

What is the community challenge?

The proportion of students who enroll in postsecondary education within two years after high school is directly related to family income, with lower enrollment rates for low-income students and higher enrollment rates for high-income students (Lutz & Chavez, 1997). Kless, Soland, and Santiago (2013) found that an essential component of college readiness was the knowledge to identify, gather, understand, and use the information necessary to apply for and finance a postsecondary education.

What is the promising solution?

Through its Afford program, uAspire offers workshops and individual advising on college affordability to high school seniors both in person at their high schools and virtually via text message starting from the fall of senior year through the summer after high school graduation. The Afford program's core curricular activities are focused on supporting students through three financial aid milestones and include a planning session, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)/California (CA) Dream Act certification, and an award letter review session.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of uAspire's Afford program by WestEd began in 2014 and finished reporting in 2018. This final report describes findings on both the implementation and impact of the program for the 2017-2018 implementation year (Cohort 4) as well as a brief summary of results from the previous years of the study. The evaluation addressed high-level research questions about the fidelity of program implementation; the effectiveness of the program in increasing student understanding of the financial aid process, helping students complete and submit financial aid forms, and assisting students in leveraging financial aid; as well as supporting students to enroll and persist in postsecondary education. The research design for the impact evaluation was an RCT, with an accompanying PSM-matched QED that examined only those treatment students receiving all three of uAspire's core services.

What did the evaluation find?

As a subgrantee of GreenLight Fund, uAspire engaged WestEd, an independent evaluator, to evaluate the Afford program. The 2017-2018 implementation year evaluation found that the program was implemented with fidelity and that the program achieved many of the logic model outcomes it set out to accomplish, including:

- Afford participants were statistically more likely to submit the FAFSA/CA Dream Act application with greater accuracy than control group participants.
- Afford participants were statistically more likely to report higher understanding of the financial aid process and had higher beliefs that college can be affordable compared to control group students.
- Findings of the QED show that uAspire had a greater impact on treatment students who received all three core curricular activities than it had on the entire treatment group who only completed some of the core activities.

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Afford

Subgrantee: uAspire

Intermediary: GreenLight Fund, Inc.

Focus Area: Youth Development

Focus Population: Low-income high school seniors

Communities Served: Five high schools in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)

Notes on the evaluation

Overall, this evaluation was a well-designed and executed RCT that found several significant impacts of the Afford program on treatment students. However, some challenges in Year 4 may have played a role in the lack of impacts for some of the examined outcomes such as completing the steps in the financial aid process. More students were selected for verification nationally in Year 4 than in previous years, and the verification process delayed students' receipt of award letters from universities. Treatment students therefore may not have had award letters reviewed with their uAspire advisor by the end of school year and may not have been able to affirm that they were offered a Pell Grant or know how much they would have to pay out of pocket for the first year of college. In addition, uAspire is aware of contamination issues that may have weakened the ability of the study to find impacts on treatment students. Information that uAspire has provided over the years to school staff appears to have made its way to non-treatment students through the direct receipt of uAspire services and also through influencing the types of information provided by other school staff to students in the control group.

How is uAspire using the evaluation findings to improve?

This evaluation yielded important information about how to provide individualized support to high school students about college affordability, and how uAspire is positioned to strengthen its partnerships with school districts by leveraging the findings of the evaluation about what works. uAspire is refining the Afford program at all uAspire sites nationwide to maximize the number of students who receive the three core financial aid activities in order to make a greater impact on their ability to navigate and fare successfully in the financial aid process. uAspire has also launched the Succeed program in the Bay Area that supports Afford program students who are now in postsecondary education. Through this program, uAspire provides



advising through text messages to remind students of important steps and deadlines related to financial aid. This initiative could provide an avenue for uAspire to gain insights into students' postsecondary experiences and to assess how other factors, such as academic and social-emotional factors, contribute to the quality of students' college affordability decisions.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Designs: RCT with an accompanying PSM-matched QED

Study Population: Low-income high school seniors

Independent Evaluator: WestEd

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Moderate

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit <http://www.nationalservice.gov/research>.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.