The Impacts of the College Advising Corps on College Enrollment and Postsecondary Success in North Carolina

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APR 2024

John M Belk Endowment
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UNC SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
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North Carolina Education Futures Initiative is a joint project with the UNC School of Education and the UNC Department of Public Policy

Introduction

Attaining a postsecondary credential is one of the most promising pathways to financial security and economic mobility for students in the United States[1]. In recognition of the importance of higher education, North Carolina has embarked on an ambitious education attainment goal of 2 million North Carolinians with a postsecondary credential by 2030[2]. In 2021, 40 percent of North Carolinians between 18 and 24 were enrolled in college, placing NC only one percentage point lower than the national college enrollment rate. A closer look at college going among racial subgroups uncovers disparities in attendance. In particular, 43 percent of White students ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college, while only 23, 33, and 38 percent of American Indian, Hispanic, and Black students were enrolled, respectively.

The college application and enrollment process, however, is complex, and students often require additional support to realize their educational goals[3]. While school counselors can assist with this process, they often lack the bandwidth and training to provide students with adequate support.[4] As a result, several national college access organizations, like College Advising Corps (CAC), have stepped in to fill the need for college counseling within high schools.

Established in 2005, CAC assigns new college graduates to secondary schools to offer college advising resources to students. The primary goal of CAC is to enhance the college enrollment rate of individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, including first-generation college students, students of color, rural students, and those with low incomes. CAC advisers focus their services on six Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), including activities 1:1 meetings and college application submissions, which the organization chose due to their positive relationship with college enrollment. In addition to encouraging students to enroll in college, advisers work to help students enroll in colleges that are a good academic match and personal fit. This "match and fit" framework is important for students' future success, as students are more likely to perform well and persist if they attend an institution that meets their academic and personal needs[5]. As such, we may expect this aspect of the 1:1 advising CAC offers to increase both enrollment and student success once enrolled.

In the 2022-23 school year, CAC worked with 29 university partners in 15 states to serve over 200,000 students in more than 600 high schools. CAC expanded to North Carolina at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2007. Since then, the program has expanded to six additional campuses, including Duke University, Davidson College, North Carolina State University, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and Appalachian State University. The five CAC Programs currently active in the state served over 21,000 seniors at 122 high schools during the 2022-23 school year.

This brief is the third in a series that examines the influence of CAC advisers on students' educational outcomes in North Carolina. Our first two briefs found that CAC increased FAFSA and college application submissions, particularly among underrepresented student groups. In this brief, we extend this line of inquiry by examining the effect of the intervention on postsecondary enrollment and student outcomes once enrolled in college. Prior work assessing the effect of CAC on college enrollment has found that the program increased overall college enrollment by two to three percentage points in the first years of the intervention[6]. Prior work has also found that that enrollment effects were particularly strong among Hispanic and low-income students[7]—our work tests whether these results are consistent in another state context. In addition to focusing on college enrollment, we assess the intervention's effects on students' academic outcomes once enrolled. In particular, we examine changes to credit accumulation at the end of the first year and persistence into the second year. Prior evaluations of CAC failed to uncover increased college persistence rates, but they did not examine specific indicators behind likely success such as credit accumulation.[8] While these outcomes are not within CAC's theory of action and not evaluated by CAC as a measure of their impact, their emphasis on "match and fit" is intended to encourage enrollment at institutions that can better support them, which should lead to improved outcomes.

Using data from the University of North Carolina System Office and CAC, we find that assigning a CAC adviser to a high school led to

1. An increase in enrollment at UNC System campuses among Hispanic students
2. No strong or consistent effect on credit accumulation or persistence among enrolled students

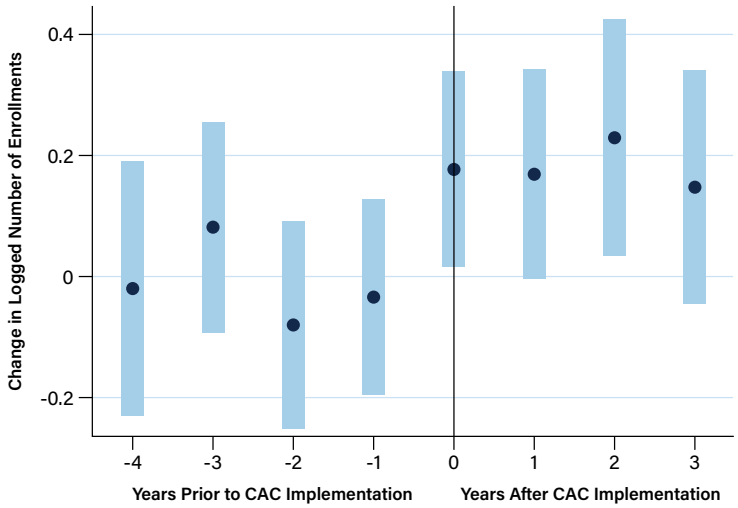
Key Findings

1. Assigning a CAC adviser to a high school led to an increase in enrollment at UNC System campuses.

First, we examined how access to CAC advisers was related to first-time, first-year college enrollment in the UNC System overall and among certain underserved populations, particularly Black, Hispanic, and Pell eligible students[9]. Our analysis for this, and subsequent outcomes, relies on a quasi-experimental method known as an event study. This approach compares changes to our outcomes of interest at high schools before and after CAC to other high schools in the state that do not have a CAC adviser[10]. This method allowed us to isolate the effect of a CAC adviser from other influences that may affect students' outcomes. Due to limitations in the years available in our data, we estimated the effect of CAC on outcomes for schools that implemented the intervention after 2010 and before 2020 and had seniors classes in years prior to the intervention (109 high schools[11]).

As seen in Figure 1[12], we found that introducing a CAC adviser into a high school led to an increase in college enrollment among first-time, first-year Hispanic students. We found that enrollment among Hispanic students from CAC schools increased by 19-26 percent[13] in the years after CAC's introduction. Considering Hispanic enrollments from CAC schools together, this is an increase of around 180 Hispanic students total from these schools to the UNC system, compared to the year prior to the intervention. We also observed increases in enrollment overall and from Black and Pell students, respectively; however, these increases could be due to chance and not resulting from placing CAC advisers because traditional statistical criteria for reporting treatment effects were not met.

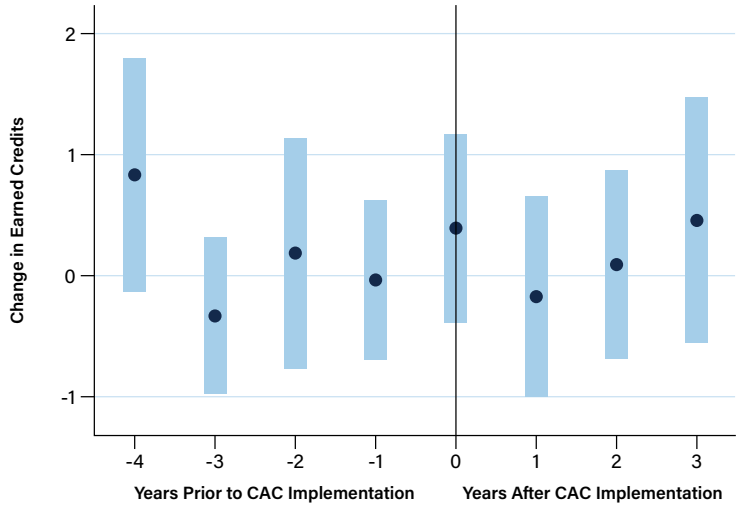
Figure 1 Comparative Change in UNC System Enrollments for North Carolina CAC High Schools Among Hispanic Students



2. Assigning a CAC adviser to a high school did not lead to changes in average credit accumulation or persistence.

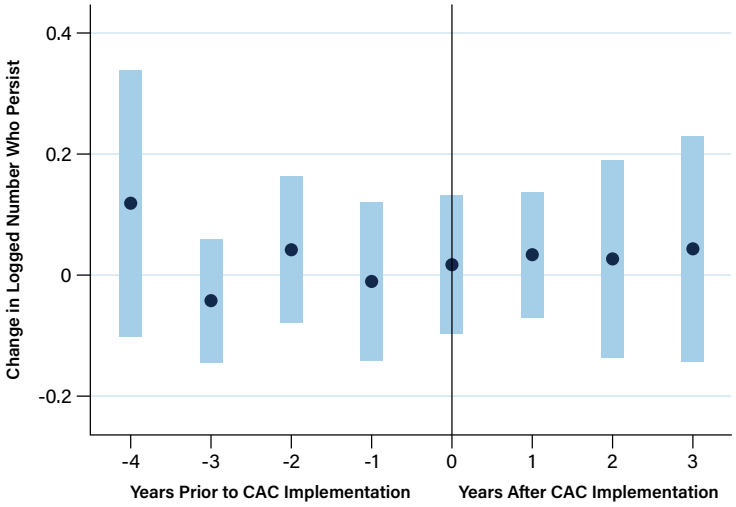
The next two analyses in this brief examine the academic performance of students from CAC-advised high schools once they enter the UNC System. While not in the organization's theory of action and not used as a formal metric of programmatic success, it is possible that CAC's emphasis on placing students in colleges that are a suitable academic match and personal fit will lead to better academic outcomes. Given the policy relevance, we have included these outcomes in our analyses. First, we examine full-time students' earned credits at the end of their first year of college[14]. Figure 2 indicates that students did not earn any more or fewer credits in college after the program was introduced.

Figure 2 Comparative Change in Students' Earned Credits for North Carolina CAC High Schools



We also examined the number of students who persisted into their second year of college. Aligned with our previous findings, we do not observe evidence that CAC influenced the number of students who persisted. See Figure 3 for results.

Figure 2 Comparative Change in Persistence into the Second Year of College for North Carolina CAC High Schools



Implications

In this brief, we assessed the effect of CAC on students' postsecondary enrollment and academic outcomes. Our findings suggest that CAC

- increased enrollment among Hispanic students
- did not result in consistent changes in students' credit accumulation or the number of students who persist into their second year

Our analysis examining college enrollment reflects much of the extant literature on CAC, which finds it leads to more students of color enrolling in college.[15] This pattern is promising, as CAC works specifically to improve college-going rates among historically underserved groups. The fact that we do not find strong evidence of enrollment changes among the broader student population could result from several factors. Students must undergo several steps between college acceptance and enrollment, such as attending orientation and paying enrollment deposits, which often happen during the summer. Because CAC students are not enrolled in school at this time, they may not receive adequate support in these later steps in the college application process. Future work should assess these intervening steps to understand whether they are impeding CAC students from enrolling in college. Answers to this question could help inform CAC's KPIs moving forward.

Our analysis of college enrollment faces several key limitations, which precludes us from observing the full effects of CAC on enrollment. As mentioned, due to data limitations, we can only observe enrollment in the UNC System. However, CAC advisers also encourage NC students to attend community colleges,

private four-year colleges, and out-of-state institutions. Indeed, internal CAC data indicates that as many as 65 percent of students tracked enrolled in colleges outside of the UNC system. Further, prior work on CAC finds that the intervention increased college enrollment rates at community and technical colleges[16]. As such, it is possible that CAC advisers increased enrollment within colleges not in our data. Examining the effects of CAC on enrollment in other types of colleges is a crucial next step in understanding the landscape of the intervention.

Finally, echoing prior research[17], we generally find that CAC did not affect students' performance once enrolled in college. While CAC advisers attempt to help students enroll in colleges that are a good academic match and personal fit, the advisers currently do not focus their services on helping students transition into college nor does the organization provide support to students once enrolled. However, it is encouraging that CAC students are performing about the same as they would have in college absent CAC. Future work should examine CAC students' experiences once in college to identify any potential barriers to student success. If there are common barriers across students, CAC advisors could help connect students to resources before enrollment to stave off these challenges. CAC may also consider creating partnerships with student success organizations at campuses that attract a large number of CAC-served students to ensure that these students receive guidance and support in their transition to college.

About Us

The Education Futures Initiative is a multi-disciplinary project that is data-driven, evidence-based, and action-oriented. The initiative brings together faculty affiliates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with expertise in education policy and rigorous research methods from across academic disciplines—including education, public policy, economics, and sociology—to answer questions and identify high-leverage, evidence-based programs vital to North Carolina's efforts to improve educational attainment and economic development.

The Education Futures Initiative and the work reported in this brief are generously supported by John M. Belk Endowment. We would also like to thank Michael Cobb at the College Advising Corps for his thoughtful feedback.

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Endnotes

1 Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Kline, P., & Saez, E. (2014). Where is the land of opportunity? The geography of intergenerational mobility in the United States. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 129(4), 1553-1623. doi: 10.1093/qje/qju022

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6 Bettinger, E.P. & Evans, B.J. (2019). College guidance for all: A randomized experiment in pre-college advising. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 38(3), 579-599. doi.org/10.1002/pam.22133

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7 Bettinger, E.P. & Evans, B.J. (2019). College guidance for all: A randomized experiment in pre-college advising. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 38(3), 579-599. doi.org/10.1002/pam.22133

Bettinger, E.P., Antonio, A.L., Foster-Hedrick, J., Orias, E. (n.d.) College Advising Corps @ Boston University 2014-2018 Final Evaluation Report chrome- americorps.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/GreenLight_CAC_EASE_Final_Report_Greenlight_040219_508_1.pdf

8 Ibid.

9 It is important to note that a great deal of enrollment for CAC-served students occurs outside of the UNC system.

10 The comparison group contained 285 public high schools. We excluded charter schools, alternative and vocational schools, and schools not open all years in the panel to best reflect our treatment sample.

11 For our analyses examining the behaviors of Pell recipients, our first year of data was 2014. Therefore, we were unable to include schools that introduced an adviser prior to this year, which limited our sample for those analysis to 64 high schools.

12 The X-axis in this figure and those that follow indicates the year in which the outcome of interest is measured, with 0 being the year CAC began working with the high school, –1 being the year immediately before the partnership, and 1 being the year after the partnership started. A vertical blue line separates the pre– and post–CAC time periods in year 0. The Y-axis indicates the size of the CAC effect on the outcome of interest. The shaded blue area around the dots represents the range of statistically plausible changes in application submission given our sample size. In all models we control for HS level characteristics that could impact college going including school characteristics such as racial/ethnic composition, percent of students on FRPL, size of senior class, cohort graduation rates, school locale, and title 1 status. We also control for community characteristics like unemployment rates, percent in the county in poverty, and median household income. Finally, we control for other interventions that may impact college going such as local college promise programs. In the analyses where the outcomes are credit accumulation and enrollment one year after entry, we include controls for the number of students from each HS who enrolled at each UNC System institution to control for changes to the outcome that may arise from more students attending a particular institution.

13 To transform regression coefficients from logged outcomes to percent changes, we exponentiated the coefficient, subtracted 1 and multiplied that number by 100.

14 We subset the data for these analyses to only include full-time enrollees because full- and part-time students have different academic experiences once enrolled. Full-time students made up 95% of enrollments from CAC high schools.

15 Bettinger, E.P. & Evans, B.J. (2019). College guidance for all: A randomized experiment in pre-college advising. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 38(3), 579-599. doi.org/10.1002/pam.22133

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.