



Research in Brief

The Michelle Obama Effect

How Former First Lady Michelle Obama's Community Events Impact FAFSA Completion

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Introduction

Throughout her time as First Lady, Michelle Obama (Mrs. Obama) focused substantial energy on promoting college attendance and persistence. *Reach Higher* aims to encourage underserved students to continue their education past high school and obtain a postsecondary credential with labor market value. Reach Higher's activities include raising awareness about the value of a postsecondary education (via the use of events and social media) and providing students with access to financial aid resources and other tools, including a text-based intervention.

At *Reach Higher* events, including school visits, Mrs. Obama typically focused her remarks on information and motivational stories to encourage students on their path to and through college. Our analysis examines how some of these visits may have impacted students' financial aid filing, specifically submission of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). We find through our analyses that Mrs. Obama's visit to a postsecondary institution or school district led to substantial increases in the share of students completing the FAFSA.

"Life is a trip. But no matter what, whether that's a tough class, financial difficulties, or something else ... you have got to stay focused on that horizon for yourself. You have got to keep your heart in the game every single day. You have got to commit yourselves to your future and to your education."

*-First Lady Michelle Obama
San Antonio, TX, May 2, 2014*

Data & Sample

We focus our analysis on several events in the spring of 2014, which coincided with when high school seniors would have been working on their FAFSA:

- Howard University, 4/18/2014 (Washington, DC)
- University of Texas, San Antonio, 5/2/2014 (San Antonio, TX)
- Dillard University, 5/10/2014 (New Orleans, LA)
- Topeka Public School District, 5/16/2014 (Topeka, KS)

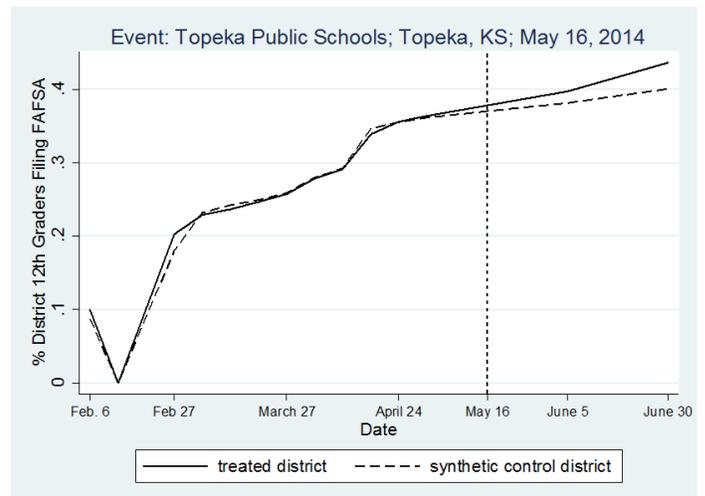
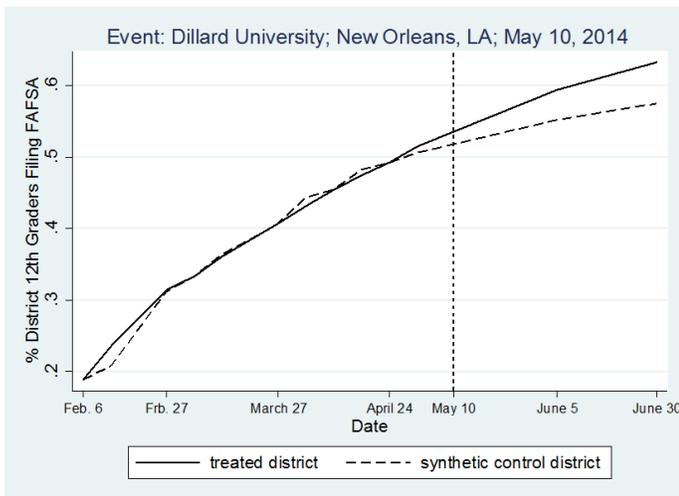
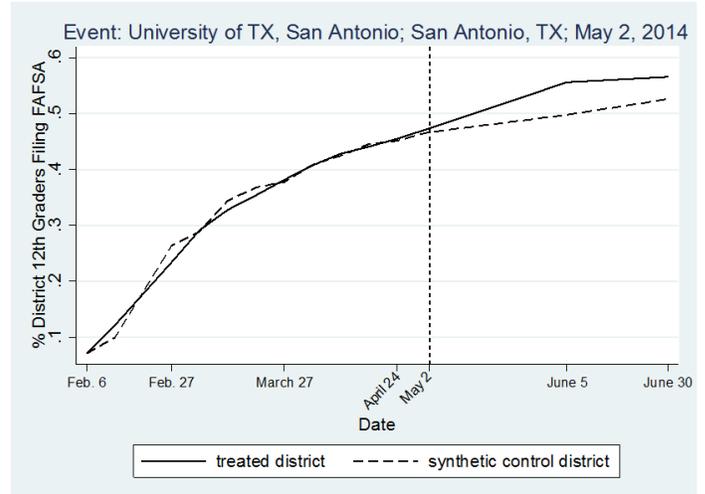
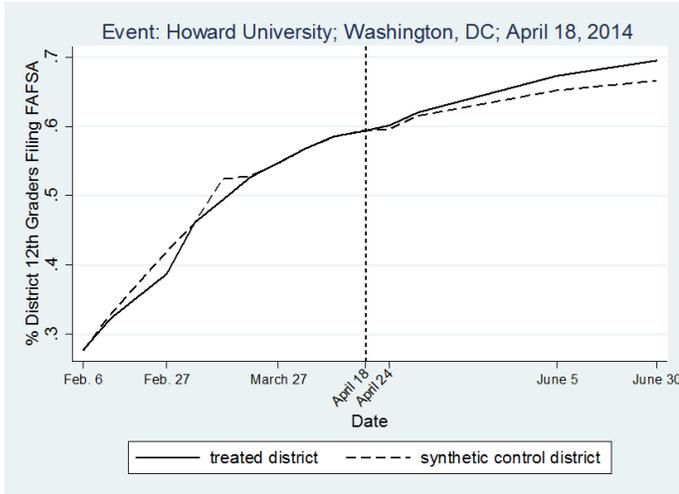
We use counts of FAFSA filing from the Department of Education's Federal Student Aid office and use the Common Core of Data 12th grade enrollment counts for 2013-14 to calculate FAFSA filing rates and include district-level demographic information in our analysis.

Analytic Strategy: Synthetic Control

We use a quasi-experimental method called synthetic control to compare FAFSA filing rates over time in each district Mrs. Obama visited to FAFSA filing rates in a "synthetic control" district—a composite district made up of a weighted average of other similar districts in the state. The FAFSA filing rates in the synthetic control districts were nearly identical to the FAFSA filing rates in the districts Mrs. Obama visited in the weeks leading up to her event. If her visit had no effect, we'd expect filing rates to continue to track identically between the districts she visited and the synthetic control districts in the weeks after her visit. However, we find that in each location Mrs. Obama visited, FAFSA filing rates increase initially relative to synthetic controls and then sustain that difference with a widening gap in FAFSA submission over time.

Findings

Below we share synthetic control results for each of the four districts Mrs. Obama visited during the 2014 FAFSA application cycle. We see that the treated districts and synthetic controls have very similar FAFSA submission rates prior to Mrs. Obama's visit, but that in each location treated districts increase their FAFSA filing relative to the synthetic controls. Not only do treated districts experience a bump in FAFSA submissions, but they sustain that difference with a widening gap in FAFSA submission over time.



Conclusion

Researchers have long argued that role models have a substantial influence on young people's decisions and actions. Mrs. Obama dedicated extensive time and resources to inspiring young people to pursue higher education, and she leaves office as one of the most influential role models in America. We find that her community events resulted in increased FAFSA completion, leading students to take key steps to making their postsecondary dreams a reality.

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