Project SOAR

Education navigators did not change FAFSA completion

Target a Priority Outcome

Project SOAR (Students + Opportunities + Achievements = Results), also known as ROSS for Education, was a demonstration program reflecting the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) commitment to expand educational services to youth living in HUD-assisted housing.[1] Project SOAR provided grant funding to nine public housing authorities (PHAs) to hire and deploy counselors—or "education navigators"—to help youth between the ages of 15 and 20 living in public housing complete the necessary steps to transition to and succeed in postsecondary educational programs.

HUD selected nine PHAs for Project SOAR. PHAs hired education navigators to work on-site in PHAs between fall 2016 and spring 2018 to help students (1) complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), (2) complete postsecondary applications, (3) complete other administrative steps necessary for postsecondary enrollment, and (4) improve their general financial literacy and college readiness.[2] OES collaborated with HUD and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to evaluate the impact of Project SOAR.

Translate Research Insights

Students from families with a lower socioeconomic status (SES) attend college at lower rates than students from wealthier families, even when taking into account measures of academic preparation.[3]

There are multiple barriers that can help explain gaps in college going between students from low-SES families and their higher-SES peers. Of particular relevance are barriers related to financial constraints and a lack of information about the financial aid process.

Postsecondary access programs to address these barriers range from those which are extremely light touch (e.g., one-way text messages, not personalized to the student) to those which are very intensive (e.g., weekly in-person meetings combined with additional financial and academic supports). While some communications interventions have increased FAFSA filing and other postsecondary activities, the growing consensus is that information alone generally is not enough to improve postsecondary access and success. More intensive interventions which include a combination of intensive academic advising, mentoring, and financial support more consistently produce significant and sizable gains in postsecondary enrollment and persistence. While education navigators targeted multiple behaviors and outcomes, the primary analysis focused on FAFSA completion.

Embed Evaluation

There were two evaluation components: a randomized evaluation and a non-randomized evaluation.

Four grantees participated in the experimental impact evaluation. In these four PHAs, a total of 78 buildings or groups of buildings known as Asset Management Projects (AMPs) were assigned either to the treatment group (n=34), where all students 15-20 living in the AMPs were eligible to receive navigator services, or the control group (n=44), where youth living in the AMPs did not have access to navigator assistance. In these PHAs the impact of Project SOAR was estimated by comparing the outcomes for individuals in the treatment AMPs to the outcomes of individuals in the control AMPs.

The remaining five grantees were part of a non-experimental component of the impact evaluation. Among these grantees, OES estimated the effect of SOAR by comparing trends in FAFSA completion for the grantees to the trends of other, non-SOAR PHAs using a synthetic control method. There were a total of 1,137 PHAs available for the comparison.[4]

[1] For more information see: https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/archives.

[2] The FAFSA is used to determine not only eligibility for federal financial aid, but also in many cases state and institutional financial aid.

[3] Ma, Jennifer, Matea Pender, and Meredith Welch. 2019. *Education Pays 2019: the benefits of higher education for individuals and society.* College Board.

[4] More specifically, since the analysis analyzed aggregate outcomes at the PHA level, and since the outcomes are redacted for PHAs with fewer than ten students achieving the outcome in

Analyze Using Existing Data

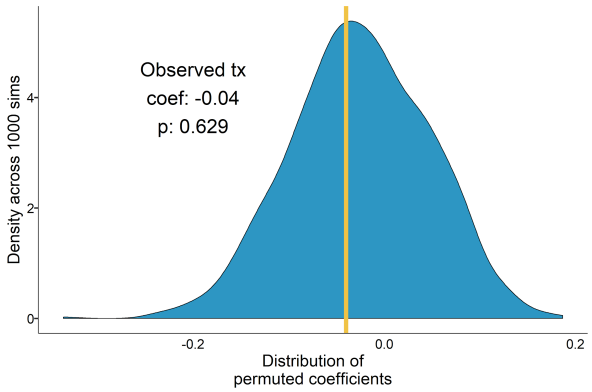
The analysis relied on an administrative data match between HUD and ED. HUD provided a list of age-eligible individuals in public housing to ED, which ED matched to administrative records on FAFSA completion and other postsecondary outcomes.

Because not all age-eligible students would be likely to complete the FAFSA, the analytic sample was restricted to include only those who would likely have been rising high school seniors or older over the relevant period. The primary outcome of interest was FAFSA completion for the 2019-2020 academic year.

Results

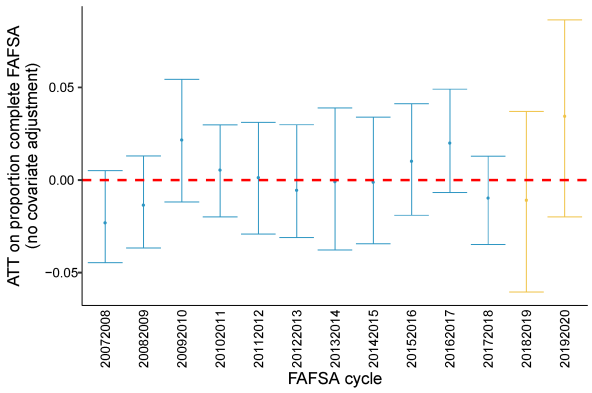
Neither the experimental nor the non-experimental analyses found evidence that SOAR changed FAFSA completion rates. For the experimental analysis, SOAR was estimated to have led to a four percentage point reduction in the rate of FAFSA completion, but the difference was statistically indistinguishable from zero (p=.63).[5] The estimates were imprecisely estimated given a total of 78 experimental units.

Figure 1. Randomization Inference results for FAFSA Completion 2019-2020 cycle (blocking variables only): distribution of permuted treatment coefficients. The figure shows that the observed treatment coefficient is neither larger nor smaller than the majority of permuted treatment coefficients, indicating a null effect.



The main specification of the non-experimental analysis estimated that SOAR increased FAFSA completion by 3.43 percentage points, but the difference was not statistically significant (p=.28). A second specification of the model (which omitted PHAs with any missing data as possible comparisons) estimated SOAR increased FAFSA completion by 3.93 percentage points, and the result was marginally significant (p=.08).

Figure 2. Synthetic control treatment effect on FAFSA completion by year. The figure shows results are positive in the focal treatment year (2019-2020 FAFSA cycle) but not statistically significant (p = 0.28).



Build Evidence

The results suggest that SOAR was not successful at increasing FAFSA completion rates, though there are two limitations. First, randomization at the AMP level reduced statistical power relative to randomizing navigator assistance at the student level. Second, the analysis examined the impact of a program where navigators engaged fewer than half of eligible residents in the PHA. Importantly, an implementation analysis suggested that the

a given year (e.g., fewer than ten students complete the FAFSA), the donor pool—or group of PHAs available for the comparison—was comprised of PHAs with at least one year of non-redacted FAFSA completion.

[5] Uncertainty is based on randomization inference as discussed in the analysis plan. A robustness check using parametric standard errors produced a similar p-value.

two-year period of the grant was not long enough to develop mature programs. Future research on similar grant-based models should take into account the time it takes to integrate on-site staff into communities and develop steady-state program operations. Several of the grantees see value in continuing the SOAR model and are working to secure sources of funding to continue providing some version of navigator assistance. Additionally, the novel data matching between HUD and ED shows the promise for future research on the intersection between housing and education.