

# The Effect of the College Advising Corps on Student Financial Aid Applications in North Carolina

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# Introduction

Research has shown that students are more likely to enroll in college when they receive financial aid.<sup>1</sup> Most students apply for financial aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is managed by the United States Department of Education (ED). The FAFSA uses information about a student and the student's family finances to determine how much they are able to pay for college. This information is then used by the ED and colleges to award need-based financial aid.

However, applying for financial aid—and completing the FAFSA, in particular—is a complex process, and it can be difficult for students to access financial aid from federal, state, institutional, and community sources.<sup>2</sup> In a recent cohort, 19 percent of students eligible for financial aid did not complete the FAFSA, which left them ineligible for all federal and some state and institutional aid programs.<sup>3</sup> Among students who do complete the FAFSA, many do not complete it by the priority deadline for allocating aid, which results in them missing out on first-come-first-serve aid sources.<sup>4</sup> In response to the need for robust resources for college-bound high school students, a host of non-profit organizations such as GEAR UP, TRIO Programs, and College Possible have stepped in to support high school students on their path to college. One area in which they offer support is with financial aid processes. These organizations help students navigate the college application and enrollment process, which includes addressing the challenges around understanding the FAFSA and completing it on time.

Among these organizations, College Advising Corps (CAC) has become a leader in using a near-peer advising approach to increase students' postsecondary enrollments. Founded in 2005, CAC places recent college graduates in high schools to provide college advising resources with the goal of increasing college enrollment of students from low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented backgrounds. To accomplish this goal, CAC focuses its services on eight key performance indicators (KPIs): campus visits, college representative visits and college fairs, SAT/ACT registration, college workshops, college application submissions, FAFSA completion, scholarship dollars awarded, and parent engagement. CAC now works with 22 university partners to serve over 240,000 students in 782 high schools across the country. CAC expanded to North Carolina at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2007, and 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 current CAC Programs in the state, which include all of the above except for Davidson, served over 21,000 seniors at 122 high schools during the 2022–23 school year.<sup>5</sup>

Our analysis of the relationship between North Carolina CAC advisers and high school students' college-going behaviors—especially surrounding FAFSA completion—draws on data from the University of North Carolina (UNC) System Office, the Federal Student Aid Data Center, and CAC. We found that:

- Students in schools served by CAC advisers completed and submitted more FAFSAs
- Some students in schools served by CAC advisers submitted their FAFSAs earlier
- Students who met with a CAC adviser were more likely to submit a FAFSA



## Background on College Advising Corps and Financial Aid Interventions

Several studies have evaluated CAC's effect on various student outcomes. This work has largely focused on CAC's overarching goal, college enrollment, and the overall findings have shown some evidence that CAC interventions affected the likelihood that students will enroll, particularly among Hispanic and low-income students.<sup>6</sup> Recently, others have examined the influence of CAC advisers on the organization's KPIs. Using a research design similar to this brief, Clayton found that the presence of a college adviser in a high school did increase SAT participation rates.<sup>7</sup> This research brief builds on Clayton's work by assessing the impact of college advisers on other college-going behaviors— specifically with regard to FAFSA completion.

Prior work on financial aid interventions indicates that providing students with coaching can increase FAFSA completion rates.<sup>8</sup> However, most of the interventions examined in this research were either low-touch (e.g., sending texts or emails) or one-time meetings. Since CAC advisers spend two academic years in each school, it is possible that their effect on students' financial aid-related college-going decisions may be more pronounced.

## Key Findings

### 1. Schools served by CAC advisers completed and submitted more FAFSAs

First, we examined how access to CAC advisers was related to FAFSA submission and completion. Although they appear synonymous, submission and completion are two distinct steps in the FAFSA process. *FAFSA submission* refers to a student submitting the required documents to the ED's Federal

Student Aid office for review. An application is not considered *complete*, however, until it is inspected by the ED for incomplete information and the applicant provides any information that was found to be missing. Colleges are unable to process incomplete FAFSAs, and therefore it is important to examine completion and submission separately.

In the 2022–2023 application cycle, the ED’s Federal Student Aid Data Center reported that on average, 81 FAFSAs were submitted per high school in North Carolina, while the average number of completed FAFSAs was 77. Across the state, almost 3,600 FAFSA applications that were submitted were considered incomplete.

To study the relationship between access to CAC advisers and FAFSA submission and completion rates, we drew on school-level FAFSA data as reported by the ED’s Federal Student Aid Data Center. Our analysis relied on a quasi-experimental method known as an event study.<sup>9</sup> This approach compares changes in FAFSA submission and completion at high schools before and after CAC advisers were posted to them to other high schools in the state that do not have a CAC adviser. Ultimately, this method allowed us to isolate the effect of a CAC adviser from other influences that may affect FAFSA submissions and completion.<sup>10</sup> 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 2014 and before 2020 and had senior classes in years prior to the intervention (64 high schools).<sup>11</sup>

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, we have found that introducing a CAC adviser to a high school led to an increase in submitted and completed FAFSAs at that high school. The x-axis in Figure 1 (and in those that follow) indicates the year in which the outcome of interest was measured, with 0 being the year a CAC adviser was introduced in the school, -1 being the year immediately prior to introduction, and 1 being the year after introduction. The pre-CAC and post-CAC time periods are separated by a vertical black line on year 0. The y-axis indicates the effect of CAC intervention 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.<sup>12</sup> Our analysis revealed that high schools with CAC advisers experienced a 10 to 20 percent increase in FAFSA submissions and completions, or about 11-20 FAFSAs per high school, in the years after the introduction of the program.

Figure 1

FAFSA Submissions Increased

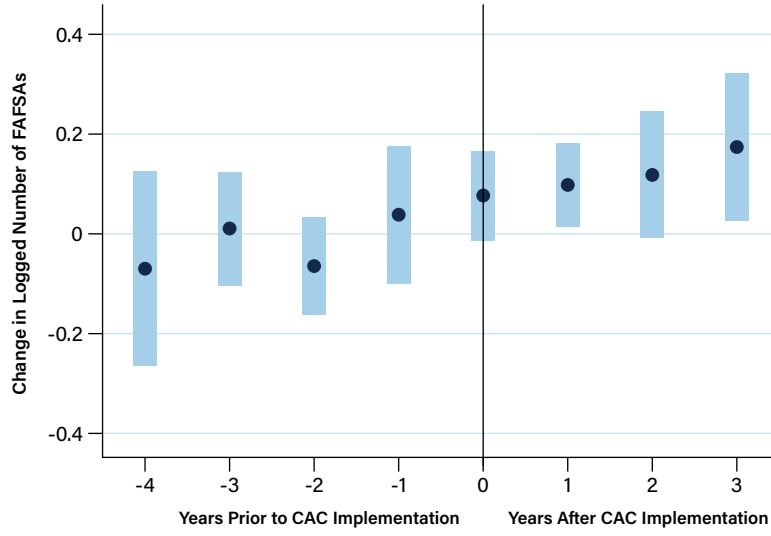
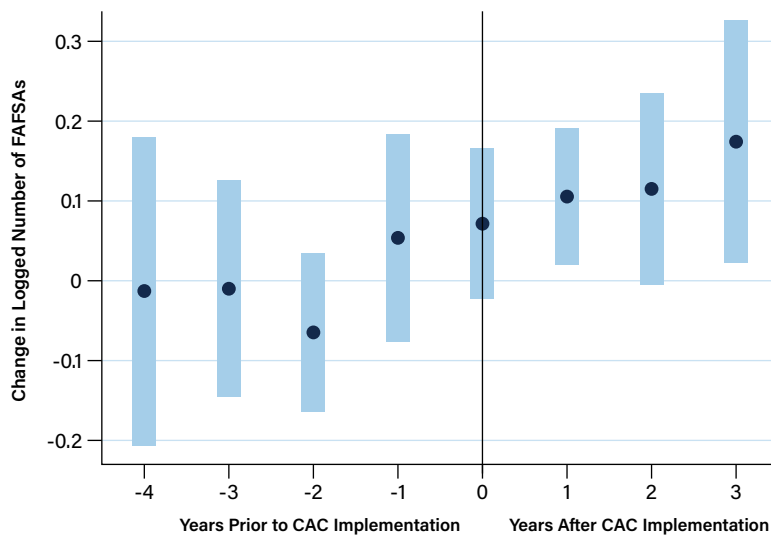


Figure 2

FAFSA Completions Increased



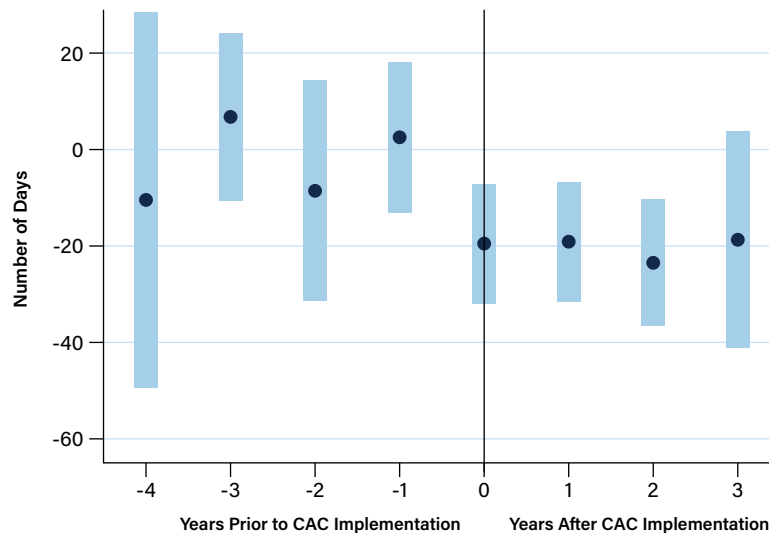
## 2. Some students in schools served by CAC submitted their FAFSAs sooner

Next, we examined the effect of CAC’s intervention on the timing of students’ FAFSA submissions. While students in North Carolina have five months to complete their FAFSA before the March 1 priority deadline, students who complete the application earlier are more likely to receive first-come-first-serve state and institutional grant funds. We used data from the UNC System Office to analyze the number of days that elapsed between the day the FAFSA opened for submissions (October 1) and the day a student submitted their application.<sup>13</sup> Like our analysis of FAFSA submission and completion, we used an event study method; however, our results are reported in terms of days. Additionally, in this analysis we examined changes among students overall, as well as specific underserved populations, mainly Pell-eligible students, and Black and Hispanic students.

The results of our analyses, shown in Figure 3, show suggestive evidence that Black students who attended high schools with CAC advisers submitted their FAFSAs earlier than they would have had the school not had a CAC adviser. In particular, the average number of days that elapsed between FAFSA’s opening for submission and student submissions for Black students declined by 19 to 23 days in the years after the CAC adviser entered the high school.

Figure 3

Days Between FAFSA Open and Submission Declined Among Black Students



### 3. Students who met with an adviser were more likely to submit a FAFSA

Our final research question explores whether meeting with an adviser influenced the likelihood that a student would complete a FAFSA. While the first analysis in this brief hinted at this question, it was completed at the school level, which did not allow us to identify the effect of meeting with a CAC adviser on individual students' FAFSA submissions. Using data provided by CAC, however, we have been able to pursue this research question by descriptively examining the relationship between FAFSA assistance and submission at the student level. It is important to note that the results of these analyses do not support drawing conclusions about a causal relationship, as the data do not include a clear comparison group of students. Further to this, these data have been self-reported by advisers, and therefore they are not guaranteed to be consistent or accurate, which may undercut the results.

Using logistic regression,<sup>14</sup> we estimated the relationship between meeting with an adviser and submitting the FAFSA. First, we assessed whether an adviser's assistance in completing the FAFSA increased the likelihood of submission. We found that a student's probability of submitting the FAFSA increased by 66 percentage points if an adviser assisted them with completing their FAFSA. We also assessed whether meeting with an adviser about the FAFSA increased a student's probability of submission. These meetings could involve the adviser helping a student complete the FAFSA, or they could simply be a meeting in which the adviser helps a student understand the process. We found that a student's probability of submitting the FAFSA increased by 27 percentage points if they met with an adviser about the FAFSA at least once. Next, we examined whether the frequency of meetings about the FAFSA between an adviser and a student had a relationship with the likelihood of FAFSA submission. In this case, we found that a student's probability of submitting the FAFSA increased each time they met with an adviser. For example, a student's probability of submission increased by six percentage points if they had one meeting with an adviser about the FAFSA. The probability of submission for students who met with an adviser five or 10 times was 35 and 57 percentage points higher, respectively, than for those who never met with an adviser.

## Implications

While much of the existing literature has found that CAC interventions do not have an effect on college enrollment, we have shown that CAC's interventions may be successful in changing students' other behaviors in the college-going process. Our analyses revealed that:

- Students at high schools that had CAC advisers submitted and completed more FAFSAs than they would have had CAC not partnered with their school.
- Back students in the UNC system who attended a high school with a CAC adviser submitted their FAFSAs sooner than would be expected without the intervention.
- Students who meet with CAC advisers may be more likely to submit their FAFSAs, and that this likelihood increases with the number of times they engage with an adviser.

These findings indicate that college advisers may help students who enroll in college be more successful. Submitting the FAFSA, and doing so earlier in the school year, may help students become eligible for grant-based funding that is only available for those who have completed their FAFSA or for funding that is allocated on a first-come-first-serve basis. These additional funds could reduce students' reliance on student loans or more generally reduce the financial burden of students enrolled in college.

Although the analyses in this brief indicate that CAC advisers help students complete essential financial aid-related milestones in the college-going process, several steps remain between FAFSA completion and receiving aid; these should be explored in future research.

- First, a disproportionate number of low-income students are selected for FAFSA verification—a process whereby students must submit documents to prove aid eligibility.<sup>15</sup> Verification can be a difficult process for students to complete; it has long been considered a barrier for students on the road to college.<sup>16</sup> Future research should investigate whether CAC advisers are effective in helping their students complete the verification process.
- Second, to receive aid, students must interpret financial aid award letters and complete financial aid paperwork at their universities. How CAC advisers assist students in this process should also be examined through further study.
- Finally, the evidence presented in this brief indicates that advisers likely influence students' behaviors in the application process. As such, it is important to understand whether this influence is contained to financial aid-related behaviors, or whether students are also more likely to apply and enroll in college after the introduction of CAC.

## 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.

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- 11 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.

- 12 To transform regression coefficients seen in the graphs from logged outcomes to percent changes, we exponentiated the coefficient, subtracted 1 and multiplied that number by 100. This same procedure applies to the remainder of the analyses with logged outcomes.
- 13 Beginning the 2016-2017 school year, the FAFSA open data moved from January 1 to October 1. We have accounted for this change in our calculations
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