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Delivering On the Promise:
**Structuring College Promise Programs to Promote Higher
Education Attainment for Students from Underserved Groups**

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Delivering On the Promise: Structuring College Promise Programs to Promote Higher Education Attainment for Students from Underserved Groups

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College enrollment and completion rates in the United States vary considerably across demographic groups. Higher education attainment is lower for students from lower income families than for students from higher income families. It is lower for students who are first in their families to attend or complete college. And it is lower for African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians than for Whites and Asians (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Higher education attainment also varies based on place of residence, with considerable differences both across and within states (Perna & Finney, 2014).

One emerging strategy for increasing higher education attainment for people living in particular places is the “college promise” program. Over the last decade, but especially in the past few years, programs with the promise label have been advanced at the local, state, and federal levels. Whereas traditional financial aid programs award grants and loans to students who demonstrate financial need or meet academic criteria, promise programs target resources beyond state or federal aid to individuals who live in designated places, meet local- or state-defined eligibility criteria, and/or attend specific K–12 schools. The Kalamazoo Promise exemplifies this approach. Created in 2005 and funded by anonymous donors, the Kalamazoo Promise inspired the establishment of similar programs in economically disadvantaged communities in Michigan and other states (Miller-Adams, 2015). Known as “place-based scholarship programs,” these programs promise financial support for college for students who reside in the designated area (e.g., school district or city) and/or attend a specified school (Miller-Adams, 2009). Promise programs also include the “free community college” programs that have recently been authorized by Tennessee, Oregon, and Minnesota, and are under consideration by other state governments.

By offering the promise of a financial or other award to students who meet specified eligibility criteria, promise programs have the potential to promote equity in higher education opportunity and outcomes. Whether promise programs achieve this goal will likely depend on how programs are structured and designed. Programs differ in numerous dimensions including residency requirements, time when students commit to the program (e.g., before middle school, during high school), demographic and academic eligibility requirements, structure of the financial awards (e.g., first or last dollar), postsecondary institutions at which the financial award may be used, availability of support services to address nonfinancial barriers to college access and completion, funding sources, and sustainability and scalability (Andrews, 2013; Hemenway, 2016; Perna & Hadinger, 2012).

Programmatic variations may be advantageous, given the likely benefits of crafting programs to meet the needs of a particular community and context (Miller-Adams, 2009). But this heterogeneity also complicates efforts to determine how a program should be structured to improve higher education attainment, especially for students from underserved groups.

Purpose

Drawing from a review of relevant theory and research, this report sheds light on how promise programs should be structured to promote college enrollment and attainment for students from underserved groups and identifies productive directions for future research.

Programmatic Characteristics for Promoting College Attainment

To increase higher education attainment for students from underserved groups, promise programs should:

Recognize the Context—Including the “Place”—Where a Student Lives

College-related decisions do not occur in a vacuum but are influenced by the contexts in which students are embedded, including the characteristics of the schools they attend and the communities and states in which they live (Perna, 2006). Promise programs recognize variations across contexts in the resources for promoting college going by limiting eligibility based on the state, city, county, or school district in which a student resides and/or the school a student attends. In addition to providing a financial aid award only to individuals living in a particular place, programs should also recognize other place-based barriers that restrict higher education attainment for students from underserved groups (Massey, 2013). Programs should be structured to ensure the availability in the designated place of other resources that are known to promote college going, including access to academically rigorous coursework (Perna, 2005; Perna et al., 2015) and college and financial aid counseling (Perna et al., 2008).

Promote Early Awareness of College and Financial Aid

Communicating information about the availability of financial assistance to pay college costs has the potential to promote college enrollment by ensuring that students and their families use available financial resources to help pay college costs and by encouraging students to engage in college-related behaviors (Perna, 2010; Perna & Steele, 2011). If middle and high school students (and their families) believe they will have the financial resources necessary to pay for college, students may aspire to attend college, take the rigorous academic courses required for college entrance and success, and seek and obtain sources of support for other aspects of the college attainment process. Research suggests the positive effects on college enrollment when the criteria for receiving financial aid are simple, clear, and transparent (Dynarski, 2000, 2004).

Target Resources to Students Who Would Not Otherwise Enroll or Complete College

Programs that provide benefits to all students who meet residency requirements (e.g., “universal” place-based scholarships) may be more politically palatable and sustainable, but may also have higher costs and be inefficient, as they allocate finite resources to individuals who would enroll in college even without the program. Need-based grants are especially important to promoting college-related outcomes for students from low-income families (Castleman & Long, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2015). Programs that restrict awards to students who meet minimum academic achievement (e.g., state-sponsored merit aid programs) tend to award aid to students who would have enrolled in college even without the aid (Dynarski, 2000; Groen, 2011; Heller, 2006).

Provide a Financial Award That Reduces the Cost of Attendance for Low-Income Students

Promise programs vary in the amount of financial assistance provided, duration of the financial award, and types of institutions at which students may use a financial award. First-dollar scholarships provide a fixed award to students regardless of other financial aid a student receives, whereas last-dollar scholarships are reduced by financial aid received from federal and state governments and other sources. Last-dollar scholarships are less expensive per student and thus may enable a program to serve more students with available fiscal resources. But last-dollar scholarships are regressive, providing fewer dollars to students with the most need, and generally do not recognize that college costs include more than tuition and fees.

Ensure Availability of Resources to Promote Success at the Institutions Students Attend

Restrictions on the characteristics of institutions at which students may use a financial aid award will likely influence the college or university that a student attends. Promise programs that limit financial aid to students who attend particular colleges and universities should ensure that the institutions in which students enroll have the resources required to promote student success. Completion rates vary considerably but tend to be lower at two-year colleges than at four-year colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Rates of transferring from two-year to four-year institutions also tend to be low (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Engender Confidence That the Program Will Deliver Its Promise

To incentivize changes in students' college-going behaviors, students (and their families) must believe that the promised benefit will actually be received (Perna & Hadinger, 2012). Questions about the financial sustainability of a program may create doubts about whether a program will deliver the promised award.

Encourage Academic Preparation and Achievement

Academic preparation and achievement are critical for enrolling and succeeding in college (Perna, 2005), and academic criteria for receiving a financial award may incentivize students to improve their academic readiness for college (Dynarski, 2004; Perna, 2010). Whether a promise program can affect academic preparation depends on the number of years that students know about a program in advance of their potential college enrollment date (Andrews, DesJardins, & Ranchhod, 2010), as well as the resources that a program provides to improve students' academic readiness. Programs should work to minimize negative unintended consequences of academic requirements for scholarship eligibility such as incentivizing students to take less-rigorous courses (Dynarski, 2004).

Assist Students with Navigating Into and Through Higher Education

While important, a financial award alone is insufficient to promote college enrollment and attainment, especially for students from groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education (Perna & Kurban, 2013). Promise programs should consider how to assist students with navigating their way into and through higher education, and the support services that may be offered before, during, and after students enter college. Potential services may be oriented toward academics, college admissions, socio-cultural topics, and other issues. Research

demonstrates the importance of providing personalized guidance and information about college application processes (Bettinger, Long, Oreopolous, & Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Hoxby & Turner, 2013), as well as the positive effects of federal TRIO programs on students' college-related outcomes (Maynard et al., 2014).

Directions for Future Research

Available research only begins to address the questions that are of interest to promise program designers, funders, participants, and host communities. While program evaluations may have value to individual programs, program directors, funders, and other stakeholders would also benefit from insights about what works, for whom, and how in other programs. Creating knowledge that is transferable to other programs requires conducting research that is theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous (Perna, 2016).

Do Promise Programs Improve Higher Education Attainment?

Promise programs have the potential to influence a host of outcomes across the educational pipeline. Important student-level outcomes include academic preparation for college during K–12 school years, college enrollment and choice, degree completion, post-baccalaureate education, and employment. Additional research is needed to fully understand the effects of the range of available programs on the spectrum of students' college-related outcomes.

Promise programs are often just one intervention among many that a state, community, or school adopts with the goal of improving higher education attainment (Ash, 2015). Future research should explore how promise programs interact with other reforms to promote higher education attainment, and the effects of a promise program above and beyond other interventions.

Promise programs are developed to respond to needs, conditions, and characteristics of the local context. The generalizability of findings about one program may be limited by differences in the demographic, economic, and historical context of states and communities, including differences in state K–12 and higher education systems. Researchers should consider ways to productively conduct analyses of multiple programs.

Participants in promise programs are necessarily different from nonparticipants. Future research should continue to consider how to identify program effects using appropriate comparison groups. Future research should also consider the forces that influence the characteristics of individuals who become aware of, participate in, and complete a program.

Research tends to examine effects for the first cohort of students that is eligible for a program (Andrews, DesJardins, & Ranchhod, 2010) or outcomes only for students in the first few years of the program (e.g., Ash, 2015). Future research should consider how outcomes vary as a program matures and the longer-term effects of programs for different groups of students.

How Should Promise Programs Be Designed to Improve Attainment?

Available research tends to consider *whether* a program works, not how or why. More research is required to understand how particular program characteristics and components promote or limit outcomes for students, schools, communities, and states, and how particular program characteristics influence the characteristics of participating students. Future research should also consider the effects of program characteristics on the type of college or university that a student attends, and the implications of these enrollment choices for degree completion, “undermatching” (defined as enrollment in an institution that is less academically selective than

the institution a student could enroll in), and the growing concentration of students from low-income families in less selective institutions (Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016).

Research should also consider the unintended consequences of particular program features. One well-documented program feature with negative consequences for college access of low-income students is an academic eligibility requirement (Dynarski, 2004; Scott-Clayton, 2011). Another program characteristic with potential negative unintended consequences is long-term residency requirements (DeLuca, Wood, & Rosenblatt, 2011; Dowd, 2008).

Programs may receive financial support from a range of sources including state appropriations or lotteries, city and county governments, school districts, colleges and universities, civic and philanthropic organizations, and private corporate and/or individual donors. More research is required to understand how to ensure the financial sustainability and scalability of promise programs. Future research should also consider the role of leadership in establishing and sustaining a program, and the individual and interacting roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in program establishment, operation, and sustainability.

Are the Effects of Promise Programs Limited to Individual Student Participants?

We also need to know more about the effects of promise programs on stakeholders beyond student participants. Research should consider how programs may influence outcomes and characteristics of the K–12 schools that participants attend, including a school’s “college-going culture” and availability of academically rigorous courses. Promise programs may incentivize students to meet academic achievement thresholds, but they typically include few incentives for schools to create structural change (Iriti, Bickel, & Kaufman, 2012). Without being academically prepared for college-level work, program recipients may be derailed in their progress to degree completion by the need to complete developmental or remedial coursework. Future research should also consider consequences of promise programs for colleges and universities, including an institution’s ability to serve all students with available resources, the provision of remedial or developmental education, transfer pathways, and pricing. We also need to know more about the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of a promise program on the well-being of communities and states. By increasing higher education attainment, programs may improve economic development and other community- and state-level outcomes.

Cost effectiveness is critical to the sustainability of a program. Additional research is required to understand whether the benefits of a promise program exceed the total direct and indirect costs and whether the net benefits of a program are greater than what could be achieved with alternative uses of the funds (Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016).

Conclusion

Closing persisting gaps in higher education attainment is essential to ensuring the economic competitiveness of our nation, states, and communities (Perna & Finney, 2014). Improving college access and attainment for students from underserved groups is also important for social justice reasons, given the many benefits of higher education (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). With the explicit recognition of the place in which students are embedded, college promise programs have the potential to increase higher education attainment, especially for students from groups that are historically unrepresented in higher education and living in communities with relatively low educational attainment rates. While available research suggests promising practices, more research is also needed to more fully understand whether and how promise programs deliver on their promise.

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