

MOTOR CITY

MOMENTUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Three Years of the
Detroit Promise Path
Program for Community
College Students**

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Colleen Sommo
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TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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(Youth Policy Lab at the University of Michigan)



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OVERVIEW

Postsecondary education is widely seen as a necessity in the modern economy. Yet students at community colleges often face steep odds when it comes to completing a degree. Community colleges serve many low-income and first-generation students as well as students of color, all of whom must contend with many obstacles to success. These include the inability to pay for expenses not covered by financial aid, a lack of academic preparedness, a confusing array of requirements and paperwork for financial aid and course selection, and competing priorities such as the need to work. At the same time, two-year colleges are severely underfunded, and therefore are unable to provide the level of personal support that many students require. The three-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time freshmen in community colleges is only 35 percent.

MDRC and the Detroit Regional Chamber partnered in 2016 to create the Detroit Promise Path (DPP), an evidence-based student services program designed to help more Detroit high school graduates—among the nation’s most underserved students—enroll and persist in college, accumulate credits, graduate, and potentially transfer to a four-year program. DPP builds on an existing scholarship program called the Detroit Promise, launched in 2013, which covers community college tuition and fees for up to three years of attendance. At the heart of DPP are campus coaches who help students acclimate to college, proactively reach out to them with help and reminders about tasks and deadlines, and offer a sympathetic ear to young people who may be grappling with personal challenges—all with the goal of keeping them in school and on track to graduate.

This report presents findings from MDRC’s randomized controlled trial evaluation of DPP at five Detroit community colleges. The campus coach and other DPP program components were well-implemented at four out of five of the colleges, and program participation was high. More than 90 percent of program group students responded to coaches’ initial outreach, and participation in coaching meetings remained high throughout the follow-up period for students enrolled in college. A student survey found that nearly 90 percent of respondents rated the program as valuable or highly valuable.

Many students continued to face significant obstacles to enrollment and persistence, however. Only about 65 percent of students in the program group enrolled in courses in the fall semester that they applied for a Promise scholarship. Of these enrolled students, more than 40 percent dropped out of school after one year. Students most often identified nonacademic barriers such as financial issues as the reason they dropped out of school.

The evaluation found that more students in the DPP program stayed enrolled in school and earned more credits, compared with students who were offered the Promise scholarship alone. However, at the three-year mark, there was no evidence of an impact on degrees earned.

It is clear that promoting college access is not enough. Programs must also tackle *progress*—helping students stay in school and get to graduation. The Detroit Promise scholarship combined with the Detroit Promise Path program supports is a step toward helping students stay in school. But there is still more to be done to help them get to graduation, too.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MDRC would like to thank the Detroit Regional Chamber for the opportunity to partner on the design and evaluation of the Detroit Promise Path program. DPP's leadership and campus coaches are the ones who make the program work. We are continuously impressed by your dedication and hard work on behalf of your students. In addition to each of the coaches, we recognize DPP staff members Monica Rodriguez and Wytrice Harris, who lived and breathed the program.

MDRC would also like to thank the Youth Policy Lab at the University of Michigan, which has been a wonderful research partner throughout this project. The Youth Policy Lab made possible some of the work that we had originally only wished for, including the student survey and the student interviews. In particular, we thank Brian Jacob for his expertise and guidance, Andrea Plevak for her support of the project, and YPL research assistants Abigail Orrick, Brittany Vasquez and Jannette Norrington for their work on collecting and analyzing student feedback. We look forward to continued partnerships on this and other University of Michigan research projects.

We would also like to thank the funders of this demonstration, without whom neither the program nor the study would have been possible. The program and the evaluation are primarily funded by the Michigan Education Excellence Foundation, with additional support from The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ford Foundation, JP Morgan Chase, and The Kresge Foundation. The Detroit Promise Path evaluation is affiliated with MDRC's College Promise Success Initiative, which was funded by the Ascendium Education Group.

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We also thank MDRC staff members for their contributions to this study and this report. At MDRC, we thank Rob Ivry, Michelle Ware, and Sean Blake, without whom this evaluation would not have gotten off the ground. Michael J. Weiss, Evan Weissman, Rashida Welbeck, Katie Beal, Ann Kottner, and Jill Kirschenbaum provided insightful comments on the early drafts of this report. Stanley Dai and Kalito Luna conducted the data programming for this report. Jill Kirschenbaum edited the report and Ann Kottner prepared it for publication.

Finally, but most importantly, we express deep gratitude to the students who participated in this demonstration. Without you, there would be no study. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“My coach made going to school easy. I never really had someone to just listen and help me release my ideas and feelings. She is wonderful.”

“My coach took time to get to know me, then discussed the program, financial aid. . . . He advised me on things I had no knowledge of.”

“I deal with a lot of family issues and I can talk to my coach about anything. . . . He helped me figure out how to talk to my family and convince them that college is a stepping-stone to a better life. He lit the way for me in college to make something positive of myself.”

– THREE STUDENTS IN THE DETROIT PROMISE PATH PROGRAM

Many of today’s college students—especially those in community colleges—are the first in their families to pursue higher education. Millions of undergraduates come from low-income families and battle self-doubt from within and stereotypes from without. Yet most community colleges are severely underfunded, and therefore are unable to provide the level of personal support that these students need. For these and other reasons, the three-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time freshmen in community colleges is only 35 percent.¹

But what if things were different? This report is the final publication from MDRC’s evaluation of the Detroit Promise Path (DPP) program. DPP is an evidence-based student services program for community college students. DPP was created by MDRC and the Detroit Regional Chamber in 2016 to help more Detroit high school graduates apply to and persist in college, accumulate credits, graduate, and potentially transfer to a four-year college. DPP builds on an existing three-year scholarship program called the Detroit Promise, which covers any gap between financial aid and tuition and fees for high school graduates to attend local community colleges. At the heart of DPP are campus coaches who help students acclimate to college, proactively reach out to them with help and reminders about tasks and deadlines, and offer a sympathetic ear to young people who may be grappling with personal challenges—all with the goal of keeping them in school and on track to graduate.

This report presents findings from MDRC’s randomized controlled trial evaluation of DPP at five Detroit-area community colleges. About two-thirds of eligible students in 2016 and 2017 were randomly assigned to be offered DPP (the program group), while the rest were assigned to

1. National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, “Winter 2019-20, 200 Percent Graduation Rates component (provisional data)” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Website: <https://ies.ed.gov/>.

receive the Detroit Promise scholarship alone (the control group). The main findings include the following:

- The coaching and other DPP program components were well implemented at four out of five colleges, and program participation was high. More than 90 percent of program group students responded to coaches' initial outreach, and participation in coaching meetings remained high throughout the three-year follow-up period for students enrolled in college.
- DPP was viewed favorably by program group students at all of the colleges. A student survey found that nearly 90 percent of respondents rated the program as valuable or highly valuable.
- Many students continued to face substantial obstacles to enrollment and persistence. About 65 percent of students who were offered the full DPP program enrolled in courses in the fall semester that they applied for a Promise scholarship. Of these enrolled students, more than 40 percent dropped out of school after only one year.
- Compared with students who were offered the Promise scholarship alone, more students in DPP stayed enrolled in school and earned more credits. But after three years, there was no evidence of an increase in degrees earned.
- Direct costs of DPP were \$648 per student per year, for a total of \$1,944 per student over the course of the three-year program. By enabling students to take more courses, the program added indirect costs of an additional \$366 per student, which from the college perspective were at least partially offset by the increased revenue associated with students taking those courses.

During the two study cohorts in 2016 and 2017, about 625 students per year received the Promise scholarship and of those students, about 400 students per year were offered the new Detroit Promise Path program.² A total of 1,268 students are in the study.

The Detroit Promise Path has been scaled up over the past three years to serve more students. Beginning in 2018, DPP expanded and now serves *all* incoming students at four of the five Detroit-area community colleges that participated in the study. This program shows that College Promise programs—a popular intervention aimed at improving college access by making tuition free—can be leveraged to address both college access and academic progress.

2. The final semester of the program for the 2017 cohort was spring 2020, the same semester that the coronavirus pandemic hit Detroit. The city, and the students in the study, were highly impacted by the pandemic. The program quickly shifted to a fully remote version during this semester of the study period as well as subsequent semesters for later, non-study cohorts. Student need was drastically higher during this semester.

THE DETROIT PROMISE PATH PROGRAM MODEL

Detroit’s community college students face steep odds. They must grapple with considerable institutional issues such as insufficient advising and counseling staff, high rates of contingent or adjunct faculty teaching introductory courses, and a confusing array of requirements and paperwork for financial aid and course selection.³ Community college students are referred to remedial courses at high rates, delaying their expected time of graduation.⁴ They are often working while in school and cannot always prioritize studying.⁵ For students from low-income households, the need to work is especially acute, as financial aid may cover tuition and fees but not transportation to school, child care, food, or other necessities.⁶ At the same time, students may receive enough aid for tuition but not enough to purchase all of their textbooks.

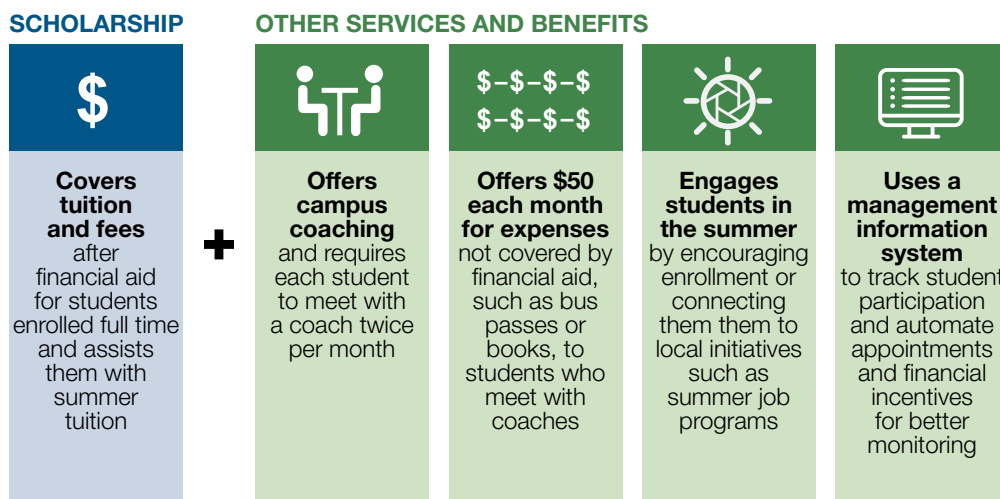
Black students face additional hurdles such as self-doubt, a sense of not belonging, stereotyping from faculty or other students, and both subtle and overt racism. These challenges can be further amplified for students who are coming from predominantly Black high schools in Detroit to predominantly White colleges in the suburbs.⁷ And because community college students typically spend little time on campus outside of class time—they are unlikely to live on campus, participate in clubs, or play sports—their emotional connection to college can be more tenuous, further reducing their sense of belonging in the college community compared with students at residential universities.⁸

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3. Jolanta Juskiewicz, *Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data 2015* (Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges, 2015); Kevin J. Dougherty, Hana Lahr, and Vanessa S. Morest, *Reforming the American Community College: Promising Changes and Their Challenges*, CCRC Working Paper 98 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2017); Robert S. Feldman, *The First Year of College: Research, Theory, and Practice on Improving the Student Experience and Increasing Retention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
 4. Elizabeth Ganga, Amy Mazzariello, and Nikki Edgecombe, *Developmental Education: An Introduction for Policymakers* (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2018).
 5. Erin Dunlop Velez, Alexander Bentz, and Caren A. Arbeit, *Working Before, During, and After Beginning at a Public 2-Year Institution* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2018).
 6. Sandy Baum, *Student Debt: Rhetoric and Realities of Higher Education Financing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Jennifer Ma, Sandy Baum, Pender Matea, and Meredith Welch, *Trends in College Pricing* (New York: The College Board, 2017).
 7. See Delila Owens, Krim Lacey, Glinda Rawls, and JoAnne Holbert-Quince, “First-Generation African-American Male College Students,” *The Career Development Quarterly* 58, 4 (2010): 291-300, and Shaun R. Harper and Isaiah Simmons, *Black Students at Public Colleges and Universities* (Los Angeles: USC Race and Equity Center, 2019) for more. In the DPP study, some of the colleges are predominantly Black institutions and some are predominantly White institutions.
 8. Regina Deil-Amen, “Socio-Academic Integrative Moments: Rethinking Academic and Social Integration Among Two-Year College Students in Career-Related Programs,” *Journal of Higher Education* 82, 1 (2011): 54-91; Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

The Detroit Promise, administered by the Detroit Regional Chamber and launched in 2013, is one of more than 300 free college or College Promise scholarships nationwide. These are often called “place-based scholarships,” in that they offer to cover college tuition and fees for all the students in a particular geographic area—in the case of the Detroit Promise, the entire city of Detroit. Like most College Promise scholarships, the Detroit Promise is available to all high school graduates and does not have merit-based eligibility criteria. Students may use their scholarship to attend any community college in the greater Detroit area.

In the early years of Detroit Promise, Chamber staff members observed that the scholarship was helping more high school graduates enroll in college initially, but large numbers of scholarship recipients were dropping out before their second year. The Chamber wanted to incorporate student success components into the scholarship so Promise students would not only enroll in school but would be more likely to succeed there. As a result, MDRC and the Chamber created the Detroit Promise Path, which added four evidence-based service components to the existing Promise scholarship (shown in Figure ES.1).

FIGURE ES.1 Detroit Promise Path Program Model



The heart of DPP is its campus coaching component. Students begin meeting with a coach in the late summer before their first semester of college. They are also offered a financial incentive to attend coaching meetings: a monthly gift card that is refilled with \$50 each month they meet with their coach as directed. The money helps students pay for expenses not covered by financial aid. DPP lasts for the full three years of the Promise scholarship, including summer semesters, when students are encouraged to enroll in classes (paid for by the scholarship) or engage in a local summer jobs program called Grow Detroit’s Young Talent. DPP program operation is supported by a management information system that coaches use to track participation in coaching sessions and to do outreach via email, phone, and text messages.

The present study enrolled students in 2016 and 2017. Participants’ average age at study entry was 18, as the Detroit Promise scholarship serves recent high school graduates. Students must enroll in college within three semesters of high school graduation in order to access the scholarship,

and most students enroll in the fall semester immediately following graduation. In the study, well over 90 percent of students identified as people of color, primarily as Black. Four out of five students reported that they did not live with a parent who had completed a bachelor's degree.

This evaluation of DPP aims to understand the program's implementation, effects, and costs. The report first presents a descriptive analysis of the program's implementation and academic outcomes for program students only. The findings are supported by evidence from interviews, focus groups, a student survey, program participation data, and college transcript records. Second, the report presents estimates of the program's impact on student academic outcomes, using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, widely accepted as the gold standard of evaluation designs. In the RCT, students were randomly assigned to be eligible either for DPP (the program group) or for the Detroit Promise scholarship alone (the control group). Random assignment is a fair way to distribute limited spaces in a program, and it also allows unbiased estimation of the program's impacts. The difference between the two groups represents the impact of the additional program components. This is not an evaluation of College Promise programs generally; the control group students in this study continued to receive the Detroit Promise scholarship.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

Overall, DPP was implemented with high quality and with high fidelity to the model at four of the five colleges. The service contrast, or the difference between what program group students received and what control group students received, was meaningful. Across cohorts and semesters, DPP students had positive views of the program, particularly their relationships with their coaches. In the words of one student, "My coach is a generous person. He is patient with me concerning my financial aid and he offers so much thoughtful advice with whatever issue may arise." In a student survey, nearly 90 percent of respondents described DPP as valuable.

Yet students reported that they continued to face significant barriers to success. Many struggled to afford basic needs; financial issues—whether academic, such as being able to afford textbooks, or nonacademic, such as being at risk of eviction and homelessness—were students' most serious concerns.

These factors may underlie the high rates of students who did not enroll initially or who left college after a few semesters. Of the students who completed their Detroit Promise scholarship application during summer 2016 and summer 2017 and therefore entered the study, only about 65 percent of them enrolled in courses the subsequent fall semester. This is much lower than seen in other MDRC community college studies.

Impact Findings from the Randomized Controlled Trial

This study prespecified three main or confirmatory outcomes: enrollment, credits earned, and degrees earned. As shown in Table ES.1 over the three years of the program, DPP helped more

TABLE ES.1 Three-Year Academic Outcomes Summary

Outcome	Program Group	Control Group	Difference	P-Value
Average number of semesters enrolled	2.9	2.5	0.4***	0.002
Average number of semesters enrolled, categorical ^a				
0	18.2	20.1	-1.9	0.417
1 - 2	32.6	40.5	-7.9***	0.005
3 - 4	19.2	17.5	1.8	0.436
5 - 6	30.0	21.9	8.1***	0.001
Total credits earned	17.1	13.5	3.7***	0.001
Earned a credential (%)	7.2	6.8	0.4	0.771
Sample size (total = 1,268)	829	439		

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using data from the National Student Clearinghouse and the Detroit Promise Path colleges.

NOTES: Estimates are adjusted by site, interaction between race and gender, and ACT and SAT score.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Weights are calculated to make the effective (weighted) random assignment ratio the same in all random assignment blocks. The effective random assignment ratio is equal to the full sample's random assignment ratio.

Credential measures include three full academic years of data (in other words, fall, spring, and summer for three full years). Enrollment and credit measures include these same data except the final summer session (in other words, Year 3 summer is not available).

^aAverage number of semesters is the primary outcome in this analysis. The categorical version of this outcome is a complementary measure added to aid the interpretation of the primary measure.

students make progress in higher education, based on the positive impacts on enrollment and credits earned, but it did not have a measurable effect on credential completion in this time-frame. Thirty percent of students in the program group enrolled in five or six semesters (out of six) compared with 21.9 percent of students in the control group, for an estimated impact of 8.1 percentage points. Program group students earned more credits than the control group students, on average (17.1 credits compared with 13.5 credits, respectively), for an estimated impact of 3.7 credits—a 27 percent increase.

At the end of three years, 7.2 percent of the students in the program group earned a degree or certificate compared with 6.8 percent of students in the control group. The difference, 0.4 percentage points, is neither practically nor statistically significant. While there is no measurable effect on credential completion at this time, it is possible that the impact on credit *accumulation* may lead to an impact on completion in the future.

Program Costs

DPP cost an estimated \$840 per student per year for a total of \$2,520 per student over the three-year program—the college-perspective net cost. This includes *direct costs*, such as staff salaries and monthly student financial incentives, and *indirect costs*, such as the cost of additional credits taken by students in the program group compared with students in the control group, as well as increased revenue from those additional credits to the college. The total direct cost per program group student per year was \$648. (Both the net and total direct costs include program group members who did not enroll.) Direct costs make up the bulk of the total cost of the program. More than half of the cost of the program came from the coaching component—namely, employing the campus coaches who worked directly with students.

At this cost, the program helped more students persist in college and earn more credits. However, because DPP did not lead to more degrees earned at the three-year mark, it was not cost-effective for improving degree receipt.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the six semesters of the program, DPP helped more students make progress in college; they enrolled in more semesters and earned more credits. At this point, however, there is no evidence of an increase in degrees earned. MDRC hopes to secure funding for longer-term follow-up to continue to track these students. Around 30 percent remained enrolled in college during the final semester of follow-up.

The Detroit Promise Path program was implemented well, and nearly all students contacted for the survey and qualitative study expressed a highly positive view of the program and of the help they received from their coaches. Yet these students continued to face great barriers to success. More research on how to address these issues is required.

It is clear that college access is not enough. Programs must tackle both *access*—helping students get to college—and *progress*—helping them stay in school and get to graduation. The Detroit Promise Path program model is one way that College Promise and other free college programs can support students' academic success. However, there is more to be done to improve graduation rates as well.