

First in the World Validation Study

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) February 2016

1. What is the purpose of the First in the World grant program?

The Department of Education awarded nearly \$60 million to 17 colleges and universities in its First in the World grant program. This program aims to support a wide range of innovation to support student outcomes. The validation grants, specifically, are designed to test, at a broad scale, interventions supported by significant evidence.

2. Why are we implementing the Carolina Works Validation Study?

The North Carolina Community College System is on a mission to improve student outcomes statewide. With initiatives such as Completion by Design, the Data Initiative, launching its upcoming statewide Student Success Center in partnership with Jobs for the Future, and the recent implementation of developmental education redesign, the methods by which we support our students' success are changing to help us become more effective in our practice. The Carolina Works Validation Study presents an opportunity to test the proven success coaching intervention on a broad scale within NCCCS to provide more significant evidence for possible scalability and possible replication.

3. What is an RCT evaluation?

An RCT, or Randomized Controlled Trial, is an experimental study to assess causality between a "treatment" (some sort of intervention) and an outcome. In an RCT, the study sample is randomly assigned to either receive the treatment (the "treatment group") or not (the "control group"). Control students cannot receive the treatment. This type of evaluation is often referred to as the "gold standard," and evidence from an RCT meets the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations.

4. What is the What Works Clearinghouse, and why does an RCT meet WWC standards without reservations?

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The mission of WWC is to be a central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education. To achieve this objective, the WWC assesses the quality and findings of existing research. The WWC has established a systematic review process to assess the scientific merit of research against WWC standards. The highest WWC standard is "without reservations," which means the study design 1) determined who received the treatment through a random process and 2) sample attrition is low. An RCT is



the only type of study design that can meet these two criteria and thus can be distinguished as meeting WWC standards without reservations. A condition of the FITW Validation grant awarded to Carolina Works was to conduct an RCT evaluation that meets WWC standards without reservations.

5. How will the RCT be conducted for the Carolina Works project?

Proactive student success coaching is the treatment being tested at the 10 colleges participating in the Carolina Works project. Beginning fall 2016 and continuing throughout the study period, students who have not enrolled in the college during the prior three academic terms at the 10 community colleges will be randomly assigned a FITW success coach (i.e., the treatment) or be randomly assigned as a control (i.e., no assignment to a FITW coach) on the first day of classes in each fall and spring term. These students represent the study sample. Once a student is assigned to the treatment or control condition, this assignment cannot change during the study period, which starts in August 2016 and ends in August 2019. In other words, if a student is assigned a FITW coach on the first day of the term they enter the study sample, they will be on a FITW coach's caseload for the entire study period as long as they remain enrolled in the college; if a student is not assigned a FITW coach on the first day of the term they enter the study sample, they cannot be assigned a FITW coach in any term during the study period.

6. Can we start random assignment before fall 2016?

If one or more colleges are ready and willing to start random assignment in the summer 2016 term, they could serve as pilots for the rollout of the Aviso technological platform and the random assignment process. The evaluation team would randomly assign students in the summer term to treatment or control, but these students would not be considered part of the study sample. Any college interested in being a pilot site should contact the evaluation team as soon as possible.

7. What about students who are not in the study sample – i.e., returning students who enrolled in the prior three academic terms – can they be assigned a FITW coach?

The short answer is no. During the study period, only students who are randomly selected into the treatment group can be assigned a FITW coach. The reason is twofold – first, we want to manage the caseload of coaches (i.e., students assigned to treatment) so that coaches can provide robust coaching supports; second, assigning a coach to students who are not in the study can lead to “spillover” between the control and treatment groups. “Spillover” occurs when a student assigned to the control group receives the treatment, and this undesirable scenario is more likely when the treatment is available to students beyond the study sample. As noted above in Question 5, the study sample is defined as students who have not enrolled in the prior three academic terms; thus, *non-study students are all returning students who did enroll in at least one of the previous three terms*. This group of non-study students will become increasingly smaller over time as these students graduate.



8. Why is “spillover” a bad thing?

A key reason that 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. When “spillover” occurs – especially in large numbers – the contrast between the treatment and control group is diluted, and the effects of the intervention is underestimated; in the worst scenario, diluting the contrast between the treatment and control groups could result in *no* positive effects of the treatment being detected. The expectation for each college is for zero spillover to occur.

9. What is the Aviso technological platform, and how is it related to the RCT evaluation?

As part of the Carolina Works project, each college will be implementing the technological platform called Aviso. The Aviso system uses predictive analytics to provide real-time information about students in a FITW coach’s caseload. This information includes a risk-factor assessment for each course in which a student enrolls. The Aviso system also generates automated alerts on attendance, grades and registration that FITW coaches are expected to follow-up on with their students.

10. Are students who are assigned a FITW coach the only ones who benefit from the Aviso technology?

No -- The Aviso system and its functionalities will be implemented for all students, and it will reflect a standard configuration for all colleges during the study period. Put simply, registered students will have access to Aviso; faculty will be able to use Aviso to look-up students in their classes; and auto-alerts for attendance, grades and registration, for example, will be generated and sent to all students, regardless of their status in the RCT study. However, only a FITW coach will receive alerts for students on their caseload (i.e., treatment students). Automated alerts for students in the control group and other students at the college are sent only to the student.

11. We are hiring our FITW coaches now – what do they do during the spring and summer?

As noted above, the Aviso platform is a new system for Carolina Works colleges (with the exception of Central Carolina Community College). During the spring and summer, the coach should become proficient in the Aviso platform. Coaches will receive training from Aviso and will be expected to help with local implementation of this technological platform so it will be ready and operational by fall 2016 when random assignment begins. Coaches should also receive professional development on best practices in student success coaching, which Aviso will also provide in collaboration with the First in the World staff. In addition, coaches will need to learn about the services and supports available on their respective campuses so they can knowledgeably refer students on their caseload. Finally, as noted in Question 6,



colleges can pilot the random assignment process during the summer term if they are ready and willing to begin.

12. What happens when a student that is not assigned a FITW coach walks into a coach's office?

The coach should redirect students who are not on their caseload to other support services staff or offices on the campus for assistance. In general, a FITW coach should not provide assistance directly to students unless they are listed on their caseload (i.e., assigned to treatment within the RCT evaluation). When students not on their caseload (i.e., control students and non-study students) walk into their office, FITW Coaches should document in the Aviso system when they refer students to other services. In emergency or acute situations, we understand that a coach may need to provide direct assistance to students who are not on their caseload. In these rare instances, the coach must document the services provided for the student in the Aviso system.

13. How many students are needed for the RCT study sample?

The grant proposal indicated a sample size of 16,449, half of whom would be randomly assigned to receive the treatment and half would be randomly assigned to the control group. The current plan is for a sample size of at least 20,000 – randomly assigned to either receive the treatment or be a control student. This revised estimate is based on the number of students enrolled at each college in fall and spring who had not been enrolled in the previous three academic terms. Assuming that colleges include students from all or most programs for the RCT study, we expect to reach this sample size in four terms (fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018), which is quicker than initially planned.

14. The study period ends in August 2019, but random assignment ends in spring 2018 – what does this mean for assigning coaches?

After spring 2018 – assuming the sample size estimates have been met – we will no longer be randomly assigning students to the study sample. At that point, colleges can expand the process of assigning coaches to *all new* students. Returning students cannot be assigned a coach, because such students may have been assigned to control during prior terms. In Fall 2019, colleges can assign coaches to any students they so choose, because the study period will have ended.

15. How is faculty involved in the RCT study?

One of the functionalities of the Aviso platform is that faculty can send “early alerts” to coaches and other support services staff if they so choose. During the RCT study period, if an instructor initiates an “early alert,” Aviso will direct the alert to a student’s FITW coach if the student is part of the treatment group. During implementation and training, it is essential that faculty understands that an RCT evaluation is underway, and that the Aviso system will direct instructor “early alerts” differently based on a student’s status in the study. We are still determining how to handle “instructor-generated early alerts” for control students and for



students not in the study sample. The evaluation team is scheduling phone calls with all colleges to discuss this point, and will make recommendations for each college – based on its unique context – by March 31, 2016.

16. What if faculty walks a student directly to a FITW coach?

While this action is normally considered a “best practice,” it should not be done during the study period, because the instructor will not know if a student was randomly assigned to the treatment or control group (or is not part of the study). Faculty should be trained to use the Aviso “early alert” function if they are concerned about a student; this system will direct the instructor’s message to a FITW coach if appropriate.

17. We do not want to randomly assign students to a FITW coach as part of the RCT – what should we do?

As a condition of the First in the World grant award, all colleges are required to participate in the RCT validation study. The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) is building the evidence base for effective practices that can improve student retention and completion. Carolina Works is one of only two Validation Grants awarded in 2015, and the primary outcome of this award is the evidence generated by the RCT evaluation. As evaluators, we want to minimize the burden to participating colleges, and will try to accommodate any local issues as they arise; however, our fundamental responsibility is to protect the integrity of the RCT study. If a college is unwilling to participate in the RCT evaluation, they cannot be part of the grant, and will be subject to requirements outlined in the Contractual Agreement signed by the college’s president.

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