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What are Community College ‘Promise’ Programs and do they provide any long-term impact on student completion?

Dr. Kathryn Jameson-Meedy

Research suggests that free Community College tuition and fees, also known as Promise Programs, have made an impact not only on student enrollment; but also on longer term student persistence and completion. The efforts to make free college tuition a reality have increased significantly over the past five years; so much so that in 2014 a non-profit organization titled “*Campaign for Free College Tuition*” was established to educate parents, students, the higher education community, taxpayers and policy makers regarding these efforts (Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2015).

Review of the Literature

In the past six months, five states and communities have created new programs to provide free community college. These include statewide programs in Oregon and Minnesota; and local efforts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Dayton, Ohio, and Palatine, Illinois. These five programs of free college education, are added to a long list of Promise type programs that have been implemented across the nation; including another 11 states that have proposed legislation for various forms of free community college. Promise Programs have grown from one city – Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2005 to more than three dozen nationwide. Programs are in 18 states in addition to one of the first statewide programs in Tennessee (Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2015; Executive Office of the President, 2015).

Key Required Components for Effective Implementation and Characteristics.

Eligibility and other requirements of Promise Programs vary from state to state and from program to program. Some Promise Programs base eligibility on length of residency within their college service areas for local students to receive the free tuition scholarships. Other programs have modified their initial requirements, such as family income and GPA levels; adjusting their program eligibility based on lessons learned from formative evaluations and knowledge gained from implementing their first semester pilot of free college tuition.

Examples.

- *Kalamazoo, Michigan* – The Kalamazoo Promise was first announced in November of 2005 and funded by a group of anonymous donors who pledged to cover the cost of tuition and fees for students graduating from the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) and attending any one of Michigan’s 44 public colleges and universities. The Kalamazoo Promise is one of the most flexible Promise Programs in the nation, granting eligible students their college funding any time within ten years of high school graduation for up to 130 credits of undergraduate college education. The Kalamazoo program is also one of the more generous Promise Programs, and is referred to as a “first-dollar” scholarship program. This means that eligible students are allowed to receive additional financial aid over and above the Promise funds. Enrolled post-secondary students must maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA per enrollment period to continue eligibility. Length of time residing within the KPS district also factors into eligibility. The Kalamazoo Promise covers 100 percent of tuition costs and fees for students who enrolled in KPS in kindergarten. Then on a sliding scale, the Program covers a percentage of costs down to 65 percent of tuition and fees for those enrolling in the KPS system for 9th grade. Students enrolling in KPS for grade 10 or after are ineligible for the Promise funds. In the KPS high schools, the Kalamazoo Promise had a dramatic positive effect on GPAs for African American students, up by 0.7 points by year three of the program. Six years after high school graduation, the program increased the percentage of all students earning any postsecondary credential by 12 percentage points; from a pre-Promise baseline of 36 percent to post-implementation outcomes of 48 percent, a proportional increase of one-third. One important long-term outcome of the Kalamazoo Promise has been the reversal of the KPS decades-long slide in enrollments. Between 2005 and 2014, enrollment in the KPS grew by 24 percent. In addition to creating a college-going culture throughout the community, significant growth brought new financial resources into the district and led to the construction of two new schools which were the first to be opened in the district for almost 40 years. The Kalamazoo Promise has not only produced substantial economic benefits, the program has helped to rebuild the economic mobility for the most marginalized, producing benefits throughout all of Michigan (Bartik & Lachowska, 2014; Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2015; Miller-Adams, 2015).
- *Ventura, California* – A Promise Program has been running at Ventura College (VC) since first announced in 2005 when the cost to attend college at that time was \$26 per unit. The VC program was strategically designed similar to Kalamazoo in that the objectives were to not only improve the college-going rates in the county, but to also remove economic barriers and to enhance the quality of the Ventura County workforce. In the second year of the VC Promise, the program served 80 students at a cost of \$10,000. Of the initial cohort, 88% of Promise students persisted from fall to spring and 68% enrolled the following fall semester.

Only 44% of non-Promise peers remained in college during the same time period. Initially, the VC program required family income levels to be below \$50,000 for eligibility. This mandate was eliminated in 2007 in addition to admitting students who have successfully completed GED requirements. Students must apply within 12 months of High School completion. In 2009, VC was presented the Innovation of the Year Award for their successful Promise Program. The VC Promise Program now allows all recent Ventura County High School graduates, regardless of income level or high school GPA to have their enrollment fees paid during their first year at VC. After a period of nine years, nearly half of all Promise students reported that they would not have attended college without the program. Surveys found that VC Promise students take more classes and transfer to universities at greater rates, with 82% of Promise students enrolled full-time, compared to 46% of the general student population. A longitudinal study of the Ventura College Office of Research and Evaluation, found that VC Promise students were awarded 58% more degrees and certificates than their Non-Promise counterparts. Twenty-one percent (21%) of Hispanic students in the VC Promise cohort were awarded degrees or certificates compared to 11% of Hispanic students in the Non-Promise cohort. This is a difference of 89%. In fall 2015 1,100 freshman students started the first day of school without having to pay their enrollment fees (Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2015; Innovation of the Year, 2009; K. Armstrong, personal communication, January 15, 2016; Opportunity Changes Everything, 2015; Ventura College Promise, 2015; Ventura College Longitudinal Study, 2012; Ventura Promise Breaks New Ground, 2007).

- Tennessee – The Tennessee Statewide Promise Program was announced in 2014 and the first class of Tennessee Promise students enrolled in the fall of 2015. Tennessee has 13 Community Colleges and 27 Colleges of Applied Technology. Funding for this statewide program is drawn from their state lottery. In addition to enrollment costs, students will also receive enhanced mentoring as they navigate their college pathway, while maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA. Students eligible for the Promise scholarship logged 200,000 hours of community service in 2015 and Tennessee had the highest increase of any state in the percentage of students who applied for federal financial aid because of the high level of interest in the new state program. The Promise program is administrated by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) / Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), (About Tennessee Promise Scholarship, 2015; Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2015; Executive Office of the President, 2015).
- Long Beach, California – The Long Beach City College (LBCC) Promise Program established in 2008, is a collaboration with Long Beach Unified School District and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). Local high school students receive a free semester of tuition with the added bonus of guaranteed transfer admission to CSULB for those students choosing a bachelor’s degree pathway. Building on the success of the Long Beach Promise, LBCC launched Promise Pathways in 2012. The Pathways initiative ensures that new students belonging in college-level classes are appropriately assessed and placed by looking beyond standardized test scores to evaluate placement based on students’ overall high school achievement. The LBCC Promise program recently began assigning graduate students as learning coaches. In addition, Promise students are required to enroll in a one unit college success course and complete 9 units or more to remain in the program. The outcomes and impact have been significant. Promise Pathways has increased the

number and percentage of students across all ethnic groups who have successfully completed coursework needed to transfer to a four-year undergraduate degree program. CSULB students have also experienced increased success. The six-year graduation rates at CSULB have risen from 45 percent to 60 percent. Through the end of 2015, the LBCC program provided a free semester for more than 7,000 local students, and recently announced that they would extend their scholarship to one full academic year. During 2014 and 2015, the Long Beach Promise won several honors; including a State of California \$5 million Award for Innovation in Higher Education (Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2015; Executive Office of the President, 2015; Long Beach College Promise, 2015; S. Cully, Personal Communication, January 19, 2016).

Methodology

The researcher for this literature review research brief found a total of 13 publications which focused on researching or discussing research results for free college Promise Programs. The researcher examined peer reviewed publications, studies released by research entities such as Brookings and Upjohn Institute, relevant state and federal websites, and articles discussing the applicable research of free community college tuition programs. In addition to the literature review, the researcher interviewed individuals involved with the implementation, evaluation or administration of Promise Programs on community college campuses. Findings and conclusions for this research brief are drawn from the conclusions of the literature reviewed and the individuals interviewed.

Findings and Conclusions

The review of literature produced recurring themes for those Promise Programs where outcome data is available. Not only is free college tuition an effective intervention strategy in the short-term to boost enrollments; but free college programs also have a positive long-term effect of increasing student completion in community colleges nationwide. The outcome data for the initial Promise Program of Kalamazoo, Michigan shows that high school students planning to take advantage of the program have increased GPAs, especially for African-American students. In addition, the Kalamazoo Promise spurred a boom to the surrounding community, helping to rebuild economic mobility for many marginalized individuals and families; which produced broader impact benefits throughout the state. As in Kalamazoo, the Long Beach Promise and Ventura College Promise Programs have been operating for greater than five years. Both programs have compiled outcome data that shows significant student completion success. The overwhelming community-wide effectiveness of the Long Beach program has prompted the Mayor of Long Beach to create a new internship program for local business. In 2015 the mayor launched the Long Beach Internship Challenge to double the number of internships. More internships create more opportunities for increased numbers of high school and college students. As a result, the students gain relevant hands-on experience in the local community workforce so they will be able to position themselves for success in a competitive job market. Numerous school districts throughout the state of California are using the Long Beach Promise as a blueprint for Promise collaborations in their own service areas and communities. Including El Monte, Fresno, Humboldt County, the Inland Empire, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Francisco.

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