

7 Why do Promise programs benefit students? Enrollment and Completion

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Promise programs can lead more students to enroll in college and complete degrees or credentials.

Promise programs benefit students by making it more likely that they will enroll in college, remain enrolled, and complete degrees or credentials. The extent of these effects will depend on program design and implementation. The strongest effects will occur when Promise funding is generous and students can choose from a range of postsecondary options, and when navigation and support services are provided at critical transition points.

Policy Considerations

- Promise programs that are financially generous and easy to access are likely to have the biggest impacts on postsecondary enrollment.
- Promise programs that offer a range of postsecondary options (by including credentials, two-year, and four-year degrees) allow students to find a better fit than those that are limited to two-year institutions.
- Statewide Promise programs restricted to the two-year sector will likely shift enrollment away from four-year colleges during the program's first few years, albeit modestly.
- Community college–initiated Promise programs will likely increase first-time enrollment at the Promise-eligible college(s), so administrators should assess the institution's capacity to serve these additional students.
- Some students who enter college in response to a Promise program may have lower levels of academic preparation than the current study body, so these entering students may need more support services to be successful.

What We Know

Impacts on Postsecondary Enrollment

Promise programs have significant positive impacts on college enrollment, as shown by numerous rigorous research studies. An investment in Promise programs can give students who otherwise might

not do so the opportunity to attend college. Program design differences affect the magnitude of impacts: programs with easier application procedures reach more students and more generous programs produce greater effects.

Research to date has focused on programs that include both two- and four-year postsecondary options and impacts on four-year outcomes tend to be larger.

In Table 1, we summarize the enrollment effects of programs, which indicate the percentage point change in the proportion of high school graduates who enroll in college within 6–12 months of high school graduation.

Other studies have analyzed program effects on the raw number of students who enroll in college. A study of 30 local-level Promise programs that each covered a single community college (rather than allowing students

Table 1. Effect of Promise Programs on Postsecondary Enrollment

Location	Percentage point (pp) change in proportion of students who enroll in college after high school
Knox Achieves ¹	+3–5 pp at community colleges in TN
New Haven ²	+8–14 pp at public colleges in CT; +10–14 pp at public, four-year colleges in CT
El Dorado Promise ³	+14 pp at any college nationally; largest increases among students of color and students with below-average high school GPAs
Pittsburgh Promise ⁴	+5 pp at any accredited postsecondary institution in PA
Say Yes to Education ⁵	+8 pp at any college in NY (attributed mostly to enrollment growth at four-year colleges)
Kalamazoo Promise ⁶	+5–8 pp at any college in MI; +9 pp at four-year colleges in MI
Oregon Promise ⁷	+4–5 pp at community colleges in OR

Note: Program characteristics, data points, and methodology vary across studies. These estimates are not directly comparable, even if enrollment is measured in the same units.

¹ Carruthers, C. K., & Fox, W. F. (2016). [Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee](#). *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 97–112.

² Daugherty, L., & Gonzalez, G. C. (2016). [The impact of the New Haven Promise program on college enrollment, choice, and persistence](#) (Working Paper No. 1146). RAND Corporation.

³ Swanson, E., & Ritter, G. (2020). [Start to finish: Examining the impact of the El Dorado Promise on postsecondary outcomes](#). *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 49(N3), 1–31.

⁴ Page, L. C., Iriti, J., Lowry, D., & Anthony, A. (2019). [The promise of place-based investment in college access and success: Investigating the impact of the Pittsburgh Promise](#). *Education Finance and Policy*, 14(4), 572–600.

⁵ Bifulco, R., Rubenstein, R., & Sohn, H. (2019). [Evaluating the effects of universal place-based scholarships on student outcomes: The Buffalo “Say Yes to Education” program](#). *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 38(4), 918–943.

⁶ Bartik, T. J., Hershbein, B., & Lachowska, M. (2021). [The effects of the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship on college enrollment and completion](#). *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(1), 269–310. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.56.1.0416-7824r4>

⁷ Gurantz, O. (2020). [What does free community college buy? Early impacts from the Oregon promise](#). *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 39(1), 11–35.

⁸ Li, A. Y., & Gándara, D. (2020). [The promise of “free” tuition and program design features: Impacts on first-time college enrollment](#). In L. W. Perna & E. J. Smith (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs* (pp. 219–239). American Educational Research Association.

to select from multiple colleges) found enrollment increases of 9%–22% at receiving institutions.⁸ Effect sizes varied depending on student race and gender; enrollment increased the most for Hispanic males and females (42% and 52%, respectively)⁹, and Black males and females (47% and 51%, respectively). While enrollment increased among white males and females, the enrollment of Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students did not change.

The Tennessee Promise produced a 40% increase in enrollment at community and technical colleges.¹⁰ The related Tennessee Reconnect for adult students (who did not enter college directly after high school) increased adult student enrollment by 19%–28%, with largest increases among part-time and male students.¹¹ In contrast to the previously mentioned studies, the New York Excelsior program produced no changes to college enrollment numbers,¹² which is attributed to its multiple requirements, lack of vigorous marketing, and other available aid programs in the state.

Some of these enrollment effects subsequently faded as a result of pandemic-related disruptions and a strong labor market, which contributed to overall enrollment declines, most prominently at two-year colleges.

Statewide programs that focus only on the two-year sector can lead to short-term shifts from four-year to two-year institutions. The Oregon Promise and the Tennessee Promise both experienced these substitution effects, but they largely faded after the second year of program operations.

Impacts on Postsecondary Persistence

Promise programs typically increase persistence in higher education,¹³ defined as the percentage of students who start college in a given academic year and return the following year. Recipients of the Pittsburgh Promise were 4–7 percentage points (pp) more likely to persist into their second year of college.¹⁴ The Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo and Syracuse increased first-to-second year persistence rates by 5.5 pp.¹⁵

Studies have also found positive impacts on credits earned. Knox Achieves students earned nearly 7 more credit hours during the first two years of college.¹⁶ Students on the Detroit Promise earned 17.1 credit hours versus 13.5 credit hours for nonparticipants during their first three years of college.¹⁷ Accelerated credit hour accumulation is associated with reduced stop-out rates and lower student debt. For the

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Nguyen, H. (2020). [Free college? Assessing enrollment responses to the Tennessee Promise program](#). *Labour Economics*, 66(July), 101882.

¹¹ Collom, G. D. (2022). [A quasi-experimental investigation of adult student enrollment responses to the Tennessee Reconnect grant](#). *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*.

¹² Nguyen, H. (2019). [Free tuition and college enrollment: evidence from New York’s Excelsior program](#). *Education Economics*, 27(6), 573–587.

¹³ Swanson, E., Watson, A., & Ritter, G. (2020). [Promises fulfilled? A systematic review of the impacts of Promise Programs](#). In L. W. Perna & E. J. Smith (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs* (pp. 33–68). American Educational Research Association.

¹⁴ Page, L. C., Iriti, J., Lowry, D., & Anthony, A. (2019). [The promise of place-based investment in college access and success: Investigating the impact of the Pittsburgh Promise](#). *Education Finance and Policy*, 14(4), 572–600.

¹⁵ Bifulco, R., Rubenstein, R., & Sohn, H. (2019). [Evaluating the effects of universal place-based scholarships on student outcomes: The Buffalo “Say Yes to Education” program](#). *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 38(4), 918–943.

¹⁶ Carruthers, C. K., & Fox, W. F. (2016). [Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee](#). *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 97–112.

¹⁷ Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., Cullinan, D., O’Donoghue, R., Lepe, M., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2021). [Motor city momentum: Three years of the Detroit Promise Path program for community college students](#). MDRC.

¹⁸ Collier, D., & McMullen, I. (2021). [Modeling first year stop out of Kalamazoo Promise scholars: Mapping influences of socioeconomic advantage and pre-college performance to college performance and persistence](#). *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*.

Kalamazoo Promise, giving students a greater share of Promise funding (from 65% to 100% of tuition) slightly reduced the likelihood of dropout between the first and second year.¹⁸

However, Tulsa Achieves had no impact on students' credits earned, retention rates, or credential completions, although it was unclear why.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the program did improve transfer rates from two- to four-year colleges by 13–14 pp., attributed to articulation agreements that Tulsa Community College formed with nearby four-year colleges, and financial incentives for participants to transfer.

Impacts on Postsecondary Degree Completion

There is emerging evidence that Promise program recipients are more likely to complete associate and bachelor's degrees compared to their nonparticipating peers, although additional research is needed to confirm these findings across different types of programs. The El Dorado Promise produced no changes in associate degree completions but did increase bachelor's degree completions by almost 9 pp. (see Case below for more details).²⁰ Tulsa Achieves increased bachelor's degree completion among Native American students by 9 pp., and among Hispanic students by 4 pp. Among white students, the program increased the likelihood of

associate degree completion within three years by 4 pp. Tulsa Achieves also increased the likelihood of two- to four-year college transfer by 13 pp. among Hispanic students. However, it did not affect degree completion or transfer rates for Black or Asian American students.²¹ The Kalamazoo Promise, an unusually generous program, produced a 10–12 pp. increase in any degree completion measured six years after high school graduation; much of this increase was in bachelor's degrees.²² Yet, the Detroit Promise Path did not result in any significant impact on credential completion.²³

Recommended Reading

Bartik, T. J., Hershbein B. J., & Lachowska, M. (2015). *[The effects of the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship on college enrollment, persistence, and completion.](#)* Brookings Institution.

This report describes impacts of the first place-based scholarship program—the Kalamazoo Promise. The Kalamazoo Promise increased the likelihood of students enrolling in college after high school graduation by 14%, and increased the likelihood of four-year college enrollment by 34%. The program also increased the cumulative number of credit hours completed. Lastly, the program increased the percent of students earning any postsecondary credential by 12 percentage points.

¹⁹ Bell, E. (2021). [Does free community college improve student outcomes? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design.](#) *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 43(2), 329–350.

²⁰ Swanson, E., & Ritter, G. (2020). [Start to finish: Examining the impact of the El Dorado Promise on postsecondary outcomes.](#) *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 49(N3), 1–31.

²¹ Bell, E., & Gándara, D. (2021). [Can free community college close racial disparities in postsecondary attainment? How Tulsa Achieves affects racially minoritized student outcomes.](#) *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(6), 1142–1177.

²² Bartik, T. J., Hershbein, B., & Lachowska, M. (2021). [The effects of the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship on college enrollment and completion.](#) *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(1), 269–310.

²³ Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., Cullinan, D., O'Donoghue, R., Lepe, M., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2021). [Motor city momentum: Three years of the Detroit Promise Path program for community college students.](#) MDRC.

Jaggars, S. S. (2020). [A broken “promise”? How college promise programs can impact high-achieving, middle-income students.](#) Third Way.

This report considers the broader implications of promise programs that increase enrollment in community colleges at the expense of four-year universities, specifically that diverting students away from four-year colleges may dampen bachelor’s degree completion.

Li, A., & Gándara, D. (2021). [These are the students free community college programs help the most.](#) The Conversation.

This article summarizes findings of a study of 33 college promise programs in 18 states that affect single community colleges. These programs increased the first-time, full-time college enrollment of Black, Latinx, and white students. However, programs with an academic merit criteria, as well as those that allocated scholarships on a first-dollar basis, increased the enrollment of white students only.

Li, A., & Mishory, J. (2018). [Financing institutions in the free college debate.](#) The Century Foundation.

This report provides a framework for state financing of free-college programs. It summarizes studies on how Promise programs affect demand and provides policy guidance on how to design and implement free-college programs that anticipate capacity challenges.

Pals, T., & Wu, T. (2020, October). [Study: Free-college programs have led to large enrollment increases at two-year institutions, especially among historically underserved students.](#) American Educational Research Association.

This media release describes two studies conducted by Denisa Gándara and Amy Li on Promise programs at single community colleges. It emphasizes the large enrollment increases seen among Black and Latino students, and also details differences in enrollment outcomes according to program design, including by first-/last-dollar, income-eligibility criteria, full/partial tuition coverage, and with/without additional support services.