What is a college "Promise" program?
The creation and transformation of a concept, 2005-2022

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Promise programs are discussed as a policy movement that began with the 2005 launch of the Kalamazoo Promise. Since then, programs bearing the Promise label or sharing similar features have spread across the higher educational landscape, appearing in most states and across postsecondary sectors. Simultaneously, scholarly literature discussing these programs has burgeoned. And yet, scholars and others are unable to formulate a clear conception of what a Promise program is and what if anything sets such a program apart from other scholarship programs (e.g., state need-based grants). In this paper, we examine how scholars have discussed these programs over time. We begin with the initial theorization of the Kalamazoo Promise as a case and observe its use as a prototype in the formulation of a general model once "Promise program" was established as a category. We follow how the spread and transformation of "Promise programs" was reflected in repeated partial reconceptualization. We find three competing conceptual models emerging in sequence: 1) a thick, place-based causal model derived as a generalization of the Kalamazoo Promise, 2) a thin empirical model crafted in the aftermath of the launch of the Tennessee Promise, and 3) a partially acknowledged minimal or symbolic model advanced haltingly in response to critiques of last-dollar community college state programs. Scholarly conceptualization is largely reactive to empirical program diffusion and transformation, though scholarly idealization may have played a role in this diffusion itself.

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Abstract

Since the 2005 launch of the Kalamazoo Promise, organizational initiatives bearing the "Promise" label or sharing features with Kalamazoo's program have spread across the higher educational landscape, appearing in most states and across postsecondary sectors. Concurrently, scholarly literature discussing these programs has burgeoned. And yet, scholars and others are unable to formulate a clear conception of what a Promise program *is* and what if anything sets such a program apart from other scholarship programs (e.g., state need-based grants). In this paper, we examine how scholars have discussed these programs over time. We begin with the initial theorization of the Kalamazoo Promise as a case and observe its use as a prototype in the formulation of a general model once "Promise program" was established as a category. We follow how the diffusion and transformation of Promise programs was reflected in repeated partial reconceptualizations. We find three competing conceptual models emerging in sequence: 1) a *thick, place-based causal model* derived as a generalization of the Kalamazoo Promise, 2) a *thin empirical model* crafted in the aftermath of the launch of the Tennessee Promise, and 3) a partially acknowledged *minimal or symbolic model* advanced haltingly in response to critiques of last-dollar community college state programs. Scholarly conceptualization is largely reactive to empirical program diffusion and transformation, though scholarly idealization may have played a role in this diffusion itself.

Keywords: Promise programs, financial aid, college access, free college programs

The American higher educational landscape is, today, dotted with organizational efforts calling themselves "Promise programs", most of which claim to deliver "free tuition" or even "free college". These programs have been created, funded, and operated by a wide range of actors: local philanthropists, municipalities, school districts, colleges, corporations, and states. They vary greatly in terms of what they provide, where they can be used, and who is eligible. It is not clear how many of these programs exist; separate, imperfectly overlapping databases have been gathered by the Upjohn Institute (Miller-Adams et al., 2020), College Promise (2021), and UPenn's Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (Perna & Leigh n.d.).

Promise programs are also the subject of a rapidly proliferating body of academic discourse: empirical papers, policy analyses, program evaluations, literature reviews, and books. And yet, this literature stumbles over basic questions. What exactly *is* a "Promise" program? What counts as one, and what does not? What, if anything, distinguishes them from other scholarship/grant categories? What, if any, essential features do all Promise programs share? There is a striking lack of consensus regarding basic conceptualization, as we demonstrate below.

This conceptual fuzziness has been no obstacle to practical use, either in policymaking or in academic analysis. Year by year, dozens of new Promise programs are unveiled across the higher educational landscape, and scholars produce scores of new empirical studies, policy papers, and commentaries. Databases of both Promise programs and the associated research literature (College Promise, 2020; Upjohn Institute, 2021) are gathered, and scholars and policymakers convene yearly in PromiseNet conferences. College Promise, a national policy advocacy nonprofit founded in 2015, created and supported the College Promise Research Network and has convened national conferences since 2020. It is clear to all concerned parties that Promise programs "are" a recognized social entity, even if people disagree about what they are. Conceptual fuzziness may, one suspects, even facilitate program diffusion.

Nonetheless, there is *some* consistency to these programs. Most interested parties would agree that Promise programs have *something* to do with financial aid and college access, and that they are

distinct from, say, the federal Pell grant or New York's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP)—though the precise point(s) of distinction may arouse debate. They are also clearly thought to be good things, as they are proudly unveiled and advertised, and as they seem to advance higher educational virtues like the democratization of educational opportunity.

In what follows, we trace the history of the "Promise program" as a *concept*. We begin by examining the conceptualization of what came to be known as the "first" Promise program: the Kalamazoo Promise (KP) in 2005. This program predated the analytical creation of "Promise program" as a category; this category, as we show, was largely built around KP as prototype and ideal. We note the reciprocal relationship between existing theorization and KP; KP was both an instantiation of prevailing human capital theory and was conceptualized largely through its framework. What emerged around 2010 was the first of three "Promise" models: a complex or "thick" causal model of the Promise program as "place-based" scholarship (e.g., Miller-Adams, 2015). In the years after KP, the empirical composition of newer programs shifted, and this could no longer be ignored after the 2014 launch of the Tennessee Promise (TP). Subsequently, scholars articulated a stripped-down, empirically based "thin" model which could accommodate both KP and TP (Perna & Leigh, 2018), but which drained Promise programs of any specificity. Finally, we document the partial articulation, in response to criticism of TP-style state programs, of a third model of Promise programs which we call the "symbolic" causal model. We conclude with implications for research and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Most academic discussions of Promise programs begin by defining Promise programs in relation to some larger category of phenomena having a known history (i.e., financial aid programs). Doing so would undermine the present goal of analyzing how researchers and other commentators defined and categorized these programs over time. Instead, we begin by sketching the conceptual framework employed in our reading of the Promise literature.

Institutions, Meanings, and Categories

We interpret "Promise programs" as a nascent *institution* within higher education. Thus, we ground ourselves primarily in institutional theory (i.e., sociological neo-institutionalism), which has a robust presence in comparative education (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Ramirez, 2012), and has been called "macro-phenomenological" in orientation (Meyer, 2017).   The gist of this approach is that the world is thick with "institutions", assemblages of mutually reinforcing conceptualizations and practices which, though inter-subjective and historically contingent, are so deeply taken for granted that they appear to be objectively existent and so are used unreflectively. The process through which a social pattern becomes taken for granted is *institutionalization* (Jepperson, 1991).

Here, we are less interested in the *why* than in the *how* of institutionalization; how are new social "things" (e.g., "Promise programs") created, established, and transformed? To explore this, institutional theory draws on fine-grained theories of meaning developed in semiotics and cognitive linguistics.

Semiotics suggests that new cultural elements are created from existing elements. For semiotics, an element—a "sign"—consists of an arbitrary and conventional linking of signifier (written or spoken symbolization), signified (its "meaning"), and referent (the "thing" in the world). Signs are constituted in and through their relations with other signs, forming a semi-coherent system of signification (Barthes, 1964). New cultural elements are therefore transformations, concatenations, or syntheses of existing elements, and they take their "sense" through embeddedness in this larger system of meanings and practices.

Semiotic theory also suggests that social elements can be transformed over longer time frames because the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary and contingent. For instance, the term "culture" initially denoted an agricultural process, and over centuries drifted in meaning to refer first to childrearing and education, thence to the development of "high" civilizational products, and thence to the distinctive life-patterns of groups, and beyond (Williams, 1976). Cognitive linguistics supplies the

insight that such drift in meaning, while non-deterministic, is also not purely arbitrary; it functions through logics of association such as metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, the drift in the meaning of *culture* from agriculture to education (cultivation) derives from a metaphorical relationship between raising crops and raising children.

Cognitive linguistics provides an additional insight into content of institutionalized categories; indeed, institutions are usually categories (e.g., "community colleges") rather than single instances (e.g., "the Supreme Court"). Cognitive linguists (Croft & Cruise, 2004; Lakoff, 1987) argue that categorization is automatic and tacit, and that they work differently than we think they do. Our common-sense notion, which has also been philosophically formalized, is that categories are "containers" into which cases can be unambiguously assigned based on essential properties[1]. In practice, they argue, categories are more like branching systems built around exemplary cases or "prototypes" (Lakoff, 1987). Category membership is clearest for cases most like prototypes, with others included in graduated fashion relative to their (dis)similarity to prototypes. Category boundaries thus tend to be fuzzy.

The foregoing suggests some guidelines for grasping the development of "Promise programs". First, the concept will be built from previously existing cultural material. The first "Promise programs" will be understood first as instances of other categories. Second, the meaning and practice of "Promise program" may gradually shift over time while the label (the phrase "Promise program") remains constant. Third, as a category, "Promise program" will be built around prototypical cases, and category boundaries will be fuzzy.

Epistemic Communities, Theorization, and Academic Discourse

The development of "Promise programs"—that is, in practice—occurred through public acts of various organizations. But our focus here is on the development of the *meaning* of "Promise programs",

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[1] Lakoff calls this the "classical theory of categories", and it is the basis for crafting analytic definitions such as those advanced for "Promise programs".

and that occurred largely within academic discourse. Several concepts are useful in grasping how academics constructed this meaning over time: sensemaking, theorization, epistemic communities, and epistemic cultures.

Sense-making is the deliberate attempt to make sense of empirical events or observations which cannot be readily grasped through established categories (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), though of course ambiguous events need not trigger sense-making activity. When it does occur, sense-making involves the establishment of new categories from elements of existing ones. The concept of sense-making was developed in phenomenological studies of organizations, but of course academics are continuously engaged in sense-making activity. Indeed, academic discourse can be thought of as involving the rationalization and standardization of sense-making: integrating new cases to existing categories and/or generating new analytical abstractions by transforming or synthesizing existing concepts. We will note such efforts occurring in response to the appearance of well-publicized programs in Kalamazoo and Tennessee.

Academic sense-making occurs with reference to established, often dominant theoretical frameworks. In educational research, the dominant theoretical frame (worldwide) is human capital theory, which derives from economics, posits educational behavior to be rationally governed, and conceives of education as generating productive capacity (Marginson, 2019). But academic theories like human capital theory do not remain isolated within academic discourse. Derived in dialogue with the world of practice, they re-enter it to provide frameworks for interpretating and acting upon the world, sometimes generating self-fulfilling prophecies (Maitlis & Christiansen, 2014). Institutionalists note that the modern world is highly theorized, with state and organizational policies based on institutionalized theorizations— hypothesized general causal relationships between entities and forces (Strang & Meyer, 1993). Human capital theory is, according to institutionalists, a rationalized myth that constructs education policy on a global scale (Fiala & Lanford 1987). We will see the dominance of human capital frameworks in both generating Promise programs and in making sense out of them.

Sense-making, including the academic variety, occurs within epistemic communities, networks of schooled processionals held to be competent within given domains and who share frameworks for making sense of the world, including causal theories and normative orientations (Cross, 2013). In higher education, there is some separation between leading practitioners (college administrators) and those who research the field. But both are examples of what Scott (2008) calls "creative professionals" empowered to "augment and warrant" aspects of the frameworks that characterize their domain. Moreover, administrators and researchers are trained within similar schooled environments and are often in oral and written communication. They largely share conceptual and moral orientations. A tight-knit epistemic community emerged quickly in relation to Promise programs, consisting of both policy entrepreneurs and administrators creating programs and academics writing about them.

Academic epistemic communities are sites of what Knorr Cetina (2007) calls shared epistemic cultures. Within fields, constructions of problems and of epistemic objects take place (Allan, 2017). Established frameworks present problematics – sets of "problems" which frame a set of observations as interesting. For instance, the human capital framework conceives of inadequate accumulation of educated labor as a central problem to which empirical observations may contribute to understanding, while social justice frames see persistent disparities in educational outcomes as more compelling. Epistemic objects are constructed in relation to causal theories and normative problematics. Epistemic cultures also carry presentational conventions: established practices of problem presentation, ritualized citation of authoritative sources, employment of dominant theories in interpretation. We will see that not only theorizations but problematics are quite uniform across the literature on Promise programs.

The preceding conceptualization should sensitize the reader to perceive the emergence of dominant conceptualizations and problematics as a scholarly community and literature forms around the nascent institution of "Promise programs". We should not expect a sharp delineation between practice and analysis; leading Promise researchers were prominent in the development and dissemination of the

"Promise model". However, we also should note that program creation has been highly decentralized, and that scholarly formulations have been chasing rather than guiding practical program creation.

Promise Programs and Promise Research

Between 2005 and the present, the category "college Promise program" came into being and transformed dramatically. This happened across two domains: the "practical" domain of program creation and the discursive domain of academic research[2]. These involved somewhat distinct sets of actors, both of whom inhabit the world of higher education and who are situated in overlapping professional networks.

Some facts upon which there is consensus will aid in orientation. The "first" Promise program was the Kalamazoo Promise (KP), which was launched in 2005 and persists to this day. This program was created by anonymous private donors and apparently funded lavishly enough that it could operate "in perpetuity". It covers up to 100% of tuition for up to four years to any public college in Michigan (later, this included partial payment of tuition to in-state private colleges). This is provided on a "first-dollar" basis; that is the amount is unaffected by receipt of other grant aid (which may therefore be stacked). To be eligible, one must be a graduate of Kalamazoo Public Schools and reside in Kalamazoo. In fact, one must have attended KPS schools at least during grades 9-12 to obtain any scholarship (65% of tuition), and to receive the full scholarship (100%) one must have attended since kindergarten, with the award graduated by grades attended in between. Eligibility began with the 2005 graduating KPS cohort, and eligible students have 10 years after graduation to use the scholarship. There are no merit or need-based eligibility criteria (Miller-Adams, 2009a).

KP was well-covered in the media, and other scholarships quickly appeared elsewhere which had the word "Promise" in their title and/or were allegedly modeled after KP (Miller-Adams, 2015). In 2008,

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[2] The "creation of a promise program" is also largely a set of discursive acts, just as is the writing up of a study of such programs.

Michigan created legislation to seed and fund programs like KP in other struggling communities (termed "Promise Zones"). Academic study KP began shortly after its launch largely through the efforts of the Kalamazoo-based Upjohn Institute. This organization played a central role in facilitating category creation and diffusion (Miller-Adams, 2009b), as we discuss below.

Subsequently, there have been an expanding number of programs which claim to be or are identified as "Promise programs", and an expanding volume of literature discussing, describing, measuring the effects of, and commenting upon these programs. Databases of these programs and of the research on these programs are maintained, conferences held, and review articles written.

Statewide "Promise" programs first appeared in 2014 with the launch of the Tennessee Promise (TP). Like KP, TP received considerable publicity and spawned imitators. At least eight states have followed suit; the number depends on one's definition of Promise program. California passed legislation in 2017 (AB19) to seed and fund Promise programs at community colleges throughout its system. By 2022, hundreds of local "Promise" programs had been established across the country, including increasing numbers created and administered by private nonprofit colleges (e.g., the Drexel Promise).

Methods

We set out to exhaustively identify and assemble the texts that make up the public discourse on "Promise programs". We included, beyond the standard academic sources, publicly available working papers (especially those by researchers affiliated with the Upjohn Institute), policy reviews and commentaries by authors affiliated with educational think tanks and research organizations, and program evaluations. We excluded dissertations because they are rarely read extensively, and their relevant contributions will often appear elsewhere. We excluded journalism, including op-eds and commentaries, because including such work would have expanded our textual corpus past manageability.

Delimiting by content is challenging given the amorphous nature of "Promise programs" (discussed below). The main question is whether to include writing about neighboring grant-types such

as state merit grants. We opted for inclusion on this score, including not all texts about programs that are sometimes included in the "Promise" category.

We identified relevant texts through several strategies. First, we performed Google Scholar searches using the following terms: "Promise program", "College Promise", "free college", "free tuition", "free community college", "place-based program", and specific program names (e.g., "Kalamazoo Promise", "El Dorado Promise", "Tennessee Promise"). Second, using identified sources, we engaged in "referential backtracking" (Alexander 2020) and what we might call referential fore-tracking (as Google Scholar permits searching works that cite a publication). We began with highly cited articles (e.g., Perna & Leigh 2018), and continued with less-cited work. After making our way through the literature, we reached saturation—where we were no longer encountering additional texts. We also identified key researchers (e.g., Michelle Miller-Adams, Laura Perna) and thoroughly searched their published research, which Alexander (2020) calls "researcher checking". Finally, we checked our assembled list against the existing Promise literature databases maintained by the Upjohn Institute (2021) and College Promise (2020). As we conducted our search in late 2022, we include only texts from this year or prior.

We categorized pieces by genre: literature reviews and policy overviews, mostly quantitative empirical research, and mostly qualitative empirical research. We further classified by subject matter: the program(s) which are the publications' main concern. Our final list was of 194 texts: fourteen literature reviews or policy overviews of local programs, 21 literature reviews or policy overviews of statewide programs, four Promise-relevant general empirical policy studies (e.g., Ison 2021), 87 mostly quantitative empirical studies, and 68 mostly qualitative empirical studies.

We read texts in chronological order. This was straightforward except for papers that appeared in multiple forms, usually first as working papers and then as journal articles. In these cases, we used the date of final publication.

In each text, we concentrated on locating definitional activity, considered broadly. That is, we noted explicit definitions advanced, but also the "problematic" within which Promise programs were discussed (e.g., urban disinvestment, educational inequality), how the program category (e.g., Promise program, free college, etc.) was referenced and used, and the sorts of programs discussed in the literature review. We extracted blocks of text and coded these according to emerging themes (Braun & Clarke 2006), reworking these codes repeatedly as our analysis emerged.

The Development of "Promise Programs"

Prologue: What's in a Name?

The Kalamazoo Promise did not become the "first Promise program" until several years after it appeared. However, even when it appeared it was not the first instance of what eventually became its "kind". After the category's creation, and only because of its creation, researchers realized that there had already been "Promise programs" prior to KP. The oldest was a scholarship created in the small town of Philomath, Oregon, in 1959 (Miller-Adams, 2015). Others predating KP were in operation in Tangelo Park, Florida and Tamaqua, Pennsylvania. These programs had no relationship with each other and those that created them almost certainly were unaware of the other programs. But they, just like KP, were built of pre-existing elements that could be strapped together and made into a program. Once it was decided that KP was not only its own "thing" but the progenitor of a category, it became possible to notice that this category already had members, or better, to induct programs after the fact into the category (e.g., by inclusion in Promise databases).

Just as KP was built of existing elements, its name too had pre-existing meaning. The term "promise" was already applied widely to policies. These included financial aid policies, such as West Virginia's PROMISE scholarship (defined typically as a state merit scholarship, *not* a Promise program; see below), and Oklahoma's Promise (maybe a Promise program?). KP's creators were anonymous and made no statement about their program, so we know nothing about why they used this term. But as

Miller-Adams (2015, p. 13) points out, "promise" is polysemic and imbued with positive moral valence: commitment, loyalty, assurance. Even since KP, higher education hasn't secured a monopoly on the creation of "Promise" programs[3].

The Emergence of a Category, 2004-2015

This first period witnessed the slow creation of a category. The inciting event was the appearance of what will become the category's first prototype: the Kalamazoo Promise. Academic attention to KP followed fast upon its announcement. The Kalamazoo-based Upjohn Institute quickly obtained a US Department of Education grant (shared with researchers from the University of Western Michigan, also located in Kalamazoo) to study KP's progress and impacts, and Upjohn-affiliated researchers—Michelle Miller-Adams, Timothy Bartik, and Brad Hershbein—produced much of the early empirical research on and theorization of both KP and the emerging "Promise" model (Miller-Adams, 2009a, p. 64).

In the earliest academic discourse reacting to its launch, KP was not conceived of as the first instance of a new social category. Instead, it was defined in terms of existent categories, with specific or unique features noted. Three such categorizations initially appeared. First, and most commonly, KP was classed as a "scholarship". Miller-Adams (2007:4) discussed KP against the backdrop of the entire "scholarship field", which she described as "huge, making generalizations difficult". There were further sub-specifications within this category. Dowd (2008), Bartik et al. (2010), and Daun-Barnett (2011) described KP as a "tuition guarantee". Miron and Evergreen (2008) and Miller-Adams (2006, 2007), called KP a "universal" scholarship (in contrast to need- and merit-based scholarships) and one "based only on location" or "place-based". Second, KP was a "community intervention" with the goal of broad structural change, particularly economic revitalization (Miller-Adams, 2006; Miron & Evergreen, 2008). It was an "unprecedented experiment in economic development", Miller-Adams (2006, p. 1) wrote.

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[3] For example, the proposed "Georgia Promise" was a K-12 voucher program, and Delaware's PROMISE program (Promoting Optimal Mental health for Individuals through Supports and Empowerment) is a community-based service program.

"Behind the scholarship program is an economic development agenda that seeks to revitalize the city and the region through a substantial investment in public education." Third, KP (and the El Dorado Promise, an early imitator) were examples of "strategic philanthropy" (Landrum, 2008) or "transformational giving" (Strickland, 2009). Miller-Adams (2009a) integrated all three categorizations, calling KP a scholarship with specific characteristics, a "long-term investment" in the city, and a "not-so-simple gift". In none of this early work did terms like "Promise program", or "Promise scholarship", or even "place-based scholarship" appear to describe a *category* of programs.

The Kalamazoo Promise was quickly *theorized*—articulated as a model of causal relationships between established abstracted categories of entities and forces with universal applicability[4]. This allowed KP's specificity to be explained in general terms and occurred through prevailing theoretical models from education and economics. Miron and Evergreen's 2008 working paper provided an extended expression of this formal theorization (Figure 1), as did Miller-Adams' book-length case study (2009a) and working paper (2009c). KP was conceived of as an investment that would spark economic growth through standard economic theory. It would incentivize families to remain in or move to the district, boosting population and home values and attracting business (Miller-Adams, 2006). Human capital theory also suggested that the scholarship could boost economic development through upgrading the skills of the city workforce. Additionally, there was a complex chain of causality rooted in human capital theory linking reductions in the cost of education to increased attainment through improved early perceptions of affordability (early notification), changed educational behaviors (conceived as rational investments), and improved skills and performance. Other mechanisms drew upon applications of ecological theories in education. KP was expected to "inspire" or "motivate" additional involvement and investment in K-12 education by parents, schools, and "communities" (Miron & Evergreen, 2008, p. 3).

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[4] This rationale was *not* announced by KP's founders, who after all were anonymous. As Miller-Adams noted a few years later, this anonymity meant that "any understanding of the goals of the innovation have had to be deduced from its structure, and it is impossible to know if the various impacts of the program were intended by its creators."

It would lead school personnel to see students increasingly as "college material", leading to more rigorous and supportive instruction. KP would also improve school climates in Kalamazoo through changing the actions of peers. Overall, KP was expected to produce an improved "college-going culture" in the schools and larger community.

(Figure 1 about here)

KP became a "model" to several cities adopting similar programs, many of which used the term "Promise" in their program's title. The Upjohn Institute promoted Kalamazoo as a model, most crucially through the creation of PromiseNet in 2007 and the convening PromiseNet conferences beginning in 2008. These efforts brought together "over 200 individuals representing over 100 communities in 30 states" interested in creating new programs based on KP (Miller-Adams, 2009a, p. 29). By 2008 Upjohn was compiling a public database of these programs (Landrum, 2008), and by 2009 Upjohn researchers were writing prospectuses for KP-style programs in other cities[5]. In the case of Newark, Upjohn researchers proposed a near-carbon copy of KP (minus last-dollar funding) (Erickcek & Miller-Adams, 2012). The promotion of KP as a "model" occurred in and through academic texts as well. Miller-Adams ended her case study by offering "lessons for other communities" that wanted to replicate KP (Miller-Adams, 2009a, p. 221), and she and Timothy Bartik suggested that Kalamazoo could provide a "national model" for an "American Promise" (Bartik & Miller-Adams, 2009).

Miller-Adams (2009b) suggested that KP was imitated because it "made sense" within established theories of social causation—precisely those theorizations made explicit in early years:

> One reason why the Kalamazoo Promise has attracted so much attention is its congruence with key norms in both the education and economic development fields. In facilitating access to post-secondary education for all students, the program fits with the emerging idea that a high-school

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[5] These were produced for Toledo (2009), Newark (2012), Rockford (2013), Charlevoix (2013), Hamilton (2014), Saranac (2014), and Grand Rapids (2014).

diploma is no longer sufficient for the 21st century workforce, and growing interest in the idea of a K-14 or K-16 system of publicly funded education. On the economic development front, the shift from investment in infrastructure to investment in human capital is a hallmark of current thinking about economic competitiveness and urban revitalization" (Miller-Adams, 2009b, p. 10)

Around 2009, researchers began to refer to "Promise-style programs" (Bartik et al., 2010), "Promise-type programs", "the promise model", and "the promise-type model" (Miller-Adams, 2009b). "Promise" at this point still meant "the Kalamazoo Promise" (or KP and El Dorado, as in Landrum 2008); a "Promise-type program" was one which was "emulating key aspects" of KP, a "version of" KP, "inspired by and modeled on" KP (Miller-Adams, 2009b, pp. 2-3).

Over the next few years, "Promise programs" became an established category in the emerging literature. This can be seen in several ways. First, authors used the term "Promise programs", capitalization included. Second, they noted these programs' increasing incidence nationwide. "Twenty-two Promise programs are currently granting scholarships", Miller-Adams wrote in 2011 (p. 1), while in 2013 Harris wrote of "Promise programs" that "at least seventy-three such programs exist nationally" (p. 101). Doing so became standard in empirical papers; by this time researchers were taking for granted that such a category existed and included an expanding set of individual instantiations. Third, in 2013 the first review of Promise programs appeared (Andrews, 2013), and with its own literature review, a concept has "arrived" academically.

Fourth, attempts at definition began after 2009. Such definitions elevated one or more features of KP to the status of essential category feature. Pluhta and Penny (2013, p. 725) emphasized broad universality, writing that "in contrast to traditional scholarships that often came with narrow eligibility criteria emphasizing great financial need or high academic merit, these new (Promise) programs promised financial assistance to a broad spectrum of high school graduates." Harris (2013, pp. 100-1), in contrast, emphasizes early notification: "Promise scholarships make commitments to lower-income students when they are much younger and therefore have the potential to encourage students to prepare during high

school." But most often emphasized was the "local" nature of the programs. For Miller-Adams (2009b, p. 7), KP's "innovation is a large-scale scholarship program based not on the individual attributes of the recipients (e.g., their financial need or academic merit), but on location." The term "place-based scholarship" appeared frequently as an alternative to "Promise program" and more often as a synonym (Hershbein, 2013).

It is in Andrews (2013) and particularly Miller-Adams (2015) that a synthetic definition was crafted by generalizing the KP causal model to the whole category of "Promise programs". Miller-Adams' definition:

> Promise programs seek to transform their communities by making a long-term investment in education through place-based scholarships. They all seek to expand access to and ensure success in higher education, deepen the college-going culture in both the K-12 system and the community as a whole, and support local economic development (Miller-Adams, 2015, p. 11).

Several points merit discussion. First, this echoed the theory of structural change for KP advanced in Miller-Adams (2009a) and Miron and Evergreen (2008). That is, prototype effects are striking. Second, it foregrounded program *goals* (what KP theoretically *does*) rather than *features* (what it *is*). The only program features here were 1) the provision of targeted resources (a scholarship), 2) an eligibility criterion (residence), and 3) the long-term stability of this provision. Otherwise, the entity ("Promise program") was equated with its theory of change. Third, the theory was complex, with at least five mechanisms, and maximalist, with an eventual outcome of "community transformation". As we will see, this definition became highly influential in the literature. We will henceforth refer to it as the "thick causal model", or the "KP model", for what a Promise program "is".

Given the centrality of "place" for both Miller-Adams and Andrews, it is worth asking what "counts" as a place. Is a state a place? At one point, Miller-Adams (2015, p. 10) hinted that it is when she referred to Georgia's HOPE scholarship as an example of a "place-based model". But both Andrews

and Miller-Adams (2015, p. 10) stated firmly that in a "Promise program", eligibility must be restricted to a place "far smaller than a state" (Andrews 2013, p. 2), most commonly a municipality or school district (KP uses both). The reason for this is the centrality of the economic development goal in the thick model. While state merit scholarships like Georgia HOPE were promoted as measures to counteract brain drain, Promise programs were hypothesized to change the residence decisions of college-oriented families through a generous scholarship. This causal pathway is only plausible when residential eligibility is spatially concentrated. Miller-Adams (2015, p. 9) noted that for this reason KP and those in "dozens of communities" not only restrict eligibility in this way but require long-term residence. Additionally, Miller-Adams (2015, p. 3) equated "places" with "communities"—she called places that had launched programs "Promise communities"—implying local interconnection and collective effort.

Finally, Miller-Adams portrayed KP, and Promise programs generally, as vectors of transformative change, potentially nationwide. Her 2015 book is, after all, called *Promise Nation*. In it, she described KP as "unprecedented", "generous", "ambitious" and "unorthodox" (pp. 3-4). It had not only inspired imitators but launched "the Promise movement". This movement was "remarkable" in that it "has emerged without any central direction or leadership" (p. 25), was "meeting the human capital needs of individuals and communities" (p. 103) and, if done correctly, "will continue to offer inspiration to others seeking to make their communities better places to live" (p. 104).

Miller-Adams did not generalize *all* features of KP in this fullest realization of the thick model. Neither she nor anyone else ever suggested the essentialness of first-dollar design, which is central to KP's generosity but clearly too expensive to be practically replicable (Miller-Adams, 2006). Bartik et al. (2010) noted that few other scholarships were likely to be funded by anonymous private donors. Most notably, Miller-Adams (2015) eliminated "universality" from the set of essential attributes, despite having earlier called it "arguably the most important element of the Kalamazoo Promise" and, along with place-based design, one of its "two key features" (Miller-Adams, 2011, p. 1). The reason for this was clear: too many "Promise programs", including well-publicized early programs in Pittsburgh, New Haven, and Denver, had introduced merit and/or need-based eligibility restrictions. In *Promise Nation*, Miller-Adams

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turned universality from a requirement of membership to a within-category dimension of variance. She created the first taxonomy, or internal categorization, of Promise programs; in her taxonomy programs vary by "expansiveness" (where they may be used) and "universality" (eligibility criteria). KP, despite remaining the prototypical and ideal Promise program, became also an example of one of four types: the universal-expansive. In contrast, she classed Tulsa Achieves as restrictive (usable only at Tulsa Community College) and limited (eligibility restricted by need and/or merit) (Miller-Adams, 2015, p. 42).

Indeed, Promise programs became empirically more heterogeneous as they diffused in the decade after KP, leading Miller-Adams to note that "the Kalamazoo Promise model is being replicated much less frequently than many believe" (Miller-Adams, 2011, p. 1). The thick model thus articulated KP not only as prototype but as ideal. The accretion of new programs led the full *population* of "Promise programs" to become on average less generous, less broadly applicable, and more restricted over time (Billings, 2018). Since the conceptual model for Promise programs was based on KP, this meant a growing disjuncture between model and the population it was meant to explain. Despite its diminishing empirical relevance, the thick model retained conceptual dominance over this period.

The thick model's preeminence was reinforced by the focus of early empirical work on "Promise programs". By 2015 the Kalamazoo Promise had been the subject of at least four quantitative empirical papers (Andrews et al., 2010; Bartik et al., 2010; Bartik & Lachowska, 2014; Hershbein 2013), four mostly qualitative studies (Jones et al., 2012; Miller-Adams & Fiore, 2013; Miller-Adams & Timmeney, 2013; Miron et al., 2011), a book-length case study (Miller-Adams, 2009a), and at least ten mostly applied conceptual papers (Daun-Barrett, 2011; Dowd, 2008; Miller-Adams, 2006, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Miron & Evergreen, 2008; Strickland, 2009). Virtually all other work covered other relatively generous, four-year applicable local programs in El Dorado (Landrum, 2008), Pittsburgh (Bozick et al. 2015; Gonzalez et al. 2011), Syracuse (Maeroff, 2013; Osher et al. 2015), New Haven (Gonzalez et al. 2014), and Milwaukee (Harris, 2013). Another paper (Bartik & Sotherland, 2015) investigated the effects of KP and 7 other "generous place-based scholarships" on residential patterns.

Only one paper investigated a community college program (Pluhta & Penny, 2013). Therefore, the dominant conceptual model aligned well with the accumulating empirical evidence, at least through 2015.

 The Tennessee Promise and the Thin Empirical Model, 2015-2019

In 2014, Tennessee launched the first "statewide Promise program", the Tennessee Promise (TP), a last-dollar program usable only at community colleges. The Tennessee Promise was modelled on Knox Achieves, a privately funded "place-based scholarship" in the KP sense (i.e., it restricted eligibility to residents of Knox County, TN) launched in 2008. Knox Achieves adopted "last-dollar" funding already introduced by KP imitators in Denver (2006) and Pittsburgh (2007), but unlike them restricted applicability to community colleges and did without residence-length requirements. Like KP, it didn't restrict eligibility by either merit or need. TP simply extended Knox Achieves to the entirety of the state (using state lottery funds) as part of Tennessee's "Drive to 55" agenda to increase the population of college graduates. Program-wise, TP was just a few steps from KP. But extending eligibility statewide violated the academic conceptualization of "Promise programs" that had been developing through 2015[6]: the "thick causal model" derived from the KP prototype. For the literature, TP was a disruptive exogenous *event*.

Newer programs had, for some time, departed increasingly from KP and therefore from the dominant model based on it, but the research literature had been able to ignore this. TP was too big, too noteworthy, and too influential to be either ignored or disqualified. In 2015, President Obama proposed a national program, "America's College Promise", explicitly modeled on TP. Virtually exact replicas of TP were launched in Oregon (2015), Hawaii (2017), Montana (2017), Nevada (2017), Rhode Island (2017), Maryland (2018), New Jersey (2018), Connecticut (2019) and proposed elsewhere. California renamed its existing community college fee waiver program the California College Promise Grant and passed another law (AB19) in 2017 funding the creation of local community college Promise programs. New

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[6] Miller-Adams (2015, p. 14) briefly noted TP but didn't dwell on its implications.

local programs appeared at a quickened pace, nearly all adopting the last-dollar, community college model. In terms of program design, TP had clearly, after 2014, displaced KP as prototype.

Academic practice was slow to reflect this changed landscape. Most empirical papers appearing in the years after 2014 were based on research begun much earlier, and remained focused on locally based, generous programs: KP (Bartik et al., 2016; Miller, 2018), Say Yes to Education Buffalo and Syracuse (Bifulco et al. 2017, 2019; Sohn et al., 2019), Pittsburgh (Page & Iriti, 2016; Page et al., 2019), New Haven (Daugherty & Gonzalez, 2016), or multiple such programs (LeGower & Walsh, 2017). Only four analyzed a local last-dollar community college program (Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Taylor & Lepper, 2018) or a statewide program (Lee et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2019). Conceptually, empirical research continued to employ the KP thick causal model. This meant equating "promise program" with "place-based scholarship", citing mostly studies of KP, El Dorado, Pittsburgh, and New Haven, referring to KP as the category progenitor, discussing programs against the problematic of local disinvestment, and describing them as having economic development goals (Bifulco, 2017; Daugherty, 2016; LeGower & Walsh, 2017; Miller, 2017; Page et al., 2019; Sohn et al., 2017). For instance, Page et al. (2019, p. 572) wrote that "Promise scholarships are part of a holistic approach to regional economic development that leverages local, often private-sector, investment to support workforce education and development." Most empirical papers in this period ignored TP and other statewide programs.

Some researchers tried to stretch the KP model to accommodate TP. An example is Daugherty & Gonzalez's (2016) evaluation of the New Haven Promise (launched in 2010), which they categorized as "one of the many new place-based scholarship programs (often referred to as "promise programs")". Promise programs are further defined as sharing "two key characteristics: (1) they are place-based, or limited to individuals in a particular region; and (2) they provide some level of financial support towards costs of postsecondary education" (p. 3). They added flesh to this sparse definition by echoing the economic development strand of the thick model: "Promise programs typically aim to improve economic development for a region, and are expected to drive increases in property values, reductions in poverty, increased rates of employment, and reductions in crime" (p. 3). Daugherty and Gonzalez imported from

the thick model expected improvement of "the college-going culture within [targeted] districts" (p. 4). However, they also wrote that "place-based scholarships were introduced at the state level as early as 1991" (p. 3), including in the category not only TP but older programs like Georgia HOPE. At another point, the authors discussed KP as a (prototypical) example of a *subset* of "place-based" or "Promise" programs called "city-based scholarships" (p. 3). Meanwhile, in their literature review the authors discussed "state merit programs" and "city-based promise programs" in separate paragraphs (pp. 3-4).

The trouble was that "Promise programs", qua "place-based programs", had already been contrasted with "state merit scholarships", the prototype of which was Georgia HOPE (e.g., Andrews 2013). This contrast continued to be made in the years immediately after TP. Bifulco et al. (2019, p. 918), for instance, equated "Promise programs" and "place-based scholarships", the latter being "a local program that offers near-universal access to funding for postsecondary education". These are "distinguished from more traditional need-based or merit-based programs". They continued:

> Although state merit-based aid programs such as Georgia's HOPE scholarship program share eligibility criteria related to place of residency, they also have merit-based eligibility criteria and cover larger geographic areas than the typical place-based scholarship program. (p. 918).

So, state merit programs weren't Promise programs. But the Pittsburgh Promise had merit criteria, and it was included. And in 2014 the Tennessee Promise extended eligibility to state residency and demanded through its influence to be included. There were thus no *logical, analytical* grounds for excluding programs like Georgia HOPE. But *practical categorization* will allow for precisely such inconsistencies; since it remained axiomatic that Promise programs are a different "thing" from "state merit programs", Georgia HOPE, the *prototypical state merit program*, could not be a Promise program. Additionally, if Georgia HOPE was a Promise program, then the Promise "movement" was no longer born in Kalamazoo in 2005. And the large literature on state merit grants was part of the "Promise literature". This literature, which continued to appear after KP (Dynarski, 2008; Sjoquist & Winters, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016) for its part ignored Promise programs.

These simmering contradictions were met head-on by Perna and co-authors (Perna & Leigh, 2018; Perna & Riepe, 2016). Perna and Leigh (2018, pp. 155-6) expressed suspicion of Promise programs' robustness as an analytic category, calling them "programs with the promise label" and "so-called Promise programs". Their alternative approach was almost nominalist: Promise programs were (mostly) those which claim to be so. They applied an empirical technique (clustering) to derive a typology, a contrast with Miller-Adams' analytic typology described above. Nonetheless, Perna and Leigh confronted the perennial problem of pure empiricism: "a first step in constructing a typology is identifying the population of programs" (p. 156), and that required rules about what does and doesn't count—that is, a de facto definition. They listed four criteria for category inclusion[7]. Promise programs 1) "have a primary goal of increasing higher educational attainment" and 2) "promise a financial award to eligible students". That is, they must be college scholarships. Getting more precise, Perna and Leigh stipulate that Promise programs 3) "have some type of place requirement", which connected their definition via Miller-Adams to the causal theory of economic development. But they "use a broader definition of place, recognizing that state-sponsored financial aid programs are intended to promote economic development within a state", and thus that "places" can refer to "a state, county, or city" or "school district". Finally, 4) Promise programs "promote college attainment for the traditional college-age population", excluding Programs that restrict to specific fields (e.g., ArFuture or WorkReady Kentucky) or "focused on other subpopulations" such as "adult students" (Perna and Leigh, 2018, pp. 157-8). They explicitly included programs which restrict eligibility by need and/or merit.

Perna and Leigh's new conceptualization had several aspects that require comment. First, it was ecumenical, accommodating both TP and KP comfortably. It included state merit programs—and they were included, along with many state need-based programs, in Perna's UPenn GSE Promise database—though without calling attention to this fact. Second, accommodating TP and KP was possible through a

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[7] A fifth criterion, that there be available data, speaks to inclusion in their analytic sample, not to category membership.

highly stripped-down causal model, jettisoning most of the "thick" model's mechanisms and outcomes. In this new conceptualization Promise programs were fundamentally just scholarships designed to increase college-going. Third, Perna & Leigh's "place-based" component should be seen as a gesture towards the earlier model; since virtually every state aid program requires state residency, this drained residency of any specific importance.

Perna & Leigh's reconceptualization, which we will call the *thin empirical model* or the *ecumenical model*, quickly began appearing elsewhere. For instance, Rauner et al. (2018, p. 3) wrote that "most researchers agree on two defining features of College Promise programs: 1) financial support that encourages students to attend postsecondary institutions and 2) eligibility criteria based on where students live or attend school", which can include a state. They noted that "some other researchers include a different parameter in their own definition, specifying that programs have a stated goal to deepen the community's college-going culture and economic strength." Elliot and Levere (2017, p. 4), wrote that Promise programs "typically feature a promise of free tuition or scholarships to cover all or part of tuition costs" and their "primary goal… is to expand access to postsecondary education"; they have "emerged in states and cities throughout the United States". Writing for College Promise, Hiestand (2018, p. 1) similarly defines Promise programs as 1) scholarships (though specifying that they are tuition-and-fee guarantees) which 2) have the goal of increasing access, affordability, and completion, and which 3) exist at both state and local levels.

"Free College" and the Symbolic Model

Perna's redefinition facilitated another transformation inaugurated by TP's launch: a reconceptualization of "Promise programs" as "free college" programs. For instance, Nguyen's (2019, p. 573) paper examining New York's Excelsior scholarship "adds new results to the fast-growing free-college literature". Nguyen equated "Promise" programs with "free college" programs, as did Davidson et al (2018, p. 4): "13 states have some type of statewide free tuition or promise program." Promise programs became "free college programs", connected to a movement with a longer history: the "free

college movement". Kanter et al. (2016, p. 9) wrote that "the College Promise Campaign has drawn its inspiration from the history of the free college movement", which includes the Truman Commission Report and the GI Bill (see also Jones & Berger, 2018). Widely disseminated analyses of emerging statewide "free college" programs by Education Trust (Jones et al., 2020), Research for Action (Callahan et al., 2019), and the Century Foundation (Mishory, 2018) also used the terms "free college" and "Promise" program interchangeably, though their slightly varying definitions led them to create differing program lists.

In defining a "free college, or Promise" program, the thin empirical model prevailed. For example, Taylor & Lepper (2019, p. 2) described Promise programs as simply financial aid with the goal of increasing postsecondary attainment. They referred to "the proliferation of state and local financial aid programs and policies, often known as promise programs", and stated that "the purpose of many of these programs is simple: increase direct aid to students to increase affordability, access, and success." Promise programs were conceptually no different from other scholarships, though authors continued to discuss them as if they were.

The rapid expansion of statewide last-dollar (mostly community college) programs, along with their connection to a "free college" ideal, led to prominent critiques of these programs as not fully embodying a preferred version of this ideal. Criticism focused on concerns about equity. Poutre & Voight (2018) and Pierce and Siraco (2018) drew attention to the "last-dollar" funding model and its implications regarding who receives funding. They noted that when applicability is limited to community colleges (like TP) or when states already had generous existing need-based scholarships (as did New York), a new last-dollar "Promise" scholarship will direct very little additional funding to lower-income students and will mostly benefit higher-income students. This insight was not new; such observations had been made earlier by Miller-Adams (2015), Harnisch and Lebioda (2016), and Kelchen (2017). Perna et al. (2018, p. 1750) wrote that "by providing last-dollar awards, free tuition will provide minimal increases

in financial assistance to low-income students." What was new was that this conclusion was formulated as an explicit criticism of Promise/"free college" programs.

Sometimes clearly in response to these critiques, there began to emerge an only half-acknowledged new causal model of Promise programs consonant with the empirical prevalence of last-dollar community college programs. We will refer to this as the *minimal or symbolic causal model* of Promise programs. There were three elements of this model. First, since Promise programs may not deliver much new aid, *existing aid* (e.g., Pell grants) was rolled into what the "Promise program" provided. For Carlson and Laderman (2019, p. 8) a Promise program "makes a financial commitment to adult students through leveraging aid from *all available sources"* and "commits to fill in the gaps *where needed* to cover tuition and fees." Goldrick-Rab and Miller-Adams (2018) argued that through Promise programs, students "receive financial aid they would have missed out on by not enrolling". Second, Promise programs, it was asserted, affect students through *messages* or "informational interventions" (rather than aid, though this wasn't usually made explicit). A Promise program "promotes a simple, transparent message that college is affordable" (Carlson & Laderman 201, p. 8). Third, Promise programs were claimed to include *new support services* to improve college success[8]. A promise program "establishes and supports programs and services that are tailored to the unique needs" of students (Carlson and Laderman 2019, p. 8). Importing elements of the KP-era thick causal model into this new symbolic context, Goldrick-Rab and Miller-Adams (2018) argued that free-college programs, including last-dollar community college programs, "inject elements of a college-going culture at the secondary- and even primary-school level, elicit new student-support resources from schools and community members, and create incentives for colleges and universities to better serve their students."

The Free College Era: 2020-2022

The last few years have witnessed an explosion of scholarship on Promise programs which included a collected volume (Perna & Smith, 2020a), thirty-three (largely causal effects) quantitative

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[8] There had been, and remains, little empirical work on support service expansion connected with Promise programs, and what work exists suggests it to be minimal (Callahan 2018; Perna et al. 2020).

papers, and 18 qualitative papers. Despite a lingering disproportionate focus on KP-style programs (9 out of 33 quantitative and 6 of 18 qualitative papers), empirical scholarship diversified. There were seven papers on TP, two on the Oregon Promise, one on both TP and Oregon, two on Tennessee Reconnect (an "adult" version of TP), one on New York's Excelsior Scholarship, one on Knox Achieves, and two on Tulsa Achieves (a local, last-dollar community college scholarship). Three papers studied anonymous single-institution community college programs or examined multiple programs using college-level data from IPEDS.

In this period, the "free college" understanding of Promise programs achieved clear dominance. Perhaps the most striking symptom of this was the conversion of Michelle Miller-Adams. In 2021, she published *The Path to Free College*, in which she wrote: "I use the term "Promise" to refer to locally or state-bounded tuition-free college initiatives", though these programs must have "goals that go beyond college access" Miller-Adams 2021, p. 7). Like Kanter et al. (2016) and Jones & Berger (2018), Miller-Adams placed the "Promise movement" in the larger history of "free college efforts" such CUNY's free tuition period. The "current free-college movement" was born, she wrote, with the Kalamazoo Promise (p. 5). She acknowledged that "no one owns the "Promise" label", and that as a result there was disagreement about what a Promise program is. For some, "Promise remains identified with a smaller group of place-based scholarship programs that are concerned with community transformation along with college access". While not quite an endorsement of Perna and Leigh's ecumenical compromise, this came close.

"Free college, or college promise programs" were most often discussed against a problematic of nationally rising tuition costs, not local disinvestment. Sometimes this appeared on its own, with affordability being a sufficiently compelling problem. More commonly rising costs were alleged to exacerbate educational disparities (a justice frame), or to cause "stagnant educational attainment" in the workforce (a human capital frame). "Free college" was sometimes substituted with "debt-free college" or "tuition-free college". Sometimes, authors suggested that Promise programs function as tuition guarantees (e.g., Millet et al., 2020).

Conceptualizations drew primarily on the thin, empirical model, though often with a nod to the thick model and a ritual citation of Miller-Adams (2015). For example, Billings, Gándara and Li (2021, p. 81) wrote that Promise programs are "distinct" from other financial aid in that "they emphasize residency in their eligibility criteria"; this included state residency. Rosinger et al. (2021, p. 1) more explicitly tapped the thick conception, writing that ""free college" programs, sometimes called *college promise* or *place-based* scholarships, have emerged as a popular policy response to improve college affordability and reduce racial and economic disparities in college access" (emphasis added). Leigh and González Canché (2021, p. 259) discuss "place-based scholarships within the Promise movement", drawing on the thick model in their discussion of this Promise subtype – community funding, influence on residential decisions, impacts on "a local community's college-going culture and local economic development" (see also Collier & McMullen, 2023; Collier & Parnther, 2021; Farmer-Hinton & Kellogg, 2022).

In this period, it became standard to note that "Promise programs" vary widely, and the axes of variation—developed by Miller-Adams (2015), Iriti et al. (2018), and Miller-Adams and Smith (2018)—also standardized. The terminology varied, but usually the dimensions were generosity (what is provided: first vs. last-dollar, etc.), applicability (where the scholarship can be used); eligibility (who can qualify), and funding/operation. This, too, was consistent with the "thin causal model", as what remains common, given all this variance, is simply the foregrounding of a college scholarship. Some researchers expressed dissatisfaction with this situation (Miller-Adams, 2021, p. 7), but more typically heterogeneity was not discussed in relation to category coherence or the potential for estimated effects to generalize. Promise programs were implied to be a single category with unitary causal effects on outcomes that could be empirically measured.

The "thick model" persisted intact in empirical studies of early, KP-style programs. The research team investigating the El Dorado Promise cleaved closely to the thick model in its entirety (Ash et al., 2021; Ritter & Swanson, 2020; Swanson et al., 2020; Swanson & Ritter, 2021). The Upjohn Institute continued to insist on the KP-rooted place-based model. On their website they called Promise programs "often… synonymous with place-based scholarships", which "seek to transform places as well as

individuals", and Upjohn's definition specifically "exclude(s) statewide Programs like the Tennessee Promise that bear many similarities to local Promise programs". Some papers from Upjohn-affiliated researchers in this period avoided the use of the term "Promise program" in favor of "place-based scholarship" (Bartik et al., 2021; Hershbein, et al. 2021). Researchers investigating the Degree Project continued to use Harris's (2013) equation of Promise programs with "early awareness" or "early commitment" programs (e.g. Farmer-Hinton & Kellogg, 2022).

In addition, some papers written using the "free college" understanding selectively imported elements of the "thick" model into their causal design. Perna and Smith (2020b), for instance, claim that Promise programs "have the potential to smooth students' transitions across educational sectors and institutions… by adopting a cross-sector approach". They may also "encourage the structural changes that are needed to ensure that all students are academically ready" (see also Millet et al., 2020). Similarly, Billings, Gándara and Li (2021, p. 82) suggest that Promise programs (they profile statewide last-dollar community college scholarships) "may increase the rigor and quality of the K-12 system".

There was, in this period, some acknowledgement of the prevalence of community college-only applicability in both statewide and local programs, though mostly in papers focusing on such programs (Bell, 2021; Bell & Gándara, 2021; Ison, 2020). Overviews of Promise programs did not tend to remark on the shift to community college applicability (e.g., Miller-Adams, 2021; Perna & Smith, 2020b). This may be because such last-dollar community college programs were incompatible with the dominant thin empirical model. To summarize why: last-dollar community college programs deliver little funding to lower-income students—that is, to the students most likely to be induced by a scholarship to attend college. For higher-income students, such programs may *reduce* overall attainment by diverting students to a two-year college (Jaggars, 2020). The thin causal model, in which Promise program is a scholarship that improves college-going, is severely challenged by these considerations.

Finally, there was in this period additional articulation of the minimal, symbolic causal model. For example, Millet et al. (2020) defined Promise programs as *messages*. A Promise program provides "a simple and clear message of free tuition for students who live in designated places, meet local or state

eligibility criteria, or attend specific secondary schools or meet community eligibility criteria" (note, too, the thin ecumenical model category bounding). A Promise program is "an irrevocable trust, a promise delivered to students and families", a "pledge", "an explicit public assurance", and "a public commitment". College Promise (2021, p. 3) wrote that Promise programs "send a clear message that college is attainable for every hardworking student". This "message" mechanism is a transformation of the "early notification" mechanism noted by Andrews (2013) and foregrounded by Harris (2013). In these formulations money was *also* a "message" (assuring students that college would be feasible), but it was a message about *real future cost reductions*; Andrews and Harris were describing generous, four-year applicable programs which would considerably lower costs. But in the context of last-dollar community college programs, the "message" is often all that remains. Millet also allowed Promise programs to take credit for existing aid, providing "a comprehensive approach to financial aid, often leveraging federal and state aid programs and supplementing existing federal and state aid with the dollars needed to cover students' remaining tuition and fees." So too Billings, Li and Gándara (2021, p. 83): "Promise programs can use federal financial aid such as Pell grants to cover tuition and fees for eligible students". The latter authors also bring in support services, "some Promise programs provide academic support, student services, and/or career/workforce support" (p. 84). Similarly, College Promise (2021, p. 3) wrote that "quality Promise programs acknowledge that support services and teaching excellence are critical to college quality and success".

The implicit symbolic causal model of the last-dollar community college program is thus: programs "promise" tuition-free college, despite many eligible students already qualifying for it. Since students often over-estimate the real cost of college, this "message" realigns perceptions and induces enrollment. Consequently, the student accesses aid to which were already entitled. The college advertises, and might provide, "wrap-around services" to support completion; these could be new or could have predated the program. This model has been increasingly gestured towards, but never explicitly advanced, in the literature since 2020.

Discussion

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Above, we discussed first the process through which the category "Promise program" was gradually constructed in academic discourse. This category didn't crystalize until around 2009, four years after the public announcement of the "first Promise program" (KP). First, researchers discussed KP in terms of existing categories – a financial aid program, a tuition guarantee, an act of strategic philanthropy—but with some unique features. Second, KP was, as an instance, *theorized* using human capital theory, supplemented by ecological educational theory. It is important to note the recursivity involved here; as Miller-Adams noted, KP was almost certainly *designed* through reference to human capital theory, or was at least rooted in similar assumptions to those human capital theory formalizes. To this extent, the academic theorization was something of a rationalized reconstruction of the "goals" of program creators (unknown because KP was funded anonymously). Third, the category appeared in outline as researchers started referring to "Promise-style" programs, by which they meant "programs like or inspired by the Kalamazoo Promise". Next, the program became a social "thing" in its own right, an existing though new category. The analytic definitions created for this category were generalizations of the causal model constructed earlier for the Kalamazoo Promise (i.e., the theorization of KP). The category thus retained a heavy, though unacknowledged dependence on the conceptual prototype. After the category appeared, KP became the progenitor, and its launch date became the category's birthdate. Researchers even inducted precursors of KP (e.g., Philomath, Oregon's Clemens scholarship) into the category.

We then noted the serial emergence of three conceptual models for what a Promise program "is". We called these 1) the thick causal or KP model; 2) the thin empirical or ecumenical model; and 3) the minimal or symbolic causal model.

The thick model is the most elaborate. In it, a Promise program has direct effects on a) families' residential decisions through a monetary incentive to reside in the eligible geographic area, b) on students' educational decisions by reducing the cost of college attendance, and c) on students' educational efforts by clarifying the college-going decision (assuring that costs will be covered). A Promise program also has indirect effects on students' outcomes by d) spurring structural change, cross-sector

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collaboration, and the creation of support programming in the eligible school system and its surrounding community; e) changing the school climate by altering the expectations and behaviors of peers; f) changing the school climate by changing the perceptions and therefore behaviors of teachers and school staff; g) improving the "college-going culture" within the surrounding community. These processes result in economic revitalization in the targeted area through a) attracting/retaining college-aspiring families, and thereby their economic contributions, and b) increasing the human capital stock of the population through improved academic outcomes of its youth. This model was derived *for* KP and is most appropriate to it. It makes sense only for a truly generous, locally concentrated, broadly available (and superficially simple) scholarship. It was developed in response to the launch of KP and KP's empirically clear inspiration of other programs which nonetheless borrowed selectively from KP's features. Its generalization to the full category "Promise programs", despite their heterogeneity and decreasing resemblance to KP, is a clear instance of "prototype effects" in category construction.

The second model is what we called the "thin empirical model" or "ecumenical model". It was occasioned by the launch of the Tennessee Promise, which as discussed above undermined the thick causal model but was too large and influential to be excluded from the "Promise program" category. Indeed, we argued that in terms of *new program design* TP quickly supplanted KP as the category prototype. The model developed in its wake by Perna and co-authors was able to accommodate both KP and TP, as well as nearly anything else (thus the "ecumenical" moniker), but only by stripping nearly all of the causal infrastructure out of the existing thick model. This new model made a Promise program simply a college scholarship (i.e., additional funding) that would improve postsecondary attainment (thus the "thin" characterization). Conceptually, there remained nothing to distinguish a "Promise" program from any other grant program, and indeed Perna and Leigh included programs created well before 2005 in their database. These difficulties received little comment at the time or since, partly because researchers freely imported bits of the thick model into the new framework to provide the needed conceptual specificity.

The third model, which we referred to as the minimal or symbolic causal model, is in some ways the most interesting. It emerged as a downstream result of the expansion of state community college Promise programs; more precisely it was articulated in response to criticisms of these programs. The most salient criticism was that community college Promise programs deliver little in the way of additional funding to lower-income students, since these students' tuition is already covered by Pell and state grants. The third model shifted emphasis to the informational or messaging effects of a Promise program, incorporated existing aid accessed "because" of the Promise program into what the Promise program provides, and asserted the existence of additional support services created because of the program. This model appeared in outline in several texts (e.g., Millet et al., 2020) but was never explicitly advanced as a new conceptualization. In these formulations, what receded was the notion that a Promise program *is a scholarship*; as such it is in implicit contrast to both prior models, but particularly the second. But this model allows the scholarship to fade quietly, its retreat never emphasized.

There are two sets of implications from this analysis. First, and most obviously, there are implications for scholarship on "Promise programs". We specifically did not try our hand at answering the central question—what "is" a Promise program—but instead tried to provide clarity into why this question has been so difficult to answer. Our goal was to reveal the shape of the confusion. "Promise program" is fundamentally a practical category, crafted in decentralized fashion over time by practitioners and policy entrepreneurs and constantly subject to renegotiation. It is not an analytic category, an objectively existing set of "things" with shared essential features, and so attempts at analytic definition are bound to fail. Our hope is that researchers shift to studying the *socio-historical processes* themselves through which "Promise programs", both individually and collectively, are created and transformed. This involves grasping these programs as embedded in and constructed by shifting political, economic, and semiotic environments.

More conservatively, we hope this analysis will move researchers away from making the practical assumption that Promise programs are essentially similar entities with unitary effects. It is all too common for researchers to draw in elements of the "thick" model, which was created in reference to KP,

when discussing likely effects of a local or state community college Promise program. Our suggestion is for researchers to disaggregate whichever program they are analyzing into its specific component rules and resources and to postulate which effects are likely to derive therefrom. Do we really expect community revitalization to be sparked by a last-dollar community college scholarship? This involves the implicit recognition that "Promise program" is a first and foremost a *political* category, not necessarily an analytically useful *policy* category.

Secondly, this analysis has implications for the work of research. Academic definitions are typically analytic definitions corresponding to what Lakoff (1987) calls the "classical theory of categories". That is, academic definitions presume that categories refer to "real" things—containers into which empirical cases can be objectively sorted based on these cases' essential characteristics. However, in practice categories are more like branching systems around prototypes with graduated membership and fuzzy boundaries separating them from neighboring categories. This is clearly true of Promise programs in practice. As practitioners copied and modified prior programs, which had in turn been copied and modestly modified from other prior programs (and so on), the category gradually transformed and diversified. This produced a lack of fit between the definition and the empirical universe to which it referred, traceable ultimately to the disjuncture between the implicit model of categorization the consequences of decentralized human practice. Because of this disjuncture, analytic categories—which we use in academic conceptualization—are often leaky.

Beyond this general point, it was fascinating to observe how standard academic literary practices facilitated the persistence of an obsolete conceptual model. Here we refer to the continued use of the KP-rooted thick model as late as 2021; it had never credibly characterized more than a handful of programs and had ceased to be realistically applicable to most "Promise" programs as early as 2010. Particularly in empirical research, academics are averse to novel conceptual work and the conflict may spark (e.g., with reviewers). It is instead common practice to import existing conceptualizations and theories wholesale to produce their empirical predictions and make sense of their analyses. A conceptualization, once standardized in the literature, is continuously redeployed despite its declining correspondence to empirical

reality. In this case, this tendency was reinforced by reliance on empirically unusual, but early and well-researched, cases (e.g., the Kalamazoo, El Dorado, and Pittsburgh Promise programs). This was a function in part of the length of time involved in research; there was little data on newer programs. It may also have reflected a bias in favor of studying larger, more generous cases in a program-category because they were more likely to produce measurable, publishable effects. Regardless, it is standard in empirical articles for established theory and findings to be used somewhat unreflectively as the foundation for the new analysis. Errors, or outdated conceptions, and biases built into these theories and findings reappear in article after article until such time as a significant local paradigm shift occurs. That is: there is a conservative bias built into the standard working of academic epistemic communities and their associated epistemic cultures. This institutionalized bias can guard against erroneous innovations, but it can also safeguard errors.

Finally, there are implications for policy analysis. A thorough institutional history of Promise *programs*, not simply academic conceptions thereof, is needed to trace in detail the process through which Promise programs drifted away from the Kalamazoo model over time. What is significant is despite this tendency among newer programs, they largely retained the initial label "Promise", appropriating thereby its associated moral prestige (derived ultimately from Kalamazoo's generosity). In institutionalist terms, there was increasing decoupling between model and practice; Yi (2017) has expressed this decoupling in semiotic terms as the decoupling of meaning from form, transforming "Promise program into a "mythic signifier". This sort of process—the adoption and partial modification of a program script, leading to drift in the full population of programs—is likely a much very common general process.

Conclusions

What is a college "Promise" program? Any one program is an assemblage of rules, resources, and representations operated by an organization or set of organizations. Promise programs are the universe of such programs, but they are linked through family resemblance and historical influence. The category is the continually renegotiated outcome of several social processes, created within the linked epistemic communities of both practitioners and researchers. One lesson of this research is that, in the

case of Promise programs, research played a role, albeit a supporting one, in the creation and generation of the category and empirical universe itself. More generally, human intersubjective objects are constituted partly through our conceptualization of them, rendering pure "objectivity" in the human sciences a fool's errand. Research feeds back into the process it attempts to analyze objectively, but rarely acknowledges its own part of the causal social process. It would be an advance for research on Promise programs to cease referring to them as objective "things" whose "effects" can be objectively measured and to acknowledge the social processes involved in their formulation and transformation.

Still, there is, we think, a broader common-sense understanding of what a "Promise program" "is"—what people "mean" when they use the term. This meaning is related to but not quite captured by the three models articulated in the literature. We will not hazard an attempt at this definition here, but will provide some thoughts. By Promise program, people usually mean some sort of grant program that can increase college access by reducing *both* economic and cognitive costs. Promise programs are simple, or at least simplifying. This usually means that they are tuition guarantees, but of course many Promise programs are not. They are broadly available, which means usually that they are usable at nonselective colleges and are available to all qualifiers. This, too, is simplifying if they do not have complex eligibility rules. This is why Promise programs have been linked to the "free college" movement, for this movement wishes to make college-going not only cheap but simple.

Any given Promise program, while linked conceptually and culturally to this broader understanding, can be thought of as an *enactment* of this general (and vague) social formulation. Researchers should not treat these programs as instances of some Platonic category or members of a common species. There is no analytic means of distinguishing Promise programs from other sorts of grants, but there is a clear difference between the *idea* of Promise programs and what these other grants are thought to be "about". This makes a Promise program a cultural and political performance, as much as it is anything else.

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What is a Promise program?

Figure 1: Theorization of Kalamazoo Promise's causal effects on student and community outcomes.

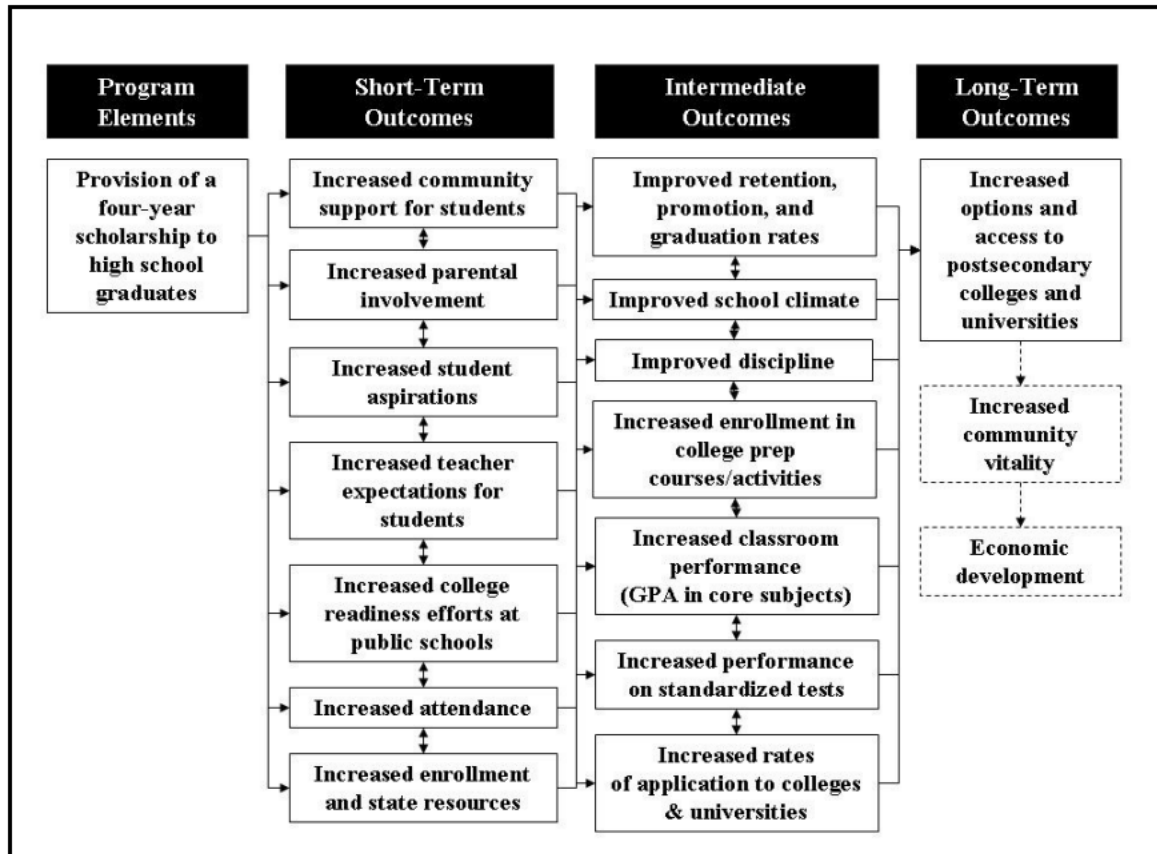From Miron and Evergreen 2008:3.

Figure 1. Logic Model for the Kalamazoo Promise Scholarship Program
Note: This is an outcomes logic model and does not prescribe processes or any particular theory of action.

What is a Promise program?