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Success factors: How does messaging affect program usage and impact?

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Clear and consistent messaging is an important component of a successful Promise program.

Without effective outreach around benefits and the steps needed to access them, a Promise program will fall short of its potential. The ability to deliver a simple, clear message is strengthened if program requirements are kept to a minimum and resources are provided for professional communications (including a high-quality website) and tailored outreach and engagement.

Policy Considerations

- Promise program designers should pay attention to how they communicate with stakeholders, especially students and families.
- Clear and consistent messaging is supported by program designs with minimal criteria, “automatic” eligibility determinations, and the use of plain language.
- Dedicated resources for professional communications capacity, including a high-quality website, should be included up front in Promise cost estimations.
- Tailored outreach to students can help ensure they clearly understand program rules and benefits.

What We Know

Research shows that when program-eligibility criteria are straightforward and minimal, more eligible people will participate. This makes intuitive sense: the fewer the requirements, the easier it is for individuals to determine whether they qualify.

Recent evidence suggests that eliminating students’ uncertainty about whether they qualify to participate in a Promise program is more effective than requiring them to submit proof of eligibility.² In a recent study, researchers mailed letters to two groups of prospective students offering tuition-free college, all of whom were eligible to attend the University of Michigan tuition free. The first group was told they automatically qualified, whereas the second group was told they would have to prove income eligibility. Students in the first group (with the guarantee) were more likely to apply to

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² Burland, E., Dynarski, S., Michelmore, K., Owen, S., & Raghuraman, S. (2022). *The power of certainty: Experimental evidence on the effective design of free tuition programs*. National Bureau of Economic Research. .

and enroll at the university than those in the second group.

Another recent study suggests that fewer eligibility criteria may lead to higher uptake of program benefits. Researchers examined 33 Promise programs at the community college level and found that programs without income criteria saw larger increases in community college enrollment than those with income criteria.³ In addition to adding a level of uncertainty, eligibility requirements, such as income criteria, usually impose compliance costs on students, requiring them to take an extra step (e.g., fill out paperwork) to demonstrate that they qualify.

While minimal eligibility requirements are desirable from a messaging standpoint, Promise program designers must determine eligibility criteria within the context of available resources. As a result, they may face a trade-off between the target level of benefits (e.g., funds flowing to students with the greatest need) and the complexity of eligibility criteria.

Research has shown that a universal message (e.g., “tuition-free college for all”) can go a long way in inducing prospective students to attend college. However, it is imperative that the message of “free college” not be misleading. New evidence on the Tennessee Promise illustrates that students’ expectations for what the program will provide are often unmet, and those expectations are shaped by the “free college” language used to promote the program.⁴

Promise program designers should consider two additional aspects related to messaging (beyond

eligibility criteria). First, outreach is a critical complement to messaging.⁵ Research on other types of programs showed that outreach to those who are eligible is important for increasing program participation. Relatedly, tailoring outreach to eligible individuals can be especially effective.⁶ Second, the accessibility of the written language used in messaging (e.g., avoiding jargon) can positively affect rates of program participation.⁷

Recommended Reading

Conroy, E. (2022, April 4). [*Simplicity matters for free college*](#). Forbes.

Clear and simple messaging for students regarding Promise programs is important for program effectiveness, as demonstrated by recent studies.

Carlson, A., & Laderman, S. (2018). [*The power of a promise: Implications and importance of adult promise programs*](#). State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO).

Programs designed for adult students must consider the factors unique to this student population, considering they have different responsibilities than other students. SHEEO encourages Programs to relay program information using clear and simple language.

Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022). [*Reducing barriers to free college programs*](#). Scholars Strategy Network.

This brief highlights barriers in program design that could impact student access and persistence. Authors advance policy recommendations aimed at ameliorating the barriers that can limit the effectiveness of free college or Promise programs.

³ Gándara, D., & Li, A. (2020). [*Promise for whom? “Free-college” programs and enrollments by race and gender classifications at public, 2-year colleges*](#). *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(4), 603–627.

⁴ Kramer, J. W. (2022). [*Expectations of a promise: The psychological contracts between students, the state, and key actors in a tuition-free college environment*](#). *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 01623737221090265.

⁵ Kim, D. H., & Rifelj, K. K. (2021). [*Packaging the Promise: Money, messaging, and misalignment*](#). *Teachers College Record*, 123(6), 1–38.

⁶ Hock, H., Jones, J. T., Levere, M., & Wittenburg, D. (2021). [*Using behavioral outreach to counteract administrative burden and encourage take-up of simplified disability payment rules*](#). *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 4(1).

⁷ Dorn, S. (2014). [*Public education, outreach and application assistance*](#). Urban Institute.