Promise Design Matters: A Review of The Degree Project (TDP)

By Anjana Venkatesan

Introduction

In recent years, the free college or "College Promise" movement has seen tremendous momentum at the local and state level. In the face of rising college costs, mounting student debt, and an ever-growing demand for an educated workforce, it is no surprise that Promise programs have found supporters in over 300 communities in 44 states all across the US. As the number of Promise programs continues to grow, there's a demand for effective research and evaluation on postsecondary outcomes in order to inform best practices and program design for Promise programs.

In order to research the effectiveness of Promise scholarships at improving college access and success, Great Lakes Higher Education's foundation, now the Ascendium Education Group, partnered with Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to establish The Degree Project (TDP), a College Promise program designed as a randomized control trial study with longitudinal data. The trial was carried out by a team of researchers lead by Dr. Douglas N. Harris of Tulane university. Great Lakes committed $31 million to provide eligible Milwaukee students with up to $12,000 each for post-secondary education at an approved two- or four-year colleges in Wisconsin. This policy brief will make the case that program design--especially as it relates to equity--matters for building a Promise program, as demonstrated by the results of Milwaukee's Degree Project.

Background

Milwaukee is the largest city in Wisconsin with a diverse population of roughly 600,000 (44.8% white, 40% black, 17.3% Latino, 3.5% Asian, and 3.4% two or more races)[1]. The average household income is roughly $51,000, almost $10,000 below the national average. Although encompassing a fairly diverse community, Milwaukee is considered to be among the most segregated cities in the country, with only about 8% of African Americans in Milwaukee County living outside the city limits. Of people age 25 and older, 86% have at least a high school diploma, but educational attainment has significant racial gaps.

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[1] US Census Bureau. (n.d.). Census.gov. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/

Each year, Milwaukee Public Schools graduate about 3,000 students from high school [2].

The graduation rate of White students is 92.7% but there are significant high school graduation gaps for Black (80.4%) and Latino students (59.3%). For post-secondary education, the gap widens further between White (64.6%), Black (27.2%), and Latino (15.1%) degree attainment.

Program Design

The Degree Project was structured as a last dollar scholarship which would grant students up to $12,000 over two years (four semesters) to fill unmet need after other scholarships and sources of funding were taken into account. In order to receive the money, students had to have earned a high school GPA of 2.5 or higher, maintained a 90% attendance record, and filled out the FAFSA student aid application. These requirements were significantly above the average ninth grade GPA and attendance records; for the TDP cohort the average GPA was 1.8 and the average attendance rate was 81 percent.

While there were no income restrictions on eligibility, students had to be degree-seeking first-time college enrollees and were required to start college within 15 months of graduating high school. Funds could be used at any of 66 two- or four-year public colleges, and many private colleges, in Wisconsin. Students enrolled full-time were eligible to receive up to $6000 a year while students enrolled part-time received only $3000 a year.

Implementation and Outcomes

From 36 Milwaukee Public Schools, a cohort of 5,000 ninth graders were selected to participate in The Degree Project. About half received the education Promise benefit (n=2,587), and the other half (n=2,464) were chosen as the control (did not receive the educational benefit). Researchers assigned entire schools--rather than individual students--to treatment and control groups in order to examine and encourage the spillover effects of peer learning and community support.

The program started in the fall of 2011 when 2,587 Milwaukee Public School freshmen students were notified of the Promise Program and informed of the eligibility criteria they would have to meet by graduation in order to receive the scholarship. The other 2,464 students were not informed of the Promise Program. By 2015, the anticipated graduation year of the chosen Promise high school cohort, 36 percent (923) of potential Promise students had either dropped-out or moved to a different school. Of the remaining 64 percent (1,664) potential Promise students at an eligible MPS, only 445 students met the requirements (GPA, attendance and FAFSA completion) for the Promise scholarship. Due to eligibility requirements and program design, only 17 percent of the TDP students ultimately met the performance requirements necessary to receive the financial benefit.

[2] Anderson, S. (2016, July 16). By the Numbers: Milwaukee Public Schools Graduation Rates Consistently Below State Averages in 2015. Retrieved from https://patch.com/wisconsin/waukesha/numbers-milwaukee-public-schools-graduation-rates-consistently-below-state

Education Outcomes

Outcomes from the study were split between impact in high school and college. Comparisons between the TDP students offered the scholarship and those not offered the scholarship showed no significant change in high school GPA, attendance, or on-time graduation. Surprisingly, offering the Promise did not encourage more students to even meet the minimum performance requirements needed to obtain the scholarship after high school. Despite the lack of impact on quantitative academic measures, student surveys revealed significant increases in college going behaviors such as completing the FAFSA, participating in college access programs, applying to more colleges, and taking more senior year AP courses. Additionally, students reported increased motivation to prepare for college and greater confidence in their ability to attend.

At the college level, TDP produced no impact on initial enrollment. However, by the second year after high school graduation, students who were offered the scholarship were 1-2% more likely to have enrolled than students who did not receive the offer and students who actually went to on receive the scholarship were 5-9% more likely to enroll than students who were never offered the scholarship. For students who went on to college, those with the scholarship were, unsurprisingly, much more likely to attend a college in-state even if they would have otherwise been able to attend a more competitive institution. Scholarship recipients were also much more likely to attend a community college, and surveys revealed that some chose to do so due to the appeal of a two-year degree being entirely "free."

Discussion

While the observed effects of The Degree Project were smaller than might have been expected, it is important to recognize that the program design created many limitations that affected final outcomes. Ultimately, it was determined that the short-term nature and Randomized Control Trial implementation failed to produce the catalyzing effects necessary to provoke lasting change in the education system. The Degree Project researcher team concluded that there were several design flaws that greatly diminished the project's impact and contributed to weaker outcomes, particularly for high school level impacts.

First and foremost among these flaws was the use of high-performance requirements which, despite being directly modeled off the requirements of the Pittsburgh Promise [3], proved severely limiting and a poor fit for MPS students. Requiring a 2.5 GPA and 90% attendance record in a community in which the average GPA is 1.8 and attendance is 81% limits eligibility; only 16.3% of previous graduating classes would have met these requirements.

[3] Harris, D. N. (2013). Is traditional financial aid too little, too late to help youth succeed in college? An introduction to The Degree Project promise scholarship experiment. New Directions for Youth Development, 2013(140), 99-116. doi:10.1002/yd.20080

Such a restricted pool of eligible students limits spillover effects and greatly dampens the development of a community-wide, college-going culture as not enough students were reliably receiving the scholarship to induce changes in the behaviors of those around them. Researchers noted that these burdensome requirements also created serious equity concernsin the context of a city already facing significant achievement gaps [4]. Setting a prohibitively high performance bar to the scholarship not only sharply curtails the scope of impact a program can have but also runs the risk of exacerbating existing disparities.

The second major problem was a lack of supplemental support and resources for students receiving the scholarship. Student surveys revealed that TDP did in fact prompt students to prepare for college and motivate them to work harder, however this only translated to measurable changes for behaviors requiring one-time actions, such as filing FAFSA or applying to more colleges. For behaviors that required more long-term effort, such as improving GPA, students found themselves with more motivation, but no substantive guidance or support on how to achieve desired results. This is supported by the testimony from the students themselves that, while they did have conversations with adults and guidance counselors about both the scholarship and the path to college, interactions were generally very shallow and amounted to little more than encouragement rather than meaningful help. Researchers concluded that the short-term nature of the experiment and the focus solely on the financial incentive of TPD failed to encourage lasting change in support structures or services for students that would be necessary for them to take full advantage of the program and improve overall student success outcomes.

Finally, researchers pointed to insufficient communication as a detrimental factor in the effectiveness of the program. Messaging to the broader community has been previously shown to play a key role in successfully implementing a Promise program [5], however messaging was limited in this study due to the need to restrict the scholarship effects to treatment groups of students. While TDP was designed with an extensive communication plan involving regularly mailed pamphlets and brochures sent to both students and counselors, the information provided was general in nature and materials sent to counselors often lacked specific action items. Under the assumption that counselors would be best positioned to offer personalized guidance and communications, researchers examined the impact of the number of communications received by a student from their counselor and found a significant positive impact with more counselor engagement for all TDP outcomes. Unfortunately, again due to the financially focused nature of the experiment, the program did not encourage or assist counselors in engaging with students. The relatively short project time-frame also did little to encourage structural changes in the interactions between councilors or administrators and students.

[4]Harris, D. N., Farmer-Hinton, R., Kim, D., Diamond, J. B., Reavis, T. B., Rifelj, K. K., Carl, B. R. (2018, October 01). The promise of free college (and its potential pitfalls). Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-promise-of-free-college-and-its-potential-pitfalls/
[5] Dynarski, S., Libassi, C., Michelmore, K., & Owen, S. (2018). Closing the Gap: The Effect of a Targeted, Tuition-Free Promise on College Choices of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students. NBER Working Paper No.15387. doi:10.3386/

As a Promise program, The Degree Project may not have produced the largest of impacts when it comes to measurable college successes, but it provides many crucial insights on the importance of Promise design and implementation. Through its extensive quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, TDP makes it clear thatthat money alone is not enough to make a Promise program successful.

During program creation, careful and thoughtful design, including baseline data on key student performance metrics, is necessary to ensure that a program can effectively reach the students of a given community. During program implementation, resources and supports must be available for students and high schools to make meaningful changes. Throughout the administration of a program, frequent, clear, and personalized communications must be utilized on a regular basis. More broadly, programs should be designed to create not only short-term changes in behavior, but to catalyze systemic and institutional changes that can have farther reaching and longer lasting effects. By examining the limitations of The Degree Project and understanding the how to overcome them, Promise programs across the nation can be better prepared to maximize their impact.

Find out more about the College Promise movement by visitingcollegepromise.org/join

About the Author

Anjana Venkatesan currently serves as Senior Policy and Research Advisor at the College Promise Campaign where she advances the Campaign's goal of promoting research-driven best practices for Promise Programs around the country. Her work includes the development and expansion of the College Promise Research Network which aims to facilitate information sharing among Promise researchers and connect researchers with program practitioners in order to improve Promise Programs and help ensure student success.

Ms. Venkatesan received her bachelor's degree as well as a Master's in Public Administration from the University of Alabama. She previously served as a Senior Research Associate at the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center.