Increasing FAFSA Completion: Seattle and King County

A pair of communications do not change FAFSA completion rates

Target a Priority Outcome Part of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) mission is to utilize housing as a platform for improving residents' quality of life, including by increasing educational opportunity. Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the first step to accessing Federal and other forms of aid for post-secondary education. HUD partnered with the Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) in 2017 to design and evaluate a pair of mail-based communications which encouraged youth residing in public housing in Seattle and King County to complete the FAFSA.

Translate Evidence-Based Insights There are several reasons why people do not fill out the FAFSA, including lacking general knowledge about the financial aid process, having difficulty with the complexity of the FAFSA, not having access to parental financial information, not having easy access to the FAFSA, and procrastination. There is evidence to suggest providing information and reminders can improve completion of tasks related to the financial aid process.[1]

HUD and OES designed and sent a bundle of two letters to address the basic informational gaps that may exist. The letters gave general information about the FAFSA and simplified the process for starting the application to two easy steps. The second letter attempted to dispel common misconceptions about out-of-pocket costs of college by showing the total cost of tuition and fees once a full Pell Grant was taken into account and used a social norm to indicate that most public housing residents were eligible for a Pell Grant.[2]

All 17-24 year old residents in residing in public housing in the Seattle Housing Authority and King County Housing Authority were mailed both letters between February and April 2017.

Embed Tests The evidence-based insight was evaluated with a non-experimental, augmented synthetic control method.[3] The augmented synthetic control method creates a comparison unit by weighting PHAs in the comparison group in a way that best matches the characteristics of the treated PHAs. The effectiveness is estimated by comparing the outcomes of the (combined) treated units and the weighted synthetic comparison unit. Residents of similar age from other large public housing authorities (PHAs) were used to create a comparison group.[4]

Analyze Using Existing Data The main outcomes of interest are FAFSA completion for the 2017 and 2018 academic years.[5]

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[1] Castleman, Ben, and Lindsay Page. 2015. "Beyond FAFSA completion." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 47, no. 1: 28-35; Castleman, Benjamin L., and Lindsay C. Page. 2016. "Freshman year financial aid nudges: An experiment to increase FAFSA renewal and college persistence." *Journal of Human Resources* 51, no. 2: 389-415; Bird, Kelli A., Benjamin L. Castleman, Joshua Goodman, and Cait Lamberton. 2017. "Nudging at a national scale: Experimental evidence from a FAFSA completion campaign." EdPolicy Works Working Paper Series No. 54.

[2] Pell Grants are Federal grants awarded to low- and middle-income post-secondary students. Students must complete a FAFSA in order to qualify for a Pell Grant.

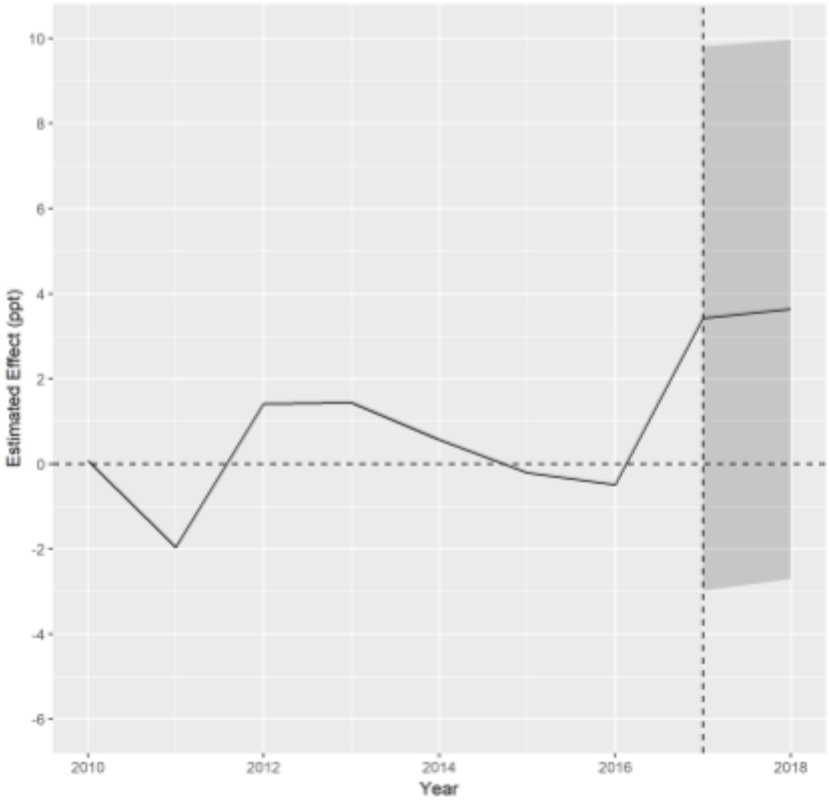
[3] Ben-Michael, Eli, Avi Feller, and Jesse Rothstein. 2018. "The Augmented Synthetic Control Method." *arXiv preprint arXiv:1811.04170.*

[4] The pool of PHAs for the comparison group included the 90 largest PHAs based on the number of residents in public housing, excluding PHAs that were identified to have a similar intervention or had missing data.

[5] The 2017 academic year refers to the period that covers the

Outcome data are collected by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in the Enterprise Data Warehouse & Analytics system. HUD provided ED with a file that included individual level data with identifying information to be matched to outcome data, and ED returned outcome data aggregated to the PHA.[6] The PHA-level outcome data also were matched to other PHA-level demographic information from HUD's Picture of Subsidized Households data products.[7]

Figure 1: Gap Plot of Estimated Effects



Results The results suggest the communications did not change FAFSA completion rates. Sending the two letters is estimated to have increased FAFSA completion by 3.4 percentage points in 2017 and 3.6 percentage points in 2018, but the estimates cannot be distinguished from zero. Robustness checks using different model specifications yield substantively similar results of a small, statistically insignificant positive effect.[8]

Figure 1 is a gap plot which shows the estimated differences between the treated PHAs and the synthetic comparison PHA from 2010 - 2018. The area to the left of the vertical dotted line is the pre-treatment period. The trend line should be close to zero (the horizontal reference line) if there is a good fit between the treated PHAs and the comparison PHA. If the treatment was effective, the trend line would rise in the post-treatment region to the right of the vertical reference line. The shaded area around the trend line in the post-treatment region represents the 95 percent confidence interval around the estimates.

Build Evidence This pilot, and the two other FAFSA encouragement campaigns completed by HUD and OES, failed to produce significant gains (or decreases) in FAFSA completion. It is possible more targeted efforts may produce different results. The provision of information alone to a broad group of residents does not change post-secondary educational behavior.

fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters. Note that the 2018 academic year is in progress, so the results are dynamic and can change as student complete the FAFSA for spring enrollment, for example.

[6] To comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), ED is unable to provide HUD or OES with individual-level data.

[7] https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/assthsg.html

[8] This is true not only for different model specifications using the augmented synthetic control method, but also using a matching SCM estimator without bias correction and the generalized synthetic control method. More detail about model specification is available upon request.