Policy Brief

Recognizing The Implications of Promise Program Design for Equity and Efficiency

BY LAURA W. PERNA, JEREMY WRIGHT-KIM, AND ELAINE W. LEIGH

In the face of excessive student loan debt and the ever rising cost of college, College Promise programs have emerged across the United States as potential mechanisms for improving college access and affordability [1,2]. Promise programs may improve college enrollment and other outcomes by providing a financial award that reduces costs of attendance, a clear message that college is affordable, and other supports that enable students to enter and progress to degree completion [3]. Although improving educational attainment has substantial benefits for individuals and communities [4], each Promise is unique and outcomes vary from program to program [5]. Although some research explores how Promise programs influence student outcomes, few studies have probed how program design and resource investments influence program outcomes, equity, and efficiency.

Our research team addressed this knowledge gap by drawing on case studies of programs that offer free tuition to attend four community colleges. Our study suggests that, when designing and implementing Promise programs, stakeholders should recognize that:

- Promise programs can influence outcomes for students who are eligible for the program and students who are ineligible.
- Whether and how programs influence outcomes for different students depend on program eligibility requirements and resource investments.
- Eligibility criteria can have implications for equity and efficiency.
- Program resources include not only the financial award but also personnel, facilities, and materials.
- Investing in personnel and other supports may improve equity and efficiency by enabling students to meet eligibility requirements and helping students to remain enrolled and complete their educational programs.

To receive a monthly update about Promise news, events, and publications, sign up for our newsletter at www.collegepromise.org

1

Background

Using Promise programs as a means to improve educational outcomes has opportunity costs, as resources allocated to a Promise program cannot be used for other initiatives [6]. Whether a Promise program is an effective use of resources depends on whether it advances societal goals for equity and efficiency [7]. Efficiency considers not only program outcomes but also the resources used to achieve them, and seeks to produce the greatest results with the fewest resources [8]. Equity considers program beneficiaries and distribution of benefits [9]. A program that promotes vertical equity allocates resources to students with the greatest financial or educational need [10,11] and recognizes the structural barriers that limit opportunity for high-quality higher education [12,13]. Economic efficiency studies seek to identify how an intervention leads to various outcomes and the resources used to achieve outcomes [14]. The utility of probing the implications of program design for Promise programs is suggested by Harris et al.'s study of the Milwaukee Degree Project [15]. Their study draws on interview data to consider why the program did not increase college enrollment. Highlighting the role of program design and implementation, they conclude that the program set academic eligibility requirements too high and did not provide sufficient information and support to help students meet requirements.

Research Overview

To increase understanding of how program design and resource investments influence program outcomes, equity, and efficiency, our study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the potential ways selected programs may influence student outcomes?
2. What criteria determine program eligibility?
3. What resources are invested in the financial awards and other aspects of program implementation?

Using the Penn AHEAD College Promise database [16], we selected 6 Promise programs operating in different state, local, and institutional contexts to examine. The studied programs offer free tuition to attend four community colleges.

Laura W. Perna
University of Pennsylvania

Laura W. Perna is GSE Centennial Presidential Professor of Education, Vice Provost for Faculty, and founding Executive Director of Penn's Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research uses various methodological approaches to identify how social structures, educational practices, and public policies promote and limit college access and success, particularly for groups that are underrepresented in higher education. Recent publications include Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs (with Edward Smith, 2020, AERA) and Taking it to the streets: The role of scholarship in advocacy and advocacy in scholarship (2018, Johns Hopkins University Press).

Program Characteristics	Northeast	Rural	Midwest	West
First Awards	2015	2006	2016	2008
Number of Promise Programs	1	2 (Academic Scholarship and Occupational Scholarship)	2 (Promise Program and Adult Promise)	1
Minimum Award	Yes- $300	No	No	No
Eligibility Requirements				
Place designation	Graduation from HS in city	County residency	City residency	Graduation from partner HS
Program application	None	Annual	One time	One time
Income	Pell-eligible	No	Promise: Pell-eligible; Adult Promise: AGI< $56,000	No
College readiness	College-level English	No	Promise: ACT>15; HS GPA>2.0; Adult Promise: No	No

Notes: Certain program characteristics, such as eligibility criteria, changed over time. The information above reflects program characteristics at the end of our data collection.

We first collected and analyzed information from program reports and websites, institutional documents, governmental budgets, state policy documents, and federal databases (e.g., U.S. Census). We then conducted multi-day visits to each site between September 2018 and April 2019 that included semi-structured individual and group interviews with city and county officials, as well as staff and students from the community college and affiliated high schools. We asked about program history and evolution, eligibility criteria, the Promise recipients, financial award, other supports, program costs, and outcomes. Using all the information gathered, our team produced a case report for each institution which we asked institutional representatives to review and provide feedback on. We then engaged in cross-case analyses to address the research questions in this study. These analyses were guided by our understandings of equity and efficiency [17], benefit-cost analysis, and resource allocation [18].

Jeremy Wright-Kim
University of Pennsylvania

Jeremy Wright-Kim is PhD Candidate and MEA Stinner Fellow in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and pulling from sociological, organizational, and economic frameworks, his research examines issues of social stratification and explores how to structure policy and practices to best address educational inequities, with a particular focus on community colleges as engines of social mobility and educational opportunity. His dissertation explores the impact of the community college baccalaureate (CCB) on institutional enrollment and financial patterns. Recent work has been published in Educational Policy, Review of Higher Education, AERA Open, and other outlets.

Findings

Our findings shed light on how program design and resource investments may influence outcomes, efficiency, and equity. Figure 1 depicts the relationships among eligibility requirements, resource investments, and potential student outcomes that emerged from our analyses. We found that Promise programs may influence outcomes for both students who do and do not meet eligibility criteria. Whether these outcomes represent improvements in vertical equity depends on whether outcomes are improved for students from underserved groups. Whether these outcomes represent efficient resource use depends on whether outcomes are better than what would have been achieved in the absence of the program.

Potential Student Outcomes

For students who meet eligibility requirements, Promise programs may: improve college enrollment and other outcomes; shift their enrollment from a four-year institution to the community college; and/or give them resources that they did not need to enroll. Allocating resources to students who would have enrolled at the institution, even without the program, represents an inefficient use of resources. Programs may also influence outcomes of students who do not meet eligibility requirements. Programs may:

- Increase enrollment of ineligible students. Some students may enroll at the institution even if they do not meet eligibility requirements, particularly if institutions allocate resources to market the program, recruit students, and help interested students enroll.
- Improve post-enrollment outcomes of ineligible students. If programs encourage institutions to make other reforms (e.g., reduce textbook costs), programs may improve outcomes for all students who enroll at the institution.
- Decrease post-enrollment outcomes of ineligible students. If institutions shift resources to a Promise program (e.g., for advising) and reduce resources for other programming, they may reduce outcomes for non-Promise students.
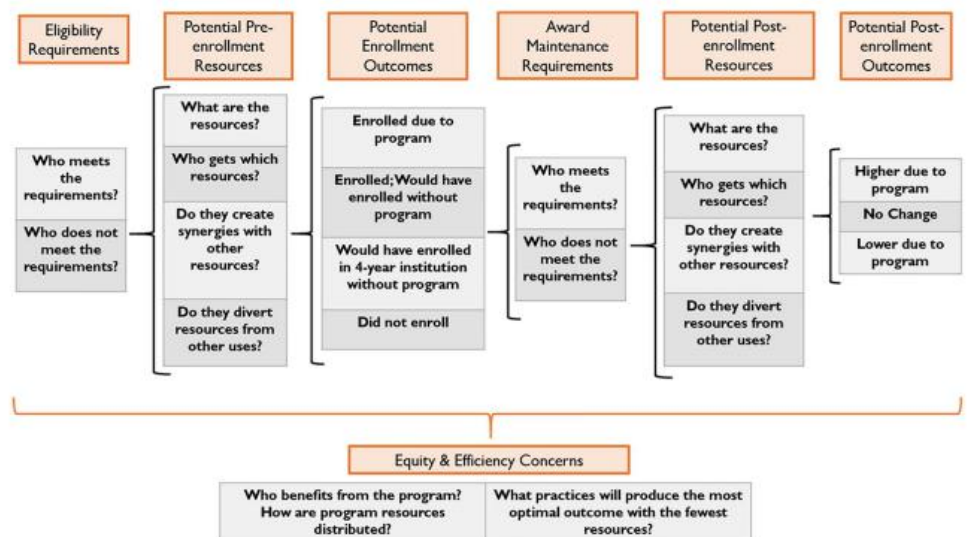

FIGURE 1. Conceptual model of relationships between eligibility requirements, program resources, and student outcomes.

Elaine W. Leigh
University of Pennsylvania

Elaine W. Leigh is PhD Candidate in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include policies and practices that address inequities in college access and completion for underrepresented students and the role of postsecondary education in community and economic development. Her dissertation explores how cross-sector, or "collective impact" education collaborations advance systems change through their formation of organizational networks and postsecondary access and completion strategies. She has published other studies of college promise programs and their implementation in Research in Higher Education, Educational Researcher, American Behavioral Scientist, AERA Open, and other outlets.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility requirements determine who can participate in a program and vary from Promise to Promise. Requirements for initially receiving an award can include: place of residence, citizenship, age, income, FAFSA completion, college readiness, college transition programming, college enrollment timing and intensity, college academic programs. Requirements for maintaining or renewing an award can include: GPA, credit accumulation, advising, and extracurricular requirements.

Eligibility criteria can have implications for equity and efficiency. For example, requiring a program application limits eligibility to only those who complete this requirement, but requiring an application may provide an opportunity to increase students' knowledge and awareness of the program and other prerequisites. Requiring a minimum level of high school academic performance may increase efficiency by encouraging students to meet these preparation requirements, but reduce equity by allocating resources to more advantaged students.

Resource Allocation

Programs may invest resources not only in the financial award, but also in personnel, facilities, and materials. Resource investments can have implications for equity and efficiency.

- Financial award. All selected programs use a last-dollar approach. While this approach leverages the availability of federal and state grant funding, it also allocates more institutional resources to students from higher-income backgrounds. When the financial award is limited to the cost of tuition and fees, this approach also does not assist low-income students with other costs of attendance, including books and supplies, housing, food, transportation, childcare, and other expenses.
- Personnel. Allocating personnel to program administration increases costs, but may improve student outcomes, as well as equity and efficiency. Personnel can help students meet and maintain program eligibility. Personnel can also collect data, monitor program outcomes, and make adjustments to improve student outcomes.
- Facilities and materials. Dedicating space for a program at feeder high schools and/or the college will increase program costs, but may also increase program awareness and outcomes by providing identifiable spaces for students to find support. Marketing materials may improve awareness among potential participants and other program stakeholders, including parents and teachers.

Recommendations

Given the many benefits of higher education for individuals and society [19], and persisting differences across groups in the likelihood of receiving these benefits [20], we need interventions that level the playing field for high-quality higher education. Promise programs have the potential to address structural and systemic barriers, but whether they realize their potential depends on program design and resource investments.

To advance societal goals [21], Promise programs should be designed and implemented to efficiently use resources to improve outcomes while also increasing vertical equity. To achieve this vision, we encourage policymakers and practitioners to recognize that:

- **Promise programs may affect outcomes for students who meet eligibility requirements and for students who do not meet these requirements.**
    - Consider how to allocate resources to improve outcomes for Promise recipients without reducing resources available to non-Promise students. Consider how to leverage learning from Promise program implementation to encourage other institutional changes that improve outcomes for all enrolled students.

- **Eligibility criteria have trade-offs.**
    - Although eligibility requirements may be intended to encourage students to engage in behaviors that are positively related to academic progress and degree completion, they can also serve as gates that limit access to program benefits. Consider how to allocate personnel and other resources to help students, especially students from historically underserved groups, participate in the program.

- **Last-dollar financial awards that cover only the costs of tuition and fees do not improve college affordability for students from low-income families.**
    - The average Pell Grant and average award from a state's largest need-based grant program exceed published tuition and fees for full-time students at all four of our studied institutions. As such, these programs do not help students with the lowest family incomes meet non-tuition costs of attendance including books and food. This approach is also an inefficient use of resources if institutional dollars are received by students who would have enrolled without the program.

- **Resources beyond the financial award may boost program efficiency and equity.**
    - Marketing and facilities may increase program awareness and help students know where to get support. Student-facing personnel may help students meet eligibility requirements and persist toward graduation. Data and evaluation may help institutions identify how to modify the program to improve outcomes for all students.

References

1. Dowd, A. C., Rosinger, K. O., & Castro, M. F. (2020). Trends and perspectives on finance equity and the Promise of community colleges. In L. Perna (Ed.), Higher education: Handbook of theory and research (Vol. 35, pp. 517–588). Springer. https:// doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31365-4_7

2. Perna, L. W., & Leigh, E. W. (2018). Understanding the Promise: A typology of state and local college Promise programs. Educational Researcher, 47(3), 155–180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17742653

3. Perna, L. W. (2016). Delivering on the Promise: Structuring college Promise programs to promote higher education attainment for students from underserved groups. Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, University of Pennsylvania. https:// www.ahead-penn.org/sites/default/files/u2/Delivering_On_ the_Promise_Perna.pdf

4. McMahon, W. W. (2009). Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education. Johns Hopkins University Press.

5. Perna, L. W., & Smith, E. J. (2020). How our findings bear on future policy, practice, and research. In L. W. Perna, & E. J. Smith (Eds.), Improving research-based knowledge of college Promise programs (pp. 305–324). American Educational Research Association. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxw3phv.16

6. Levin, H. M., McEwan, P. J., Belfield, C., Bowden, A. B., & Shand, R. (2018). Economic evaluation in education: Cost effectiveness and benefit-cost analysis (3rd ed.). Sage

7. DesJardins, S. (2002). Understanding and using efficiency and equity criteria in the study of higher education policy. In J. C. Smart, & W. G. Tierney (Eds.), Higher education: Handbook of theory and research (Vol. 17, pp. 173–219). Springer. https:// doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0245-5_4

8. Dowd, A. C., & Shieh, L. T. (2013). Community college financing: Equity, efficiency, and accountability. In The NEA 2013 Almanac of Higher Education (pp. 37–65). National Education Association. http://ftp.arizonaea.org/assets/docs/2013_Almanac_ Dowd.pdf

9. DesJardins, S. (2002). Understanding and using efficiency and equity criteria in the study of higher education policy. In J. C. Smart, & W. G. Tierney (Eds.), Higher education: Handbook of theory and research (Vol. 17, pp. 173–219). Springer. https:// doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0245-5_4

10. Perna, L. W., Leigh, E., & Carroll, S. (2018). "Free college:" A new and improved state approach to increasing educational attainment? American Behavioral Scientist, 61, 1740–1757

11. Poutré, A., & Voight, M. (2018). The state of free college: Tennessee Promise and New York's Excelsior Scholarship. Institute for Higher Education Policy. http://www.ihep.org/research/publications/state-free-college-tennessee-Promiseand-new-yorks-excelsior-scholarship

12. DesJardins, S. (2002). Understanding and using efficiency and equity criteria in the study of higher education policy. In J. C. Smart, & W. G. Tierney (Eds.), Higher education: Handbook of theory and research (Vol. 17, pp. 173–219). Springer. https:// doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0245-5_4

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: collegepromise.org or email info@collegepromise.org

References

13. Dowd, A. C., & Shieh, L. T. (2013). Community college financing: Equity, efficiency, and accountability. In The NEA 2013 Almanac of Higher Education (pp. 37–65). National Education Association. http://ftp.arizonaea.org/assets/docs/2013_Almanac_ Dowd.pdf

14. Levin, H. M., McEwan, P. J., Belfield, C., Bowden, A. B., & Shand, R. (2018). Economic evaluation in education: Cost effectiveness and benefit-cost analysis (3rd ed.). Sage

15. Harris, D., Farmer-Hinton, R., Kim, D. H., Diamond, J. B., Reavis, T. B., Rifelj, K. K., Lustick, H. A., & Carl, B. (2020). The Promise of free college and its potential pitfalls: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial of a performance-based aid program. In L. W. Perna, & E. J. Smith (Eds.), Improving research-based knowledge of college Promise programs (pp. 119–150). American Educational Research Association. https:// doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxw3phv.9

16. Perna, L. W., & Leigh, E. W. (2016). Database of college Promise programs. Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, University of Pennsylvania. http://ahead-penn.org/creatingknowledge/college-Promise

17. Dowd, A. C., & Shieh, L. T. (2013). Community college financing: Equity, efficiency, and accountability. In The NEA 2013 Almanac of Higher Education (pp. 37–65). National Education Association. http://ftp.arizonaea.org/assets/docs/2013_Almanac_ Dowd.pdf

18. Levin, H. M., McEwan, P. J., Belfield, C., Bowden, A. B., & Shand, R. (2018). Economic evaluation in education: Cost effectiveness and benefit-cost analysis (3rd ed.). Sage

19. McMahon, W. W. (2009). Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education. Johns Hopkins University Press.

20. Cahalan, M., Perna, L. W., Addison, M., Murray, C., Patel, P. R., & Jiang, N. (2020). Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2020 Historical Trend Report. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennAHEAD).

21. DesJardins, S. (2002). Understanding and using efficiency and equity criteria in the study of higher education policy. In J. C. Smart, & W. G. Tierney (Eds.), Higher education: Handbook of theory and research (Vol. 17, pp. 173–219). Springer. https:// doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0245-5_4

This brief summarizes information presented more completely in:
Perna, L.W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. (2020). Is a college Promise program an effective use of resources? Understanding the implications of program design and resource investments for equity and efficiency. AERA Open, 6(4), 1-15. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858420967633