



RCT Evaluation Design

Carolina Works—First in the World Validation Study

RCT Basics

The evaluation design for Carolina Works is an RCT, or Randomized Controlled Trial. An RCT is an experimental study to assess causality between a “treatment” (some sort of intervention) and an outcome. In an RCT, the study sample is randomly assigned to either receive the treatment (the “treatment group”) or not (the “control group”). This type of evaluation is often referred to as the “gold standard,” and evidence from an RCT meets the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations. *As a condition of the First in the World grant award, all colleges are required to participate in the RCT validation study.*

By supporting in the Carolina Works initiative, colleges can:

- **Help students:** Data-informed student coaching has proven successful in other contexts in improving college student retention and completion (Bettinger & Baker, 2014).
- **Boost enrollments:** Increasing student retention is particularly critical to colleges’ bottom line in an era of decreasing enrollments.
- **Advance the national conversation:** Carolina Works is one of only two Validation Grants awarded by the Department of Education in 2015, and has an important national role in building the evidence base for effective practices that can improve student retention and completion.
- **Build the case for sustained funding.** The Carolina Works Validation Study presents an opportunity to test the proven success coaching intervention on a broad scale within NCCCS, to provide evidence for possible scalability and the additional resources required to support this.

Carolina Works RCT: Overview and Key Definitions

Proactive student success coaching is the treatment being tested at the 10 colleges participating in the Carolina Works project. Across all Carolina Works’ colleges, the RCT study requires two conditions be maintained throughout the study period. These conditions are called the “business as usual condition” and the “treatment condition.” All students at the college receive business as usual services, while only students in the study sample randomly assigned to have a coach (i.e., the “treatment group”) receive the treatment services. *In general, coaches should be dedicated to their caseload, which are students assigned to the treatment group. Coaches should **not** be providing outreach or services to students assigned to the control group or to non-study students.*

In fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018, students who have not enrolled in the college during the prior three academic terms at the 10 community colleges will be randomly assigned a

FITW success coach (i.e., the treatment) or be randomly assigned as a control (i.e., no assignment to a FITW coach) on the first day of classes. These students represent the study sample. Once a student is assigned to the treatment or control condition, this assignment cannot change during the study period, which starts in August 2016 and ends in June 2019. Figure 1 presents a graphical depiction of study sample intake.

Definitions:

Study sample—Students not enrolled in the prior 3 terms; high school students excluded

Treatment group—Students in study sample randomly assigned to *treatment condition*

Control group—Students in study sample randomly assigned to *business-as-usual condition*

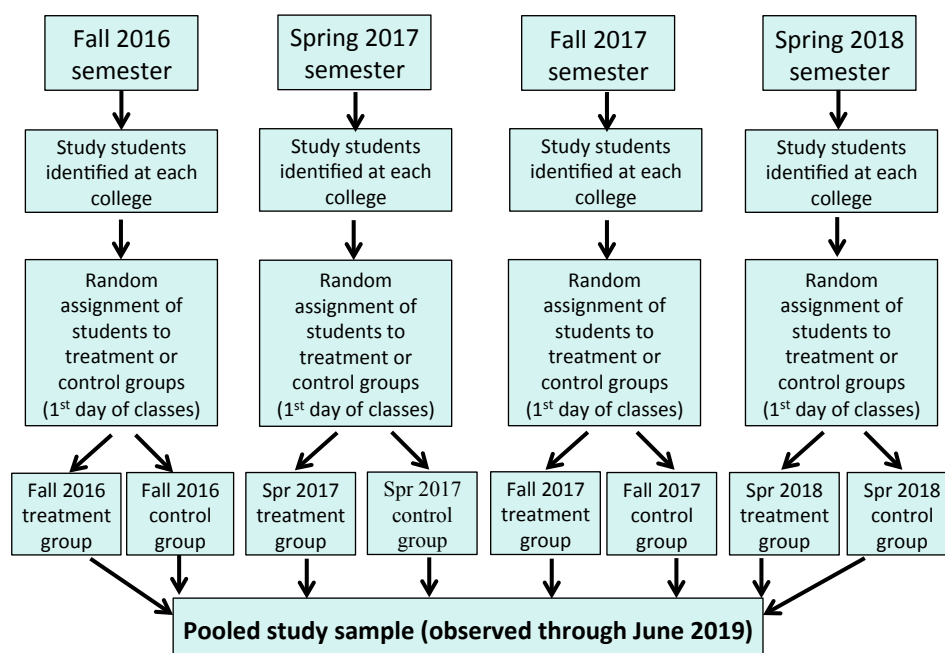
Non-study group—Students enrolled during prior 3 academic terms (not included in RCT)

Treatment condition—Assignment to a Success Coach and receipt of proactive coaching

Business as Usual condition—Services already operating at college + Aviso functionality

Study period—August 2016 - June 2019

Figure 1: Study sample intake across four semesters, observed through June 2019



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