

REVIEW PROTOCOL FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDIES IN THE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION TOPIC AREA, VERSION 2.0

Topic Area Focus

This document outlines the processes to be used in the review of individual studies in the postsecondary education topic area. *Postsecondary education* is any form of schooling occurring after the secondary level (i.e., after high school). This area may include interventions that increase the success of students transitioning to postsecondary education, instructional programs that occur in person or online as part of postsecondary schooling, out-of-classroom practices such as mentoring, adult education activities, and so on.

Types of Reports

The WWC produces two different types of reports that are relevant to the review of individual studies. The first is known as a *single study review*. These reports are reviews of individual studies which describe the program, policy, or practice studied; indicate whether the study meets WWC evidence standards; and summarize the study's findings on effectiveness. A second product is known as a *quick review*. These reports are designed to provide education practitioners and policymakers with timely, preliminary objective assessments of the quality of the research evidence from recently released research papers and reports that have received coverage in the media. They are brief study summaries that describe the study being reviewed, its findings, and the WWC's rating of the study (which may be provisional due to the nature of the review process, which precludes asking study authors to clarify issues important to determining the study rating). Most quick reviews are followed up with a more detailed single study review.

Quick reviews and single study reviews are carried out by a lead methodologist and a content expert. These individuals play a central role in determining the content and quality of the final products. The *lead methodologist* carries out the initial coding of the study, drafts reports, makes technical decisions for the team, and serves as the point of contact for study authors and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The *content expert* provides context-specific support and guidance (e.g., determining the specific subgroups and outcomes that the review should highlight). These individuals are supported by a WWC certified coder, who verifies that the information in the report and the report documentation are correct.

Identifying Studies for Review

There are two distinct mechanisms by which a study will come to be reviewed under this protocol. First, a study could qualify for review by receiving significant media attention. Also, a study could be reviewed at the request of IES.

To identify studies that have received significant media attention, media scans are run weekly, and the following scoring rubric is applied to studies receiving media mention:

1. Significant media attention:

Add 5 points for a news item in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Education Week*, or *Inside Higher Ed*.

Add 3 points for a blog or opinion piece in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.

Add 1 point for a blog or opinion piece in another higher education outlet.

Based on the “significant media mention” criterion, studies not mentioned in these outlets would not be eligible for review.

2. Evidence of (or claims of) causal relations:

Add 5 points for using a “key causality term” (e.g., “effects of,” causes, impacted, “created a change in”) or having a study design that claims to be a randomized controlled trial, “rigorous” quasi-experiment, single-case, or regression discontinuity design.

Subtract 15 points for studies that are not claimed to be randomized controlled trial, rigorous quasi-experiments, single-case, or regression discontinuity designs, or studies that are not described using one of the “key causality terms.” Operationally, this scoring system implies such studies would not be a priority for review (see scoring rubric below).

3. Study size:

Add 3 points for a multiple institution study.

4. “Buzz”:

Add 3 points for being in the most viewed or most emailed list for the higher education outlet.

Studies will be scored based on the following:

- Higher priority: 11+ points
- Lower priority: 6–10 points
- Not a priority: ≤5 points

Studies classified as “higher priority” will be forwarded to IES for a decision regarding whether they merit a review. Studies classified as “lower priority” will only be forwarded when there are too few higher priority studies to review.

In most cases, studies identified for review through the media mentions mechanism will first receive a quick review, followed by a single study review. Studies that are reviewed based on an IES request will only receive a single study review.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA AND EVIDENCE STANDARDS

Studies must meet several criteria to be eligible for review. These relate to the population that was sampled, the study design that was used, the outcomes that were measured, and when the study was conducted. Each of these is discussed below.

Populations to be Included

To be eligible for review under this protocol, a study must utilize postsecondary students in the United States or Canada. Studies of other student populations (e.g., high school students) are eligible for review only if they assess an outcome relevant to postsecondary education (e.g., transition to postsecondary enrollment; see below).

Many studies will provide effect size estimates for subgroups of students. The content expert for the review is responsible for determining which subgroups should be reported for any given review. In general, the WWC determines a study rating based on average intervention effects and will report subgroup analyses only for groups that are identified in the protocol as being of theoretical, policy, or practical interest. For studies reviewed under this protocol, these subgroups will be students who are (a) first-generation college students, (b) racial/ethnic minorities, (c) academically underprepared, (d) students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (e.g., Pell Grant recipients), and (e) community college students. In addition, the WWC will report subgroup effects for gender when they are available.

Types of Studies to be Reviewed

Following the current *WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook*, to be eligible for review, a study must be a primary analysis of the effect of an intervention. If a study does not examine the effects of an intervention, or if it is not a primary analysis (e.g., if it is a meta-analysis or other literature review), then it is not eligible for review. Studies that do not examine the effectiveness of an intervention, but have been portrayed so in the media, may still be eligible for a quick review.

In addition, the study must have an eligible design. *Eligible study designs* include randomized controlled trials, quasi-experiments, and certain kinds of single-case studies. The category “quasi-experiment” is broad. The WWC currently has standards for reviewing studies that use matching or statistical control in an attempt to equate non-equivalent groups, and also pilot standards for simple versions of the regression discontinuity design (i.e., those that use a single forcing variable). The WWC currently does not have standards for other types of quasi-experimental designs, such as the instrumental variable approach.

Relevant Outcome Domains

To be eligible for review, a study must also assess a *relevant outcome domain*. Generally, these will include outcomes related to (a) access and enrollment, (b) credit accumulation, (c) academic achievement, (d) attainment, and (e) the labor market. Measures of actual behavior are preferred

to those that measure intentions and related constructs. When studies present both types of measures for an outcome (e.g., both intention to enroll and actual enrollment), the WWC will focus on the behavioral measure. The content expert associated with the review is responsible for the final determination of outcome relevance for any particular review.

The content expert is also responsible for grouping outcomes into domains. Generally, these are:

Enrollment: Any college enrollment at all (access); number of terms in school; number of years in school; 4-year vs. 2-year vs. non-enrollment; selectivity of the enrollment institution; full-time vs. part-time enrollment

Credit accumulation: Number of credits earned; degree bearing vs. non-degree bearing credits earned; credits earned vs. credits attempted; completion of remedial coursework

Academic achievement: grade point average; courses passed vs. courses failed

Attainment: Certificate completion; degree completion

Labor market: Employed vs. unemployed; employed full-time vs. employed part-time; employed in field vs. not employed in field

Timeframe

Studies must have been conducted within the last two years to be eligible for review under this protocol.

Review of Studies Against WWC Evidence Standards

All studies will be reviewed against the WWC Evidence Standards, using the most current version of the *Procedures and Standards Handbook*. Generally, these standards assess outcome reliability and validity, attrition, baseline equivalence, and similar methodological and statistical issues. This review determines the overall WWC study rating.