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Validating the Effectiveness of Success Coaching on Community College Student Outcomes with a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) Design

Carolina Works: An Overview

The goal of the Carolina Works project is to increase student retention and credential completion across 10 North Carolina community colleges through the provision of proactive success coaching informed by Aviso, a web-based early alert and advising system using predictive analytics. This brief is the first of several to provide updates on the Carolina Works project, which is led by Central Carolina Community College.

Prior research has demonstrated that success coaching increased student retention in postsecondary institutions (Bettinger & Baker, 2014).¹ The Carolina Works study is one of only two validation grants awarded in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Education’s First in the World program, and is designed to test, at a broad scale, interventions for student success that are supported by previous evidence.

By testing success coaching at 10 colleges within the North Carolina Community College System, Carolina Works can build the evidence base for effective practices that can improve student retention and completion, and lay the groundwork for

further scalability in North Carolina and nationally.

RCT Study Design

The evaluation design for Carolina Works is a Randomized Controlled Trial, or RCT. An RCT is an experimental study to assess causality between a “treatment” (some sort of intervention) and an outcome, and is often referred to as the “gold standard” of research evidence.² In an RCT, students in the study sample are randomly assigned to either receive the treatment (the “treatment group”) or not (the “control group”). Proactive student success coaching is the treatment being tested at the 10 colleges participating in the Carolina Works project.

A key reason that an RCT is considered the “gold standard” for evaluation is that randomly assigning students to either treatment or control ensures that there are no systematic differences between the two groups with regard to any characteristics (both observed and unobserved), except one – *the treatment group receives the intervention while the control group does not*. Thus, any differences between the treatment and control group in terms of outcomes can be causally attributed to the intervention as opposed to some other characteristic(s) of students.

¹ Bettinger, Eric and Rachel Baker (2014). “The Effects of Student Coaching: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Advising.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Studies*, 36 (1): 3-19.

² A well-conducted RCT meets the Department of Education’s “What Works Clearinghouse” standards without reservations.

Across four terms (fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018), new students at the 10 Carolina Works community colleges will be randomly assigned a success coach (i.e., the treatment) or be randomly assigned as a control (i.e., no assignment to a FITW coach) at the start of the term. These students represent the study sample. Once a student is assigned to the treatment or control condition, this assignment does not change during the study period.

Evaluation Update: Off to a Good Start with the Fall 2016 Cohort

The first group of students across the 10 Carolina Works colleges entered the study sample in August 2016.

whom were assigned by lottery to a Success Coach. As expected with an RCT methodology, the randomization process resulted in two groups of students that look very similar in terms of their demographic and academic characteristics.

Success Coaches at each institution began proactive outreach to treatment students the first week of classes, and will continue to provide these individualized services as long as these students are enrolled at the institution.

Looking Ahead

A new cohort of students will enter into the study sample in Spring 2017. Preliminary outcomes (fall-to-spring retention) will also be available that term, providing an early assessment of the impacts of proactive coaching on student success. A Spring 2017 Evaluation Brief will provide an update on study progress. The final evaluation report is due in September 2019.

Fall 2016 Carolina Works Study Sample		
	Treatment Group (Success Coach)	Control Group (Business as Usual)
Number of Students	2,347	2,338
% Women	65%	65%
% Men	35%	35%
% Age 18-24	61%	58%
% Age 25+	39%	42%
% White	74%	75%
% Black	22%	20%
% Native Am	2.6%	2.7%
% Other race	1.4%	2.3%
% Hispanic (any race)	6.5%	7.3%
High school GPA	2.78	2.76
% Enrolled in Dev Ed	21%	22%
% entirely online	19%	19%
Credit load	11.2	11.2

Table 1 summarizes selected characteristics of these 4,685 students, approximately one-half of

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