TEXAS
The University of Texas at Austin

SEEKING COLLABORATORS: POSTSECONDARY PURSUITS AND PROMISE PROGRAMS

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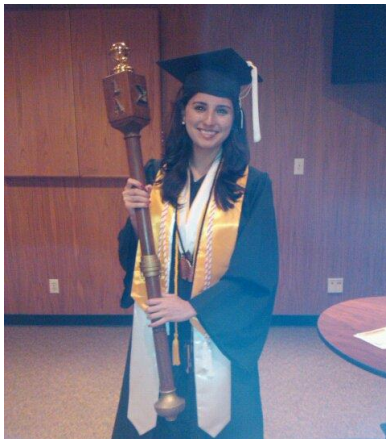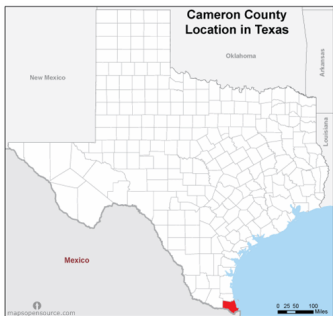
Outline

I. **Who I am**

II. Why I'm Here

III. Promise Programs and Administrative Burden

IV. Potential for Collaboration

Who I am

College Completion, the Texas Way: An Examination of the Development of College Completion Policy in a Distinctive Political Culture

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Background: College-completion policies dominate state higher education policy agendas. Yet we know little about how policy actors make decisions—and what sources of evidence they use—within this policy domain.

Focus of Study: This study explores the use of evidence in college-completion policymaking in depth, focusing on Texas. In addition to exploring policymakers' use of different types of information, this study examines the role played by intermediaries.

Research Design: We employed a qualitative case study design drawing on interviews with 32 policy actors engaged in college-completion policy in Texas. Our analysis consisted of both deductive coding (based on our a priori coding scheme) and inductive coding (based on emerging themes) to arrive at our four major findings.

Findings/Results: The analysis revealed four primary findings. The first theme suggests an insular culture of college-completion policymaking: Policymakers at various levels preferred Texas-based data and rejected the notion that external groups contributed to setting the college completion agenda in Texas. Second, business groups and a business ethos permeated college-completion policymaking in Texas. Third, research evidence was seldom employed in this policy process, partly because policymakers prefer concise and timely information. Finally, the study uncovered a new tactic for supplying research employed by certain intermediaries: punchy messaging, which was effective at garnering attention but also yielded unintended consequences.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Overwhelmingly, higher education policy actors tended to prefer Texas-based data. Respondents cited three major reasons for this preference: the high quality of the state higher education coordinating board's data, Texas's unique demographics,

Completion at the Expense of Access? The Relationship Between Performance-Funding Policies and Access to Public 4-Year Universities

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Efforts to improve college-completion rates have dominated higher education policy agendas. Performance-based funding (PBF) intends to improve college completion and links state funding for public colleges and universities to performance measures. One critique of PBF policies is that institutions might restrict student access. This study uses a difference-in-differences design and institution-level data from 2001 to 2014 to examine whether 4-year, public institutions become more selective or enroll fewer underrepresented students under PBF. Our findings, supported by various robustness checks, suggest that institutions subject to PBF enroll students with higher standardized test scores and enroll fewer first-generation students. PBF models tied to institutions' base funding are more strongly associated with increased standardized test scores and enrollment of Pell students.

Keywords: access; equity; higher education, state educational policies

For nearly a decade, policymakers in the United States have pursued a college-completion agenda—one that emphasizes the completion of postsecondary degrees and certificates (Lester, 2014). Public rhetoric suggests the focus on completion represents an explicit shift away from a college-access agenda (Adams, 2015). Yet gaps in college access across demographic groups persist; in 2014, 84% of high school graduates from high-income families went to college compared to 58% of low-income graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Equity-focused higher education observers worry the college-completion agenda not only may deemphasize access for historically underserved groups but also may counter the college-access agenda by producing perverse incentives (Kantrowitz, 2012). For instance, campus officials could seek to improve completion rates precisely by limiting access to students deemed less likely to graduate (Lester, 2014).

Proposals for improving college-completion rates abound, and performance-based funding (PBF) has been particularly appealing to state policymakers. In 2017, 35 states employed PBF models to fund either some or all of their public higher education institutions (Li, 2018a). PBF models link state appropriations for public colleges and universities to institutional performance on metrics identified in the funding models (e.g., degrees awarded). These policies warrant scrutiny given their prevalence across states and their potential for yielding negative unintended consequences, such as limiting access to historically underserved groups (Dougherty et al., 2016).

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the degree to which PBF is associated with restricting access to public 4-year universities and how these potential effects differ based on key institutional and policy characteristics. To date, the literature on PBF has overwhelmingly focused on policy impacts related to *intended* outputs (e.g., Dougherty et al., 2016; Hillman et al., 2014b; Hillman et al., 2015; Hillman et al., 2018; Rabovsky, 2012; Rutherford & Rabovsky, 2014; Sanford & Hunter, 2011); these studies have generally found null effects of PBF on completion metrics (see Bell et al., 2018, for a meta-analysis of this research). Recent quantitative and qualitative studies also suggest PBF may limit access for different groups of students (Birdsall, 2018; Dougherty et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Kelchen, 2018a; Kelchen & Stedrak, 2016; Li & Zumeta, 2016; Umbricht et al.,

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Promise for Whom? "Free-College" Programs and Enrollments by Race and Gender Classifications at Public, 2-Year Colleges

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Promise programs are proliferating across the United States, with wide variation in their design. Using national data on 33 Promise programs affecting single, 2-year colleges, this study examines program effects on first-time, full-time college enrollments of students by race/ethnicity and gender classification. Results suggest Promise programs are associated with large percent increases in enrollments of Black and Hispanic students, especially students classified as females, at eligible colleges. Promise programs with merit requirements are associated with higher enrollment of White and Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander female students; those with income requirements are negatively associated with enrollment of most demographic groups. More generous Promise programs are associated with greater enrollment increases among demographic groups with historically higher levels of postsecondary attainment.

Keywords: *community colleges, higher education, postsecondary education, minorities, equity, quasi-experimental analysis*

DISPARITIES in college access across demographic groups are persistent in the United States. For instance, in 2016, 57% of recent high school graduates who are Black enrolled in college, compared to 70% of White high school graduates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). The gap in college access and degree attainment contributes to widening socioeconomic inequality, particularly since there are substantial economic benefits associated with college attendance, even for those who do not complete a degree (Carnevale et al., 2012; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Toutkoushian et al., 2013).

Policy interventions to encourage college-going are numerous (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016), and these initiatives may have differentiated effects across demographic groups (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2017; Chen, 2008; Herbaut & Geven, 2019). This study examines the heterogeneous effects on various demographic groups of one intervention aimed at increasing college access: Promise programs. Promise programs, also known as place-based aid programs, guarantee coverage of a substantial portion of college tuition and fees for students who live in a particular place (Miller-Adams, 2015). These programs have existed across the United States since at least the late 1990s but have garnered greater attention in recent years as they have been proposed by U.S. presidential candidates (Mangan, 2019; Mishory, 2018). An exact count of Promise programs is unknown, since these programs are diffusing rapidly and definitions of Promise programs vary, but one inventory documented at least 144 Promise programs as of mid-2019 (Miller-Adams

I'm here because...

- I want research to be used to inform policy and practice
  - Research shows this is most effective through relationships and robust partnerships
- I want to improve opportunities and outcomes for people in Texas

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Applying the Framework of Administrative Burdens

TUITION-FREE (PROMISE) PROGRAMS

College Promise Landscape

Source: College Promise

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS

Effects on Student Outcomes

- Can increase high school graduation (Carruthers & Fox, 2016)
- Large increases in college enrollment (Bartik et al., 2021; Bell, 2021; Bifulco et al., 2019; Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Gándara & Li, 2020; Gurantz, 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Page et al., 2019; Swanson & Ritter, 2020)
    - Can be larger for low-income students & Black & Hispanic students (Anderson et al., 2023; Gándara & Li, 2020)
- Can shift students from non-eligible institutions to Promise-eligible institutions (Bell 2021; Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Page et al., 2019; Perna et al., 2018; Gurantz, 2022)

Effects of Student Outcomes

- Can increase GPA & persistence (Bifulco et al., 2019; Page et al., 2019; Swanson et al., 2020; Bell 2021)

- Can improve transfer (Bell, 2021; Bell & Gándara, 2021)

- Can increase bachelors & associates degree attainment (Bartik et al., 2021; Bell, 2021; Bell & Gándara, 2021; Swanson & Ritter, 2020; Harris et al., 2018)

Effects of Student Outcomes

- Can reduce student loan debt (Odle et al., 2021)

- Can increase wages, though effects are inconsistent across studies (Carruthers et al., 2020; Borg et al., 2021; Hershbein 2021)

Why do college promise programs improve student outcomes?

1. Can decrease financial burden
2. Can enhance perceptions of affordability
3. Can reduce financial uncertainty
4. Can make college attendance an expectation
5. Can improve college-going culture and marshal more college-going supports in high school
6. Can provide additional supports (academic, navigational, career-related) in college

Perceptions of Affordability

"as dramatic as it sounds, it's the reason I kind of went to university because by myself and even by the support of my entire family, **I still would not be able to afford it**"

- Marisol

Uncertainty Reduction

- "in the beginning I was just applying for scholarships blindly and just hop[ing[that it covers everything... But knowing that **it's going to be covered for sure, for sure**. I have a realistic goal now of how much money I'm going to have to find somehow through scholarships or grants. So it brings down that stress a lot and makes your goals kind of more easier to achieve... And then I think it's just it takes a burden off of you and also your parents because they [don't] have to worry about covering tuition" - Sarah

Despite evidence of effects...
The devil is in the details

Eligibility requirements

Institutions included

Scholarship structure

Non-tuition supports

Eligibility Requirements

- Financial need
- Merit (e.g., GPA, attendance)
- U.S. citizenship
- No degree earned
- Minimum credit hour enrollment
- Community service / internship
- No loan default
- Avoiding illegal drug use
- Postgraduate residency requirement
- Recency of high school graduation

Institutions Included

- Single college
- Group of college partners
- Only public two-year colleges
- All public (two-year and four-year) colleges
- All nonprofit (public and private colleges)
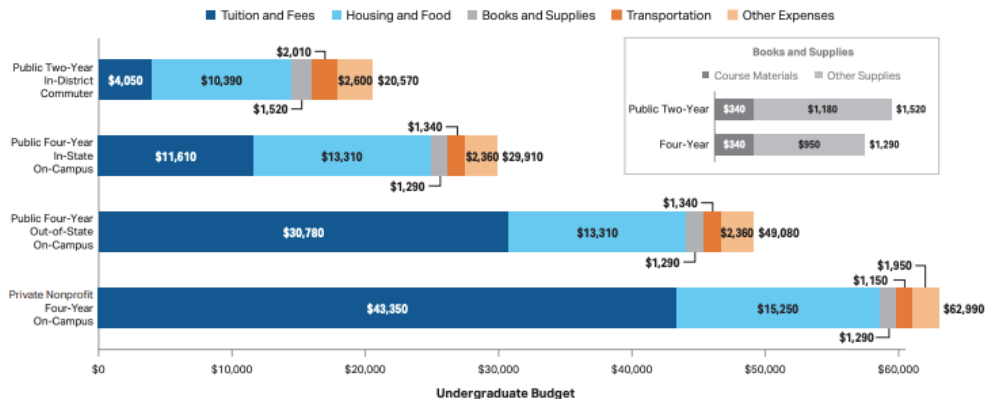
Scholarship Structure

- First dollar: Applied to tuition bill before all other aid (stacks on to other aid)

- Last dollar: Applied to tuition bill after all other aid

- Middle dollar: Applied to tuition bill after *some* other aid but before others

- Last dollar plus: Applied to tuition bill after all other aid *plus* a stipend regardless of other aid

Non-Tuition Costs

Student Budgets, 2024-25

In 2024-25, average budgets for full-time undergraduate students range from $20,570 for public two-year in-district students to $62,990 for private nonprofit four-year students. At public four-year institutions, average budgets are $29,910 for in-state students and $49,080 for out-of-state students.

FIGURE CP-1 Average Estimated Full-Time Undergraduate Budgets (Enrollment-Weighted) by Sector, 2024-25

Legend: ■ Tuition and Fees ■ Housing and Food ■ Books and Supplies ■ Transportation ■ Other Expenses

Public Two-Year In-District Commuter: $4,050 | $10,390 | $1,520 | $2,010 | $2,600 = $20,570

Public Four-Year In-State On-Campus: $11,610 | $13,310 | $1,290 | $1,340 | $2,360 = $29,910

Public Four-Year Out-of-State On-Campus: $30,780 | $13,310 | $1,290 | $1,340 | $2,360 = $49,080

Private Nonprofit Four-Year On-Campus: $43,350 | $15,250 | $1,290 | $1,150 | $1,950 = $62,990

Books and Supplies:
Legend: ■ Course Materials ■ Other Supplies
Public Two-Year: $340 | $1,180 = $1,520
Four-Year: $340 | $950 = $1,290

X-axis: Undergraduate Budget ($0, $10,000, $20,000, $30,000, $40,000, $50,000, $60,000)

NOTE: Expense categories are based on institutional budgets for students as reported in the College Board's Annual Survey of Colleges. Figures for tuition and fees and housing and food mirror those reported in Table CP-1. Data for books and supplies, transportation, and other expenses are projected and reflect the average amounts allotted in determining the total cost of attendance and do not necessarily reflect actual student expenditures. Books and supplies may include course materials such as hardcopy textbooks, online textbooks, textbook rentals, and other supplies such as a personal computer.

SOURCE: College Board, Annual Survey of Colleges; NCES, IPEDS Fall 2022 Enrollment data; Student Watch and Student Monitor.

Source: College Board, 2024

Non-Tuition Supports Included

- Books and other course materials
- Transportation
- One-time or recurring grants / stipends
- Academic support (tutoring, advising, learning communities, designated counselor/advisor)
- Student services (peer mentoring, success coaching, workshops)
- Career/workforce support
- Priority enrollment
- Cohort models
- Summer engagement activities

Program Financing

- Public entities
  - Local / state appropriations
  - Taxes (sales, property); tax-increment financing
  - Lottery revenues
  - Interest earnings on public endowment
  - Federal aid (Pell Grant, pandemic relief funds)
- Private entities
  - Businesses
  - Philanthropic foundations
  - Individual donors
- College funding
  - College foundations / development

Some questions I'm interested in

- How do students perceive promise / tuition- free programs?
    - To what extent do they know about these programs?
- How do these programs affect student outcomes, including college enrollment, completion, workforce outcomes, and perceptions about the value of higher education?
    - How do these effects differ across groups of students?
- How do specific characteristics of these programs (e.g., first- or last-dollar, eligibility criteria, additional supports) differentially affect student outcomes?
- Where these programs exist (i.e., where students do not have to pay tuition), what factors hinder college student success?

What else do you wish you knew about Promise programs?

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

Administrative Burden

Learning costs: What are the *informational barriers/areas of confusion*?

Compliance costs: What are the eligibility/paperwork requirements leading to *onerous experiences*?

Psychological costs: What are the *psychological burdens*?

Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. P. (2019). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Gándara, D., Acevedo, R. M., Cervantes, D., & Quiroz, M. A. (2023). Advancing a framework of racialized administrative burdens in higher education policy. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 1-29.

Reducing Administrative Burden

How can we reduce uncertainty and *informational barriers*?

Provide clear and simple messaging that students can attend college without paying tuition

Offer extensive communication

Avoid misleading students

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Reducing Administrative Burden

How can we streamline or eliminate **_onerous requirements_**?

Reduce paperwork burdens and consider automatic enrollment

Provide staffing/counselors to navigate requirements

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Reducing Administrative Burden

How can we minimize *psychological burdens*?

Reduce students' fear, anxiety, & feelings of stigma

Avoid overly restricting choice (institutions, majors)

Promote sense of belonging

Ensure sustainability of aid

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What else do you wish you knew about administrative burdens and college student opportunities, experiences, and outcomes?

Are you interested in...

- Evaluating:
  - A program or policy related to college student success that you implemented in the last few years?
  - A change to a program or policy related to college student success that you implemented in the last few years?
- Understanding which factors shape success for your students?
- Streamlining processes to improve success for your students?
- Identifying students who could benefit from additional support?
- Something else related to supporting college student success that could benefit from working with a researcher?

Thank you!

Please feel free to follow up via email: denisa.gandara@austin.utexas.edu