A Novel Two-Generation Approach to College Promise: HOPE Toledo Promise

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Introduction

Two-generation interventions link intensive, high-quality education services for youth and parents within the same family [2,9]. Empirical evidence suggests that two-generation education programs have positive effects on parent and child outcomes, especially among low-income families [3,4,9]. Yet little is known about the new area of two-generation college scholarship programs. Two-generation scholarship programs represent a promising and innovative anti-poverty strategy that can promote economic mobility for families by sending both generations to college for free. HOPE Toledo, a first of its kind two-generation colleges scholarship program shows potential in fostering mutual motivation and support among youth and parents [10]. It remains an open question whether two-generation college promise programs, which are rare, are more effective in achieving outcomes than single-generation college promise programs.

Background

Although postsecondary opportunities are abundant in Greater Toledo, less than 20% of adults have a college degree, and college entrance and completion rates remain disproportionately low among low-income students and students of color. Relatedly, with a median annual household income of $38,000, most youth and parents across Toledo cannot afford the postsecondary education and skills training that are increasingly essential in the 21st century economy [1,12]. HOPE Toledo Promise actively engages whole families with the goal of improving outcomes of youth and parents alike. A family-centered approach builds from developmental science theory that the life outcomes of parents and children are highly interdependent and likely have cascading effects over time [8]. In fact, parents’ educational attainment is the strongest predictor of children’s skill development, academic achievement, and career aspirations [5]. The younger generation cannot be the sole agent of change for generational poverty and inequity [2].
HOPE Toledo Promise is the first comprehensive two-generation college promise program of its kind in the United States. This program provides cost-free postsecondary education for 4.5 years (including tuition, room, board, books, and fees) to high school graduates (“youth scholars”) and one of their parents/guardians (“parent scholars”) in Toledo, Ohio. HOPE Toledo Promise began with the 2020 graduating class of Jesup W. Scott High School in Toledo where students are among the most underestimated and disadvantaged within the district. Students come from predominately low-income families and most identify as Black. Further, students’ academic and test scores are some of the lowest districtwide. At present, the HOPE Toledo Promise program involves 62 youth scholars from the 2020 Scott High School graduating class and 55 youth from the 2021 graduating class. Approximately 30 parent scholars are currently or soon to be involved. Additional program features include: (a) a family-focused program structure where all students from the same high school meet monthly with HOPE Toledo’s leadership and their parents; (b) individual and group mentorship and advice from program leadership and partners; and (c) enhanced and coordinated mentorship and academic/career advisement from partnering postsecondary institutions.

Northwestern University’s Implementation Study and Research Findings

Our mixed methods implementation study of HOPE Toledo Promise’s inaugural year (2020-21) draws on four sources of data: (1) program administrative (N = 116 youth), (2) surveys of eligible youth scholars from the first program cohort (N = 25), (3) focus groups of eligible youth and parent scholars from the first program cohort (N = 30), and (4) in-depth interviews with program leaders and partners (N = 10) (Sommer et al., 2021). Surveys assessed the postsecondary education and program experiences, learning and study strategies, and psychological wellbeing of youth scholars. Focus groups emphasized the voices and perspectives of youth and parents, including those who did and did not enroll in the program. Interviews drew on the experiences of community and program leaders engaged in program design and implementation.

Modified from Ascend at the Aspen Institute
HOPE Toledo Program Participation among Youth and Parent Scholars

Of the 116 graduates of Scott High School class of 2020, 62 students participated in the HOPE Toledo Promise in the academic year 2020-21. Enrolled youth scholars had higher average GPAs and SAT scores and were less likely to have an Individualized Education Plan compared to students who did not enroll. Youth scholars were approximately 19 years old and most identified as Black. Parents were eligible for the same scholarship if their high school senior enrolled in the program. Nearly a fifth of the 62 eligible parents participated in the program while another fifth expressed interest. Some parents did not enroll because they either had too much education (previously attained a Bachelor’s degree) or too little (not yet attained a high school diploma or GED). At the end of the first year, no parent scholars that enrolled in the program dropped out.

The Experiences and Wellbeing of HOPE Toledo Promise Youth Scholars

The top three reasons that youth scholars chose to participate in HOPE Toledo Promise were: (1) an opportunity for a free college education, (2) a chance for a higher paying job in the future, and (3) an opportunity to have the college experience. In focus groups, youth expressed that without scholarship support, they would not have attended college, although they had contemplated it, and for some, the idea of attending college was a wholly new consideration prompted by the scholarship. Youth were also encouraged to attend college by family members and, for a few, by their experiences with a college preparation program during high school.

Two-thirds of youth scholars enrolled in four-year postsecondary institutions, a third in two-year colleges, and a small number in technical/vocational schools. Once in college, youth showed a limited understanding of college expectations and requirements and a mix of skill levels in managing college coursework. Even so, many youth scholars were progressing academically: about a third were thriving, a fifth were deeply struggling, and most were somewhere in between. Promisingly, nearly half of youth scholars reported high perceptions of emotional support and high career identity.
Yet at the same time, youth scholars faced significant struggles: the vast majority indicated strong feelings of loneliness and over a third reported high levels of psychological distress. Likewise, most were still worried about having enough money for food and access to medical care even though two-thirds had jobs. COVID-19 seemed to have a largely detrimental impact on youth scholars. For example, online learning seemed to decrease motivation and limit social connection, which may partially explain the high levels of loneliness and psychological distress. Students in dorms reported feeling isolated and missing the typical college experience with peers, faculty, and administration. Future study during more normal times will help disentangle the effects of COVID-19 from a more typical college experience.

Initial Insights into a Two-Generation Approach to College Promise

Importantly, this implementation study shed light on the potential benefits of a two-generation, family-centered approach to the college promise movement. Both youth and parent scholars shared the experience of feeling ill-prepared for the rigors of college, and this common experience brought some families closer together. Importantly, youth and parents in college at the same time also reported a variety of opportunities for mutual learning and support. For instance, parents helped their young adult children create schedules, manage assignments, and select courses. At the same time, youth provided their parents with technology support such as understanding Blackboard and Zoom. Two generations in college at the same time also seemed to foster healthy competition and motivation among youth and parents to achieve and persist in college [10]:

“My daughter, me and her, we like to compete. So, my first semester I was like ‘Let’s make a bet. Whoever gets the best grades, we got to treat the other one out’ […] We just do a lot of competitions but it’s all fun and games because it’s basically uplifting each other, she’s uplifting me to go back to school. I’m lifting her up to go, you know, follow her dreams and be whoever she wants to be. And it’s kind of fun having a kid in college and I’m in college.” – Parent Scholar

“Competition for our grades. We be making like bets and stuff, like who’s going to have the best grades and stuff [...] like for a reward.” – Youth Scholar

“I think it may be the little bit of motivation that’s keeping him there, because he’s watching me press through [...] He’s watching me still go and it’s encouraging him to fight.” – Parent Scholar
Plans are underway to further examine intergenerational dynamics and their influence on college persistence and completion among the first and second cohorts of families enrolled in HOPE Toledo Promise.

Discussion and Future Recommendations

Our study of HOPE Toledo Promise’s inaugural year investigated the experiences and perspectives of youth and parents and identified many of the typical successes and challenges facing students in single-generation college promise programs (Sommer et al., 2021). What is distinctive about HOPE Toledo Promise are the family dynamics among the group of young students whose parents also attend college. These youth and parents were navigating the college process together and encouraging persistence and completion despite barriers [10]. Our findings suggest the potential benefits of a two-generation approach to college promise and the need to design more creative, family-centered strategies. These could include career exploration at the family level, providing opportunities for parents and youth to increase career knowledge and skills together. Linking a postsecondary education to viable career opportunities in the local marketplace has shown to be essential for success in the current economy. HOPE Toledo Promise has already begun to partner with local educational institutions and employers to develop college-to-career pipelines in the fields of healthcare and education where shortages exist and workers of color are woefully underrepresented.

Our study is constrained by a small sample, the limited participation of parent scholars, and the pandemic’s impact on student experiences. Future evaluation research will assess the effectiveness of HOPE Toledo Promise on youth and parent outcomes and will make recommendations, if proven effective, for replicating a range of two-generation approaches to college promise programs in other cities across the country. A family-centered, two-generation framework, coupled with strategies to address racial and economic inequities and integrate systems at the city level, may be one way to strengthen the college promise movement and improve student outcomes [6,7]. The Kresge Foundation is investing in HOPE Toledo Promise to implement this type of approach and in Northwestern University’s Two-Generation Research Initiative to study it.
References


Teresa Eckrich Sommer is a Research Professor at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University where she co-directs the Northwestern Two-Generation Research Initiative. Sommer studies the dual development of parents and children and the social mobility of families. She is a leading national scholar in the evaluation of family-centered programs that invest in the education of parents and children/youth in the same family at the same time. Sommer holds a MA and PhD in Public Policy from Harvard University.

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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.

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