

introduction

Chapter 1

Improving Research-Based Knowledge of College Promise Programs

Laura W. Perna

University of Pennsylvania

Edward J. Smith

The Kresge Foundation

The many benefits that accrue to individuals who participate in higher education are well documented. People with higher education typically have higher earnings, higher rates of employment, lower likelihood of unemployment and poverty, better health, longer lives, and more (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). The earnings premium realized by those with a college education has been growing since the mid-1970s (Carnevale & Rose, 2015), and the employment-related benefits of a bachelor's degree were realized even during the Great Recession (Carnevale, Jayasundra, & Gulish, 2016).

Yet the opportunity to realize these benefits—as well as the many other economic and noneconomic benefits that tend to come with higher education—is unequal, as demonstrated by persisting differences in attainment across groups. College enrollment and completion rates are lower, on average, for individuals from lower-income families, individuals whose parents have not completed college, and African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians/Native Americans (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, & Santillan, 2018; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Higher education attainment also differs by place of residence, with variations across and within states (Perna & Finney, 2014; Perna & Ruiz, 2017). These and other differences in attainment contribute to the continued economic and social stratification of our society (Perna & Finney, 2014).

Ensuring that all people have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from high-quality higher education is important for reasons of social justice, as well as for the economic and social prosperity of our communities, states, and nation (Perna & Finney, 2014). Higher education provides benefits not only to participants but also to nonparticipants, because with higher rates of attainment come a higher tax base, less reliance on social welfare programs, lower rates of crime, and greater civic engagement (Ma et al., 2016). Society also benefits from having a workforce with the qualifications needed for available jobs. Sectors of the U.S. economy with more highly educated workers (e.g., health care, education, business services) are expanding, and technological changes are increasing the

demand for educated workers across other sectors, including service and manufacturing (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). The United States needs higher levels of attainment to meet workforce needs and international competition, and the required levels of attainment cannot be achieved without raising attainment among groups that have historically been underserved by our nation's educational structures and systems (Marcus, 2019; Perna & Finney, 2014).

Aid (FAFSA), and received a financial aid offer from the college or university. Although the federal government mandates that colleges and universities have a net price calculator on their websites to provide prospective students with individualized estimates of expected college costs, the information that is presented is sometimes misleading and inaccurate, and the extent to which students and families use the tool is unknown (Cheng, Asher, Abernathy, Cochrane, & Thompson, 2012; Perna, Wright-Kim, & Jiang, 2018). Most students receive little assistance at their high schools in trying to understand actual college costs; the average K–12 school in the United States had 482 students per counselor in 2014–2015 (Clinedist & Koranteng, 2017), and few school counselors are trained as financial aid advisors (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2017; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008).

The College Promise Movement

College promise programs are an emerging approach to increasing the higher education attainment of people in particular places (Perna & Leigh, 2016). Catherine Millett and colleagues (this volume) contend that these programs, also known as “free tuition” and “free college” programs, provide a pledge, guarantee, and commitment that some portion of the costs of attending college will be covered (e.g., Eskhis vlegoi.-2(ling)-12(e.gcalal.

effects of a small number of relatively longstanding and comprehensive programs such as the Kalamazoo Promise. Miller-Adams (2015) labels the Kalamazoo Promise a “place-based scholarship program,” and describes place-based scholarship programs as “seek[ing] to transform their communities” by increasing college access and attainment, fostering “a college-going culture in both the K–12 system and community as a whole, and support[ing] local economic development” (Miller-Adams, 2015, p. 11). As Ritter and Swanson (this volume) hypothesize, an approach that improves K–12 academic achievement and encourages residents to move to or stay in a community may improve postsecondary education outcomes directly, as well as indirectly by improving students’ academic readiness for college and creating a college-going culture in the community. Research suggests that the Kalamazoo Promise raised academic expectations w 2612 ae0(R)23(esear)12(c((c)1y)62(. 0 Td (-)Tj 0.067 T

Table 1. Variations in Characteristics of Different Categories of College Promise Programs (Continued)

Characteristic	Place-Based Promise Scholarship Programs ^a

evaluation. With the goal of addressing this knowledge need, this volume presents a collection of research studies that examine several categories and variations of college promise programs. These theoretically grounded empirical investigations use varied data sources and analytic techniques to examine the effects of college promise programs that have different design features and operate in different places. Individually and collectively, the results of these studies have implications for the design and implementation of promise programs if the programs are to create meaningful improvements in attainment for people from underserved groups. The authors' efforts also provide a useful foundation for the next generation of college promise research.

In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of the chapters that follow, while in the final chapter of the volume we offer conclusions that cut across the chapters and identify implications for policy, practice, and future research. In the next chapter, Catherine Millett, Stephanie Saunders, Martha Kanter, and Robyn Hiestand build on this introductory chapter to offer additional grounding and contextualization for the included empirical studies. Millett and colleagues describe the characteristics of promise programs and highlight the important challenges that college promise programs seek to address, including the need to both increase the educational attainment of the U.S. population and reduce persisting gaps in attainment across groups. They also offer an overview of the history of the college promise movement and describe the engagement of the federal, state, and local governments, philanthropic organizations, and business leaders.

Two systematic reviews of research follow. Together, these two reviews establish the state of knowledge from research conducted prior to this volume on two different categories of programs. Elise Swanson, Angela Watson, and Gary Ritter first provide a systematic review of the effects of the subset of programs known as "place-based" scholarship programs on indicators of community development, K-12 achievement, and college attainment. Swanson and colleagues limit their attention to programs that meet the definition of place-based scholarship programs offered by Miller-Adams (2015), that is, programs modeled after the Kalamazoo Promise. From their review of 16 studies that met their criteria for methodological rigor and that were published between 2005 and 2016, the authors conclude that the examined place-based scholarship programs have attracted residents to their areas and improved postsecondary outcomes. They also conclude that, although the identified stud-

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collected from 14 Illinois Promise students enrolling in summer courses suggest the academic, economic, social, and cultural factors that may influence summer enrollment decisions.

The next two chapters examine the effects of yet another approach: promising a financial award to students who graduate from designated high school(s) and attend a single community college. Using a difference-in-difference analysis with data from 1998–1999 to 2015–2016, Amy Li and Denisa Gándara examined the effects of 32 such programs (a.k.a. “local programs”) that were operating across the United States. They found that fall enrollment of first-time, full-time credential- and degree-seeking students increased at institutions with promise programs after program implementation. Li and Gándara also capitalized on program variation, exploring whether effects on enrollment varied based on program design features. They found that programs with a need-based eligibility requirement were associated with smaller increases in enrollment than programs that did not have an income eligibility requirement. In addition, the effects on enrollment were not higher for programs with relatively more generous financial awards (that is, programs that provided first-dollar awards or that covered tuition for completion of a two-year degree).

Roman Ruiz, Elaine Leigh, Ashley Napier, and Manuel González Canché explored

the studies for program design and point to questions that program administrators and policy makers should consider in design and implementation. Of particular importance is attention to understanding who benefits—and who does not benefit—from a promise program and other implications of program design for equity. Continued attention is needed to whether and how programs promote equity rather than perpetuate the stratification of higher education opportunity and outcomes. Program administrators and policy makers should also consider the availability of the nonfinancial supports that may enable students not only to enroll in college but to earn a degree; they should consider ways to promote a true cross-sector approach; and they should recognize the importance of data collection for determining if and how a program is working.

We also identify topics for future research, including the long-term effects of programs on outcomes for different groups of students and the implications of different eligibility criteria and approaches to the financial award for program participation and outcomes. We need to know more about program implementation and management, including financial and political sustainability, program leadership, and whether the benefits of programs with different designs exceed the costs. And we need more qualitative research if we are to better understand the mechanisms that contribute to program outcomes, including potential unintended consequences. Illustrating the value of qualitative inquiry are three case studies of Michigan Promise Zone programs, which examine how and why administrators may change program eligibility requirements and other features as programs are implemented (Smith, 2019). Smith's findings show that some changes may have positive effects on college-related outcomes, while others may be problematic.

Our Approach to the Research That Follows

This introductory chapter offers a framework for conceptualizing and understanding the diverse array of college promise programs. New approaches to defining, categorizing, and evaluating such programs are still emerging, however. Rather than enforce a uniform approach, we allowed the contributors to this volume to articulate their own perspectives. As a result, inconsistencies arose. For example, Millett et al. take an inclusive approach and assert that more than 280 programs exist in the United States, while Swanson and colleagues identify only 82 programs as meeting the criteria for their review. Because of differences in program definitions and data availability, the contributors also focused on different program design features in their analyses.

These and other inconsistencies are not surprising, given the rapid growth of college promise programs and the emergent state of research about them. We hope the differing approaches represented here will help guide efforts to further refine and develop a shared understanding of meaningful categories. Even with inconsistencies in definitions and approaches, we believe this volume advances understanding of the variations among promise programs across the United States. We hope that insights from these chapters will be useful to policy makers, program administrators, and researchers, as college promise programs continue to be established, implemented, evaluated, and refined.

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