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Project, Summary of Methodology and Key Findings

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# **Evaluating a College Information and Awareness Campaign**

## **The Texas GO Center Project**

### **Summary of Methodology and Key Findings**

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## **1. Introduction**

In this short brief, we discuss in turn an outline of our evaluation of GO Centers, the methodology used, a summary of our findings, and a discussion of policy implications. This document summarizes our research to date – an academic paper and a more detailed policy paper are forthcoming. They will address many aspects of the evaluation not covered here, including a more detailed description of the GO Center program, its initial implementation, a technical derivation of our estimation technique, robustness checks on our statistical results, and a detailed policy discussion.

GO Centers are a novel program whose aim is to increase demand for higher education among high school students by 1) providing information concerning the college going process, and 2) by changing students' fundamental beliefs about the appropriateness and benefits of college. The program is targeted at those students who are academically prepared, yet choose not to continue their schooling. Specifically, the program engages the efforts of current college students, college-bound high school peers, members of the community, and a committed faculty member to provide information on college choice, the application process, financial aid, and SAT taking to current high school students. Extensive marketing materials are used and emphasis is placed on convincing students of the value of a college education and that attending is the right decision to make.

In 2003, the state of Texas started 38 GO Centers in low-performing high schools and has subsequently expanded coverage to include two-thirds of the state's high school students by 2007. We link data on the location and expansion of GO Centers over time to a database that follows the universe of Texas high school seniors into Texas colleges, and employ a differences-in-differences estimator (a description of which is provided in Section 2 below) to determine the program's causal impact on college application, acceptance, enrollment, and persistence rates.

We find convincing evidence that GO Centers have had a positive impact on all of the college-going outcomes of study. However, and not surprisingly, this impact is concentrated mainly amongst the Hispanic and low-income students targeted by the

program. There is also evidence that the program impacts are larger for students exposed to GO Centers for more than one year. These results, with percentage effects, are summarized in Section 3 below.

Our analysis suggests an important role for GO Centers in high schools; however, we do not yet have the data that will allow us to state conclusively *why* the positive results occurred. We are currently conducting a survey of all Texas high schools that will enable us to shed more light on the mechanisms through which GO Centers work. This brief concludes in Section 4 with a discussion of future research and policy implications.

## **2. Brief Description of Methodology**

The main goal of this study is to determine the *independent* influence that GO Centers have had on college application, acceptance, enrollment, and persistence rates in Texas. To determine this independent effect, we must account for the reality that there are many factors *other than GO Centers* that affect college going behavior – and we do not want to wrongly attribute their influence to that of GO Centers. Our methodological approach addresses this problem in two ways. First, we look at *changes* in college-going behavior over time in GO Center schools, rather than simply observing rates post-implementation. Schools adopting GO Centers had very different characteristics and levels of college-going activity pre-implementation; therefore, the effect of GO Centers must be determined by how much these outcomes of interest have *changed* due to implementation. The difference in outcomes from before and after the center was put in place allow us to isolate the effect of factors that changed over that time period – one of which is GO Centers – independent of the effect of pre-existing differences between schools that did not change over the time period in question.

However, a simple before-after difference does not control for the fact that other factors influencing college-going behavior may have changed at the same time that GO Centers were implemented. For example, it might be that schools that adopted GO Centers *also* hired more guidance counselors in the same year. In this case, a simple difference in college-going rates would attribute an observed increase in enrollment to GO Centers, while it might have really been the new counselors that deserved the credit.

To overcome this potential bias, we look to see if *changes* in college-going behavior over time at GO Center schools are *different than changes* in similar schools that did not have GO Centers. This technique – comparing schools that received the program to a similar schools that did not – is called “matching” and helps to overcome the fact that we do not know the counterfactual of what the changes in college applications, acceptances, and enrollment *would have been* at a GO Center school, had the center not been there.

Integral to this matching technique is choosing the appropriate schools to “match” with a GO Center schools. The ideal comparison school has one key attribute – that the changes in college-going behavior over the GO Center implementation period are similar to *what would have happened* at the similar GO Center School, had it not had a center that was working to change applications and enrollment. Using individual-level information from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in conjunction with school-level data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), we perform a statistical analysis to find matched control schools that have similar pre-program trends in college attendance rates, college application rates, academic course-taking, TAKS Exit Exam scores, racial mix, pupil-teacher ratios, drop out rates, and school funding. Using this methodology, the average difference between outcomes of interest at GO Center schools and their matched comparison schools is our estimate of the effect of the program.

### **3. Summary of Key Findings**

Overall, we find convincing evidence that first group of 38 GO Centers that were implemented in the 2003-04 school year had a large and statistically significant impact on college application, acceptance, enrollment, and persistence rates. Not surprisingly, the impact was concentrated among the low-income and Hispanic students who were both targeted by the program and were most likely to be on the “margin” of attending college. However, we still find small, positive benefits for other students as well. Encouragingly, the program impact is larger for students who had access to GO Centers starting in their

junior year. Specific results are summarized below<sup>1</sup>, and we conclude with a discussion in Section 4.

### ***3.1 Application Rates***

- GO Centers increased application rates to Texas colleges by 21.9 percentage points overall. This translates into a 68% increase over the previous year when 32% of high school seniors applied to college.
- Disaggregating, we find a larger impact amongst the low-income and Hispanic students most heavily targeted by the program, with increases in application rates of 28.9 and 30.8 percentage points respectively.
- GO Centers had a stronger effect when students were exposed to the program for longer than one year. For students who were Juniors during the first year of the program, college application rates increased by 33.0 percentage points overall.
- As we do not have application data for 2-year schools in Texas, these results likely *understate* the positive impact of GO Centers on interest in higher education.

### ***3.2 Acceptance Rates***

- Most of the students affected by GO Centers applied to lower-tiered 4-year colleges which have nearly open-admission policies. Therefore, the program impact on acceptance rates essentially mirrors that on application rates.

### ***3.3 Enrollment Rates***

- GO Centers' effect on enrollment rates mirror the trends in application and acceptance rates, but with smaller effect sizes.
- When averaging across *all students*, there is only slight evidence that GO Centers increased college enrollment rates (both 2- and 4-year schools), with an average increase of 4.6 percentage points (not statistically different from 0).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all point estimates are statistically significant at the .05 level.

- However, when looking at *specific sub-groups of students*, there is a statistically significant and meaningful impact on enrollment rates, with increases of 9.0 and 9.2 percentage points amongst Hispanics and low-income students, respectively.
- The impact of GO Centers on college enrollment was also larger for students exposed to the program for two years. Amongst students exposed to the program during their junior year of high school, college enrollment rates increased by 18.5 percentage points overall, and by 23.2 and 17.6 percentage points among Hispanic and low-income students, respectively.

### ***3.4 College Persistence Rates***

- GO Centers increased one-year college persistence rates, but only for students who were exposed to the program for two years<sup>2</sup>. Students who were exposed to a GO Center as a junior in high school were 10.0 percentage points more likely to persist for at least one year in college, relative to matched comparison schools. This effect increases to 12.6 percentage points among Hispanics, and we do not find a statistically significant impact of GO Centers on one-year college persistence rates among low-income students.

## **4. Discussion**

These results provide strong evidence that the GO Center program, as implemented, is an effective way to increase college application, acceptance, enrollment, and persistence rates – particularly among the traditionally underserved students that were targeted by the program. However, the statistical analysis we have preformed thus far does not answer the question of *why* GO Centers have succeeded as well as they have. For example, is it “peer-to-peer” persuasion or easy access to information that is most responsible for GO Center success? We are currently administering a statewide survey of every Texas high schools to collect detailed information on Go Center activity in individual high schools. Armed with this new information, we will be able to shed more light on the mechanisms through which GO Centers work, and inform policy for the future.

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<sup>2</sup> The data is not yet available to observe college persistence rates over one year.

Furthermore, GO Centers are still a relatively new program and, as such, we do not know the program's impact upon long term outcomes such as college completion rates, employment, and wages – arguably the outcomes we are ultimately most interested in. As the first cohorts of students exposed to GO Centers progress through college and into the labor market, we plan to study these outcomes, using Texas Workforce Commission data, which is housed at the THECB.

At this time, our recommendation for whether or not GO Centers should be continued and expanded is a qualified “yes.” Our analysis shows that the program, on average, and in the manner it was implemented in the 2003-04 school year, works. However, much work still needs to be done, and many questions remain unanswered. Are GO Centers the most cost effective way to increase higher education in Texas? Which aspects of the program should be emphasized? Which are unnecessary? Are GO Centers appropriate for all types of schools, or just the ones targeted in the first year of implementation? While the answers to these questions can be speculated on using heuristics, it is imperative that we use observed data that will allow for more detailed statistical analysis – and provide bias-free answers that can confidently be used for policy making.