



Effects of the Back on Track Model on College Persistence and Completion

An Opportunity Works Brief

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Opportunity Works was a three-year effort led by JFF with the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) to help opportunity youth—young people ages 16 to 24 not in school or meaningfully employed—access postsecondary and career pathways. Based on the Back on Track framework, seven cities undertook cross-sector collaborative approaches with diverse partners to provide supportive enhanced preparation and postsecondary/career bridging for eligible young people, with a particular focus on young men of color.

In a previous study, we estimated the effects, after one to three years, of the Back on Track framework on education outcomes for three sites that participated in a quasi-experimental impact evaluation (Anderson et. al 2019). We found large, consistent, positive impacts on participants' postsecondary enrollment and increased connection with either education or employment. Specifically, Opportunity Works participants were twice as likely to enroll in college as similar young people in the comparison group.

In this study, we follow participants up to five years after program entry to estimate effects of program participation on college persistence and completion in the South King County program site. Opportunity Works participants in South King County enrolled in college an average of 1.7 more semesters than their counterparts in a matched comparison group. In addition, about 17 percent of program participants earned a postsecondary credential, such as a college degree or a non-degree college credential, compared with 2 percent in the comparison group. Most of the completion effects are because of increases in non-degree credentials awarded to participants. We also find suggestive evidence that Opportunity Works increased the participants' likelihood of graduating with a two-year college degree.

What Is Opportunity Works?

Opportunity Works was a three-year effort led by JFF with AFCS to help opportunity youth—young people ages 16 to 24 not in school or meaningfully employed—access postsecondary and career pathways.¹

Between the critical ages of 16 and 24, many young people with low incomes risk becoming disconnected from school and the labor market. In 2016, 6 percent of young people ages 16 to 24 were not in school and did not have high school credentials; among young people from families with the lowest incomes, it was nearly 10 percent.² Males were about 45 percent more likely to have dropped out than females.³ About 14 percent of high school dropouts in this age range were unemployed, and about 40 percent were not in the labor force.⁴ But the employment prospects for opportunity youth are encouraging if they gain the necessary postsecondary credentials and skills.

The Back on Track framework fosters the growth and scale of programs aimed at improving the postsecondary success of opportunity youth. Back on Track is characterized by three program phases:

- **Enriched preparation:** recruits high school noncompleters ages 16 to 24 and provides them with the curriculum, support, and coaching essential for educational success and career readiness, as well as support in completing a high school credential.
- **Postsecondary/career bridging:** helps students bridge to college and/or careers. This phase caters to opportunity youth who already have or are very close to obtaining high school credentials and helps them build the skill set essential for postsecondary achievement.
- **First-year support:** provides support to students to gain the skills necessary to persist through their first year of college or career.

South King County/Seattle Program Details

Seattle Education Access (SEA) partnered with Open Doors reengagement sites around South King County that provide high school completion supports through a mix of diploma and GED instruction, as well as case management to address basic needs such as stability, housing, and transportation. SEA added college preparation navigators and retention services to supplement these existing services provided at Open Doors reengagement sites. The bulk of SEA's intervention focused on career exploration, including one-on-one coaching; career assessments helping students identify areas of interest and career pathways; provision of labor market information; connection to alumni and people in the field; use of information to make decisions about a specific program; and support for financial planning, scholarships, and budgeting. These services represented the postsecondary/career bridging phase of the Back on Track framework. The program served young people ages 16 to 21 with or without a high school credential who were unemployed and/or not enrolled in postsecondary education, especially young men of color.

Short-Term Evidence on College Enrollment

The earlier Urban Institute-led evaluation measured the impacts of Opportunity Works participation for young people in Hartford, Philadelphia, and South King County (Anderson et. al 2019). Participant outcomes were compared with opportunity youth in other programs that were not using the Back on Track framework. For that analysis, the study used both the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) and a follow-up Opportunity Works survey, as well as data from a baseline survey.

We found in the earlier study that the impact of Opportunity Works programs on postsecondary enrollment was strongly positive. When pooling the sites together, Opportunity Works participants were more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions than their matched counterparts. About 53 percent of program participants enrolled in a postsecondary institution after the baseline survey, compared with only 26 percent in the matched comparison group. In other words, participants were more than twice as likely as similar young people not in Back on Track programming to enroll in a postsecondary institution. Young men of color in Back on Track programming were six times more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution.

Program participation was associated with higher postsecondary enrollment in each Opportunity Works site. Program participants in Hartford were 25 percentage points more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution than their counterparts in the matched comparison group (a 93 percent gain), 12 percentage points more likely to enroll in Philadelphia (a 40 percent gain), and 44 percentage points more likely to enroll in South King County (a 200 percent gain).

Medium-Term Evidence on College Persistence and Completion

This new study extends the work from the previous study that included short-term outcomes measured through 2018 to assess medium-term education outcomes through June 2020. We focus on the program operating in South King County.

Data

Study participants—both those enrolled in Opportunity Works programs and members of the comparison group, who were opportunity youth participating in other programs—enrolled in their programs on a rolling basis between June 2015 and July 2017. The baseline survey was similarly conducted on a rolling basis, administered soon after participants entered programs. The survey launched in October 2015 and concluded in July 2017. The baseline survey was designed to capture participant characteristics early in their program enrollment. It included questions about their age, gender, race, and ethnicity; household composition; school experiences; and employment and income.

The Urban research team obtained college data from the NSC for all study participants who completed the baseline survey and who had a valid birthdate.⁵ Our analysis captures any interaction with postsecondary institutions from their baseline interview data to June 2020.

In this follow-up study, we examine the effect of program participation on college persistence and completion in South King County. We also update the enrollment impact findings from our first report, as some participants might have enrolled in college for the first time after 2018. The research team estimated program impacts using the methods described in box 1 for the following outcomes, achieved at any point after the study participant completed the baseline Opportunity Works survey:

- enrolled in any postsecondary institution;
- number of semesters enrolled in any postsecondary institution;
- earned a college degree or credential;
- earned a non-degree college credential;⁶
- earned a 2-year degree; and
- earned a 4-year degree.

BOX 1

Methods

Following the same approach used in our first evaluation, the research team used propensity score matching (PSM) to estimate the impacts of the Opportunity Works intervention.

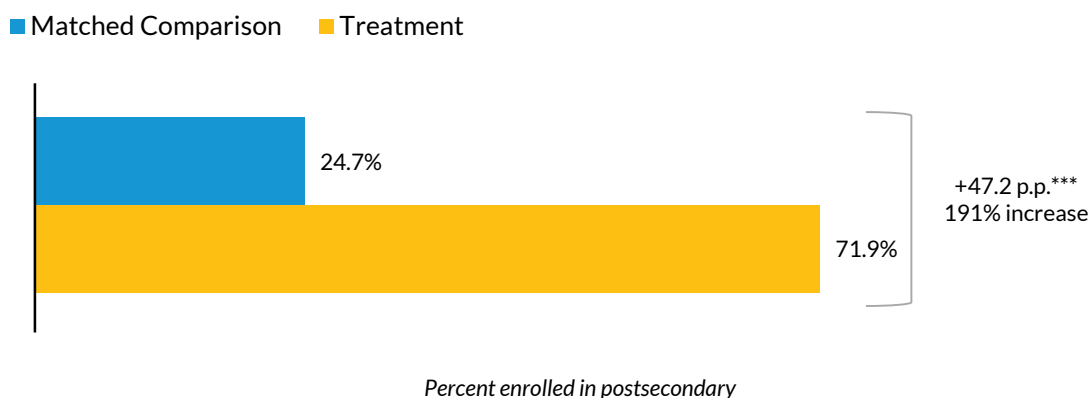
- PSM is a strong approach in which a program participant group and a group of similar individuals who are not offered the program are pooled into one large group with an indicator of treatment status.
- The first step is to estimate the probability of entering the program—the “propensity” to enroll in the program—as a function of a number of variables that could affect program enrollment. The result is an equation that predicts each person’s probability of enrollment based on their characteristics.
- The second step is to compare outcomes for program participants and nonparticipants with the same probability of enrollment, based on each person’s array of characteristics.
- To achieve a reasonable match of characteristics, we allowed individuals from a treated site to be matched to individuals from the comparison group from another site.
- This comparison provides a good estimate of what the program participant would have achieved if they were not in the program, as long as the variables used for matching are exhaustive and there are not large unmeasured differences between the participating and nonparticipating cases.
- This comparison of outcomes between program participants (the treatment group) and nonparticipants (the comparison group) produces the program impact estimates.

Note: See Anderson et al. (2019) for a detailed description of the PSM method used in this study and how we selected the pool of individuals used to construct the comparison group.

Findings

Tracking Opportunity Works participants in South King County for up to five years after program entry using NSC data, we still find that program participants are more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions than their matched counterparts (figure 1). In South King County, about 72 percent of program participants enrolled in a postsecondary institution after the baseline survey, compared with only 25 percent in the matched comparison group. In other words, program participation increased the likelihood of postsecondary enrollment by about 47 percentage points—a nearly three-fold increase (191 percent).

FIGURE 1
Impacts on Postsecondary Enrollment for Opportunity Works Participants in South King County Relative to a Matched Comparison Group



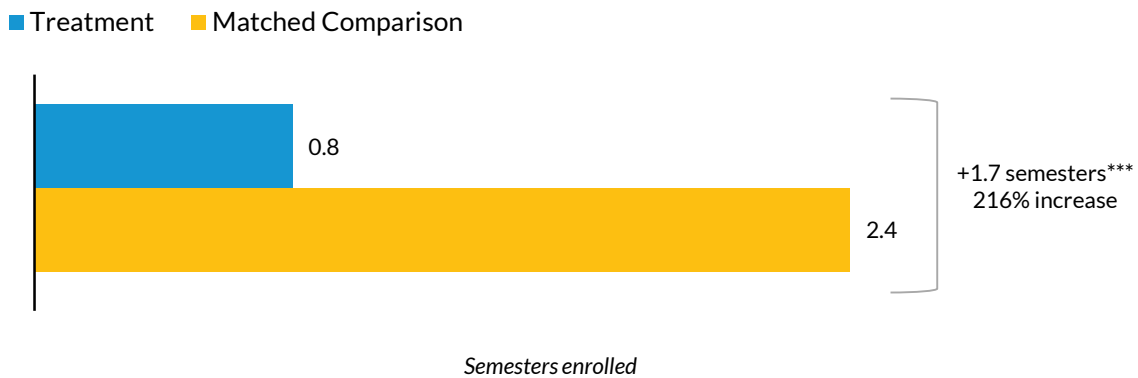
Sources: National Student Clearinghouse and Opportunity Works baseline survey.

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. "Not sig." indicates a difference is not statistically significant at 10 percent level. "p.p." stands for "percentage points."

We also find that Opportunity Works participants in South King County enrolled in college for more semesters than people in the comparison group. Program participants enrolled in a postsecondary institution for 2.45 semesters on average compared with only 0.78 in the matched comparison group (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Impacts on Average Semesters Enrolled in College for Opportunity Works Participants in South King County Relative to a Matched Comparison Group



Sources: National Student Clearinghouse and Opportunity Works baseline survey.

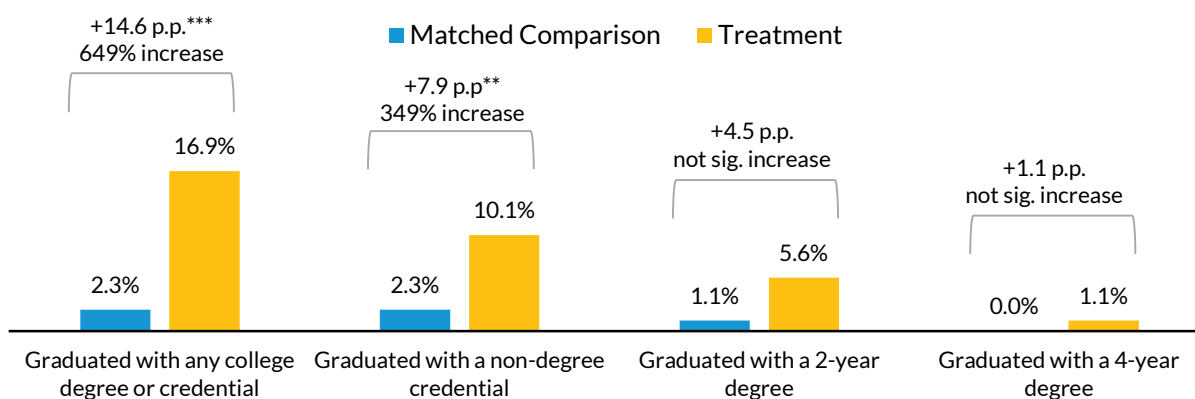
Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

We also examined the number of semesters enrolled among participants who enrolled at all. We found that Opportunity Works helped more “marginal” students to enroll in school—those who would not have attended college otherwise. Given the program’s large effect on college enrollment, we might expect that these Opportunity Works students who would not otherwise have enrolled in college at all are less likely to persist. Conversely, comparison group members who managed to enroll in college without the benefit of the Back on Track supports may be more stable or motivated on their own and thus more likely able to persist. Therefore, the expected direction of the impact on semesters enrolled among those who actually enrolled is ambiguous. But even when restricting the sample to participants with some college experience, we find South King County participants are enrolled in college for slightly more semesters (3.4 versus 3.1, not graphed).

Opportunity Works participants also had a higher likelihood of earning a postsecondary credential. Looking at all participants in South King County (not conditional on having attended college), about 17 percent of program participants earned a college degree or a non-degree college credential in the observed period of up to five years, compared with 2 percent in the comparison group (figure 3). In other words, program participants had a higher likelihood of earning a college degree or credential by about 15 percentage points, a more than seven-fold increase. When restricting the sample to those with some college enrollment, we find that Opportunity Works participants in South King County were more likely to obtain a college degree or credential than their comparison group counterpart (23 percent versus 9 percent, not graphed).

FIGURE 3

Impacts on Postsecondary Credential Attainment for Opportunity Works Participants in South King County Relative to a Matched Comparison Group



Sources: National Student Clearinghouse and Opportunity Works baseline survey.

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. “Not sig.” indicates a difference is not statistically significant at 10 percent level. “p.p.” stands for “percentage points.”

We also examine which type of degree or credential Opportunity Works participants received (figure 3). We find that most South King County graduates earn non-degree college credentials.⁷ About 10 percent of all Opportunity Works participants in South King County received a non-degree college credential in the observed period, compared with 2 percent in the comparison group, a more than four-fold increase. We also find that program participants in South King county are more likely to receive a two-year (associate) college degree than the comparison group (6 percent versus 1 percent), but this difference is not statistically significant. The share of participants awarded a four-year (bachelor) degree is very small in both the treatment and comparison groups (1 percent versus 0 percent).

Discussion

Opportunity Works has a positive and significant impact on postsecondary persistence and completion for program participants in South King County. The magnitude of the impact is large: about 17 percent of Opportunity Works program participants in South King County were awarded a college degree or a non-degree credential in up to five years after program entry, compared with 2 percent of the comparison group. Most of the graduation effects are because of increases in non-degree credentials awarded to participants. But we also find suggestive evidence that Opportunity Works increases South King County program participants’ likelihood of graduating with a two-year college degree (positive effects but imprecisely measured).

In sum, we find that Back on Track postsecondary bridging framework has a positive medium-term effect on participants’ college outcomes in South King County. It would be valuable to conduct future research with a longer follow-up period, with more data sources, and in additional Opportunity Works

or other Back on Track sites to understand how the better educational outcomes translated into longer-term economic and social well-being, such as better job opportunities and financial well-being.

Appendix

TABLE A.1

Classification of College Degrees and Non-Degree College Credentials

Degree title recorded by NSC	Category
Aas/welding fabrication tech	Two-year degree
Associate in arts	Two-year degree
Associate in science	Two-year degree
Associate of applied science	Two-year degree
Associate's	Two-year degree
Bachelor of arts	Four-year degree
Bachelor of science	Four-year degree
BBA—marketing communications	Four-year degree
Certificate—Automotive Technology	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Mfg. Welding Tech Fndmntls	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Adv. Mfg. Machine Technology	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Medical Assisting	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Medical Office Assistant	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Adv. Mfg. Machine Technology	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Shield Mtl. Arc Welding-cert	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Registered Medical Assistant	Non-degree college credential
Certificate—Cert ECE St. Initial	Non-degree college credential
Diploma—property maintenance and repair	Non-degree college credential
Diploma—dental assistant	Non-degree college credential
Diploma—engineering drafting/cad	Non-degree college credential

Notes

- ¹ The Opportunity Works communities were members of the Opportunity Youth Forum network, convened by AFCS.
- ² “Table 219.75: Percentage of high school dropouts among persons 16 to 24 years old (status dropout rate), by income level, and percentage distribution of status dropouts, by labor force status and years of school completed: Selected years, 1970 through 2016,” US Department of Education, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_219.75.asp?current=yes.
- ³ “Table 219.80: Percentage of high school dropouts among persons 16 to 24 years old (status dropout rate) and number of status dropouts, by noninstitutionalized or institutionalized status, birth in or outside of the United States, and selected characteristics: Selected years, 2006 through 2016,” US Department of Education, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_219.80.asp?current=yes.
- ⁴ “Table 219.75: Percentage of high school dropouts among persons 16 to 24 years old (status dropout rate), by income level, and percentage distribution of status dropouts, by labor force status and years of school completed: Selected years, 1970 through 2016.”
- ⁵ The NSC is a national repository of data on postsecondary enrollment and credential completion maintained by a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization. It tracks students at 3,600 colleges and universities, covering 99

percent of postsecondary students in the United States. For those who have enrolled in a postsecondary institution, the NSC provides data on enrollment institution and state, institution type, enrollment dates and status, class level, major(s) of study, graduation status and date, and degree(s) earned.

⁶ Appendix table A.1 classifies college degrees and nondegree college credentials.

⁷ Non-degree college credentials take fewer than two years to complete and often relate to specialized training in a professional sector (e.g., medical assisting).

References

Anderson, Theresa, Breno Braga, Teresa Derrick-Mills, Alan Dodkowitz, H. Elizabeth Peters, Charmaine Runes, and Mary Winkler. 2019. *New Insights into the Back on Track Model's Effects on Opportunity Youth Outcomes*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

About the Authors

Breno Braga is a labor economist and senior research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute. His research has covered topics such as the effects of high-skilled immigration on labor markets, the role of local conditions in asset accumulation, and the local factors associated with debt in collections. His articles have been published in academic journals including the *Journal of Labor Economics*. Braga received his MA in economics from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and his PhD in economics from the University of Michigan.

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