EXAMINING HOW
COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS
Promote Student Academic and Financial Readiness

POLICY INFORMATION REPORT

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RESEARCH REPORT

Examining How College Promise Programs Promote Student Academic and Financial Readiness

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Currently college promise programs are proliferating in number at the local and state levels. Most promise programs provide financial resources beyond conventional state and federal student aid to students who live in designated places and meet local- or state-defined eligibility criteria. There is an immense variety of models and funding designs for these programs. In this study, we conducted a rigorous content analysis of the public web sites for a diverse subsample of 35 promise programs to explore how college promise programs promote student academic and financial readiness. Although our analysis made it clear that there is more to learn about promise programs, including understanding general administrative processes and program operations, we highlight several design and implementation considerations that may increase the capacity of these programs to promote equity in higher education access and success.

Keywords College promise; higher education; education; graduation; education costs; student finances; personal finance; undergraduate education; college readiness, student supports; program design; primary and secondary education; scholarships

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Seven in 10 parents of school-aged children worry about college financing (Jones, 2015). For parents of children younger than 18 years, paying for college surpasses their concerns about retirement (68%) or paying for medical expenses in the event of a serious illness or accident (56%). At the same time, parents are concerned about their child's academic preparation for postsecondary education. In a survey of low-income parents, the majority of parents (64%) believe their child is only "somewhat" or "not too" prepared to handle college-level work, with another 29% believing their child is "very prepared." In this same survey, only 18% of parents rated their child's high school as having done an "excellent" job of preparing students for college (Deloitte Development, 2009).

Parents' financial and academic worries about their children continuing on to postsecondary education are well founded and, in many ways, interconnected. In fact, planning tools like the College Preparation Checklist[1] compiled by the U.S. Department of Education and the *BigFuture*™ college planning web site developed by the College Board, encourage the coupling of financial and academic preparation for college before high school and as early as the elementary school years. To be successful, students must be prepared to complete postsecondary course work and meet the tuition (and other fees and expenses) obligations to secure their postsecondary placement. Both of these require preparation and planning on the part of students and their families—yet, even with planning, they may be difficult for some students to achieve.

For decades, when it comes to recognizing what helps students gain access to and succeed in postsecondary education, students' aspirations for college, level of academic preparation, and financial ability to pay for it have been established as factors (St. John, 1991). While reducing college cost is a key policy lever for increasing college enrollment (Deming & Dynarski, 2009), existing financial aid programs alone do not improve college completion rates (Deming, 2017). This is especially true for low-income students. More than one-quarter of low-income students enrolled in a 4-year institution drop out by the end of their second year of college (Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Breitwieser, 2017).

Promise programs are among the fastest growing trends in education. From 2015 to 2017, the number of promise programs has more than doubled from 80 to more than 200, and new promise programs are being developed at the local and state levels. Generally, promise programs aim to fund college tuition and expenses and to support students from entry through completion. They provide resources beyond conventional state and federal student aid to individuals who live in designated places, meet local- or state-defined eligibility criteria, or attend specific secondary schools.

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A hallmark of promise programs is their variety of models and funding designs (Kanter, Armstrong, Cammack, & Blalock, 2016). Programs vary on many dimensions, including student eligibility requirements, the structure and amount of financial awards, types of higher education institutions in which awards can be used, scholarship maintenance requirements, support services provided to students at their high schools or colleges to address other college access issues, and completion guidance and preparation (Kanter et al., 2016; Perna, 2016). Additionally, they vary based on how they are funded and sustained.

For this exploratory study, we developed a framework to examine the diversity of promise programs. Similar to the recent college promise typology developed by Perna and Leigh (2017), our framework also features program sponsorship, financial reward structure, institutional requirements for the reward, and program eligibility criteria.

As the number of promise programs continues expanding, it is useful to understand how these programs are constructed and what services they provide to students. The commonalities and variations across promise programs are key for gauging program impact and clarifying the services and program features that best serve as blueprints for designing future programs. Additionally, we considered program contributions to students' college preparation, access, success, and completion by assessing the alignment between promise programs' activities (including student support services, eligibility requirements, and award specifications) and the research literature on postsecondary access and success.

The purpose of this exploratory analysis was to understand how these programs are designed and reflect on what we see, in the hope of helping students and improving the system. This analysis was especially timely, given the proliferation of promise initiatives and the tendency for programs to be modeled after existing programs, without a definitive framework for determining the impacts of various design and implementation features.

An Approach to Examining College Promise Programs

This study involved a rigorous content analysis of public web sites for a diverse subsample of 35 promise programs in the United States (see the appendix for more detail). The sample was selected from a comprehensive matrix of 241 promise programs compiled by the College Promise Campaign (2017), which included basic program details. Details included census region, program unit of place, funding source, institution type where students can enroll, student age of matriculation, presence of academic eligibility requirements, and how the promise reward is structured (see Table 1). First-dollar programs provide students funds first, before any other grant or awarded funding, whereas last-dollar programs provide tuition funds to students only after other public funding has been applied.

We examined the programs from two perspectives. The first perspective was an organizational view that focused on (a) vision statements, (b) mission statements, (c) objectives or program outcomes, (d) strategies for meeting common goals, and (e) action plans. The second perspective was the student experience with promise programs, starting with the program eligibility and then considering postmatriculation into the program, the monetary and nonmonetary supports, and the possible maintenance requirements for the scholarship award.

Given the exploratory nature of this work, we elected to present our findings in ranges rather than exact percentages. In addition to noting if there was no coverage, we visually present the data in four ranges: 0.01%–24.9%, 25%–49.9%, 50%–74.9%, and 75%–100% (see Figure 1). In this heatmap data visualization technique, the color intensity correlates with the percentage coverage to improve visual processing (Ward, Grinstein, & Keim, 2010).

College Promise Program View

Promise programs are place-based programs designed to increase college attainment through the provision of financial support for students residing in the designated area (e.g., city, school district, county, or state) to attend college. Given the placed-based nature of these programs, the unit of place seemed the appropriate perspective for examining how college promise programs work. The three units of analysis are in order of relative size and include (a) local or city level (which also included school district–specific programs), (b) county level, and (c) state level. We examined three specific program domains, including (a) the vision, mission, objectives, strategies, and action plans (VMOSA) strategic planning model; (b) evaluation; and (c) sustainability (Figure 2).

Table 1 College Promise Programs: Population Compared to Project Sample

College promise program characteristics	Full sample		Project sample	
	N	%	*n*	%
College promise's census region	241		35	
Midwest	59	24	13	37
Northeast	29	12	3	9
South	72	30	10	29
West	80	33	9	26
Multiple regions	1	0	0	0
College promise's unit of place				
Local, city (including school district)	123	51	15	43
County	52	21	8	23
Statewide	56	23	11	31
Funding source for college promise				
Private	102	42	16	46
Public	69	29	11	31
Public/private	40	17	4	11
Institution type where students can enroll				
2-year	134	56	16	46
2- and 4-year	69	29	17	49
4-year	22	9	2	6
Student age of matriculation for starting program				
Elementary school	2	1	0	0
Middle school	4	2	1	3
High school	9	4	1	3
High school graduate or beyond	199	83	31	89
College promise has academic eligibility requirements				
Yes	99	41	14	40
No	90	37	20	57
Unknown	52	22	1	3
How the college promise award is structured				
First dollar	40	17	7	20
Last dollar	173	72	26	74
No award	2	1	1	3

Note. Calculations by authors. Not all percentages add up to 100% due to exclusion of programs with unknown or not applicable data. Two promise programs were designated as offering no award in the College Promise Campaign matrix; however, the one program in our sample lists a first-dollar scholarship on its web site. Data are from the "Map of College Promise Programs" by College Promise Campaign, 2017, unpublished raw data.

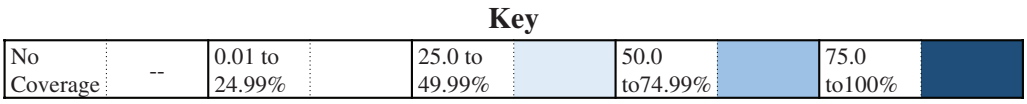

Figure 1 Key for representing percentage coverage data ranges.

Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies, and Action Plans of Promise Programs

As promise programs proliferate in number and design, it is useful to understand how they frame their strategic vision and action plans and what they aim to accomplish. Strategic planning can be a useful way to understand promise programs because it provides organizational direction and outlines measurable goals. The process can guide program decision-making, be used to evaluate progress, and inform changes that lead to improving impact.

VMOSA is a practical planning process that serves as a tool for community initiatives to develop a strategic blueprint for moving from dreams to actions toward positive community outcomes. The Community Tool Box, which developed VMOSA, aims to help people work together to change conditions that affect their lives and to build healthier communities (KU Work Group for Community Health and Development, 2017). VMOSA provides a framework for examining how promise programs are strategically conceptualizing their work.

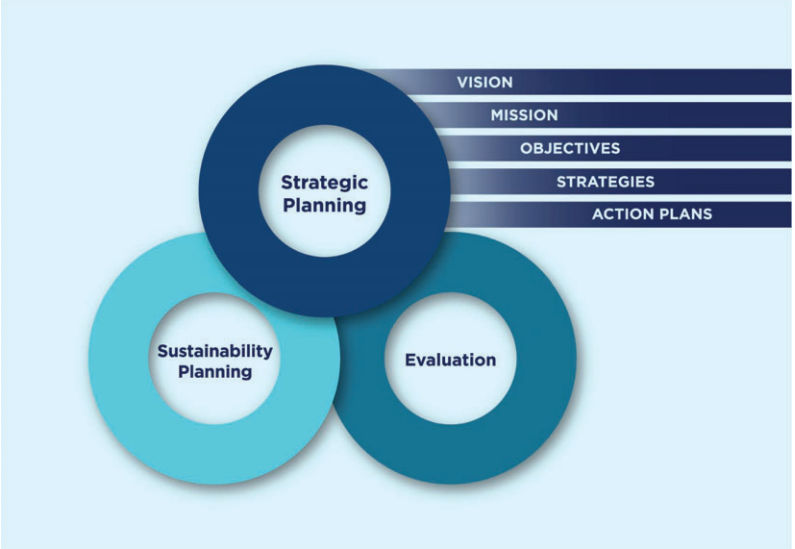

Figure 2 Profiles of college promise program operations.

	Local/City	County	State	Total
VMOSA				
Vision Statements				
Mission Statements				
Objectives/Intended Program Outcomes				
Decrease economic burden of college education				
Increase college degree attainment				
Improve local economy				
Strategies for Meeting Common Goals				
Provide financial assistance for postsecondary education				
Promote college access success				
Create or strengthen college-going culture in K–12 system		–	–	
Support economic and community development		–	–	
Community collaboration				
Action Plans				

Key

No Coverage	–	0.01% to 24.99%		25.0% to 49.99%		50.0% to 74.99%		75.0% to 100%	

Figure 3 Percentage of programs providing details on vision, mission, objectives, strategy, and action plans by service area. Data are from ETS analysis.

To gain a high-level overview of the promise programs, we looked at the five dimensions within the VMOSA model: (a) vision, (b) mission, (c) objectives, (d) strategies, and (e) action plans (see Figure 3).

Vision (The Dream)

Vision statements present the ideal, a statement summarizing what a program or initiative espouses as the ideal conditions for the community they serve. For promise programs, this might include ideas of helping provide economic and academic success for all students within a community. For instance, according to Say Yes Buffalo (2017), "our vision is that every student can graduate high school and college when given the proper supports, resources, and opportunities."

Our content analysis of promise program web sites reveals that not quite half of programs provided a vision statement. The percentage of programs providing vision statements decreased with the relative geographical unit size of the program service area. A smaller portion of state-level programs had vision statements than county-level programs, and local- and city-level programs had the highest portion of programs setting vision statements about what their programs are aiming toward with their services. Overall, the web presence for several local- or city-level initiatives were grounded in strong language about their respective programs' vision and mission, which provides each with clear, public aspirations.

Mission (The What and Why)

Mission statements are more concrete and action oriented than vision statements, describing what programs are going to do and why they are doing it. While a majority of programs had mission statements, a smaller portion of the county-level or state-level promise programs in our sample had them on their web sites. This may have to do with the origin of many county- and state-level programs. These programs are more likely to be publicly funded or even initiated by legislation — which may not always clearly communicate the vision or mission of the lawmakers.

Promise program mission statement examples talk about inspiring and empowering students to enroll in and graduate from postsecondary and higher education institutions by providing the tools, knowledge, and financial resources essential for success (Denver Scholarship Foundation, 2017) and allowing children who might not otherwise get a college education to receive a free community college education (Launch Manistee, 2017).

Objectives (How Much of What Will Be Accomplished by When)

Objectives provide measurable results for the broad programmatic goals. Objectives can be set at many levels, including individual behavioral objectives, community-level outcomes objectives, and organizational process objectives. Setting measureable objectives for nonprofit institutions is a well-established way to lay the foundation for nonprofit strategic planning. "By quantifying and measuring the strategy, organizations reduce and even eliminate ambiguity and confusion about objectives and methods. They gain coherence and focus in pursuit of their mission" (Kaplan, 2001, p. 360).

Over 75% of the local- and city-level programs and county-level promise programs publish objectives on their web sites, compared to fewer than half of the state-level programs. As with vision, the administrative origin of state-level programs may be at play. State-level programs are legislatively, thus politically, generated; however, the administrative means of implementing and managing these programs are operated by separate bureaucratic entities. The administration and management of programs are generally disconnected from the mission- and policy-focused political work that initiates programs (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2015). Thus it is not surprising that state-level programs are less likely to publish information connected to aspects of the VMOSA strategic planning framework.

Several of the promise programs stated intended outcomes. Among these, three themes emerged. The first was that the program intended to decrease the economic burden of paying for a college education. The second was that it would increase college degree attainment. The third was that the promise program would contribute indirectly to bolstering the local economy.

Strategies (The How)

Strategies explain how the promise programs aim to reach their individual objectives. Generally, organizations have a wide variety of strategies that include people from all of the different parts, or sectors, of the community. All of the promise programs in our sample employed one specific strategy: They provided financial assistance for postsecondary education for students living within a specified location, for example, a specific city or state.

The promotion and use of community collaboration on shared objectives was the next most common strategy mentioned by promise programs in our sample. The more local the program is, the more common it was to find reference to collaboration. The collaborations described included coordinated activity between school districts; city officials; partner colleges/universities; county officials; foundations; and youth service providers, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, and/or other nonprofit agencies, such as community action organizations and health centers. Collaboration was especially common among local- or city-level programs and county-level programs. State-level programs tended to mention the use of this strategy less often. Again, the administrative roots of state-level programs may be at play here, in that publicly administered

programs may be less likely to communicate strategic plans for collaboration than a program managed directly by the community organization(s) that developed it. Additionally, state-level programs serve students across multiple communities, making localized collaborative efforts more difficult.

Increased use of collaboration at the local levels is not surprising, since a recognized strength of promise programs lies in their ability to leverage their place-based boundaries to affect the community or regional systems in which they are situated (Iriti, Page, & Bickel, 2017). Partnerships and cross-system collaboration have been shown to be an effective structural feature for community-based organizations to use in support of their role in the college access and success movement (Coles, 2012) and is suggested as a strategy for promise programs in particular (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The local nature of promise programs and their ability to align with the education delivery systems means promise programs have the potential to (a) catalyze interventions aimed at nonfinancial barriers to postsecondary access and attainment and (b) improve K – 12 and higher education outcomes (Iriti et al., 2017; Miller-Adams, 2015).

According to Miller-Adams (2017), there are several common strategies for meeting the goals that are standard among promise programs: (a) promote college access and success, (b) create or strengthen a college-going culture in K – 12 systems, and (c) support economic and community development. Our content analysis found that few promise programs addressed any of these strategies directly, while local- or city-level and county-level programs were more likely to mention these strategies on their web sites than state-level programs were. Program web sites that did address these strategies did so overtly, as part of their goal and mission statements.

Action Plan (What Change Will Happen, and Who Will Do What by When to Make It Happen)

Action plans describe how programs implement their strategies and provide specific details about the steps that will be taken to bring about the desired outcomes. While just over one-quarter of programs provided action plan details on their web sites (i.e., rollout schedules and the planned development of strategic partnerships), most of the programs provided broader details about how the program is structured and managed. For this part of the VMOSA analysis, we divided the analysis and discussion into two parts: (a) how programs define the promise and (b) details about program operations.

Defining the Promise

All of the promise programs in our sample are providing students with some form of financial support for college. Program action plans are interconnected with how these programs define their promise to students. We looked at both if, and how, the promise programs described their structure at a basic level in their Web materials, including type of postsecondary institution funded, number of semesters covered, age of matriculation, scholarship funding type (first dollar or last dollar), and amount of the award (see Figure 4).

The types of postsecondary institutions covered by a college promise program are a defining component of a promise. More than 75% of the programs in our sample provided information on the type of institution covered by their initiatives, with most of these providing details about the level of the institutions (i.e., technical colleges, 2-year, 2- and 4-year, and 4-year) on their web sites. Additionally, a majority of programs published detailed institutional restrictions or limits placed on the specific institutions covered. Examples included promise programs that fund one particular institution, a specific set of partner colleges, or in-state public institutions only.

Most programs published details about the level of institutional control (public vs. private) at the institutions covered. It was common for programs to cover tuition and fees at public, in-state colleges and universities only. County-level programs seemed more likely to place limits on the major fields covered by the promise than local-level, city-level, or state-level programs. The majors, or qualifying career and technical programs, covered tended to align with projected local employment opportunities. A majority of the local-level, city-level, and state-level programs published details on the number of semesters of tuition covered by the promise, while only one-quarter of the county-level programs provided this detail.

The vast majority of programs in our sample did not provide information on the age of matriculation into the program on their web sites, but the majority officially matriculate students at or just after high school graduation. This is when the promise programs tended to begin their support of postsecondary degree-seeking courses. However, the view of matriculation does not take into consideration earlier engagement, support, or recruitment contacts students may have with the programs.

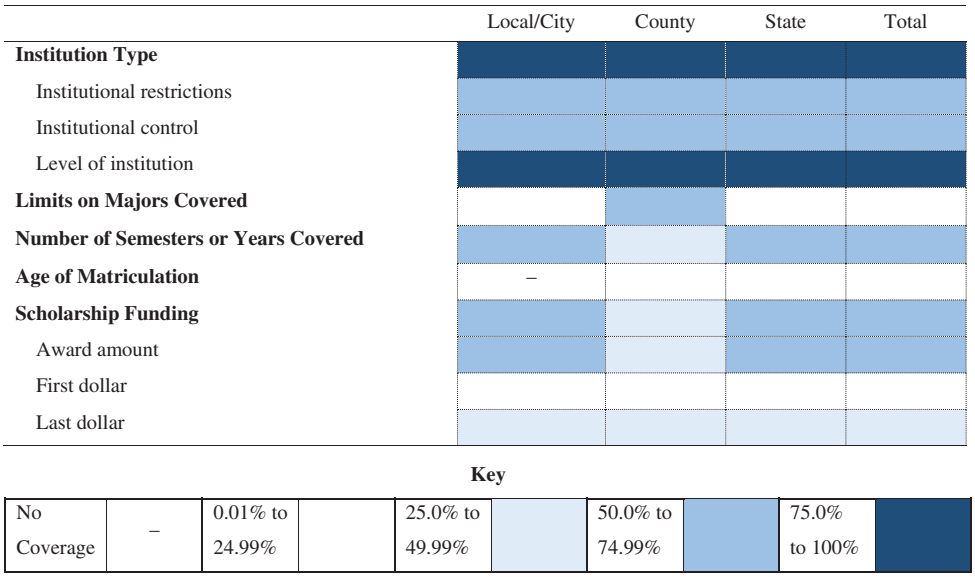

Figure 4 Defining the promise by service area. Data are from ETS analysis.

The majority of the local, city, and state programs published details on their web sites about their promise scholarship funding, including the reward amount, while county-level programs were less likely to do so. While each program in the larger sample was assigned a first-dollar or last-dollar scholarship distinction by the College Promise Campaign, most programs in our sample did not include this information on their web sites. However, among promise programs that provided this information, last-dollar scholarships were three times more common than first-dollar scholarships. Last-dollar scholarships require that students use their other available funding before being awarded promise funds, which are often calculated to make up the difference in unmet tuition need. However, last-dollar scholarships do not address the unmet need many students face, including books, living expenses, and other fees (Miller-Adams, 2015).

Program Operations

Details about program operations are also key components of the promise program action plans. Our analysis looked to determine key promise program characteristics and details. This included key program information, such as the year the program began, the state/regional location, population density of area served, annual budget, number of students served, and program funding sources (see Figure 5).

Most programs in our sample did not provide on their web sites details about their annual budgets or program staff or about when their programs began. However, more programs did provide details about their funding sources. Among local- or city-level programs, nearly one-third cited being publicly funded, and a majority cited being privately funded. For county-level programs, one-quarter mentioned being publicly funded, while a majority were privately funded, and a small group were both publicly and privately funded. In alignment with their typical origin, state-level programs were the most likely to be publicly funded. However, funding sources for more than one-quarter of the state programs could not be determined based on their program Web materials, which again could be associated with their administrative origins. Interestingly, one of the state-level programs in our sample was privately funded.

A majority of programs did not provide details on the number of students served by their promise; however, local-, city-, and county-level programs are more likely to provide this detail than state-level programs. Overall, the Web material for state-level programs was sparser, and this was particularly true when it came to operational details.

Evaluation

Following strategic planning, evaluation of program impact and implementation is the logical next step, as objectives are often written in terms of quantifiable benchmarks for evaluating results. Strategic planning and evaluation are interconnected and mutually dependent activities. Having a program evaluation plan in place when a program launches helps

	Local/City	County	State	Total
Annual Budget				
Funding Source				
Public				
Private				
Public/private				
Year Program Began				
Number of Students Served				
Staff				

Key

No Coverage	--	0.01 to 24.99%		25.0 to 49.99%		50.0 to 74.99%		75.0 to 100%	

Figure 5 Percentage of college promise programs providing operation details by service area. Data are from ETS analysis.

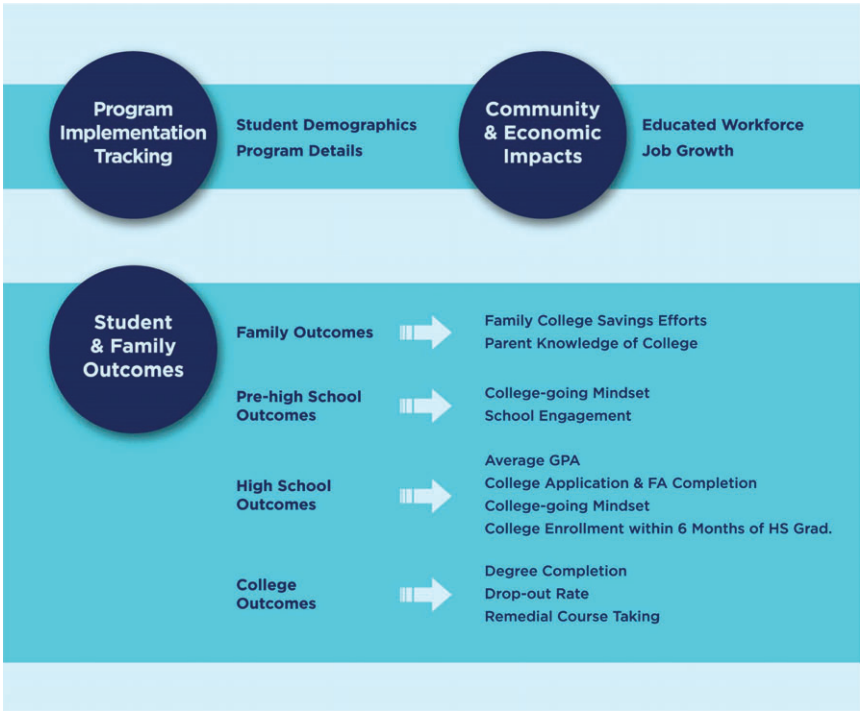

Figure 6 College promise program evaluation outcome areas and metrics.

ensure program success by laying the groundwork for the development of an underlying structure for long-term program improvement, in addition to preparing programs to be able to demonstrate their effectiveness and value (Martin, 2015).

While evaluation is an important program operation that can help organizations and initiatives assess their impact, it was not common for promise programs in our sample to provide evaluation details on their web sites. Across our sample, only a few programs posted any details about program outcomes, impacts, or implementation details on their web sites.

However, our team took a systematic look at the possible evaluation outcomes and implementation details that we thought could be expected. These included details about program implementation tracking, community and economic impacts, and student and family outcomes (see Figure 6). The list in Figure 6 may provide inspiration for future promise program implementation and impact evaluation work. Promise programs might benefit from collecting these three general types of evaluation and outcomes data, which can be used to track program implementation and impact over time.

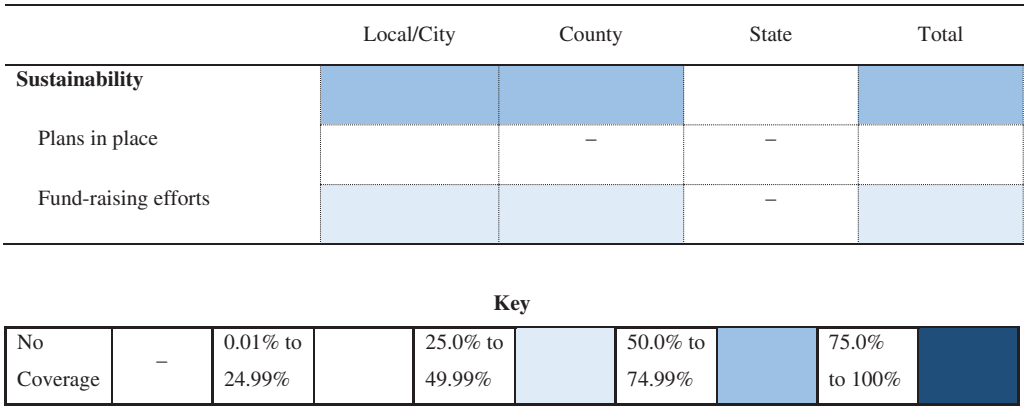

Figure 7 Percentage of programs providing information on sustainability efforts by service area. Data are from ETS analysis.

Sustainability

Independent of funding models, how promise programs plan to continue to operate in the future is important. Program sustainability is an important aspect of program operations and an important part of promise program development (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), representing the next stage of management after program development and initial implementation. Interestingly, the issue of program and financial sustainability is especially pertinent to promise programs because a majority of these programs do not offer students a simple one-time payment but rather a promise of multiple years of financial support for college.

While a majority of the local-, city-, and county-level programs had references to their funding streams, especially private donations, almost none of the promise programs in our sample mentioned having formal sustainability plans in place (see Figure 7). Many of the programs in our sample addressed sustainability on their web sites, which were often associated with the promise program's web site being used as a fund-raising tool, especially for the local-, city-, and county-level programs.

The Student Experience in College Promise Programs

For the student experience, we looked at the promise programs from the perspective of the type of postsecondary institution(s) in which they encourage and fund students to enroll. We divided the two enrollment options promise programs offered into two groups: (a) 2-year institutions, which offer associate's degrees or technical certificates, or (b) a broader group of institutions, which included both 2-year institutions and 4-year institutions and programs that cover both associate's and bachelor's degree programs.

From this vantage point of programs that cover institutions up to an associate's degree or programs that cover up to a bachelor's degree, we examined the initial eligibility requirements for receiving the promise, the requirements for maintaining the promise, and the supports that programs may offer during the high school and/or the college years (see Figure 8).

Initial Eligibility for College Promise Programs

Student eligibility requirements for college promise awards vary broadly. Programs have various residency, behavior, family income, merit/academic, and other administrative requirements students must satisfy to receive promise funding (see Figures 9 and 10).

While promise programs are, by their nature, limited by residency requirements, not all programs in our sample included this information in their Web materials. Among the programs that provided details about their residency requirements, there is a broad distribution between city, county, state, and school-specific residency requirements. Among programs that offer scholarship awards to 2-year institutions only, county and state residency requirements were more common than school-specific and city residency. Among programs that cover tuition and fees at both 2-year and 4-year institutions, state, school-specific, and city residency were more common than county residency.

Figure 8 Student perspective on college promise programs.

Figure 9 Initial eligibility for college promise programs.

Interestingly, roughly one out of every three programs mentions citizenship in its eligibility descriptions. Some programs mention that they require U.S. citizenship, while others are available to both U.S. citizens and noncitizens, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Dreamers. Programs administered and serving students at the state level were much more likely to include language about U.S. citizenship, while the actual stated citizenship requirements were divided between the two extremes. This, too, is not surprising, because state-level officials often initiate state-level programs.

Many programs had limitations around enrollment timing for eligibility. Programs defined the parameters of who could apply for awards based on when they graduated from high school or enrolled in college. These administrative limits allowed programs to define and focus on a particular pool or cohort of students (e.g., 2016 high school graduates who enroll at a qualifying college within 1 year of graduation). Enrollment timing limits were slightly more common among programs that covered both 2- and 4-year institutions than they were among programs that covered only 2-year institutions or certificate programs.

A common, majority-cited eligibility requirement among programs was that students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, a requirement of most postsecondary institutions. Using FAFSA completion

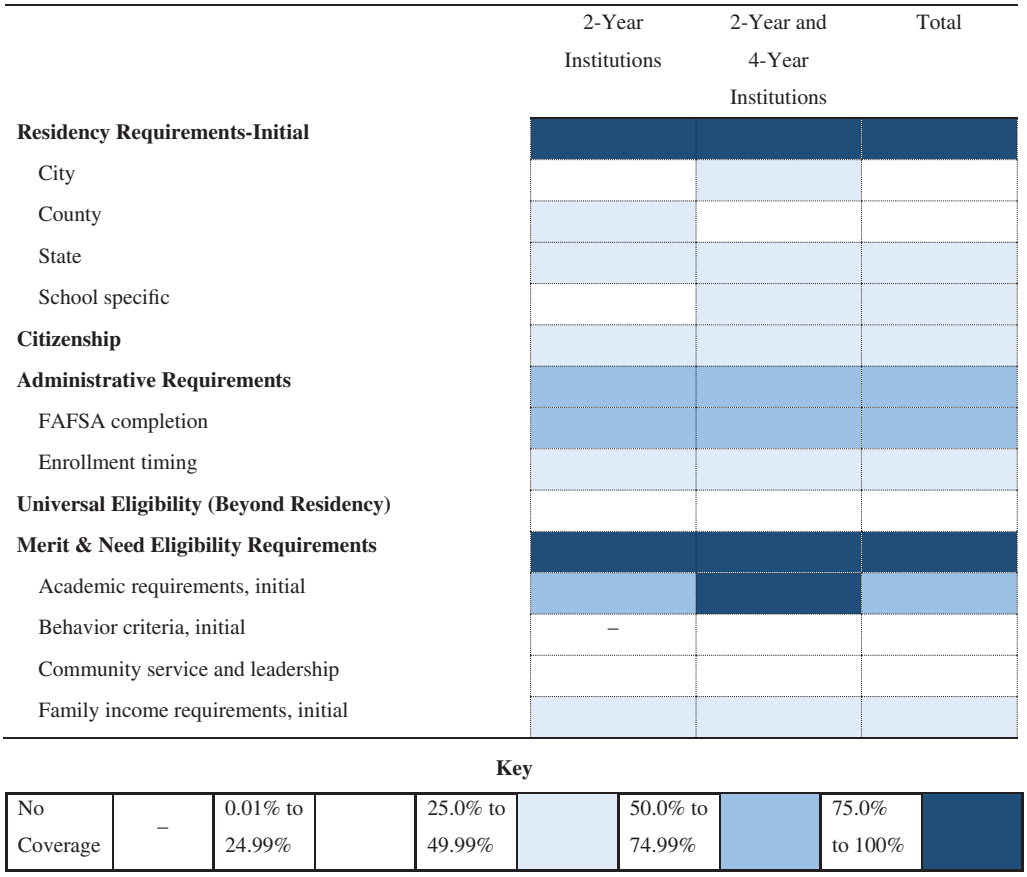

Figure 10 Program eligibility by college promise program institutional level. Data are from ETS analysis.

as an eligibility criterion could serve as an added incentive for student completion and inform the provision of college promise student aid, as many programs committed to meeting the student need that exists after state and federal aid is applied.

Beyond residency and administrative limits, there are three broad approaches to setting student eligibility:

1 *Universal*: The scholarship is available to all students in a given school district, city, or other jurisdiction that meets the program-specific residency requirements and minimum postsecondary enrollment requirements (e.g., a high school diploma or equivalency exam). Universal eligibility programs do not set minimum grade point average (GPA) or financial need requirements.
2 *Merit based*: The scholarship is available to students who meet a minimum GPA and attendance standard while in high school, often a cumulative 2.5 GPA and 90% attendance rate. Sometimes additional requirements, such as community service, are included.
3 *Needs based*: The scholarship is available to students who demonstrate financial need, which is usually based on students' eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch in high school and eligibility for Pell grants in college (Miller-Adams, 2015). Sometimes scholarship programs have both need and merit requirements.

Few of the programs in our sample have universal student eligibility, without merit or need requirements, in addition to the requisite residency requirements. Only three programs, less than 10% of our sample, were universal programs covering all students independent of academics or family need. Policy makers and social scientists tend to see universal programs as more likely to reach all segments of the highest need population without stigmatization, and in the case of promise programs, universal eligibility may underpin economic effects, such as regional population growth and family migration to promise-covered school districts (Miller-Adams, 2011).

Academic eligibility requirements were a common feature of the promise programs in our sample, with these requirements being more prevalent in programs covering 2- and 4-year institutions than 2-year institutions and certificate

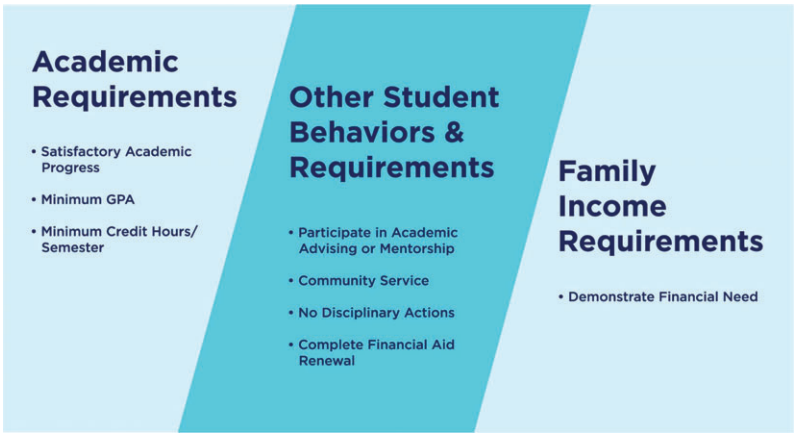

Figure 11 Maintenance eligibility for college promise programs.

programs. The most common academic requirement listed was a GPA minimum (which generally ranged between 2.0 and 2.5, or the rough equivalent of a letter grade of C, or 70 – 79 on a 100-point scale). However, some programs included standardized college-entry test-score thresholds and required specific high school course work (including evidence of typical college-track or rigorous course taking, as described by taking a set number of courses in each subject, for example, students must take four credits in English, three credits in mathematics, three credits in science, three credits in social studies, and two credits of a foreign language).

Two of the programs in our sample, which both fund attendance at 2-year and 4-year institutions, had student behavior requirements for eligibility. Requirements included school attendance and administrative confirmations that the students had no disciplinary infractions.

Several of the programs required that students perform community service or exemplify some form of leadership. This was more common in programs that cover bachelor's degrees than programs that cover only associate's degrees or technical certificates. Youth volunteer activity is associated with many positive outcomes during both adolescence and adulthood, including positive academic, psychological, and occupational well-being (Child Trend Databank, 2015). In addition, community service and volunteerism is one of several noncognitive measures used for college admissions (Noonan, Sedlacek, & Veerasamy, 2005) and is a common prerequisite for scholarship opportunities (Scholarship America, 2011).

Most of the programs in our sample were not needs based. Just over one-third of the programs in our sample had family income requirements that establish the program as being in service to low-income students. It was much more common for programs that cover both 2-year and 4-year institutions to have family income requirements than programs that cover 2-year institutions and certificate programs.

Maintaining College Promise Eligibility

Once a student has received a promise award, a majority of promise programs require that students meet academic, income, and/or social/behavioral benchmarks to continue to be in the program (see Figure 11). The most common requirements for maintenance eligibility while students are in college were academic requirements; these include minimum GPA requirements, completion of a minimum number of credit hours per semester, and satisfactory academic progress, as defined by their postsecondary institutions. Interestingly, many students lose subsequent years of postsecondary scholarship funding for not meeting academic requirements; this rate can be as high as 40% for some merit-based promise programs (Condon, Prince, & Stuckart, 2011; Dee & Jackson, 1999).

Maintenance eligibility, overall, and academic requirements, in particular, are more common among programs that support attendance at both 2- and 4-year institutions than they are for programs that fund 2-year schools and certificates (see Figure 12). While over 80% of the programs funding both associate's and bachelor's degree programs had academic maintenance requirements, just over half of programs that cover up to an associate's degree had similar requirements. Over 20% of the programs that fund up to a bachelor's degree had family income and student behavior requirements listed as maintenance eligibility requirements, while none of the programs funding up to an associate's degree referenced these requirements on their web sites.

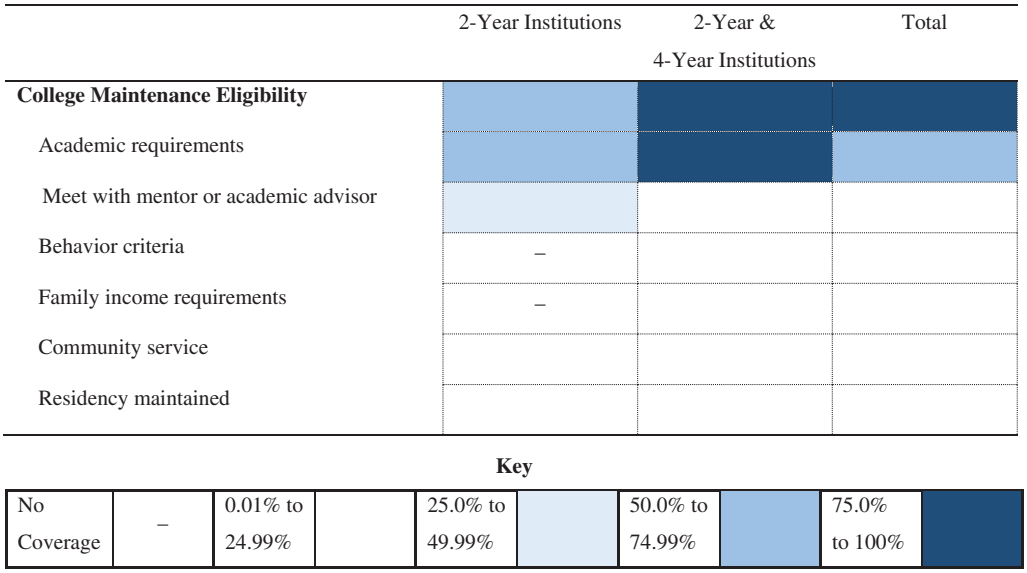

Figure 12 Criteria for maintaining college promise by program institutional level. Data are from ETS analysis.

Two eligibility requirements were more common in the promise programs covering 2-year degree and certificate programs: One was that students meet with an academic advisor or mentor, and the other was that students participate in community service. Exactly one-quarter of the programs covering up to an associate's degree in our sample require participation in mentoring or advising, while few of programs that covered up to a bachelor's degree required this.

Many of the community college programs that required advising were using guided pathways, which simplify and guide students' decision-making to help them plan for, and successfully complete, a course of postsecondary study. Community colleges initially developed these pathways in response to poor degree completion rates. These pathways work by presenting courses in the context of highly structured, educationally coherent program maps that align with students' goals for careers and further education:

> Incoming students are given support to explore careers, choose a program of study, and develop an academic plan based on program maps created by faculty and advisors. This approach simplifies student decision-making and allows colleges to provide predictable schedules and frequent feedback so students can complete programs more efficiently. (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 1)

Under 25% of the promise programs in our sample required community service. A policy that requires volunteerism for college funding support can be considered an inducement in which an individual performs certain actions by funding requirement, thus establishing a reciprocal relationship between individual purpose and community purpose (Wells & Lynch, 2014). In this way, promise program designers can ensure a student contribution. Furthermore, participation in community service has been associated with increased civic engagement in adulthood (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007) and even favorable changes in academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, retention, degree completion, amount of interaction with faculty, and increase in knowledge), civic responsibility (e.g., commitment to life goals of helping others, promoting racial understanding), and life skills (e.g., critical thinking, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, social self-confidence, knowledge of different races or cultures, and conflict resolution skills) when made part of a college service-learning requirement (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

Interestingly, among the few promise programs that matriculated students in high school, the maintenance eligibility requirements were similar to those found during the college years. These programs might have high school academic requirements, behavior criteria, or family income parameters or require participation in academic advising/school counseling. While none of the programs in our sample have requirements after postsecondary degree completion, some programs, such as the New York State Excelsior program, have postdegree residency and work location requirements (New York State Excelsior Ever Upward, 2017).

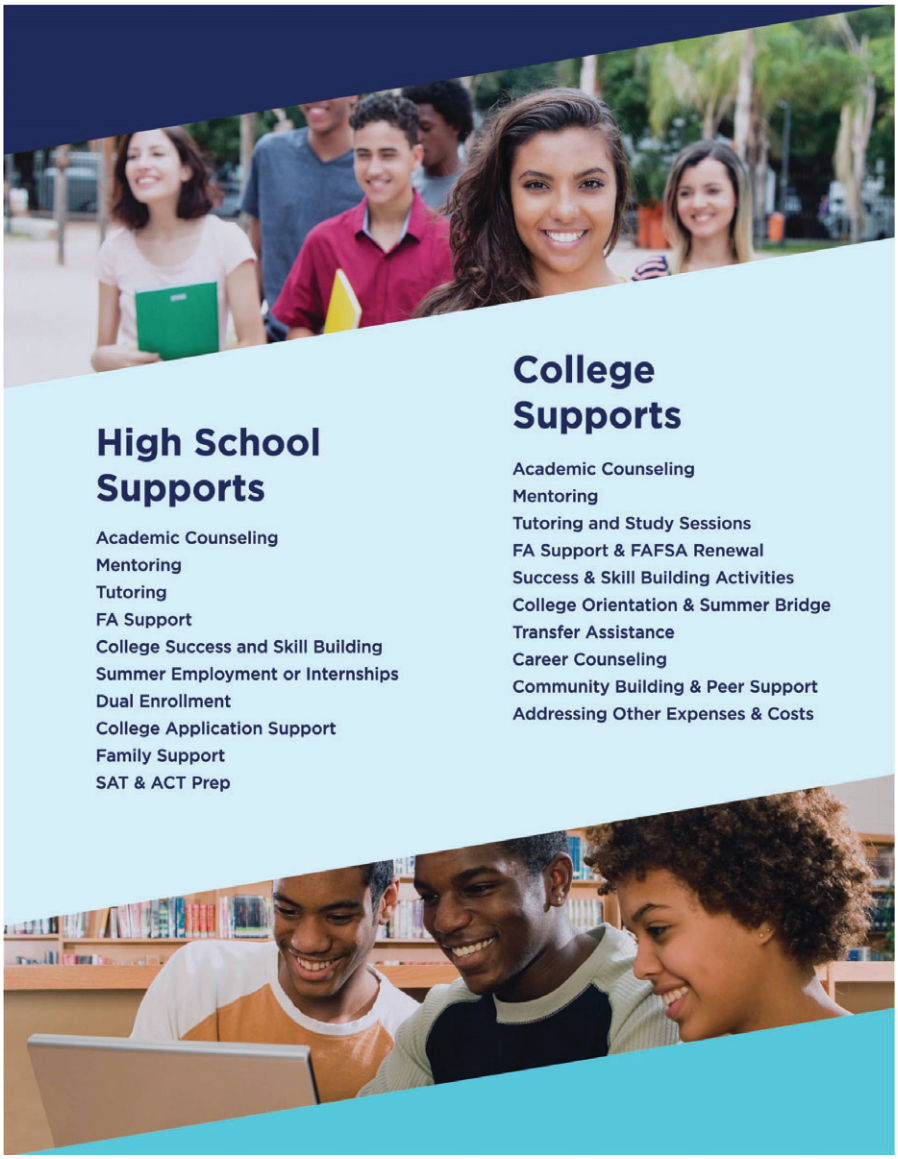

Figure 13 College promise program supports in high school and college.

Supports for College Access and Success

Five basic competencies are necessary for success in college, of which financial planning for college is only one. These competencies include (a) academic preparation, (b) access to college planning information and navigational strategies, (c) development of self-efficacy, (d) strategies of socialization and acculturation, and (e) financial aid and financial planning skills (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). Programs that provide precollege access supports, which promote these competencies, assist historically underrepresented students in gaining the necessary academic, social, and financial preparation (Swail & Perna, 2002). Additionally, similar supports at the college level promote college success for low-income first-generation students. Recent studies have found that financial support for college works best when it is paired with well-targeted student supports (Deming, 2017). College student support programs tend to promote student engagement and peer community building, monitor student progress, and provide additional academic and social support services, such as academic advising, personal and career counseling, and mentoring programs (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Other best practices for retaining underrepresented students include a structured freshman experience, an active approach to advising, and emphasis on academic support (Muraskin, 1997). With these practices in mind, our analysis looked at the kinds of supports promise programs provide during students' time in high school or college (see Figure 13).

	2-Year Institutions	2- & 4-Year Institutions	Total
High School Supports			
Academic counseling			
Mentoring			
Tutoring		–	
FAFSA and financial aid support			
College success seminars	–	–	–
Summer employment or internships			
Dual enrollment		–	
College application support			
Family support			
SAT and ACT prep	–		

Key

No Coverage	–	0.01% to 24.99%		25.0% to 49.99%		50.0% to 74.99%		75.0% to 100%	

Figure 14 College promise supports offered in high school by program institutional level. Data are from ETS analysis.

High School Supports

Fewer than one-third of the programs in our sample provided any kind of high school supports, which is not surprising, given that a majority of promise programs examined did not matriculate students until they graduated from high school (see Figure 14). Programs that provided high school support were more common among promise programs that support attendance at both 2-year and 4-year institutions than among programs that support only 2-year institutions, with the largest difference being in the provision of academic counseling. Few programs overall offered other high school supports, including tutoring, college application support, dual enrollment encouragement, family support, mentoring, preparation for the *SAT*® and ACT tests, summer employment and internships, and FAFSA and financial aid support. None of the programs in our sample offered college success workshops or seminars in high school.

College Supports

Among promise programs in our sample, the provision of supports while in college was much more common. A majority of the programs highlighted that they offer at least one support service while students are in college (see Figure 15).

Providing college support was slightly more common among programs that support associate's degrees or certificates than among programs that provide financial support for either an associate's and/or a bachelor's degree. Important to note is that there are two programs, which support specific 4-year institutions, in the latter category. These promise programs, connected directly to their sponsoring universities, provide student supports through the network of services available at their universities.

The most common college supports included addressing other expenses and costs and mentoring, followed by academic counseling. When addressing other college costs, college promise support examples included covering the cost of books, providing free printing, and issuing financial guidelines and pointers on how best to use financial aid, including recommended meal plans. Overall, there is a substantial need to address the other costs associated with college, including living expenses (e.g., housing and food), among undergraduates. Researchers have shown that food insecurity and homelessness are common among undergraduates, especially those from financially insecure backgrounds and those attending community colleges (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015).

The mentorship of college students in the promotion of college success is a well-established practice with decades of research supporting the approach (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). One-quarter of all the promise programs in our sample provided mentoring support to their students, which was the most common nonfinancial support offered to college students.

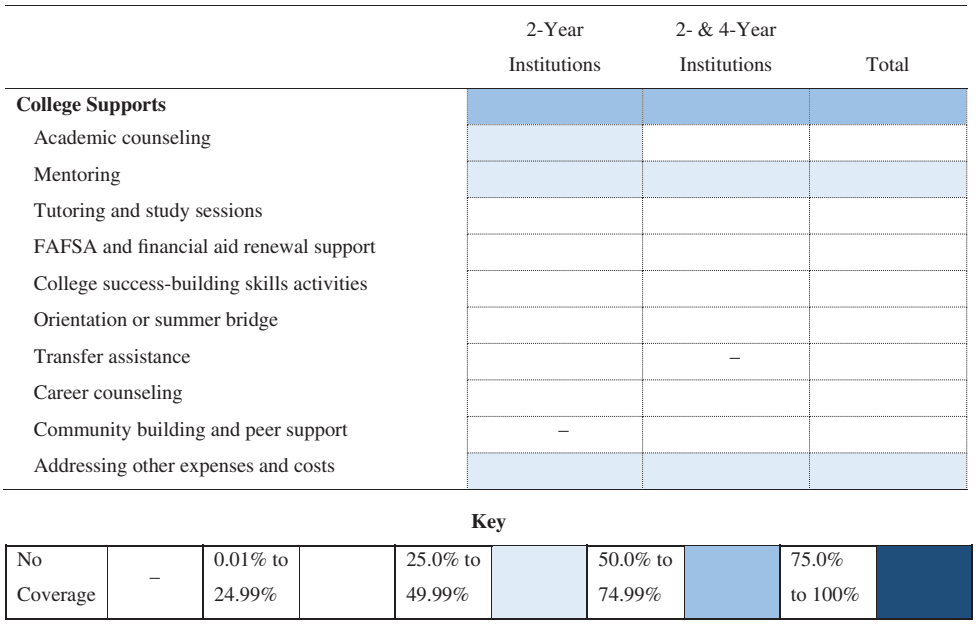

Figure 15 College promise supports offered in college by program institutional level. Data are from ETS analysis.

Mentoring formats seemed to vary widely from students having structured mentoring support offered by college staff to encouraging peer mentorship or pairing students with volunteer mentors in the community.

Several of the mentoring programs seemed to include aspects of academic counseling and advising. For instance, the Minnesota Occupational Scholarship required mentoring services to support students throughout their academic programs to participate in free mentoring services including, but not limited to, (a) communicating with the mentoring service throughout program participation, (b) developing a personalized student success plan that includes concrete steps toward program completion and job placement, (c) identifying and forming contingency plans for potential obstacles to completion, (d) making connections to on-campus resources and personal development opportunities, and (e) financial planning (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2017).

Academic counseling, not described otherwise within the context of mentoring, was twice as common among promise programs that support associate's degrees or certificates than it was among programs that provide financial support for either an associate's and/or a bachelor's degree. The academic counseling support provided often was associated with guided pathways to completion. Guided pathways for student success present students with structured course-taking plans and programs of study, thus providing coherent and concrete program maps and pathways to degree completion (Bailey et al., 2015).

Other supports for college students were less common among our sample. Supports with a limited presence included FAFSA renewal support; summer bridge or college orientation; career, tutoring, or study sessions; and college success-building skills workshops. Only one program in our sample provided transfer assistance for its students graduating with associate's degrees. Each of these possible college support services has been shown to address student needs and play a positive role in promoting college going. For instance, failure to file a FAFSA is associated with dropping out of college and not completing a bachelor's degree within 6 years of initial enrollment; however, small-scale interventions, such as text reminders that include contact information for those needing additional support, have been shown to be effective in increasing the rate of FAFSA completion (Bird & Castleman, 2016). Similarly, programs like summer bridge and college orientation have been shown to help students acclimate to college life, develop faculty and staff relationships, improve self-efficacy, and promote positive college outcomes (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). College academic supports, such as tutoring, structured study sessions, and other workshops, have been shown to positively affect college retention, especially for at-risk students (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011).

Overall, the observed nonfinancial supports varied greatly in depth and intensity across promise programs. While additional research is necessary to understand the full extent of support services offered, the variability is clear even when looking at indirect supports. For example, some indirect supports can be as simple as a link to outside resources, while

others entail contracts with partner colleges to provide extensive academic counseling and new student orientations. Beyond the existence of additional support within promise programs, the level of variation in the nature and potential quality of the supports is another domain to consider in program design.

Recommendations for College Promise Programs

We offer three recommendations based on our analysis. First, when designing their initiatives, promise programs may want to weigh equity facilitators and detractors of promise eligibility requirements and award structures. Second, program developers should consider the impact of providing additional student supports beyond the promise financial award, as doing so could enhance the intended college-going outcomes, especially for the most disadvantaged students. Third, there is a need to expand our knowledge of promise programs, including understanding general administrative processes and program operations.

Recommendation 1: When Designing Their Initiatives, Promise Programs May Want to Weigh Equity Facilitators and Detractors

Promise programs are a growing trend in education and have the potential to promote equity in higher education opportunity and outcomes. Promise programs have the capacity to improve equity in higher education access and success by promoting not only financial aid and financial planning skills but also academic preparation, access to college planning information and navigational strategies, development of self-efficacy, and strategies of socialization and acculturation—all five of the competencies laid out by Tierney et al. (2005). However, the ability of these programs to fulfill this capacity will likely depend on how programs are structured and designed (Perna, 2016).

Considering Equity and Eligibility Requirements

Other college promise eligibility requirements have direct implications for equity. For instance, one eligibility requirement, enrollment in college directly after high school graduation, could improve outcomes for all students, and for low-socioeconomic students in particular. Immediate postsecondary enrollment is associated with higher degree completion. Students who delay college are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and have lower levels of preparation, as seen in poor standardized test scores (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). However, even when academic and socioeconomic differences are accounted for, college delayers were less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Thus programs that ask students to enroll in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation may be indirectly promoting postsecondary success. However, this requirement limits the aid opportunities for students who are unable to attend college immediately due to external factors, such as familial and financial responsibilities.

Another eligibility consideration is the use of discipline history for initial program eligibility. There is a long history of evidence showing disproportionate punishment and expulsion of non-White youth, especially boys (Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Townsend, 2000). Therefore using discipline history to determine eligibility may exclude more minority youth groups already underrepresented in postsecondary education.

The completion of the FAFSA is another very common program eligibility requirement with equity implications. For some of the most financially needy students, including students from families making less than $50,000, FAFSA completion rates are disproportionately low (Kofoed, 2017). A surprising number of low-income students believe they do not quality for financial aid; this occurs most often among students who attend community colleges or who are in college part time (Kantrowitz, 2011). These students might benefit the most from FAFSA completion support (Bird & Castleman, 2016) and the new streamlined financial aid processes that allow families to file the FAFSA in October of their child's senior year of high school and to use tax data from the previous calendar year to estimate aid eligibility (Selingo, 2017).

Considering Equity and the Award Structure

One aspect of the scholarship structure to consider is the timing of when the promise scholarship starts to cover expenses (before or after the application of other aid sources). Last-dollar programs are less likely to help students with expenses

beyond tuition and fees. While this structure often makes up the difference in tuition expenses, it does not address the other unmet needs students face, including books, living expenses, and other fees. When economically insecure individuals enroll in college and face these additional costs, which are often beyond their financial reach, the growing incidence of food and housing insecurity among undergraduate students is not a surprising outcome (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015).

In her 2017 presentation to the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, Youlonda Copeland-Morgan highlighted multiple ways in which financial aid policies undermine postsecondary outcomes for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minority students. Practices include one-time scholarships, tying scholarships to grades in future years of college, requiring large time commitments to community service, and claiming that financial aid packages meet student "full need" when in fact they include private loans and parent loans (Anderson, 2017). Reflection on these practices can be of value to promise programs. For instance, promise programs generally commit to providing aid over several years, varying by the type of postsecondary degree supported by the program. In this way, promise programs are providing increased long-term security for low-income students' financial needs. In another example, some promise programs tie the scholarship to future grade requirements. While setting grade requirements can encourage academic performance, it can (a) limit how students approach choosing a major (e.g., indirectly discouraging a STEM-related major because the course work is seen as more difficult) and (b) lead to many students losing the scholarship (Condon et al., 2011). Additional considerations for promise programs include ensuring community service requirements do not become burdensome and take time away from academic work and Federal Work Study earning opportunities and supporting students in their "full need," which often includes living expenses.

Recommendation 2: The Provision of Additional Student Supports Beyond the Promise Financial Award Could Enhance the Intended College-Going Outcomes, Especially for the Most Disadvantaged Students

If a program aims to promote equity, it should consider providing additional supports beyond financial assistance. Achievement gaps by racial/ethnic and income disparities appear early. To increase postsecondary access and success for underrepresented students affected by those gaps, steps must be taken to academically and socially prepare these students for college (Gladieux & Swail, 1998; Rueda, 2005). The potential benefit of college access and success supports for underrepresented students on higher education attainment is well established (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tierney et al., 2005).

Experimental evidence has shown that offering students additional grant aid (such as promise programs offer) increases the odds of bachelor's degree attainment over 4 years, helping to diminish income inequality in higher education (Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). However, for nearly 20 years, researchers have argued that higher education policy has focused too much attention on access and financial aid, without attending to improving college preparation and persistence (Gladieux & Swail, 1998). It remains the case that the provision of financial support alone will not be enough to improve the odds of college success for many underrepresented students.

While promise programs provide financial support or college tuition and other expenses, this money alone will likely not be enough to help underrepresented students achieve college access and success. Our review showed that promise programs provide additional supports during high school or college and help students leverage the use of existing college access and success resources. However, many promise programs are not providing additional, nonfinancial supports to students, which may limit the programs' ability to impact higher education opportunities and outcomes for students, especially for those who are typically underserved.

In this analysis, we began to untangle the direct and indirect ways promise programs provide nonfinancial supports and assert that the provision of these supports potentially improves higher education outcomes for underrepresented students. With continued investigation, we can learn how to optimize the outcomes of promise programs, and program developers will know what program features have the biggest impact on the students and communities served.

Recommendation 3: We Have More to Learn About Promise Programs, Including Understanding General Administrative Processes and Program Operations

There is a wide range in promise program offerings, including how the promises are defined, eligibility is determined, and student supports are provided. The unit of place (i.e., city/local, county, or state level) is a useful framework for our

analyses of the administrative and operation functions of promise programs. The unit of place is a salient way to distinguish programs because it narrows the scope of the actors (i.e., local, regional, or state level) involved in implementation in a consistent and logical way. City-, county-, and state-level implementers and partners across promise programs seem to have more commonalities, as do the programs. The tone and details of programs are established by those who are running, championing, and facilitating them. While there are differences within the city/local, county, and state programs, this is a useful analysis frame. Furthermore, when it comes to understanding the programs interaction/requirements at the student level, it is useful to frame student experiences in terms of the kind of postsecondary experience the program supports. For instance, does the promise support postsecondary education up to an associate's degree, or does the promise extend to include support for a bachelor's degree? The eligibility requirements and student support needed vary based on the type of postsecondary institution a student is attending.

Overall, there is limited information about extant promise program operations—including VMOSA, evaluation, and sustainability planning. The sparse amount of operational detail on many of the program web sites might have several roots, including program maturity and development (many promise programs are 5 years old or less) and the intended audience of the program web sites, for instance, some web sites were geared to serve students directly, so program administrative and operational details were limited.

There are several continuing questions. Are the variations in program offerings accompanied by similar variation in strategic planning and operational structure? More importantly, as these programs increase in popularity, what can we learn about how they are structured, managed, evaluated, and sustained? Answering these questions will drive the next stage of our inquiry and future thinking about how to best support these initiatives, which promote postsecondary education through financial assistance and other actions.

Conclusions

Focusing on aligning funding for higher education with strategic goals at the state level is an important cue for policy makers. For instance, the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board, after reviewing public college funding policies, proposed to link funding to schools that prioritized underserved groups and graduate students (Fanney, 2017).

Prioritization of underserved groups is one way to align educational attainment goals with policy; promoting initiatives that improve postsecondary academic preparation and success, in addition to providing financial support, might be another. Two recent surveys suggested that students' hopes of being academically prepared and successful are not high. Youth Truth (2017) found that half of the nation's high school students feel academically unprepared for college, and Allianz Global Assistance (2017) found that half of the students entering postsecondary education are anxious that they may not graduate.

By defining the existing differences in promise program design and structure, those interested in promoting equity in higher education opportunity and outcomes will be better able to investigate and draw conclusions about how best to design promise programs. In this study, we explored these differences and provided the foundation for future research on the topic. In time, with continued investigation, we will build insights into how to optimize the outcomes of promise programs. College promise developers will know what program features may have the biggest impact on the students and communities served.

We acknowledge that the analyses presented here are just the beginning. Our aim is to continue to expand the college promise knowledge base and provide meaningful opportunities for college promise developers and implementers to discuss strategic plans, operational differences, and program model decisions. Our next steps are to (a) conduct case studies on a diverse subset of programs, (b) expand the work to include a formal survey, and (c) convene key stakeholders to discuss the different models for constructing a promise program.

As these new initiatives proliferate in popularity, it is time to continue to increase our knowledge of these programs and how they are implemented. Promise programs offer an exciting set of solutions for supporting students in their postsecondary education. As more communities and states invest in these programs, having a solid understanding of the implications of specified program features becomes increasingly important. Additionally, college promise stakeholders and implementers could benefit from continued discussions among themselves about how the programs are designed and might be optimized for meeting their strategic visions, missions, and anticipated outcomes.

Note

1 For more information, see https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/college-prep-checklist.pdf

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Appendix

Methodology

The Unpacking College Promise Programs Study includes a rigorous content analysis of the public web sites for a stratified subsample of 35 promise programs in the United States (see Table A1). These web sites serve as the data source. Web page material for each selected promise program was saved in PDF format then imported into the NVivo qualitative analysis software package.

Selecting the Sample

These programs were selected in two phases: (a) an initial phase, which included a small subset of programs for exploration, and (b) a second phase, which expanded the sample systematically. During the initial exploratory phase, the team grounded itself in promise program literature to determine some primary differentiation factors, which included funding sources, eligibility requirements, and types of colleges covered. The College Promise Campaign compiled and shared an initial matrix of promise programs, which included basic details on these factors, plus program locations.

During this phase, the aim was to provide the analysis team with a broad range of possible program differences and structures. Using the College Promise Campaign matrix, we initially selected 13 promise programs that represented a wide range of variability and the diversity of their collective program features along five dimensions: (a) geographical diversity, (b) funding sources (public and private), (c) program level (school, city, or state), (d) student program eligibility, and (e) the level of the college at which the scholarships could be used (2-year, 4-year, or both). Two of the programs in this category are associated with particular 4-year institutions only. In our analysis, the programs that cover costs at both 2-year and 4-year institutions were paired with the two program in our sample that cover costs at 4-year institutions only. With only two programs, we could not make generalizations about how this attribute (supporting 4-year institution only) affects programming, so we collapsed the category to include programs that fund 2-year institutions and higher.

The research team downloaded the web site materials for the 13 programs and conducted an initial review of the web sites. During that review, it was discovered that three of the programs were not currently offering college promise scholarship funding. These three programs described themselves as a legacy scholarship, completed pilot program, or proposed future endeavor. These three inactive programs were excluded, and the remaining 10 programs were used in the initial exploratory analysis of program web material content.

For the second phase, in which we expanded our sample, the team again used the CPI matrix list compiled and shared by the College Promise Campaign, which contained 241 programs. The team removed the programs labeled as inactive by the College Promise Campaign and analyzed the remaining active programs by a number of descriptive variables, including census region, program unit of place, funding source, institution type in which students can enroll, student age of matriculation, presence of academic eligibility requirements, and how the promise reward is structured.

Table A1 List of College Promise Programs

Program name
Advantage Shelby County
Arizona State University President Barack Obama Scholars Program
Bay Commitment First Generation Scholarship
Boston Tuition Free Plan
Buffalo Scholarship Foundation
Chicago Star Scholarship
Denver Scholarship Foundation Scholar Program
Detroit Promise
El Monte Promise
Galesburg Promise
Georgia HOPE Grant
Georgia HOPE Scholarship
GO EAST LA Program
Gold Seal CAPE Scholars
Holland-Zeeland Promise
Louisiana Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)
Manistee County Commitment Scholarship
Milwaukee Area Technical College Promise
Minnesota College Occupational Scholarship Pilot Program
New Haven Promise
North Dakota Academic Scholarship
Oakland Promise
Oklahoma's Promise
Oregon Promise
Promise for the Future
Purdue Promise
Richmond CC Guarantee
Rosen Foundation Scholarship
Santa Barbara Community College (SBCC) Promise
Say Yes Buffalo
Siskiyou Promise
Tennessee Promise
The Gateway College Promise
Van Guarantee
Wichita Promise

[a]Georgia HOPE Grant and Scholarship are two separate promise program initiatives administered by the state of Georgia. Georgia HOPE Grant provides financial assistance to residents of the state who pursue certificates or diplomas at Georgia's public postsecondary institutions. Unlike the HOPE Scholarship Program, the Georgia HOPE Grant program does not have academic merit requirements.

This list of active promise programs included the programs in the original phase of the analysis. The team randomly assigned numbers to these programs and created separate ID numbers based on the assigned random number and whether the program was in the initial exploratory sample. The programs in the initial phases were assigned ID numbers first, then the remaining programs were assigned ID numbers based on the random number assignment.

To be in the sample, programs had to be determined by our team's review of program Web material to be currently active and provide a scholarship. The team aimed to select the remaining programs into our sample randomly, while trying to approximate the larger sample distribution on these key details. The team pulled 25 new programs at random into the sample for a total of 35; one randomly assigned program was omitted to create better census region balance in the final sample. Upon review of the program material, several programs that were randomly assigned into the sample were found to be inactive, without an active web site or scholarship. These programs were omitted from our sample. One randomly assigned program, though noted in the original matrix as not having a scholarship award, now has a scholarship listed on its web site and was kept in our sample.

Data Analysis Strategy

Grounded in the context of unpacking program structure and practices, a team of two researchers developed a coding schema, coded the relevant Web page material, maintained interrater reliability, and resolved coding disagreements through consensus.

During the pilot stage, a coding schema was developed that included descriptive nodes for 13 key program features: (a) defining the promise, (b) program characteristics and details, (c) vision statements, (d) mission statements, (e) objectives or program outcomes, (f) strategies for meeting common goals, (g) action plans, (h) initial program eligibility, (i) maintenance eligibility, (j) high school supports, (k) college supports, (l) evaluation outcomes, and (m) sustainability.

Coders checked and maintained their interrater reliability with a Cohen's kappa greater than or equal to .80, which is the recommended research standard (Stemler, 2001). The team used deductive constructed analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) to capture emerging ideas, meaning, and categories in the data and further categorized descriptive information, then further analyzed and contextualized the promise program features within the framework of the existing college access and success best practices literature.

Limitations

There are three limitations to the research presented in this exploratory study of promise programs. One is a data limitation. In this exploratory study, we limited data to web site information only. Therefore, if promise programs do not publish otherwise existing program information in this format or update their web sites, information will remain undiscovered. Web sites are clearly only one of many ways programs might communicate the strategic and administrative details we sought to uncover in this report. This may have resulted in an underreporting of what promise programs are accomplishing. Second, because there is no standard format for posting web site information, the comprehensiveness of the materials on the web sites ranges in depth and quality. The third limitation is that the 35 promise programs may not represent what we would uncover if we were to analyze the population of promise programs.

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