of F-test = 0.080), the pattern across the outcomes is not strong. The computer science course had one of the largest changes in credits (-0.431) as well as one of the largest reductions in students underestimating the STEM median; this is consistent with relative overconfidence mattering for behavior. However, the statistics course had the largest change in credits (-0.533), but small, insignificant effects on the beliefs outcomes. Overall, I lack the power needed to make precise comparisons across subject.

A student's intended major at the beginning of the course might affect how they update their beliefs and change their behavior. Inframarginal students—those not even considering a STEM field—might be less moved by the intervention, while those considering a STEM major may find the information more salient and react more. Appendix Table A.14 shows treatment effects on the same five outcomes as above, by whether students indicated in the pre-intervention survey that they planned to major in a STEM subject. Although I cannot reject equality of treatment effects for all outcomes, the results suggest that it is students already interested in STEM who change their beliefs and behavior more. In particular, students who stated they planned to major in a STEM subject corrected their beliefs by 1.9 percentile points (in absolute value terms), were 4.2 percentage points less likely to underestimate the course median for STEM majors, and took 0.25 fewer credits (a change of -2.6 percent).

Similarly, I test for heterogeneity in effect by whether a student had declared a major

at the time of the intervention (Appendix Table A.15; this analysis was not pre-specified). We would expect behavior to change more for students with lower switching costs, i.e., those who had not yet declared a major. Consistent with this hypothesis, all of the negative effect on STEM credits is due to students who had not yet declared a major by the semester of the intervention (-0.314 credits compared to an insignificant -0.014 for declared students). Interestingly, undeclared students (but not declared students) updated their beliefs about the STEM median, while the opposite is true of own percentile beliefs. This suggests that beliefs about other STEM majors are more salient for behavior.

There is a strong theoretical reason to believe that the informational intervention would operate differently depending on a student's pre-intervention beliefs. We would expect those who began the semester relatively underconfident to update their beliefs and behavior in a positive direction, while those initially overconfident should do the opposite. To test this, I estimate treatment effects based on whether a student under- or over-predicted their course percentile in the pre-intervention survey. Appendix Table A.16 tells a consistent story about belief updating, especially for beliefs about the STEM median. The initially underconfident students update their belief about their own percentile upwards (1.9 percentiles, though the effect is not statistically significant), and correct their overestimation of the STEM median by 10.4 percentage points. The initially overconfident students update their percentile beliefs slightly downward (-0.116, n.s.) and correct their underestimation of the median by five percentage points. However, the two groups have similar estimated treatment effects on STEM credits one semester later. I do a similar exercise where I instead interact the treatment indicator with a continuous measure of the student's error at the beginning of the semester (Appendix Table A.17). These results similarly suggest that the students who are initially the most overconfident update their beliefs downward by the most (or, equivalently, that those who are initially the most underconfident update upwards more). The interaction term for the effect on STEM credits is negative (which would mean students who are initially the most overconfident respond more negatively to the information) but not statistically significant. The results are broadly consistent with a story of a reduction in

relative overconfidence causing a reduction in STEM specialization.

Related to the above, we might expect students who enter the semester lacking information about college-level coursework and standards to be particularly susceptible to an informational intervention. I proxy a pre-treatment lack of information with two exploratory characteristics: student level (operationalized as first year or sophomore standing versus junior or senior) and first-generation college status (operationalized as whether the student has a parent with at least a bachelor's degree). The results (Appendix Tables A.18 and A.19) are somewhat mixed. Though I lack the power to make precise comparisons, the point estimates by student level suggest that students earlier in their college career change their beliefs and behavior more in response to the intervention. (Even independent of effects on beliefs, we would not expect upper year students to change their course-taking behavior by much, since the cost of switching their field specialization is much higher.) The effects by parental education or first-generation status are less clear. First generation students seem to change their behavior more than students with college educated parents; however I cannot reject these effects are equal. On the other hand, the treatment effects on the beliefs outcomes suggest that the students with college educated parents change their beliefs more, though I cannot reject equality across groups.

Though I generally lack the statistical power to make comparisons across subgroups, I interpret these results as consistent with a world where students update their beliefs in the direction of the truth, and where students who we would expect to be on the margin of specializing in STEM (e.g., younger and undeclared students, first generation college students, and students already interested in STEM) change their behavior the most.

## 7 Discussion

This paper has shown that men and women hold different beliefs about their relative performance: men are more overconfident about their relative rank and more likely to underestimate how other STEM majors perform, while women are more likely to overestimate

others. All of these facts imply that men are more confident about their relative position in STEM than women are. Providing information leads men to correctly update their beliefs about themselves and others, while women update their beliefs about others but not themselves. Men who received information about their relative performance take fewer STEM credits in the subsequent semester, while women’s behavior does not change.

This work fits within two canonical economic frameworks. The first is a discrete choice model of field specialization, first formalized by Roy (1951). In the Roy model and more recent variants (see, e.g., Altonji 1993; Altonji et al. 2016; Arcidiacono 2004; Arcidiacono et al. 2016), individuals choose a field that maximizes their expected utility. Beliefs about the individual’s field-specific ability are an input into the expected value of that field; all else equal, students with higher beliefs about their ability in STEM are more likely to choose STEM. The second framework is one of Bayesian updating and learning over time. In this framework, individuals observe their true ability with noise, and as they receive additional signals in the form of academic performance and other feedback, they update their beliefs in the direction of the truth.

An implication of these models is that, assuming there is a positive relationship between beliefs about major-specific ability and the payoff to a major, those who are performing better in STEM than they expected should be (weakly) more likely to pursue STEM, while those who receive a negative signal should be (weakly) less likely. If men are particularly overconfident and women are particularly underconfident about their performance in STEM, receiving information should lead fewer men and more women to persist in the field. Furthermore, we would expect the largest changes for those who receive the largest information shock, i.e. those who are the most under- or overconfident at baseline. However, even a large shock to beliefs about ability may not be sufficient to change behavior if a student is far from the margin due to strong underlying taste (or distaste) for STEM, strong non-STEM ability, or if frictions such as confirmation bias prevent them from incorporating the information.

Consistent with the belief updating framework, I find that students do correctly revise

their beliefs when provided with information. Both men and women correct their beliefs about how other STEM majors perform. Men but not women correct their beliefs about their own relative course rank. This somewhat mixed finding is part of a somewhat mixed prior literature. Although some studies have found that women tend to update more conservatively than men (Buser et al. 2018; Mobius et al. 2014; Coutts 2019) and that people update less when the information is about a gender-incongruent domain (Coffman et al. 2019), others find the opposite (Goulas and Megalokonomou 2015; Owen 2010).

A natural question arising from the observed gender differences in beliefs—absent the intervention—is how those beliefs are formed and why they persist. One possibility is that men are incorporating signals from other sources like standardized test scores and STEM courses they took previously, and they have received signals that are more positive than women. I can investigate this in the data, and while men are more likely to have taken calculus in high school and have higher quantitative test scores, controlling for all of these factors does not change the gender gap in beliefs. Lab-based studies of belief updating suggest that exaggerated stereotypes about groups (e.g., men are much better at quantitative subjects) can persist despite very small true differences (Bordalo et al. 2016), due to people using mental shortcuts to make predictions about themselves or others. This would explain men overestimating and women underestimating their own quantitative ability.

Consistent with field-specific beliefs mattering for specialization, men updating relative beliefs downwards leads to them taking fewer STEM credits. Though women update in a way suggesting an increase in their relative performance beliefs, their behavior does not change. Understanding why women’s choices are unmoved is critical to fully understanding gender differences in field choice. This could be explained by women having a comparative advantage in non-STEM, which remains even after revising STEM beliefs. Gender differences in STEM and non-STEM performance support this: although control men and women in the sample have indistinguishable GPAs in their college STEM courses, women do significantly better in non-STEM subjects. It could also be the case that factors other than academic beliefs matter most for women. Using survey data, Zafar (2013) finds that gender differences in preferences

and tastes, rather than confidence about academic ability, explain the gap in major choice. Recent interventions by Porter and Serra (2019), Li (2018) and Bayer et al. (2019)) also suggest that factors such as information about and interest in the field and the presence of female role models can affect women’s choices. Finally, it could be true that while women care about their performance, their *relative* rank or their performance compared to other STEM majors is less salient than it is for men. This hypothesis is supported by research finding that men have stronger preferences for competitive environments and respond more to information about the competition they face (Niederle and Vesterlund 2011; Buser et al. 2014; Berlin and Dargnies 2016).

## 8 Conclusion

The topic of gender differences in college field specialization and its implications for the labor market is one of great interest to educators and other policymakers. There is a strong theoretical and empirical basis for believing that gender differences in students’ perceptions of relative performance in STEM may be contributing to gender gaps in college major choice, but the causal evidence identifying this mechanism has thus far been limited. To understand this mechanism, I ran a field experiment across seven large introductory STEM courses at a selective university. My primary treatment entailed providing students with information about their performance relative to their classmates and relative to STEM majors. I combine survey data on students’ beliefs with administrative data on academic behavior to investigate behavioral changes and the mechanisms behind them.

Consistent with prior empirical findings about gender differences in beliefs, I find that men, particularly the lowest performing ones, are substantially more overconfident than women about their relative performance in STEM courses. Consistent with theoretical work that beliefs matter for educational choices, I find that providing information helps correct this overconfidence and close gender gaps in STEM persistence, with overconfident men updating their beliefs and adjusting their STEM course-taking downward. Prior work has

disagreed on whether female underconfidence rather than male overconfidence should be targeted to close gender gaps, but my work supports the latter. This conclusion is consistent with several recent papers that use observational data to argue that much of the gender gap in STEM is due to lower-achieving men persisting despite their marginal qualifications (Bordón et al. 2020; Cimpian et al. 2020).

I cannot yet observe how the short-term changes to beliefs and behavior induced by the informational intervention translate to longer-term, consequential decisions such as STEM major declaration and degree receipt. The passage of time and follow-up data will reveal whether the information I provided permanently discouraged men from STEM and shrank gender gaps. It will also be important to see whether the intervention simply shifted the timing of men leaving STEM, rather than discouraging those who would have otherwise stayed. While a full welfare analysis is beyond the scope of this study, factors such as counterfactual majors and earnings, capacity constraints that may be eased by men leaving, and peer effects of having higher- versus lower-achieving peers should be weighed in evaluating the effects of an informational intervention.

This study provides the first experimental evidence that gender differences in students' beliefs about their relative performance—male overconfidence in particular—contribute to gender gaps in STEM, but several important questions remain unanswered and are ripe for future research. This paper studied only students in STEM classes, who had already shown a high level of interest in STEM, and focused on STEM-specific beliefs. In future work, it will be important to study students' beliefs about their performance in non-STEM subjects, where gender differences may be less stark or even reversed. Understanding the full set of students' beliefs is critical for understanding field specialization decisions. While I included students studying multiple STEM subjects, this single study lacks the statistical power to precisely compare across STEM fields. We might expect biology—a predominantly female field—to show different patterns in students' beliefs and different responses to intervention than a male-dominated field like engineering. Future work should explore this further. Finally, this paper studies students at a single, highly selective institution, the University of



Michigan. It is possible that the degree of overconfidence among the students in my sample is related to their backgrounds and high levels of prior achievement; different populations of students may hold very different beliefs about relative performance and react differently to information.

Although the magnitudes of my treatment effects are modest, they are the result of an extremely light-touch, low-cost intervention—a single tailored email that can easily be sent to a large number of students. A more intensive or repeated intervention may be effective at changing beliefs and behavior even more. Taken in context, my findings suggest that biased beliefs about relative academic performance are one important piece of the large, complex issue of gender differences in STEM.

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## **Appendix Tables and Figures**

Table A.1: Balance by Assignment to Information-only and Information-plus-Encouragement Treatment, Above-Median Students Only

	Control	Info-only	Info + encour.	p-value
Female	0.461	0.459	0.461	
<i>Class standing (omitted: senior)</i>				
First year	0.418	0.420	0.404	0.728
Sophomore	0.419	0.411	0.428	0.764
Junior	0.126	0.125	0.127	0.993
<i>Race/ethnicity (omitted: American Indian or multiple race/ethnicities)</i>				
White	0.566	0.527	0.555	0.181
Hispanic	0.041	0.055	0.044	0.279
Asian	0.319	0.343	0.330	0.495
Black	0.013	0.007	0.014	0.248
<i>Declared major (omitted: other)</i>				
Undeclared	0.545	0.541	0.539	0.964
Engineering	0.260	0.255	0.266	0.708
Math, science, or economics	0.104	0.112	0.091	0.315
<i>Academic and demographic characteristics</i>				
In-state	0.480	0.460	0.490	0.409
Prior college GPA	3.612	3.610	3.626	0.827
Math placement score	21.001	21.168	21.002	0.552
ACT English	33.380	33.289	33.533	0.379
ACT Math	32.336	32.279	32.375	0.810
ACT Reading	32.696	32.310	32.740	0.052
ACT Science	32.193	32.102	32.160	0.897
SAT Math	737.577	738.541	734.895	0.301
SAT Verbal	661.075	658.928	660.807	0.905
HS GPA	3.916	3.916	3.912	0.614
Took calculus in HS	0.873	0.882	0.858	0.308
<i>Max parental education (omitted: less than high school)</i>				
High school	0.042	0.055	0.040	0.254
Some college	0.038	0.029	0.037	0.525
Bachelor's	0.242	0.221	0.248	0.374
Grad or professional degree	0.669	0.683	0.663	0.623
<i>Family Income (omitted: less than \$50,000)</i>				
\$50,000-100,000	0.158	0.170	0.166	0.805
Above \$100,000	0.731	0.704	0.716	0.505
Total N	940	943	940	2,823

Notes: Sample limited to above-median students; only above-median students were eligible for the information-plus-encouragement treatment. P-values based on a joint test of differences in the characteristic by treatment status, controlling for strata. I also test for differences in missingness rates on all variables and find none.

Table A.2: Balance by Assignment to Treatment, by Gender

	Men			Women		
	Control	Treatment	p-value	Control	Treatment	p-value
<i>Class standing (omitted: senior)</i>						
First year	0.446	0.407	0.077	0.419	0.428	0.688
Sophomore	0.370	0.405	0.237	0.406	0.401	0.711
Junior	0.135	0.136	0.813	0.129	0.128	0.934
<i>Race/ethnicity (omitted: American Indian or multiple race/ethnicities)</i>						
White	0.560	0.543	0.476	0.556	0.544	0.380
Hispanic	0.078	0.072	0.876	0.062	0.064	0.301
Asian	0.258	0.300	0.203	0.248	0.277	0.486
Black	0.025	0.018	0.664	0.052	0.033	0.200
<i>Declared major (omitted: other)</i>						
Undeclared	0.487	0.477	0.947	0.638	0.650	0.417
Engineering	0.305	0.314	0.842	0.153	0.149	0.388
Math, science, or economics	0.103	0.102	0.767	0.086	0.086	0.739
<i>Academic and demographic characteristics</i>						
In-state	0.514	0.506	0.688	0.534	0.536	0.368
Prior college GPA	3.296	3.368	0.806	3.444	3.483	0.362
Math placement score	19.794	20.572	0.077	18.197	18.703	0.560
ACT English	32.439	32.532	0.285	32.217	32.691	0.387
ACT Math	31.851	32.122	0.641	29.848	30.386	0.661
ACT Reading	31.975	31.761	0.026	31.981	31.934	0.101
ACT Science	31.629	31.810	0.463	30.124	30.405	0.459
SAT Math	717.445	729.825	0.128	690.168	694.202	0.019
SAT Verbal	646.050	653.934	0.289	637.603	639.435	0.155
HS GPA	3.871	3.880	0.685	3.895	3.901	0.648
Took calculus in HS	0.832	0.867	0.097	0.796	0.806	0.651
<i>Max parental education (omitted: less than high school)</i>						
High school	0.069	0.062	0.998	0.072	0.079	0.125
Some college	0.052	0.043	0.583	0.077	0.061	0.529
Bachelor's	0.242	0.237	0.973	0.265	0.245	0.275
Grad or professional degree	0.612	0.639	0.646	0.561	0.593	0.785
<i>Family Income (omitted: less than \$50,000)</i>						
\$50,000-100,000	0.175	0.185	0.308	0.190	0.195	0.462
Above \$100,000	0.658	0.664	0.392	0.588	0.619	0.990
P-value on F test of all X's		0.8306			0.7071	
Total N	1,240	1,753	2,993	1,142	1,580	2,722

Notes: "Treat" column includes students receiving either treatment arm. P-values based on a t-test of the characteristic by treatment status, controlling for strata. I also test for differences in missingness rates on all variables and find none. F-test tests for joint significance of all listed characteristics as well as missingness rates, controlling for strata.

Table A.3: Study Sample by Course

Course (for study)	N	Proportion
Biology	566	0.099
Chemistry	1,127	0.197
Economics	825	0.144
Computer Science	882	0.154
Engineering	453	0.079
Physics	327	0.057
Statistics	1,535	0.269
Total	5,715	1.000
In multiple courses	855	0.150

Notes: Students in multiple courses are assigned to a single course, chosen randomly, for purposes of the study, so that the sum of proportions for each study course sum to 1.



Table A.4: Intervention Message View Rate by Student Characteristics, Treated Students

Characteristic	Viewed message coef.	Characteristic	Viewed message coef.
Female	0.049*** (0.014)	<i>Declared major (omitted: other)</i>	
Above course median	0.037** (0.015)	Undeclared	-0.044** (0.020)
<i>Course (omitted: Chemistry)</i>		Engineering	-0.056* (0.030)
Biology	0.145*** (0.027)	Math, science, or econ	-0.016 (0.028)
Econ (section 1)	0.108*** (0.030)	<i>Acad. and demog. characteristics</i>	
Econ (section 2)	0.116*** (0.033)	In state	-0.015 (0.015)
Computer Science	0.162*** (0.026)	Prior college GPA	0.081*** (0.025)
Engineering	0.144*** (0.031)	College GPA missing	0.359*** (0.090)
Physics	0.129*** (0.033)	Math placement score	0.002 (0.002)
Statistics	0.167*** (0.024)	Placement score missing	0.046 (0.058)
<i>Class standing (omitted: senior)</i>		ACT English	-0.005 (0.003)
First year	0.034 (0.040)	ACT math	0.003 (0.003)
Sophomore	0.039 (0.036)	ACT reading	-0.003 (0.003)
Junior	0.017 (0.037)	ACT science	0.001 (0.003)
<i>Race/ethnicity (omitted: other/multiple)</i>		ACT missing	-0.185* (0.107)
White	0.027 (0.027)	SAT math	-0.000 (0.000)
Hispanic	0.008 (0.037)	SAT verbal	-0.000* (0.000)
Asian	0.016 (0.029)	SAT missing	-0.248** (0.123)
Black	0.095** (0.046)	HS GPA	-0.010 (0.062)
Race/ethnicity missing	-0.039 (0.050)	HS GPA missing	-0.019 (0.242)
		Took calculus in HS	0.008 (0.020)
		HS calculus missing	-0.014 (0.032)

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Table A.4 – *Continued from previous page*

Characteristic	Viewed message coef.
<i>Parental education (omitted: less than HS)</i>	
High school	-0.044 (0.050)
Some college	-0.048 (0.052)
Bachelor's	-0.023 (0.047)
Grad or professional degree	-0.049 (0.046)
Parent ed missing	-0.061 (0.077)
<i>Family income (omitted: less than \$50,000)</i>	
\$50,000-100,000	-0.011 (0.026)
Above \$100,000	0.006 (0.023)
Family income missing	0.003 (0.025)
N	3,333

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ;  $**p < 0.05$ ;  $***p < 0.01$  Table shows coefficients and robust standard errors from a regression where the dependent variable is an indicator for viewing the intervention message. Sample limited to students assigned to treatment.

Table A.5: Survey Response Rates

	Response rate	Number of responses
<b>Pre-intervention survey</b>		
Overall response	0.746	4,266
<i>Item-level response</i>		
Belief about own performance	0.641	3,664
Belief about STEM major performance	0.685	3,915
Intended major	0.698	3,988
<b>Post-intervention survey</b>		
Overall response	0.487	2,784
<i>Item-level response</i>		
Belief about own performance	0.413	2,358
Belief about STEM major performance	0.461	2,632
Intended major	0.466	2,662
STEM interest index	0.462	2,639
General interest in STEM	0.460	2,631
Intent to seek STEM advising	0.461	2,632
Intent to take STEM courses	0.462	2,638
STEM success index	0.470	2,687
Grades good enough for STEM	0.465	2,655
Self-efficacy scale	0.464	2,651
STEM identity scale	0.461	2,636

Table A.6: Post-Intervention Survey Response by Student Characteristics, Full Sample

Characteristic	Took survey coef.	Characteristic	Took survey coef.
Female	0.060*** (0.012)	<i>Declared major (omitted: other)</i>	
Above course median	0.060*** (0.013)	Undeclared	0.006 (0.019)
<i>Course (omitted: Econ section 1)</i>		Engineering	0.080*** (0.025)
Biology	0.561*** (0.024)	Math, science, or econ	0.031 (0.027)
Chemistry	0.017 (0.017)	<i>Acad. and demog. characteristics</i>	
Computer Science	0.486*** (0.022)	In state	0.009 (0.012)
Engineering	0.642*** (0.027)	Prior college GPA	0.109*** (0.020)
Physics	0.086*** (0.027)	College GPA missing	0.419*** (0.071)
Statistics	0.640*** (0.017)	Math placement score	0.002 (0.002)
Econ (section 2)	0.610*** (0.028)	Placement score missing	-0.007 (0.048)
<i>Class standing (omitted: senior)</i>		ACT English	0.001 (0.003)
First year	0.080** (0.035)	ACT math	-0.001 (0.003)
Sophomore	0.087*** (0.031)	ACT reading	0.000 (0.003)
Junior	0.024 (0.031)	ACT science	-0.005* (0.003)
<i>Race/ethnicity (omitted: other/multiple)</i>		ACT missing	-0.171* (0.093)
White	0.007 (0.022)	SAT math	-0.000 (0.000)
Hispanic	0.008 (0.030)	SAT verbal	-0.000*** (0.000)
Asian	0.067*** (0.024)	SAT missing	-0.296*** (0.104)
Black	-0.031 (0.039)	HS GPA	0.125** (0.053)
Race/ethnicity missing	0.051 (0.039)	HS GPA missing	0.488** (0.207)
		Took calculus in HS	-0.001 (0.017)
		HS calculus missing	-0.017 (0.026)

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Table A.6 – *Continued from previous page*

Characteristic	Took survey coef.
<i>Parental education (omitted: less than HS)</i>	
High school	-0.001 (0.044)
Some college	-0.024 (0.046)
Bachelor's	0.011 (0.041)
Grad or professional degree	-0.008 (0.041)
Parent ed missing	0.027 (0.064)
<i>Family income (omitted: less than \$50,000)</i>	
\$50,000-100,000	0.013 (0.022)
Above \$100,000	0.026 (0.020)
Family income missing	0.047** (0.022)
N	5,715

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$  Table shows coefficients and standard errors from a regression where the dependent variable is an indicator for response to the end of term survey.

Table A.7: Balance by Assignment to Treatment, Post-Intervention Survey Respondents

	Control mean	Treatment mean	p-value	N non missing
Female	0.517	0.506		2,784
<i>Class standing (omitted: senior)</i>				
First year	0.411	0.392	0.308	2,784
Sophomore	0.417	0.428	0.900	
Junior	0.129	0.136	0.344	
<i>Race/ethnicity (omitted: American Indian or multiple race/ethnicities)</i>				
White	0.533	0.535	0.916	2,698
Hispanic	0.061	0.063	0.190	
Asian	0.304	0.317	0.641	
Black	0.030	0.019	0.257	
<i>Declared major (omitted: other)</i>				
Undeclared	0.601	0.574	0.258	2,784
Engineering	0.201	0.209	0.299	
Math, science, or economics	0.095	0.104	0.504	
<i>Academic and demographic characteristics</i>				
In-state	0.506	0.517	0.292	2,784
Prior college GPA	3.441	3.475	0.217	1,172
Math placement score	19.286	19.925	0.868	2,676
ACT English	32.527	32.718	0.493	1,567
ACT Math	30.926	31.374	0.811	1,567
ACT Reading	32.085	31.863	0.007	1,567
ACT Science	30.881	31.118	0.363	1,567
SAT Math	708.241	716.954	0.245	1,623
SAT Verbal	640.119	647.132	0.813	1,623
HS GPA	3.888	3.898	0.999	2,374
Took calculus in HS	0.817	0.842	0.721	2,506
<i>Max parental education (omitted: less than high school)</i>				
High school	0.069	0.066	0.378	2,746
Some college	0.061	0.049	0.579	
Bachelor's	0.255	0.241	0.376	
Grad or professional degree	0.593	0.624	0.636	
<i>Family Income (omitted: less than \$50,000)</i>				
\$50,000-100,000	0.192	0.185	0.959	2,096
Above \$100,000	0.628	0.659	0.919	
P-value on F test of all X's		0.9532		
Total N	1,154	1,630	2,784	

Notes: Sample limited to students who responded to post-intervention survey. "Treatment" includes students receiving either treatment arm. P-values based on a t-test of the characteristic by treatment status, controlling for strata. I also test for differences in missingness rates on all variables and find none. F-test tests for joint significance of all listed characteristics (except for female, which is blocked on) as well as missingness rates, controlling for strata.

Table A.8: Comparison of Model-based and Randomization Inference P-values for Main Results

Outcome	Main effect		Effect for men		Effect for women		Difference, men vs. women	
	Model p-value	Rand. p-value	Model p-value	Rand. p-value	Model p-value	Rand. p-value	Model p-value	Rand. p-value
Absolute value percentile error	0.024	0.021	0.026	0.023	0.387	0.390	0.259	0.254
Signed percentile error	0.486	0.475	0.673	0.638	0.570	0.577	0.948	0.947
Underestimating STEM median	0.022	0.023	0.021	0.025	0.400	0.397	0.220	0.234
Overestimating STEM median	0.217	0.217	0.782	0.770	0.045	0.036	0.111	0.109
Number of STEM credits	0.056	0.038	0.033	0.026	0.573	0.543	0.303	0.282
Took any STEM courses	0.061	0.059	0.129	0.137	0.241	0.245	0.975	0.963
Intent to major in STEM	0.236	0.254	0.598	0.608	0.270	0.285	0.623	0.639
STEM interest index	0.036	0.027	0.259	0.252	0.073	0.061	0.526	0.525
Predicted prob. of STEM degree	0.287	0.267	0.282	0.269	0.644	0.635	0.745	0.729
Final exam score	0.616	0.589	0.977	0.977	0.492	0.478	0.630	0.622
Final course score	0.983	0.984	0.576	0.588	0.552	0.538	0.415	0.400
STEM success index	0.332	0.317	0.721	0.718	0.315	0.284	0.656	0.647

Notes: Each pair of p-values correspond to a single test statistic. Model-based p-values correspond to the analyses in Tables 3, 5, 6, and 7. Randomization-based p-values are based on 1,000 random draws from the distribution of possible treatment assignments, where treatment is assigned according to the procedure used for original randomization, and the test statistic is calculated the same way as for estimation. Randomization p-value is calculated as the proportion of simulated effects that are larger in absolute value than the observed effect.

Table A.9: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' STEM Course-taking by Gender and Treatment Arm, Above-Median Students Only

	Number of STEM credits one semester post intervention			Took any STEM courses one semester post intervention		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Pooled effect	-0.139 (0.131)	-0.271 (0.171)	0.015 (0.202)	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.011 (0.009)	-0.010 (0.014)
P-value, women vs. men			0.280			0.957
Info-only effect	-0.192 (0.151)	-0.373* (0.198)	0.021 (0.235)	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.010 (0.010)	-0.003 (0.016)
P-value, women vs. men			0.201			0.700
Info + encouragement effect	-0.110 (0.151)	-0.197 (0.198)	-0.006 (0.231)	-0.015 (0.010)	-0.014 (0.011)	-0.015 (0.017)
P-value, women vs. men			0.530			0.951
P-value, info vs. info+enc	0.587	0.378	0.907	0.392	0.692	0.439
Control mean	9.527	10.512	8.373	0.96	0.976	0.94
N	2,823	1,524	1,299	2,823	1,524	1,299

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Only above-median students were eligible for the information-plus-encouragement treatment; all below-median treated students received information only. Effect of either treatment (pooled) for above-median students estimated from a regression of outcome on an indicator for receiving either treatment, an indicator for being above the course median at time of randomization, and their interaction. To estimate effects on men and women, a full three-way interaction between treatment, female, and above-median is added. Treatment effects of the information-only and info-plus-encouragement intervention for above-median students estimated only on the sample of above-median students using the same specifications as above, but with two separate treatment indicators. All regressions control for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.



Table A.10: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' STEM Course-taking, Limited to Survey Respondents

	Number of STEM credits one semester post intervention			Took any STEM courses one semester post intervention		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-0.120 (0.134)	-0.244 (0.189)	-0.002 (0.191)	-0.015 (0.010)	-0.014 (0.012)	-0.016 (0.016)
P-value, women vs. men			0.368			0.907
Control mean	8.449	9.519	7.451	0.916	0.948	0.886
N	2,784	1,363	1,421	2,784	1,363	1,421

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Sample limited to students with a response to the post-intervention survey. Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Table A.11: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Students' Beliefs about Themselves and Other STEM Majors, Using Inverse Probability Weighting to Adjust for Survey Non-response

	Absolute value of error in percentile beliefs ( Predicted - realized )			Signed error in percentile beliefs (Predicted - realized)		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect (inv. prob.-weighted)	-1.212 (0.866)	-2.871** (1.221)	0.596 (1.233)	-0.192 (1.041)	-1.231 (1.444)	0.940 (1.506)
P-value, women vs. men			0.048			0.300
Control mean (inv. prob.-weighted)	19.166	20.685	17.59	8.469	10.67	6.185
N	2,358	1,166	1,192	2,358	1,166	1,192
	Underestimating course median for STEM majors			Overestimating course median for STEM majors		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect (inv. prob.-weighted)	-0.019 (0.017)	-0.038 (0.026)	0.002 (0.023)	-0.012 (0.023)	0.017 (0.034)	-0.044 (0.031)
P-value, women vs. men			0.243			0.187
Control mean (inv. prob.-weighted)	0.179	0.218	0.14	0.515	0.425	0.607
N	2,632	1,291	1,341	2,632	1,291	1,341

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Inverse probability weights (IPW) are constructed by running a logistic regression of an item response indicator on all of the characteristics listed in Table 1 as well as study course and an indicator for performing above the course median at the time of treatment. The IPW is equal to one over the predicted probability of response. IPW's are specific to individual survey items. Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies, weighting observations by the inverse of the predicted probability of responding to the relevant item. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies and weighting by the IPW. Robust standard errors reported. All beliefs outcomes based on response to post-intervention survey. Control means are also weighted by the IPW. Unweighted estimates are shown in Table 3.

Table A.12: Estimated Effect of Intervention on Number of Credits in Non-STEM Subjects

	Social Science			Psychology			Business and Policy		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Treatment effect	-0.004 (0.045)	-0.036 (0.057)	0.032 (0.070)	0.062 (0.053)	0.094 (0.061)	0.028 (0.089)	-0.036 (0.029)	-0.038 (0.044)	-0.034 (0.038)
P-value, women vs. men			0.454			0.546			0.945
Control mean	0.717	0.657	0.783	1.006	0.594	1.454	0.339	0.396	0.277
N	5,715	2,993	2,722	5,715	2,993	2,722	5,715	2,993	2,722
	Humanities and Arts			Other					
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women			
Treatment effect	0.058 (0.079)	0.100 (0.106)	0.013 (0.119)	0.082 (0.060)	0.101 (0.073)	0.061 (0.097)			
P-value, women vs. men			0.586			0.742			
Control mean	3.219	2.874	3.593	1.157	0.894	1.443			
N	5,715	2,993	2,722	5,715	2,993	2,722			

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects for all students estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Treatment effects by gender estimated from a single regression of the outcome on assignment to the either treatment, female, and treatment-times-female, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data and measured in the semester following the intervention. “Social science” includes anthropology, political science, and sociology. “Humanities and arts” includes foreign languages, history, philosophy and religion, English and writing, cultural studies, and visual and performing arts. “Other” includes all other subjects. All outcomes measured as number of credits in the semester following the intervention.

Table A.13: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Course Subject

	Absolute value of pctile error	Signed percentile error	Underest. STEM median	Overest. STEM median	Number of STEM credits
Biology	-1.333 (1.427) [16.873]	0.578 (1.951) [5.144]	-0.007 (0.032) [0.103]	-0.075 (0.052) [0.634]	0.326 (0.305) [7.396]
Chemistry	1.710 (2.723) [16.963]	-0.749 (3.340) [7.630]	-0.014 (0.035) [0.033]	0.017 (0.064) [0.817]	-0.011 (0.201) [9.534]
Computer Science	-2.295 (1.697) [21.295]	-2.611 (2.227) [8.705]	-0.075** (0.038) [0.262]	0.028 (0.043) [0.297]	-0.431* (0.250) [8.835]
Economics	-1.702 (2.200) [20.041]	1.152 (2.860) [7.694]	0.009 (0.040) [0.102]	-0.071 (0.062) [0.648]	-0.165 (0.255) [7.007]
Engineering	-5.981*** (1.984) [22.992]	-0.654 (2.571) [3.938]	-0.108** (0.054) [0.561]	-0.009 (0.036) [0.108]	0.335 (0.267) [12.763]
Physics	-10.928 (6.774) [21.474]	2.113 (8.431) [-4.000]	0.098 (0.108) [0.130]	0.009 (0.143) [0.522]	-0.082 (0.367) [12.221]
Statistics	0.446 (0.998) [17.109]	2.458* (1.278) [6.469]	-0.017 (0.022) [0.155]	-0.027 (0.032) [0.487]	-0.533*** (0.197) [6.771]
P-value, F-test of treat-by-subject interactions	0.060	0.597	0.357	0.738	0.080
N	2,358	2,358	2,632	2,632	5,715

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, course subject, and treatment-by-subject interactions, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Table A.14: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Pre-Intervention Stated Intended Major

	Absolute value percentile error	Signed percentile error	Underestimating STEM median	Overestimating STEM median	Number of STEM credits
Intended STEM major	-1.860** (0.778) [19.144]	0.819 (1.008) [5.390]	-0.042** (0.018) [0.229]	-0.013 (0.021) [0.430]	-0.248** (0.123) [9.487]
Intended non-STEM major	0.175 (1.443) [17.027]	0.675 (1.832) [7.005]	-0.020 (0.030) [0.145]	-0.074* (0.043) [0.584]	-0.053 (0.238) [4.809]
P-value, treat-by- major interaction	0.212	0.945	0.512	0.199	0.466
N	2,165	2,165	2,406	2,406	3,988

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, an indicator for intended STEM major, and a treatment-by-STEM-major interaction, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Intended major based on response to a question about planned major in the pre-intervention survey. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Table A.15: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Whether Student Had Declared a Major at Time of Treatment

	Absolute value percentile error	Signed percentile error	Underestimating STEM median	Overestimating STEM median	Number of STEM credits
Student has declared major	-2.836*** (1.058) [20.133]	0.070 (1.370) [6.393]	-0.031 (0.025) [0.270]	-0.002 (0.027) [0.386]	-0.014 (0.141) [10.053]
Student undeclared	-0.544 (0.821) [18.187]	0.956 (1.064) [6.339]	-0.035** (0.018) [0.163]	-0.036 (0.025) [0.508]	-0.314** (0.127) [7.290]
P-value, treat-by-undecl. interaction	0.084	0.606	0.884	0.345	0.113
N	2,358	2,358	2,632	2,632	5,715

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, an indicator for whether the student was undeclared during the semester of the intervention, and a treatment-by-undeclared interaction, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Major status and course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Table A.16: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Pre-Intervention Prediction of Own Percentile (Under vs. Overpredicting)

	Absolute value percentile error	Signed percentile error	Underestimating STEM median	Overestimating STEM median	Number of STEM credits
Underpredicting percentile pre-intervention	-1.021 (1.270) [16.131]	1.853 (1.433) [-12.570]	0.009 (0.024) [0.144]	-0.104*** (0.033) [0.585]	-0.145 (0.195) [9.060]
Overpredicting percentile pre-intervention	-1.666** (0.764) [19.964]	-0.116 (0.996) [12.897]	-0.050*** (0.018) [0.227]	0.011 (0.022) [0.417]	-0.192* (0.108) [8.387]
P-value, treat-by- pre-belief interaction	0.664	0.259	0.047	0.004	0.832
N	2,358	2,358	2,632	2,632	5,715

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, an indicator for whether the student was initially overpredicting their percentile, and a treatment-by-overpredicting interaction, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Initial over vs. underprediction based on response to item about predicted percentile in the pre-intervention survey. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Table A.17: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Pre-Intervention Error in Prediction of Own Percentile (Continuous)

	Absolute value percentile error	Signed percentile error	Underestimating STEM median	Overestimating STEM median	Number of STEM credits
Treatment (main effect)	-1.163 (0.869)	1.216 (0.891)	-0.013 (0.016)	-0.046** (0.022)	-0.179 (0.127)
Treatment*pre-intervention error	-0.036 (0.033)	-0.049 (0.032)	-0.001** (0.001)	0.002** (0.001)	-0.002 (0.004)
N	2,032	2,032	2,223	2,223	3,664

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, a continuous measure of the student's percentile error at the beginning of the semester, and a treatment-by-error interaction, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Initial error is based on response to item about predicted percentile in the pre-intervention survey; a negative error indicates underpredicting, while a positive error indicates overpredicting. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.



Table A.18: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Student Level

	Absolute value percentile error	Signed percentile error	Underestimating STEM median	Overestimating STEM median	Number of STEM credits
First year or sophomore	-1.574** (0.717) [18.767]	0.304 (0.922) [5.956]	-0.035** (0.016) [0.208]	-0.033* (0.020) [0.471]	-0.211** (0.099) [8.580]
Junior or senior	-1.044 (1.566) [20.043]	2.022 (2.087) [8.372]	-0.024 (0.034) [0.196]	0.028 (0.045) [0.402]	-0.051 (0.269) [8.174]
P-value, treat-by-student- level interaction	0.756	0.448	0.776	0.208	0.575
N	2,358	2,358	2,632	2,632	5,715

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, an indicator for whether the student has freshman or sophomore standing, and a treatment-by-level interaction, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Student level and course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

Table A.19: Estimated Effect of Intervention by Parental Education

	Absolute value percentile error	Signed percentile error	Underestimating STEM median	Overestimating STEM median	Number of STEM credits
Parent with bachelor's degree	-1.468** (0.705) [18.834]	1.165 (0.906) [5.504]	-0.042*** (0.016) [0.200]	-0.025 (0.020) [0.466]	-0.137 (0.103) [8.523]
First generation college student	-1.145 (1.808) [19.610]	-3.027 (2.376) [11.128]	0.011 (0.042) [0.238]	0.001 (0.047) [0.415]	-0.498** (0.249) [8.496]
P-value, treat-by-first- gen interaction	0.867	0.098	0.242	0.611	0.179
N	2,327	2,327	2,597	2,597	5,641

Notes:  $*p < 0.1$ ,  $**p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.01$ . Treatment effects estimated from a regression of the outcome on assignment to either treatment, an indicator for whether the student was a first-generation college student, and a treatment-by-first-gen interaction, controlling for student academic and demographic characteristics and randomization strata dummies. Robust standard errors reported. Outcomes measuring beliefs about percentile and STEM median based on post-intervention survey. Parent education and course-taking outcomes based on University of Michigan administrative data.

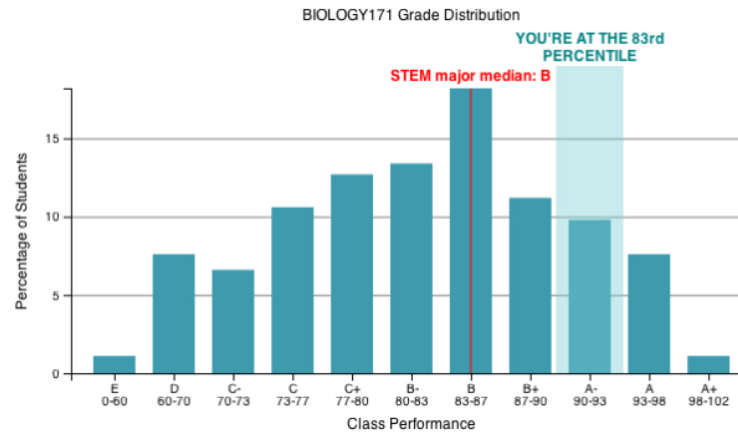
Figure A.1: Sample Intervention Message: Information-Only Treatment

## Your Bio 171 grade | And your major

A lot of people think they have to get *perfect* grades in the required classes to major in something. We're here to tell you: **it's not true.**

### HERE'S HOW YOU'RE DOING.

This chart shows the distribution of scores for students in BIOLOGY 171 (as of November 11, 2019).



- Your score is 90.8.
- You're doing as well as or better than 83% of your classmates.

### HERE'S HOW GRADES OFTEN LOOK.

The typical median grade for BIOLOGY 171 is:

- **B** for all students in BIOLOGY 171
- **B+** for BIOLOGY 171 students who declare a biology major
- **B** for BIOLOGY 171 students who declare a major in math, science, engineering, or economics

**Surprised?** We were, too, and we wanted to share the news with you.



*In case you forgot, median means half the people are below it and half are above it.*

### AS YOU PLAN YOUR SCHEDULE...

A degree in biology — or another quantitative field like math, science, engineering, or economics — can open many doors.

If you want to learn more about these majors, consider scheduling an advising appointment:

- [Biology](#)
- [LSA natural science major](#)
- [Computer Science](#)
- [Engineering](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Economics](#)

You can view course options for Winter 2020 [here](#).

~ The ECoach Team

Figure A.2: Sample Intervention Message: Information-Plus-Encouragement Treatment

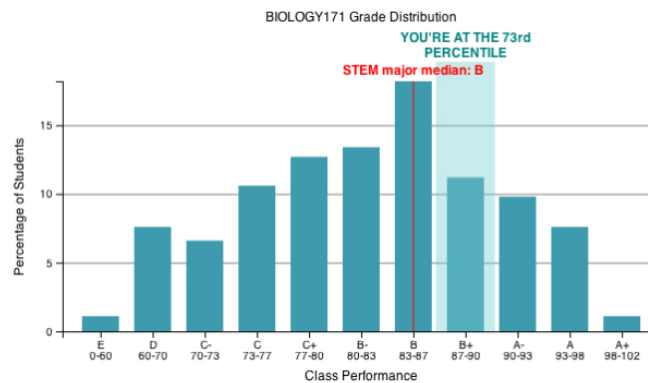
## Your Bio 171 grade | And your major

A lot of people think they have to get *perfect* grades in the required classes to major in something. We're here to tell you: **it's not true**.

In fact, **you're doing great** and we'd like YOU to **consider a major** in biology — or another quantitative field like math, science, engineering, or economics.

**YOU'RE PERFORMING LIKE A STEM MAJOR!**

This chart shows the distribution of scores for students in BIOLOGY 171 (as of November 11, 2019).



**Congratulations!** Your scores mean you're doing better than most students who go on to major in STEM.

- With your strong performance, your instructors hope you'll **consider a major** in biology, or another quantitative field like math, science, engineering, or economics.
- Your score is 87.9.
- You're doing as well as or better than 73% of your classmates.

**HERE'S HOW GRADES OFTEN LOOK.**

The typical median grade for BIOLOGY 171 is:

- **B** for all students in BIOLOGY 171
- **B+** for BIOLOGY 171 students who declare a biology major
- **B** for BIOLOGY 171 students who declare a major in math, science, engineering, or economics

**Surprised?** We were, too, and we wanted to share the news with you.



*In case you forgot, median means half the people are below it and half are above it.*

**AS YOU PLAN YOUR SCHEDULE...**

A degree in biology — or another quantitative field like math, science, engineering, or economics — can open many doors.

We hope you'll learn more about these majors. One way is to schedule an advising appointment:

- [Biology](#)
- [LSA natural science major](#)
- [Computer Science](#)
- [Engineering](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Economics](#)

You can view course options for Winter 2020 [here](#).

Congrats again — keep up the good work!

~ The ECoach Team

Figure A.3: Sample Intervention Message: Control Group

## Your Bio 171 grade | Looking ahead

### BACKPACKING IS SOON!



As you think about what classes to take next, we wanted to let you know about some options available in the Program in Biology and other departments across UM.

A degree in biology — or another quantitative field like math, science, engineering, or economics — can open many doors. If you want to learn more about these majors, consider scheduling an advising appointment:

- [Biology](#)
- [LSA natural science major](#)
- [Computer Science](#)
- [Engineering](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Economics](#)

You can view course options for Winter 2020 [here](#).

### YOUR SCORE IN BIOLOGY 171 SO FAR...

Just a reminder: your current score in BIOLOGY 171 (as of November 11, 2019) is 77.8.

~ The Ecoach Team