

From: Bridget Long [longbr@gse.harvard.edu]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 10:34 AM
To: What Works; info@whatworks.ed.gov
Cc: Bettinger, Eric; Philip Oreopoulos
Subject: WWC Quick Review - INACCURATE information in a report

To Whom it may concern,
We just received a preview copy of the upcoming WWC report that reviews our study. There appears to be a HUGE mistake in the report as it suggests we had high rates of sample attrition and that this attrition differed substantially across the treatment and control groups. This is absolutely untrue, and we are puzzled how that conclusion was drawn (of the many who have reviewed the paper, none have come to a similar conclusion). None of our tables or results point to the concern highlighted in the WWC report, and we are baffled at the percentages reported on page 2 concerning sample attrition. How were these even calculated? It is worth noting that the way we track our sample using administrative data prevents such sample attrition.

We are extremely concerned that the WWC is about to put out an inaccurate report about our work. While we understand that the Quick Review process does not entail confirming study results with the authors, the WWC should at the very least report accurately what is in the report. The reservations about sample attrition are unfounded based on everything written in our study.

How can we remedy this situation?

Sincerely,
Bridget Long (with Eric Bettinger, Phil Oreopoulos, and Lisa Sanbonmatsu)

Prof. Bridget Terry Long, Ph.D.
Professor of Education and Economics
Harvard Graduate School of Education
<http://gseacademic.harvard.edu/~longbr/>

> From: "What Works" <whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com>
> Date: May 28, 2010 6:57:53 AM PDT
> To: <ebettinger@stanford.edu>
> Subject: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study
>

> Dear Dr. Bettinger:

>
>
>

> We are emailing to inform you that a What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)
> quick review of your report, "The role of simplification and informa
> tion in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experime
> nt," will be posted on the WWC website Tuesday, June 1, 2010. As par t
> of this process, we are sharing with you a courtesy copy of the qu ick
> review (attached as a PDF to this e-mail). This quick review is
> embargoed until Tuesday, June 1, 2010, at 10am Eastern Time and can
> not be circulated until that time.

>
>
>

> Quick reviews assess whether a study's design is consistent with WWC
> evidence standards. WWC quick reviews are based on the evidence pub
> lished in the report cited and rely on effect sizes and significance
> levels as reported by study authors. WWC does not confirm study aut
> hors' findings or contact authors for additional information about t
> he study. The WWC rating refers only to the results summarized in th e
> review and not necessarily to all results presented in the study.

>
>
>

> To learn more about WWC quick reviews, you can visit the WWC quick
> review page at: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/>.

>
>
>

> Because of the volume of correspondence the WWC receives, questions
> regarding WWC reports and quick reviews should be submitted to the
> Help Desk at info@whatworks.ed.gov. Your questions will be forwarded
> to the appropriate staff member on the WWC team and you will receive
> an e-mail response.

>
>
>

> Sincerely,

>
>
>

> The What Works Clearinghouse Team

>
>
>
>
>
>
>
>

From: longbr@gse.harvard.edu
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 10:39 AM
To: info@whatworks.ed.gov
Subject: IES Website: Contact Us: Other, Reference ID Number:
537490961

info@whatworks.ed.gov, this email was automatically sent through the
Contact
link on the WWC website.

From: longbr@gse.harvard.edu

Message: RE: Upcoming (June 1, 2010) WWC Quick Review of the Report "The
Role
of Simplification
and Information in College Decisions: Results from the
H&R Block FAFSA Experiment"

To Whom it may concern,
We just received a preview copy of the upcoming WWC report that reviews
our
study. There appears to be a HUGE mistake in the report as it suggests
we had
high rates of sample attrition and that this attrition differed
substantially
across the treatment and control groups. This is absolutely untrue, and
we
are puzzled how that conclusion was drawn (of the many who have reviewed
the
paper, none have come to a similar conclusion). None of our tables or
results
point to the concern highlighted in the WWC report, and we are baffled at
the
percentages reported on page 2 concerning sample attrition. How were
these
even calculated? It is worth noting that the way we track our sample
using
administrative data prevents such sample attrition.

We are extremely concerned that the WWC is about to put out an inaccurate
report about our work. While we understand that the Quick Review process
does
not entail confirming study results with the authors, the WWC should at
the
very least report accurately what is in the report. The reservations
about
sample attrition are unfounded based on everything written in our study.

How can we remedy this situation?

Sincerely,
Bridget Long (with Eric Bettinger, Phil Oreopoulos, and Lisa Sanbonmatsu)

From: Jeffrey Max [JMax@Mathematica-Mpr.com]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 12:14 PM
To: Bridget Long
Cc: Christina Tuttle; Bettinger, Eric; info@whatworks.ed.gov
Subject: RE: WWC brief on the FAFSA Experiment

Hi Bridget,

Thanks for your email. I forwarded your questions to the WWC help desk. They are currently looking into this and plan to send you an explanation of how the WWC derived the attrition numbers.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey

From: Bridget Long [mailto:longbr@gse.harvard.edu]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 10:17 AM
To: Jeffrey Max
Cc: Christina Tuttle; Bettinger, Eric
Subject: WWC brief on the FAFSA Experiment

Dear Jeffrey,

We just received a note about the upcoming WWC report that will be issued on our FAFSA experiment (see attached). Were you involved in the review? There appears to be a **HUGE mistake** in the report as it suggests we had high rates of sample attrition and that this attrition differed substantially across the treatment and control groups. This is absolutely untrue, and we are puzzled how that conclusion was drawn. We are extremely concerned that the WWC is about to put out an inaccurate report about our work. How can we remedy the situation?

Sincerely,
Bridget Long

Prof. Bridget Terry Long, Ph.D.
Professor of Education and Economics
Harvard Graduate School of Education
<http://gseacademic.harvard.edu/~longbr/>

From: Jeffrey Max [mailto:JMax@Mathematica-Mpr.com]
Sent: Thursday, April 23, 2009 8:34 AM
To: longbr@gse.harvard.edu
Cc: Christina Tuttle
Subject: FAFSA Experiment

Hi Dr. Long,

My name is Jeffrey Max and I work at Mathematica Policy Research. As part of our work for the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), we are developing a practice guide on

the topic of improving access to higher education. The guide is intended to provide evidence-based recommendations for practitioners and relies on an expert panel and extensive literature search.

One of our panel members for the guide, Tom Bailey, noted that the FAFSA experiment with H&R Block found positive results, and he passed along a policy brief from March 2009 with the initial impact findings. While we would like to reference the findings from the study in our practice guide, we would need more information on the details of the study design and analysis to review the study based on WWC standards. Tom suggested that we check with you about whether there was a full report or other reference with more detailed information on the study design and analysis (for example, more detailed information on the number of students in the baseline and analysis samples, the formation of the treatment and control groups, and the treatment and comparison outcomes). Could you let us know if there is another document that would have additional detail? Thanks for any information you can provide.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey

Jeffrey Max
Research Analyst
Mathematica Policy Research
Tel: 202-484-4236
jmax@mathematica-mpr.com

From: Bridget Terry Long [longbr@gse.harvard.edu]

Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 4:59 PM

To: WhatWorks

Cc: Eric Bettinger

Subject: Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

That is not the correct way to do the calculation. Table 1 contains the 15 and 16 year olds (high school sophomores and juniors) who are not in the analysis in Table 2 (they were not old enough to study at the time and will be handled in separate work).

The proper way to study the attrition in our sample is by comparing the first and last columns of Table 1, and we present statistical tests in that table to test for differences across groups. Your current report is still wrong.

Bridget Long

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

From: WhatWorks <WWorks@icfi.com>

Date: Fri, 28 May 2010 15:51:41 -0500

To: <longbr@gse.harvard.edu>

Subject: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

Dear Dr. Long,

We received your e-mails expressing concern about the characterization of attrition in the forthcoming WWC Quick Review of "The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment." Please note that the WWC considers as attrition all sample loss after the point of random assignment, whether due to lack of consent, lack of posttest, missing data or other factors. Following WWC procedures, we computed attrition by comparing the random assignment sample (reported on page 10 of the study) with the analysis sample (reported in Table 2 on page 33). Our calculations arrived at these attrition numbers:

FAFSA Treatment Group

Assignment: 10,634

Analysis: 7,864

Attrition: 26.0%

Information Only Treatment Group

Assignment: 1,654

Analysis: 1,319

Attrition: 20.3%

Control Group

Assignment: 11,916

Analysis: 7,557

Attrition: 36.6%

Total Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 31.6%

Differential Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 10.5%

Total Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 34.6%

Differential Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 16.3%

For further information on how the WWC treats attrition, view the WWC Quick Review Protocol (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/gr_protocol_v2.pdf) and the WWC Standards and Procedures Handbook (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/wwc_procedures_v2_standards_handbook.pdf).

We hope this addresses your concern.

The What Works Clearinghouse

The What Works Clearinghouse was established by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. For more information, please visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

From: Mark Dynarski [MDynarski@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 7:11 PM
To: WhatWorks
Subject: FW: FASFA study

Got the address wrong.

Mark

-----Original Message-----

From: Mark Dynarski
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 7:09 PM
To: 'longbr@gse.harvard.edu'
Cc: 'whatworks@ed.gov'
Subject: Re: FASFA study

I am aware of the concern you noted. The WWC protocol for reviews of individual studies bases the review only on what is presented in the study itself. The objective is to review and rate studies that were released and covered in the media. All the information (such as what is needed to calculate attrition) needs to be in the body of the study rather than provided separately by authors.

The issue is that the existence of the 15-16 year old sample you note below is mentioned in a footnote but the paper does not provide the size of this sample. Without this information, WWC reviewers calculated attrition based on the number reported on page 10 as randomly assigned. The first and last columns of table 1 appear to be the number approached about the study and the number from whom consent ultimately was received. However, the WWC rating uses only attrition after random assignment, which I assume was conducted for the sample in the last column.

The WWC has an internal review process by which author questions are addressed after release. I am copying the help desk and they will initiate that internal review process next week.

Regards,
Mark Dynarski
Director, What Works Clearinghouse

From: Bridget Terry Long [mailto:longbr@gse.harvard.edu]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 4:59 PM
To: WhatWorks
Cc: Eric Bettinger
Subject: Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

That is not the correct way to do the calculation. Table 1 contains the

15 and 16 year olds (high school sophomores and juniors) who are not in the analysis in Table 2 (they were not old enough to study at the time and will be handled in separate work).

The proper way to study the attrition in our sample is by comparing the first and last columns of Table 1, and we present statistical tests in that table to test for differences across groups. Your current report is still wrong.

Bridget Long

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

From: WhatWorks <WWorks@icfi.com>

Date: Fri, 28 May 2010 15:51:41 -0500

To: <longbr@gse.harvard.edu>

Subject: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

Dear Dr. Long,

We received your e-mails expressing concern about the characterization of attrition in the forthcoming WWC Quick Review of "The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment." Please note that the WWC considers as attrition all sample loss after the point of random assignment, whether due to lack of consent, lack of posttest, missing data or other factors. Following WWC procedures, we computed attrition by comparing the random assignment sample (reported on page 10 of the study) with the analysis sample (reported in Table 2 on page 33). Our calculations arrived at these attrition numbers:

FAFSA Treatment Group

Assignment: 10,634

Analysis: 7,864

Attrition: 26.0%

Information Only Treatment Group

Assignment: 1,654

Analysis: 1,319

Attrition: 20.3%

Control Group

Assignment: 11,916

Analysis: 7,557

Attrition: 36.6%

Total Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 31.6%

Differential Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 10.5%

Total Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 34.6%

Differential Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 16.3%

For further information on how the WWC treats attrition, view the WWC Quick Review Protocol (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/qr_protocol_v2.pdf) and the WWC Standards and Procedures Handbook (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/wwc_procedures_v2_standards_handbook.pdf).

We hope this addresses your concern.

The What Works Clearinghouse

The What Works Clearinghouse was established by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. For more information, please visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

No virus found in this incoming message.

Checked by AVG - www.avg.com

Version: 8.5.437 / Virus Database: 271.1.1/2899 - Release Date: 05/28/10
06:25:00

From: WhatWorks
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 4:52 PM
To: 'longbr@gse.harvard.edu'
Subject: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)
Dear Dr. Long,

We received your e-mails expressing concern about the characterization of attrition in the forthcoming WWC Quick Review of "The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment." Please note that the WWC considers as attrition all sample loss after the point of random assignment, whether due to lack of consent, lack of posttest, missing data or other factors. Following WWC procedures, we computed attrition by comparing the random assignment sample (reported on page 10 of the study) with the analysis sample (reported in Table 2 on page 33). Our calculations arrived at these attrition numbers:

FAFSA Treatment Group

Assignment: 10,634
Analysis: 7,864
Attrition: 26.0%

Information Only Treatment Group

Assignment: 1,654
Analysis: 1,319
Attrition: 20.3%

Control Group

Assignment: 11,916
Analysis: 7,557
Attrition: 36.6%

Total Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 31.6%
Differential Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 10.5%

Total Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 34.6%
Differential Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 16.3%

For further information on how the WWC treats attrition, view the WWC Quick Review Protocol (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/gr_protocol_v2.pdf) and the WWC Standards and Procedures Handbook (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/wwc_procedures_v2_standards_handbook.pdf).

We hope this addresses your concern.

The What Works Clearinghouse

The What Works Clearinghouse was established by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. For more information, please visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

From: Bettinger, Eric [ebetting@stanford.edu]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 5:35 PM
To: longbr@gse.harvard.edu; WhatWorks
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

Hi All,

I wanted to chime in this discussion and make some quick notes. First off, there is an error in the paper regarding the numbers from page 10. These numbers do not align with the rest of the paper. Those numbers were from a preliminary version of the paper and included some of the dependent students (aged 15 and 16) from a complimentary project. As you can see from Table 1, the numbers (on page 10) are out of line with the rest of the paper and are a remnant of bad editing on our part. The numbers in Table 1 are the final numbers from the project. The numbers on page 10 no longer appear in the paper as they were wrong.

It doesn't make sense to use Panel A of Table 1 since this includes dependents. If you focus on the numbers in Table 1 Panel C, you get the right numbers at least for the independent students.

Randomization occurred after consent so the relative denominators are

Control: $25,215 \times .369 = 9380$

FAFSA: $25,491 \times .374 = 9610$

Info: $4,377 \times .361 = 1598$

Our final analysis sample within this group is as follows (from Table 2): 7161, 7474, and 1239.

When you look at the implied attrition rates, the attrition rates are 23.7 percent for the control group, 22.2 percent for FAFSA treatment, and 22.4 percent for the Information only group.

We cannot compute the attrition rates for the dependent sample. We do not know the final denominator since H&R Block did not give us the final number on who gave consent and were high school seniors.

The NBER version is a working paper intended to start discussion and to start the vetting process. The version on the NBER website is now out of date and will be replaced with an updated version of the paper in the coming weeks as we are currently waiting for retention data to add to the analysis.

I can understand how the numbers were derived by the Clearinghouse, but the numbers in the working paper text were incorrect. The tables are correct. As we have mentioned, the differential in attrition is far less than what the Clearinghouse listed in the document we received this morning.

Please let me know if you have questions on the project.

Best regards,

Eric Bettinger

From: Bridget Terry Long [mailto:longbr@gse.harvard.edu]
Sent: Friday, May 28, 2010 1:59 PM
To: WhatWorks
Cc: Bettinger, Eric
Subject: Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

That is not the correct way to do the calculation. Table 1 contains the 15 and 16 year olds (high school sophomores and juniors) who are not in the analysis in Table 2 (they were not old enough to study at the time and will be handled in separate work).

The proper way to study the attrition in our sample is by comparing the first and last columns of Table 1, and we present statistical tests in that table to test for differences across groups. Your current report is still wrong.

Bridget Long

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

From: WhatWorks <WWorks@icfi.com>
Date: Fri, 28 May 2010 15:51:41 -0500
To: <longbr@gse.harvard.edu>
Subject: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 2188)

Dear Dr. Long,

We received your e-mails expressing concern about the characterization of attrition in the forthcoming WWC Quick Review of The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment. Please note that the WWC considers as attrition all sample loss after the point of random assignment, whether due to lack of consent, lack of posttest, missing data or other factors. Following WWC procedures, we computed attrition by comparing the random assignment sample (reported on page 10 of the study) with the analysis sample (reported in Table 2 on page 33). Our calculations arrived at these attrition numbers:

FAFSA Treatment Group

Assignment: 10,634
Analysis: 7,864
Attrition: 26.0%

Information Only Treatment Group

Assignment: 1,654
Analysis: 1,319
Attrition: 20.3%

Control Group

Assignment: 11,916

Analysis: 7,557

Attrition: 36.6%

Total Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 31.6%

Differential Attrition, FAFSA & Control: 10.5%

Total Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 34.6%

Differential Attrition, Info-Only & Control: 16.3%

For further information on how the WWC treats attrition, view the WWC Quick Review Protocol (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/gr_protocol_v2.pdf) and the WWC Standards and Procedures Handbook (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/wwc_procedures_v2_standards_handbook.pdf).

We hope this addresses your concern.

The What Works Clearinghouse

The What Works Clearinghouse was established by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. For more information, please visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

From: Mark Dynarski
Sent: Wednesday, June 09, 2010 2:35 PM
To: longbr@gse.harvard.edu; Eric Bettinger
Cc: Debbie Reed; Sakari Morvey; Michael Ponza
Subject: WWC response on quick review of H&R Block FAFSA study
Attachments: WWC Response FAFSA Quick Review.docx

I am attaching the WWC's response on the quick review of the H&R Block study.

Regards,
Mark Dynarski
Director, What Works Clearinghouse
Mathematica Policy Research, inc.

From: What Works
Sent: Monday, December 13, 2010 7:49 AM
To: 'ebettinger@stanford.edu'
Subject: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study
Attachments: QR142_FAFSA_DC.pdf

Dear Dr. Bettinger:

We are emailing to inform you that a revised What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) quick review of your report, "The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment," will be posted on the WWC website Tuesday, December 14, 2010. As part of this process, we are sharing with you a courtesy copy of the quick review (attached). **This quick review is embargoed until Tuesday, December 14, 2010, at 10am Eastern Time and cannot be circulated until that time.**

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.

To learn more about WWC quick reviews, you can visit the WWC quick review page at:
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/>.

Because of the volume of correspondence the WWC receives, questions regarding WWC reports and quick reviews should be submitted to the Help Desk at info@whatworks.ed.gov. Your questions will be forwarded to the appropriate staff member on the WWC team and you will receive an e-mail response.

Sincerely,

The What Works Clearinghouse Team