

What Works Clearinghouse



Revised December 2010

WWC Quick Review of the Report “The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results From the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment”^{1,2}

What is this study about?

The study examined whether assistance in filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) increases the likelihood of filing the FAFSA, college enrollment, and financial aid receipt.

The authors analyzed data on about 17,000 individuals in 156 H&R Block tax preparation offices in Ohio and North Carolina.

The study authors determined whether an individual filed the FAFSA and financial aid paid out by the U.S. government using data from the U.S. Department of Education. They measured college enrollment using data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

The study measured effects by comparing the outcomes of three research groups created through random assignment: a FAFSA treatment group; an information-only treatment group which received portions, but not all, of the FAFSA treatment; and a no-treatment control group.

Within each research group, the authors distinguished between participants who were high school seniors or recent high school graduates and financially dependent on their parents (referred to as “dependent students”), participants who were independent adults with no previous college experience, and independent adults with some previous college experience.

Features of the FAFSA Experiment

The FAFSA is an eight-page, detailed application that must be completed to receive federal financial aid.

Participants were low- to moderate-income individuals who had received tax-preparation assistance at H&R Block and had a family member aged 15–30 with no bachelor’s degree.

For the FAFSA treatment group members, data from their tax returns and responses from a brief interview were used to complete the FAFSA and provide an estimate of the amount of need-based aid they would receive.

For the information-only group, data from their tax returns were used to provide an estimate of the amount of need-based aid they would receive, but direct assistance completing the FAFSA was not given.

Control group members were provided a brochure containing general information on college costs and financial aid but received no direct help completing the FAFSA and no personalized aid estimation.

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¹ Bettinger, E., Long, B., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2009). *The role of simplification and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment* (NBER Working Paper No. 15361). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

² This is an updated version of a quick review released in June 2010. Subsequent to publication of the quick review, the study authors advised the WWC of errors in the text and clarified the sample size information reported in the reviewed working paper. The WWC quick review team adjusted the study rating accordingly. A revised version of the working paper was released at the end of June 2010.

Quick reviews examine evidence published in a study (supplemented, if necessary, by information from author queries) to assess whether that study’s design meets WWC evidence standards. Quick reviews rely on the effect sizes and significance levels reported by study authors.

The WWC rating applies only to the summarized results, and not necessarily to all results presented in the study.

What did the study find about independent adults?

Independent adults who received assistance with the FAFSA *and* information about financial aid were significantly more likely to submit the aid application. The rate at which independent participants with no college experience filed the FAFSA was about 40%, compared to about 14% for the control group; the rate for independents with prior college experience was about 56%, compared to about 35% for the control group.

The FAFSA treatment had no statistically significant effect on college enrollment, but did increase the likelihood of receiving a Pell Grant and the total amount of federal grants received for both groups of financially independent adults. Independents with prior college experience in the FAFSA group were also more likely to receive a federal student loan.

The information-only treatment had no positive effect on any of these outcomes, with some evidence that it decreased receipt of federal student loans.

What did the study find about the sample of dependent students, FAFSA versus control comparison?

Dependent students whose families received assistance with the FAFSA *and* information about financial aid were significantly more likely to submit the aid application. The rate at which they filed was about 55%, compared to about 40% for the control group.

In addition, dependent students in the FAFSA treatment group enrolled in college the following fall at a rate of 34%, compared to 27% for the control group. They were also more likely to receive a Pell Grant and a greater total amount of federal grants.

The WWC has reservations about these results because the groups of students compared may have differed from each other in ways not controlled for in the analysis.

WWC Rating of Analysis of Independent Adults

The analysis of independent adults described in this report meets WWC evidence standards

Strengths: The study was a randomized controlled trial.

WWC Rating of Analysis of Dependent Students, FAFSA versus Control Comparison

The analysis of dependent students, FAFSA versus control comparison, described in this report meets WWC evidence standards with reservations

Strengths: The study was a randomized controlled trial.

Cautions: Attrition could not be calculated for dependent students in the FAFSA and control groups. High and differing rates of sample attrition may create differences in the research groups that are not due to the program and therefore bias the results. The study authors demonstrate that, among sample members for whom data were available, the FAFSA treatment and control groups remained well matched on observable initial characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and income level.

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What did the study find about the sample of dependent students, information-only versus control comparison?

There were no significant effects for the information-only group on any of the outcomes examined.

However, the WWC does not consider these results to be conclusive because there is evidence that the research groups were not initially equivalent.

WWC Rating of Analysis of Dependent Students, Information-Only versus Control Comparison

The analysis of dependent students, information-only versus control comparison, described in this report does not meet WWC evidence standards

Cautions: The information-only treatment group differs from the control group on previous college enrollment. This difference between the groups is likely related to the outcomes examined in the study. Therefore, results from this analysis cannot be attributed with confidence to the intervention.