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Enhancing Promise Programs to Improve College Access and Success

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Though the nation has made great strides in increasing access to higher education, college graduation rates remain low. At community colleges, only a fifth of students graduate within three years.¹ Community college students face many barriers to success: a lack of academic preparation, a confusing maze of requirements, a lack of support on campus, and costs such as books and transportation not covered by financial aid. College Promise programs, which now number more than 200, provide financial support to pay local students' tuition and fees.² These programs have received bipartisan support from state and municipal policymakers to improve students' *access* to college, putting college financially in reach. But these programs do not typically address college *success*. Increasing completion rates is the next step.

THE DETROIT PROMISE PATH

The Detroit Promise, administered by the Detroit Regional Chamber, allows the city's high school graduates to attend local colleges tuition-free. The community college scholarship program covers any difference between financial aid and tuition for up to three years at five area community colleges: Henry Ford College, Macomb Community College, Oakland Community College, Schoolcraft College, and Wayne County Community College. Although the program helps Detroit's students enroll in college, too few stay in school and graduate.

To improve students' academic outcomes, the Chamber and MDRC partnered to create the **Detroit Promise Path**, which adds four components to the existing scholarship program: campus coaches who help students navigate academic and personal issues; monthly financial support contingent on meeting with coaches; enhanced summer engagement; and monitoring and messages informed by behavioral science through a management information system created by MDRC. These evidence-based strategies

¹U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2014* (Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

²University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, "College Promise Programs" (website: <http://ahead-penn.org/creating-knowledge/college-promise>, accessed on June 8, 2017).

Detroit Promise Path

SCHOLARSHIP



Covers tuition and fees after financial aid is applied and assists students with summer tuition



NEW SERVICES AND BENEFITS



Offers campus coaching and requires students to meet with a coach twice a month



Offers \$50 each month for expenses not covered by financial aid, like bus passes or books, to students who meet with coaches



Engages students in the summer by encouraging summer enrollment or connecting them to local summer jobs



Uses a data integration and technology tool that tracks participation, uses messages informed by behavioral science, and automates monitoring

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come from MDRC’s experience designing and evaluating community college programs, and MDRC provided extensive technical assistance to set up the program, develop cost-effective management strategies, and ensure successful operation.

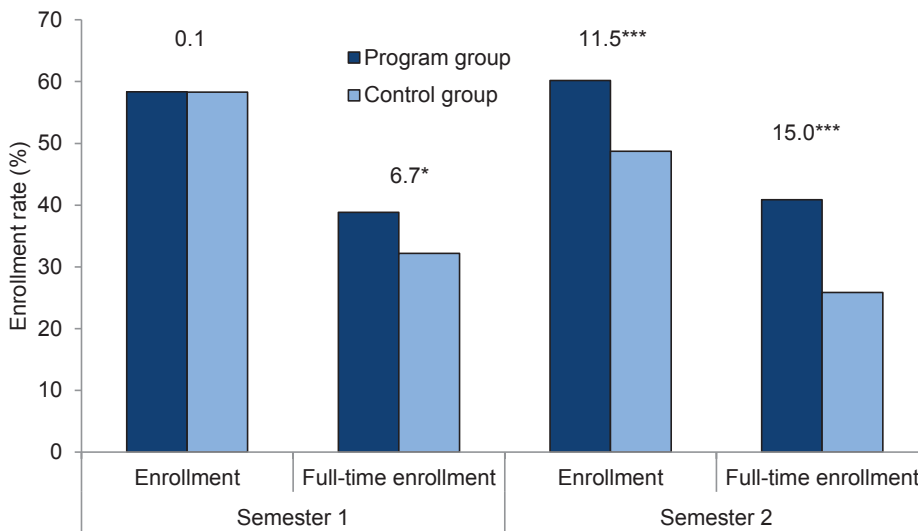
The Detroit Promise Path launched in the 2016-2017 school year. MDRC is using a random assignment design to evaluate the new program, allowing program spots to be distributed fairly while reliably estimating the program’s impact. All eligible Detroit students (624 in total) continue to receive scholarships, and about two-thirds can receive the new services. Detroit Promise students are representative of the city: 81 percent of students identify as African-American, and 78 percent do not live with a parent who has earned a bachelor’s degree. (For more information about the program, study design, and student population, visit www.mdrc.org/project/detroit-promise-path.) A second class of students will join the study in the fall of 2017. MDRC will track all students’ persistence, credit accumulation, and graduation for three years. Early findings from the first year are promising.

- **Detroit Promise Path was implemented with fidelity to the model and participation was high.** More than 95 percent of students responded to coaches’ outreach and two-thirds of enrolled students met with coaches as directed.
- **Students appreciate the program.** Ninety-six percent of surveyed students who had been in contact with a coach said the program was “valuable” or “very valuable” to them.
- **The program had a sizable impact on enrollment in the second semester and on full-time enrollment in the first and second semesters.** The figure on this page shows enrollment in the first year.

WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN FOR OTHER COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS?

Programs that are not achieving the academic success they would like should consider the other barriers students may be facing. MDRC’s wealth of experience designing and evaluating scholarship programs has produced several important findings that may be instructive: Low-income students face many expenses beyond tuition they cannot afford. Even when expenses are covered, they often struggle with insufficient support as they navigate complex college processes, an academic environment very different from high school, and competing demands such as work and child care. In Detroit, the program’s coaches are prepared to assist students with these topics and help them stay enrolled. Tracking students’ participation electronically allows staff members to monitor them and improve the program to meet their needs — and, most important, to help them stay in college. In addition to the Detroit Promise, MDRC is launching a partnership with the Los Angeles Promise in 2017. MDRC welcomes other Promise programs seeking to move from access to success.

Figure 1. Detroit Promise Path Increases Enrollment



SOURCE: MDRC calculations using transcript data from the Detroit Promise Path colleges.

NOTES: Estimates are for students who were randomly assigned by September 2016, a total of 588 students.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Estimates are adjusted by site and ACT score.