



“A Ragtag Team of Like[-Minded] Individuals Who Are Willing to Help”: The Implementation and Evolution of Student Support Services at Community Colleges with Promise Programs

Meredith Billings

The University of Texas at Arlington

Amy Li

The University of Texas at Austin

Denisa Gándara

The University of Texas at Austin

As promise programs have become increasingly popular at community colleges, these institutions have either created or repurposed student services for their promise students, in addition to covering their tuition and fees. Using a multiple case study design, we interviewed 32 community college administrators and analyzed documents to understand how support services associated with promise programs are implemented at community colleges. We found that community colleges were able to capitalize on the localized nature of programs to facilitate a smoother transition between high school and college, but that services were largely shaped by institutional constraints and capacity. Practitioners exercised their discretion to revamp services based on lessons learned during implementation, shifts in the operating environment, and student feedback.

VERSION: July 2026

Suggested citation: Billings, Meredith, Amy Li, and Denisa Gandara. (2026). “A Ragtag Team of Like[-Minded] Individuals Who Are Willing to Help”: The Implementation and Evolution of Student Support Services at Community Colleges with Promise Programs. (EdWorkingPaper: 26-1529). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/v0sy-xd38>

“A Ragtag Team of Like[-Minded] Individuals Who Are Willing to Help”:**The Implementation and Evolution of Student Support Services****at Community Colleges with Promise Programs**

Tuition-free college programs, also known as promise programs, have proliferated across the United States (U.S.) (Authors, 2021). Beginning with the Kalamazoo Promise—a program guaranteeing tuition coverage to high school graduates in Kalamazoo, Michigan—numerous colleges, localities, and states have implemented their own promise programs (Miller-Adams, 2015). While all such programs guarantee tuition coverage to students who live or attend school in a specific area, they differ in various characteristics, including eligibility criteria, funding structures, and non-tuition support services (Authors, 2021).

While some programs strictly cover tuition, an increasing number incorporate services designed to enhance student success, such as mentorship and tutoring (Miller & Weiss, 2021; Millett et al., 2018; Perna et al., 2021; Ratledge et al., 2019; Rauner & Smith, 2020; Weiss et al., 2019). A landscape analysis in California found that over 50% of promise programs in the state offered support services to promise students (Rauner & Smith, 2020). These services, including academic advising, mentoring, financial aid counseling, career counseling, and student organizations, have been linked to improved persistence and graduation rates (Dickason et al., 2024; Miller & Weiss, 2021; Ratledge et al., 2019; Reason, 2009; Weiss et al., 2019). However, little is known about how these services operate within promise programs and how they contribute to student success (Perna et al., 2021). Addressing this gap, this study examines how student support services (e.g., academic advising, peer mentoring, orientation, success coaching) are implemented and adapted within promise programs at seven community colleges in four states representing every major region in the U.S. (Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, and West).

Five programs in our study allow students from a single high school or district, and two allow students from across the state. Programs vary on other key dimensions, including institutional enrollment size, with a mix of small, medium, and large institutions as defined in the Carnegie Classifications (American Council on Education, 2025). Programs also differ according to the promise program enrollment size (ranging from 300 to 5,000), and the disbursement model (with a mix of first-, middle-, and last-dollar programs).

Examining supports is critical because the ability of colleges to offer these services within promise programs may be constrained, particularly at community colleges, which typically have lower per-student funding and serve students with greater academic and financial needs (Hillman, 2020; The Century Foundation Working Group on Community College Financial Resources, 2019). In many cases, promise programs do not allocate additional funds for student support services, essentially creating unfunded mandates (Perna et al., 2020). This strain on institutional budgets may be exacerbated by enrollment surges following program implementation with enrollment increases of over 30% at community colleges (Authors, 2020; Nguyen, 2020). Compounding this issue, these colleges already struggle with limited budgets, especially compared to more research-oriented four-year universities (Baum & Kurose, 2013; Hillman, 2020; Kahlenberg, 2015; Yuen, 2020). Although higher enrollments could be accompanied by increased tuition revenue, this revenue may not be sufficient to cover the additional costs associated with providing support services (Authors, 2025a; Monaghan & Attewell, 2023; Odle & Monday, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how colleges manage and provide services.

While promise programs have produced higher enrollments, they have been less consistent in improving student success outcomes, such as persistence and degree completion

(Authors, 2025b). One possible explanation for this discrepancy between program effects on enrollments (consistently positive) and degree completion (more mixed) is that colleges may be unable to adequately support the needs of new students. Consequently, this study examines how support services are delivered. Guided by policy implementation theory (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024; Lipsky, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980), this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How have community colleges implemented support services for promise students?
2. How have student support services at community colleges with promise programs evolved in response to student needs?

Our multi-site study included interviews with 32 practitioners across seven community colleges with promise programs, as well as an analysis of 43 institutional documents and websites related to programs and their associated student support services. We found that the localized nature of certain promise programs (where the promise-eligible high schools were geographically close to the college operating the promise program) facilitated connections and access to student supports. Moreover, college administrators faced institutional constraints, particularly a dearth of dedicated staff and program-specific resources. In turn, promise students were often directed to use student services that were available to all students, which sometimes reduced priority for non-promise students or overwhelmed those service providers. Promise program administrators used discretion to adapt support services to address student needs or to remedy perceived flaws in service design or delivery.

Theoretical Framework

To examine the implementation of student support services within promise programs at community colleges, we draw on key concepts from policy implementation (Lipsky, 1980;

Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). Policy implementation refers to the process of carrying out the directives of legislation. While promise programs in this study are not legislatively mandated, concepts from policy implementation are analogous in understanding what happens after a promise program is launched at a community college. Policy implementation literature helps identify the factors that shape how a program is enacted and why its goals may diverge from execution, including the roles of implementers, organizational capacity, and the broader sociopolitical environment. To guide our analysis of community college administrators, we also include the concept of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). Through this lens, we conceptualize community college practitioners as frontline implementers whose everyday judgments shape what the policy becomes for students. These professionals operate under conditions such as resource constraints, ambiguous or competing goals, heavy caseloads, and incomplete information, and must therefore exercise discretion in how they interpret eligibility rules, prioritize tasks, and deliver services. Together, these lenses direct analytic attention to how context and implementer cognition interact to produce variation in implementation.

Policy Implementation

Policy implementation generally refers to the process of carrying out policy (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), offering insights on the mechanisms for policy effectiveness (Gilliam et al., 2000). Felix and Nienhusser (2024), who advanced “humanizing” and critical perspectives on educational policy implementation, identified three schools of thought in the policy implementation research: rational-scientific, critical emancipatory, and culture-cognition. Our study is anchored primarily in the culture-cognition school because we focus on how implementation is shaped by the organizational and policy contexts in which work occurs and the meaning-making of implementers as they interpret and enact policy in practice. In this view,

implementation is produced through interactions among people, place, and policy and through the norms, values, and routines that structure daily work (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024).

Consistent with this lens, we examined implementation across two levels. At the context level, we attended to organizational and interorganizational conditions that shape promise program implementation. These include organizational features, such as program design and financing, the relationship between the promise program and the partnering college, and interactions with state policy. We also examined dimensions of organizational capacity, such as staffing configurations and reliance on shared services.

Implementation can differ considerably based on who is implementing, in ways that advance or hinder policy goals (e.g., Felix, 2021; Nienhusser, 2018; Nienhusser & Connery, 2021). Therefore, at the individual (cognition) level, our study examines how promise program implementers described their professional roles, identities, experiences, and values in relation to the implementation of the promise program. Furthermore, given the centrality of information asymmetry within the culture-cognition lens, we examine how implementing agents made sense of program goals and rules and how they characterized their own knowledge and uncertainties about the program (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024).

Increasingly, scholars are using policy implementation frameworks to study how policies are implemented within community colleges. Notable studies on this topic appear in a special issue of *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Most relevant to our study, Perna et al. (2021) used an implementation fidelity frame to analyze how four community colleges in distinct geographic regions implemented promise programs. Consistent with the culture-cognition framework, Perna and her colleagues (2021) emphasized programmatic and organizational contexts, finding that implementation differed based on factors including funding

levels and sources, availability of related programs, data analysis capabilities, and perceptions of the community college. Building on this prior work, this study examined how student support services associated with promise programs are implemented within community colleges.

Street-Level Bureaucrats

In policy implementation, street-level bureaucrats are the frontline of public service providers whose beliefs and actions play important roles in the enactment of policies in practice (Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). This study conceptualized community college administrators, particularly those in student-facing roles, as street-level bureaucrats. Through this lens, we expected the delivery of student support services to depend on the beliefs and actions of these individuals, who may exercise significant discretion over service delivery, even as they navigate the constraints related to existing college resources, culture, and structures. Our multi-campus design allowed us to examine how variations among personnel, institutional and state contexts, and program designs collectively shaped the type and availability of support services.

Drawing on Felix and Nienhusser's (2024) critical work on humanizing policy implementation, our framework illuminates the black box of implementing student support services in promise programs as an iterative process shaped by the discretion of practitioners, whose personal backgrounds, identities, and beliefs interact with organizational factors to influence service delivery. Ultimately, through this framework, our study explored how innovation can emerge even within resource-limited settings and how individual administrators' perspectives and learning trajectories played a role in shaping student support services.

Related Literature

Community colleges often serve diverse groups of students, particularly first-generation, racially minoritized, and from low-income backgrounds (American Association of Community

Colleges, 2025). Promise programs may entice students to attend college who otherwise would not enroll and who may require additional supports to earn their degrees. Therefore, promise aid is most effective when coupled with a comprehensive student support system to help students succeed in college (Authors, 2025c). We review literature examining the offerings, roles, or effects of student support services on promise students, and literature highlighting implementation challenges programs faced regarding these services.

Student Supports for Promise Students

Common support services provided to promise students include academic advising or college coaching, summer transition programs, and targeted student communications (Willard et al., 2019). In comparison, all the promise programs in our sample had either college coaching, academic advising, or a student success and access program. About half of the programs had an orientation or summer bridge program for students and three out of seven offered financial assistance beyond tuition and fees (described further in the Research Design section). This descriptive profile aligned with the research evidence on student support services for promise programs, as most studies examined college coaching/advising (Brockman et al., 2025; Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024; Dickason et al., 2024; Perna et al., 2020, 2021), small supplemental grants (Brockman et al., 2025; Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024; Dickason et al., 2024), summer bridge programs (Perna et al., 2020), or orientations (Monaghan & Attewell, 2023). Consistent with this pattern, our study examined a wide range of support services across community colleges in geographically varied states.

The Role, Effect, or Implementation of Student Supports for Promise Students

Perna et al. (2020, 2021) studied four local-level promise programs that each affected a single community college. The authors conducted interviews with stakeholders including college

staff and students, high school staff and students, and city/county officials. Three of the colleges studied offered support services for students, and two colleges required promise students to meet with advisors (Perna et al., 2020, 2021). Two colleges added “one or two” additional staff members to serve promise students, while the other two colleges used their remaining staff (Perna et al., 2021, p. 15). Usually, staff were reassigned, which may have reduced services to non-promise students (Perna et al., 2020, 2021).

In a separate study, Monaghan and Attewell (2023) studied another local-level promise program affecting a single midwestern community college. The program had a last-dollar design, similar to five out of the seven programs in our study. Through 67 interviews with college administrators and staff, the authors found that in the second semester of promise operation, the college created a promise office staffed with a newly created administrator position, and a full-time counselor who was reassigned from a different office. The recruitment office took on advising responsibilities for promise students as extra workload and other units (financial aid and employment services) contributed 1.5 full-time staff members. The college asked faculty and staff to volunteer as mentors, but they eventually dropped this initiative. Monaghan and Attewell (2023) classified the college’s support services as “largely symbolic” because they simply “reassigned staff, relied on employee volunteerism, and increased workloads to provide slightly more proactive services” (p. 312).

Other studies have examined the Detroit Promise (a local program) and Tennessee Promise (a state program), both of which added support programs for their promise students several years after their programs started (Brockman et al., 2025; Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024). The support services for Detroit Promise included college coaching, small financial incentives for students to attend coaching sessions, and encouragement

to enroll in summer courses or employment (Brockman et al., 2025). In a randomized control trial of the Detroit Promise Path (the promise's support program), Brockman et al. (2025) found that students participating in support services were more likely to enroll in more semesters and to earn more credits, but support services had no effect on 3-year associate degree completion rates compared to the scholarship-only promise students. However, the Detroit Promise Path was only implemented with fidelity in four out of the five eligible community colleges. Among these four colleges, there was small but statistically significant and suggestive evidence that the support services increased associate degree attainment by 2.6 percentage points (Brockman et al., 2025).

The support services in Tennessee included college coaching, community mentors, flexible class scheduling, and need-based grants to cover transportation, housing, or other eligible expenses such as books or computers (Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024). These programs were rolled out to students based on cohort year, geographical location, and financial need (Carruthers & Pratt, 2024). In Tennessee, the Knox Promise, Nashville GRAD, and tnAchieves programs provided support services to Tennessee Promise students¹ (Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024; Dickason et al., 2024). In descriptive analyses, researchers have found that Knox Promise and tnAchieves students who engaged with college coaches were more likely to persist in college and more likely to earn degrees compared to promise-only students (Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024). In addition, Knox Promise students who had three or more connections with their college coaches per-term were more likely to complete all their attempted credits and had higher semester GPAs compared to students who never connected with their college coaches (Carruthers et al., 2023).

¹ Nashville GRAD initially only served Tennessee Promise students but opened their support programs to any enrolled Nashville State Community College student during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dickason et al., 2024).

Qualitative analyses offer additional insights into the effectiveness of these support services. Dickason et al. (2024) interviewed 13 program staff and 39 students participating in Nashville GRAD and Knox Promise. Students reported that their advisors were “extremely helpful” and acted as “information centers” (as categorized by the researchers) because their advisors connected them with resources on and off campus (Dickason et al., 2024, p. 111). However, sometimes the high caseloads in the Knox Promise (300-500 students per advisor) made it difficult for students and advisors to experience personalized one-on-one connections. Since the Nashville GRAD program capped advising loads at 150 students, students and advisors within that program did not describe similar frustrations about lack of access to their advisors compared to the Knox Promise participants (Dickason et al., 2024).

In summary, there is evidence that promise students who engage with college coaching are more likely to persist, earn higher GPAs, and/or accumulate more credits compared to promise students who do not meet with college coaches (Brockman et al., 2025; Carruthers et al., 2023; Carruthers & Pratt, 2023, 2024; Dickason et al., 2024). In addition, promise students who engaged with college coaches “overwhelmingly cited their advisers as the most important and useful component” of their programs (Dickason et al., 2024, p. 110). However, promise programs sometimes had to make do with the existing staff to implement their services (Monaghan & Attewell, 2023; Perna et al., 2020, 2021). This may lead to suboptimal services (Dickason et al., 2024), divert staff away from non-promise students (Perna et al., 2020, 2021), or increase workloads for existing staff (Monaghan & Attewell, 2023). While the quantitative findings provide positive correlations or evidence that students who used support services experienced improved academic outcomes, the qualitative findings stress the need to better understand the implementation of support services and the challenges promise programs face if

they are not given any new funds or staff to operate these services. Our study extends existing literature by analyzing how individuals tasked with implementing promise programs describe not only promise program implementation overall, but more specifically the implementation of the support services embedded within these programs.

Research Design

We employed a qualitative case study because we were interested in multiple bounded systems of individual community colleges operating promise programs, with the goal of richly describing “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). We considered each college to be a single case and collected data from multiple sources and compared across cases to improve trustworthiness, reliability, and to triangulate our findings (Yin, 2018).

Sampling Procedure

We began our purposive sampling process by referencing a publicly available Upjohn Institute dataset of 204 promise programs (October 2022 version) (W. E. Upjohn Institute, 2023). We selected programs that affected community colleges (those that predominantly award associate degrees), without imposing any geographic criteria on college location. Then, we restricted programs to those that offered some type of student support services as an optional or required component for maintaining the promise scholarship (including summer bridge, financial aid counseling, academic advising). We searched program websites to confirm the availability of services, which produced a total of 13 colleges. While all colleges offer some support services, most promise programs were not partnered with specific support services, hence the small sample size of suitable colleges. We reviewed publicly available data to gain a preliminary understanding of each program (e.g., eligibility requirements, funding sources).

We invited participants to the study by contacting the promise program administrator, and if applicable, the foundation that funded the promise, because these individuals would have firsthand knowledge of program operations. Informed by our interest in support services, we contacted employees in a wide range of student-facing positions, including academic advising, career counseling, financial aid, orientation and recruitment, student success and equity, and student organizations. We confirmed with each prospective participant that they had worked with promise students in their role and had experience to engage with our interview questions. Throughout data collection, we employed snowball sampling to identify additional informants. Snowball sampling is appropriate when locating key participants who meet the criteria established (Merriam, 2009). By asking questions among current participants such as “who knows a lot about [promise students]? Whom should I talk to?”, the snowball gets larger as the researcher “accumulates new information-rich cases,” particularly when key informants are nominated more than once (Patton, 2015, p. 451). Ultimately, individuals from seven of the 13 colleges responded to our requests.

Data Sources

Our primary data source consisted of interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024 with 32 participants. Table 1 lists the seven colleges, state located, student supports exclusively offered to promise students, number of participants and general job titles (to maintain participants’ confidentiality), community college enrollment size (small, medium or large), estimated size of promise program, and geographic area of eligible students (localized or statewide). Interviews included six former, current, or interim promise program directors, or directors who oversaw a department that housed the promise program. A team of five researchers conducted highly structured, one-on-one interviews lasting 45-60 minutes. We asked questions about participants’

professional responsibilities; knowledge of the promise program; and student support services, including the delivery and frequency of services, virtual versus in-person formats, student participation, student needs, and potential effects on persistence, graduation, and transfer.

Our secondary source of information came from 43 publicly available sources such as program announcements, newspaper articles, student guides, annual reports, FAQs, and websites. To find these secondary sources, we initially searched the promise program websites for relevant documents and linked articles. Then we searched the websites of community colleges and their foundations using the name of the promise program to find applicable information. Lastly, we conducted broader website searches in Google using the name of the promise program to discover additional webpages, newspaper articles, or relevant documents. We inspected all relevant links and reviewed documents that were available on those webpages. We only included sources in our data collection that described the promise program or how it worked.

[Table 1]

Data Analysis

Four researchers conducted the data coding and analyses in Dedoose, a qualitative and mixed methods analysis software. Informed by our research questions, we individually read and open coded one interview transcript using inductive codes that arose from the data (Merriam, 2009). We then met and collaboratively agreed on a set of initial codes and the interpretation of the codes to use for subsequent interview transcripts.

After completing all interviews, we each conducted analytical coding (grouping open codes). We searched for recurring patterns in our study to create categories or themes in which codes were sorted, with each code capturing data elements that arose from at least one interview (Merriam, 2009). We refined our coding system and collectively proceeded to name the

categories. Our process shifted from inductive to deductive “in testing and affirming the authenticity and appropriateness of the inductive content analysis, including carefully examining deviate cases or data that don’t fit the categories developed” (Patton, 2015, p. 792). We tested our coding structure against additional transcript data, ultimately creating themes from the category structure.

To ensure trustworthiness and reliability, a researcher different from the interviewer served as the primary coder. A secondary coder reviewed the codes assigned and served as a reliability check. As a research team, we met regularly to discuss the coding process and added, removed, and revised our codes as new questions and clarifications arose from emerging themes (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015).

We used the conceptual framework to consolidate and differentiate codes and to interpret findings through policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy constructs, including sensemaking/meaning-making, implementers’ discretion, resource constraints and capacity, information asymmetry, personal identity/background, and judgments about student need. Consistent with the culture-cognition school of policy implementation research (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024), we organized codes into two primary domains: contextual factors and individual factors. Examples of codes related to context included *financial sustainability*, *leadership*, *relative autonomy of individual units*, and *state and local program interaction*. For individual-level factors associated with implementers, sample codes include *identity/background*, *knowledge of the promise program*, *motivation/sense of purpose*, *learning from others’ experiences* and *learning from own experiences*. As one example, when participants discussed the opportunities and challenges of developing and delivering new support services for promise students, we discovered that the relative ease of this task depended on the connections between

units within the college. When there were few connections between units that oversaw the promise program and units that delivered services, the practitioners working for the promise program experienced greater autonomy in implementing new services.

For each promise program, we created individual cases describing information such as the program's initiation year, benefits, number of students participating, student support services offered, and funding sources. We triangulated information from participants with our 43 secondary sources. For instance, when participants mentioned that students must meet with advisors each semester to renew their promise aid, we confirmed this requirement via websites and FAQs. After we constructed the case for each promise program, we engaged in cross-case analysis to examine the within-case patterns and themes across cases and whether these patterns and themes were replicated. We identified whether certain themes were more prominent depending on program characteristics listed in Table 1.

Promise Program Context

We first present a summary of the programs in our sample and indicate the similarities and differences among them. Among the seven colleges in our sample, one program each was in Florida, Michigan, and New York, and four were in California. California has state legislation (AB 19) that offers community colleges funding to initiate their own promise programs. This along with the state's large size resulted in numerous programs in California that fit our sampling criteria. The Juniper and Eucalyptus programs were available to those residing anywhere in California (serving a broader area), while the remaining five programs were open to students graduating from a specific school district or one of multiple designated high schools in the local area (which we considered to be "localized" programs). Unique to California, some promise programs in our sample were established as first-dollar programs, meaning that tuition and fees

(termed “enrollment fees”) are covered for students regardless of other aid, and students can still receive Pell grants and state-level grant aid to cover living and other college expenses.

Findings

There was one descriptive finding to answer RQ 1 and three analytic findings that addressed both research questions. For our descriptive finding, there were a variety of support services that were available for promise students. For our analytic findings that aligned with RQ 1, we found that institutional constraints and capacity shaped support services, and promise programs that were localized facilitated connections and access to support services. For our analytic finding that aligned with RQ 2, community colleges and their corresponding promise programs changed or adapted their student support services to respond to student preferences, concerns, and/or past failures. Table 2 summarizes our findings and provides cross case analysis along differing community college or program characteristics.

[Table 2]

The Variety of Support Services for Promise Students

Policy implementation of the support services within promise programs was varied; sometimes promise students were absorbed into first-year experience or student success centers within the college and these programs shared staff with the institutions to better support their students. This strategy of using existing support infrastructure aligned with community colleges’ lower funding levels per student and were available because of the type of higher needs students that they typically serve (Hillman, 2020; The Century Foundation Working Group on Community College Financial Resources, 2019). Promise programs also required recipients to complete some support services to be eligible for aid, while offering more comprehensive yet optional supports. These services were delivered during different times, some which occurred

during the high school recruitment process and others that continued into the second year of college enrollment. While we observed no patterns to services available depending on college or program characteristics, optional supports were more common among large-sized colleges. At a minimum, all programs required students to complete orientation (promise-specific or general orientation at the institution) and to meet once with an academic advisor or counselor before receiving promise aid.

An Admissions/Outreach Supervisor at Juniper College explained how in previous years, attending orientation was not a requirement for promise recipients, but that in the current year (2024), all students were required to complete a week-long orientation experience. At Sycamore College, a First-Year Experience Counselor stated that the minimum requirement was for students to meet once with an academic advisor to create an educational plan. Yet, students could take advantage of other opportunities:

For instance, they are invited to participate in our summer bridge program that lasts two weeks, it's a one-unit course on career exploration. They also can participate in home room, a math workshop, to review their math skills before fall starts. If they complete this program, they get a \$600 book voucher for fall and for spring. Many students opt into our summer bridge program. The rest come to our welcome day where they come learn about the college, and they get a \$100 book voucher for fall.

At Eucalyptus College, an Admissions/Outreach Counselor also described the requirement of promise students to attend orientation and participate in at least two retention programs each year (about 7-8 programs are offered each year). The optional supports included meeting with their academic advisor to receive an educational plan modeled after the college's

first-year experience program. Promise students also got the benefit of priority registration and got connected to financial aid offices (although they were not required to apply for additional aid) and basic needs services (e.g., applying for food stamps, receiving a bus pass, or utilizing the food pantry).

At Palm College, there were 1-2 dedicated academic advisors for the promise. These advisors registered students for classes and closely monitored their progress over the semester. The Director of a Student Support Program explained how they developed an early alert system for Palm Promise students because they needed to maintain a cumulative 3.0 GPA to remain eligible for the scholarship. If a student was struggling academically, the alert system notified the academic advisor who then reached out to the Promise Director who provided the student with remediation services or suggested that the student drop the course and retake it in another semester if the student was in danger of not earning at least a B average. One of the improvements that Palm College made to the alert system was to notify advisors “earlier and earlier” in the semester if students were struggling—to give the Promise Director “a lot more strategies to improve and work with [the student].” They made this change because if they waited until the end of the semester, there was limited support that the program could give students to improve their grades before finals.

Regardless of the type of student support services, the Interim Promise Director at Sycamore College explained the importance of coupling support services with the promise scholarship:

Imagine you’re a student and you’re on this freeway, but it doesn’t have any guardrails, center dividers, signs—that’s what college is like for students. They’re on a freeway and they don’t even know if they’re going in the right direction

sometimes. And so what we're trying to do is make sure we put up the guardrails and the signs and the mile markers so that people will see [their progress] at every developmental stage.

They further explained that advisors and reminder emails/texts can act as “nudges” to ensure that “students know they’re going in the right direction” and that they are, for example, “tak[ing] the right number of units” and “in the right classes.” This allows promise students to more successfully navigate through college and earn their degrees.

The Promise is “A Team of One”: Institutional Constraints and Capacity Shaped Support Services

There were few colleges that had dedicated staff (usually academic advisors or peer advisors) working exclusively with promise students. These programs usually had more financial resources and often used state or private foundation money to pay for staff. Typically, most colleges adapted their existing student support services by having staff members work with both promise and non-promise students. The Interim Promise Director at Sycamore College explained that he “doesn’t currently have a team” instead he has “lots of different folks who do related work” and “they are for all intents and purposes my team [but] they don’t report to me.” He said that it “makes [his] job a little bit more challenging as there’s a lot of different folks that I have to know to do the [work] appropriately,” and he is essentially “a team of one.”

An Educational Advisor in a student support program at Juniper Community College had a similar experience and said that promise students get referred to him because “the promise does not have any advisors.” Instead, the promise is “just one person who deals with the big picture” and “a part-time person” but “she can’t do a lot.” He explained that “promise is this ragtag team of like[-minded] individuals who are willing to help.” Given their close ties to the director of the

promise, he often gets asked to help with advising and typically speaks to “10 to 15 promise students a week.” This finding is consistent with prior research (Monaghan & Attewell, 2023; Perna et al., 2021), that found promise support services were often allocated to existing staff, and workloads increased as opposed to hiring new, full-time staff dedicated to the promise program.

Given staffing capacity for the promise program, most colleges leveraged their existing support services for promise students. An Outreach Director at Eucalyptus College said, “our campus does a really good job at identifying students and referring students to the various resources on campus.” Similarly, a Financial Aid Advisor at Mesquite Community College discussed how administrators need to remember that “there are lots of other resources [on campus]” to help students. She further explained:

One of the important things is to know and be knowledgeable about...your college campus so that you can direct your student populations to additional resources, because it's not just the college promise program, these schools are given lots of money, just [for] different programs. And it's a matter of just getting out there and connecting the right student with the right resources.

Also at Mesquite College, a Director/Coordinator that housed the promise program in their unit discussed how they had to be careful to not “double serv[e]” students who participate in multiple student support programs to ensure “that we’re not putting too much on the student to where they have to do three appointments in [program A] and two in [program B].” Instead, she explained that both programs had to collaborate and communicate with each other to meet the needs of the student and ensure that the participation requirements remained reasonable (e.g., double counting an advising session to meet the requirements for both programs). This demonstrated the discretion of a street-level bureaucrat, who was informed by their own values and beliefs, to

change the written policies and deliver services that were perceived to be more conducive to students' capacity.

Sometimes promise students overwhelmed services that were available to the general population of students, which showcases how implementation can reveal challenges originally unanticipated by policy designers. This occurred at both statewide eligibility programs, while only 2 out of the 5 localized programs experienced this challenge. A Counselor at Eucalyptus College discussed how promise students were “getting the first spots to see a counselor” and “the other students that are not part of [the promise] are SOL because they’re not going to be able to get an appointment.” He explained that it was a “big issue with the program” and “that’s the part where there’s a disconnect between administrators administrating the program versus what’s happening on the ground level.” This quote emphasizes the black box of policy implementation—program designers and high-level administrators did not have to deal with the impact of their decisions on staff working in student-facing positions.

A Juniper College administrator was concerned about the unintended consequences of successfully leveraging other campus resources for promise students because college leadership might not be aware that the program needs additional resources. They explained, “My big concern is [the promise program has] been successful because we’ve been getting [our promise] students into other [college-wide] programs, and students get the support they need through [a state-funded program] or somewhere else” but “the higher ups are interpreting the big picture as promise program success and don’t see a need to expand [promise-resources].” That is, since promise students were getting support services elsewhere, upper administration interprets the promise students’ success as an indication the program does not require new resources, without recognizing the true costs of operating the program. This would keep promise program staff at

the current levels which would put the promise students at a “disadvantage” as “the program can’t live up to its potential because it’s only one person.” An Outreach Supervisor at the same community college shared similar concerns that “we’re just holding together like a family to support each other to make it successful” but the promise needs “its own department” to provide adequate services to its own students.

“Help[ed] With Some Seamless Transitions:” Localized Nature Facilitated Connections and Access to Support Services

The localized nature of five programs in our sample was a benefit in strengthening the relationship between the promise and the community college because the promise-eligible high schools and the college were geographically close. This contrasts with statewide programs that affect multiple community colleges across the state and promise programs like the Kalamazoo Promise that affect all postsecondary institutions in a state. The setup made it easier to meet with students and staff face-to-face or have multiple interactions before the high school students arrived at college. In addition, since there was only one eligible postsecondary institution, it made it easier to have a contact person at the college “to provide these ongoing support services.” One participant remarked that it was “a challenge for other promise programs” that “allow all these [colleges] in the state or the vast majority of [colleges] in the state to participate [in the promise]” because there was not “someone on site [at each college] to ensure that they [the promise students] were getting the services.” This demonstrates how geography influenced the implementation of outreach services and the beliefs held by staff members about the advantages of localized programs with only one promise-eligible college because there were stronger connections between the students and the college before they arrived on campus.

A Foundation Employee at Mulberry College explained the close relationship between the promise and the community college. The two organizations co-sponsored “kickoff lunches or enrollment days” where students were bused from their high school to the college and it’s a “one-day, one-stop enrollment/orientation.” Students would learn how to navigate the student portal, register for classes, complete a financial literacy workshop, and attend an optional campus tour. In addition, the Foundation Employee discussed the Mulberry Promise success coach (a recent addition) who worked at the college. They explained how the promise worked in tandem with this person to ensure that eligible high school students had a “point person” for the application process and a “point person” while they were in college. The Foundation Employee explained how “having a relationship with that person [success coach] definitely help[ed] with some seamless transitions.”

The Interim Promise Program Director at Sycamore College also stressed the importance of having a specific contact person for students and that it’s “not enough to just have student supports.” Instead, “you have to help students to identify the supports that they should take advantage of.” The Interim Director explained how the Sycamore Promise:

really [went] out of our way to introduce students to, not just programs, but *people* in the programs, and who leads the programs so they can have names, but also faces to names...so they can then begin to perceive the associated benefits of those programs.

This representative quote stressed how facilitating connections between students and support service staff were essential in having students utilize and recognize the benefits of these services. Specifically for the Sycamore Promise, they introduced students to support staff at multiple events: preview day, summer bridge, family nights, orientation, welcome days, etc.

Preferences, Concerns, and Past Failures: How Student Support Services Changed to Respond to Students' Needs

Student support services evolved in response to the needs of promise and non-promise students via practitioners asking students directly about their preferences, addressing their concerns, and adapting practices and services due to past failures, demonstrating the discretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats. Some of the changes were a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic which caused services to either be paused, adapted to a virtual format, or created to address students' evolving needs. An Educational Advisor at Juniper College explained how the pandemic led to changes in how they served students because before they were “still in the stone ages” with an “emphasis on people being physically in our space” as they did not offer virtual services. During the pandemic:

We started talking to students and asking them, how can we better serve them? We kind of had an idea how we wanted them to work and how we wanted them to ask things—and with COVID, the campus finally said, we don't know, let's just start listening to students, and we started tailoring stuff to what they wanted us to do.

Numerous participants noted the creation of virtual supports as effective in accommodating student needs and increasing access to services for the target population, since many community college students held demanding jobs or were parents or primary caregivers. Participants described virtual sessions as “convenient” and said there were more opportunities to engage with students on a virtual platform (Zoom/Teams), especially when commuting to campus was difficult. Some participants explained that along with virtual appointments, student support services created digital forms, more comprehensive websites, and for Maple College, a digital library for career services. This allowed students to access necessary information without

having to connect with a staff member. Ultimately, these arrangements were perceived by practitioners to have made it easier to serve more students by addressing basic, initial questions.

However, the benefits of virtual appointments for academic, career, and financial planning appointments were not without drawbacks. Employees at Eucalyptus and Mulberry Colleges voiced concerns about students multi-tasking during virtual appointments, such as running errands, driving, and taking care of children. Because of the distraction of multi-tasking, Eucalyptus College discontinued telephone appointments and subsequently required all virtual appointments to be on-camera. This policy change was in response to the internal adaptation amongst student users of virtual services. Participants also voiced concerns that virtual service provision was becoming the new normal, and some perceived “traditional,” in-person appointments as more effective. According to an Academic Advisor from Eucalyptus: “What we have realized is that virtual classes and virtual counseling is not for everybody. A lot of students, especially students of color, black and brown folks, we are visual learners. We need interaction with other human beings.” Another Academic Advisor at the same college expressed the staff perspective:

For advisors who are used to doing more therapy type of environments where it’s face-to-face, it was difficult...And it really wasn’t quite the same with the students because we do academic planning, to share the screen—it was a learning curve for the advisors who didn’t like it. And yeah, that fostered a lot of early retirement on our end.

Participants in our study had split opinions on offering support services via Zoom/Teams, with some stating virtual services enhanced the availability of student services, yet others stated it diminished the quality of such services. Their beliefs about the effectiveness of practices depended in part on their identities, as described in policy implementation (Felix & Nienhusser,

2024), with older participants preferring in-person service delivery. Most participants explained that they would not be able to eliminate virtual services because “people use it, and it works for them” as voiced by a Counselor at Mulberry College. Other staff echoed similar sentiments that keeping virtual services gave students more choices and “we have quite a few students who prefer online” so “we’re going to stay online.”

Some participants discussed how they saw the promise program and its support services change over time and be “repackaged and retooled throughout the years.” One staff member at Juniper College remarked that they unintentionally set the first cohort “up for failure” because “we gave [the students] the hardest classes up front with limited support and didn’t really tell them what to expect.” He explained, “it was so bad that we had to change our efforts moving forward because so many students were failing, dropping out, just being so discouraged.” Eventually by the fifth year of the program, they created a comprehensive onboarding orientation and lowered the number of credits that they needed to take each semester. During the orientation, they “normalize[ed] the struggle [that] is going to happen in college” and provided contact people so students “know who to go to when issues arise so [students] can be successful.” These series of changes were in response to past failures, indicating how implementation is influenced by context and meaning-making among actors; the promise program experimented with what works best for students and adjusted until they found an orientation program that worked.

The Interim Promise Director at Sycamore College explained how they learned from previous failed attempts by sending out surveys to students to ask whether “something we tried was meaningful for them.” If the answer was negative, the promise used the survey data to adjust their practices because the program did not want to continue events/services/offerings that were not working for students. Similarly, an Admissions/Outreach Counselor for the Eucalyptus

Promise discussed a scenario where the program moved its application deadline from the spring to the summer to accommodate high school students' schedules as students are "still technically 12th grade in high school" during this initial deadline so "they're not paying attention to the [college] deadlines."

These three examples illustrate the wider practice of street-level bureaucrats utilizing discretion, knowledge, and meaning-making to adjust their practices/services after past failures. They were willing to listen to their students or use other evidence such as survey data, missed deadlines, or negative student outcomes to realize that their current services were not addressing students' needs and that they needed to evolve to meet "students where they were at." This iterative adaption of support services for promise students displayed how practitioners utilized personal beliefs to shape services to increase the chance of success for their students.

Discussion

The number of promise programs has grown extensively, and new programs continue to emerge to serve the increasing number of community college students (Miller-Adams, 2015; Monaghan & Hawke, 2025). Thus, it is critical to better understand the ways these programs can support participating students. Our study provides evidence that the potential success of promise programs is based on their implementation and policy context, such as the resources available to hire additional support professionals or to offer promise-specific programming.

Findings from our study highlight the choices that practitioners make, given the institutional resources available and their perceptions of the needs of promise students, consistent with literature on street-level bureaucrats and the culture-cognition policy implementation frame, both of which highlight organizational constraints and implementers' agency, including discretion, sensemaking, resource constraints and capacity, information asymmetry, and

judgments about student need (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024; Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). Taken together, these dynamics shape how community colleges adapt existing support services and whether they create new support services targeted towards promise students.

We found that the addition of promise students at several colleges (Sycamore, Juniper, Eucalyptus, Mesquite) overwhelmed existing support staff. Consequently, some promise students got priority to make appointments with advisors, reducing the likelihood of non-promise students receiving timely services. This tension of serving promise and non-promise students arises because most promise programs, while providing scholarship aid, do not increase human resources accordingly (i.e., budgeting new funds to hire staff). Existing college staff are given larger caseloads or asked to divide their time amongst all students. This finding is consistent with prior studies on other promise programs, which also found that staff caseloads were increased to accommodate greater demand for services among promise students (Perna et al., 2020; 2021; Monaghan & Attewell, 2023). Prior research suggests these higher loads can hinder the effectiveness of the program for supporting students' success, as evidenced by Bell and Meyer's (2024) study demonstrating how reducing the workload of counselors, which they conceptualize as street-level bureaucrats, can mitigate inequities in access to financial aid.

There were exceptions, such as Palm College, which had 1-2 dedicated academic advisors serving only promise students. These advisors appeared to have enough time and resources to monitor their students' academic progress more closely. These differences in promise-specific staff hires represent varied policy implementation (Lu & Matheny, 2026; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Prior research shows a similar contrast in caseloads and highlights potential implications for program effectiveness. Specifically, comparing two programs in Tennessee, Dickason et al. (2024) found that Nashville GRAD students could more

easily access their advisors because they had lower caseloads compared to Knox Promise students who experienced frustration trying to get time with their advisors because they had double or sometimes triple the caseload of Nashville GRAD.

Grounded in our conceptual framework, the culture-cognition school of policy implementation research emphasizes individuals' values and beliefs (part of cognition), and how they influence implementation (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024). Because the responsibility for steering promise students in college sometimes fell on a single college employee, the localized nature of single-institution programs allows the individual's values to influence their implementation of services through sensemaking about what "support" should look like in practice. That is, participants in our study (including the Foundation Employee at Mulberry) felt a deep commitment to being the "point person" for a student—a productive relationship that helps to ease transitions from high school to college, and throughout college. This approach reflects the belief (such as of the Director at Sycamore) that it was the institution's responsibility to personally introduce students to the key support service providers in student-serving units. The actions of practitioners exemplified their values of student success and their beliefs that it was a professional responsibility to guide promise students, which represented humanizing those implementing policy. In this way, our findings echo those of Bell and Smith (2022), Nienhusser (2018), Nienhusser & Connery (2021), and Felix (2021), which emphasize how individuals' beliefs shape how they implement policies in ways that promote or hinder students' success.

Further, consistent with our conceptual framework of street-level bureaucrats, we point to an example of a practitioner utilizing discretion to reducing unnecessary burdens for students. A Director at Mesquite College emphasized the need to avoid "double serving" students involved in multiple support programs. The participant did not want to put undue onus on the student to

fulfill appointment requirements across multiple programs. The Director explained that by collaborating and communicating with other staff members in other programs, they can holistically ensure that the participation requirements are reasonable (e.g., having one advising session fulfill mandatory advising requirements for two support programs). This illustrates how values shaped implementation decisions (Felix & Nienhusser, 2024).

Our study also extends existing literature in two key ways. First, our findings highlight the importance of geography in promise program implementation, particularly the proximity between participating colleges and the students the programs are designed to serve. Much of the existing promise literature distinguishes programs by eligibility rules, financial aid structure, and student support requirements. Our findings suggest that geographic scale and proximity also shape implementation in consequential ways. Compared with broader programs with statewide eligibility, local promise programs appeared better positioned to conduct direct outreach, coordinate with eligible high schools, and support smoother transitions into college. For example, local programs were able to organize enrollment events, transport students to campus, and share information more readily among high schools, program staff, and participating colleges. These findings do not contradict existing research on promise program design, but they extend it by showing how geography can shape the practical conditions under which program supports are delivered.

This study offers a more dynamic account of promise program implementation by showing how practitioners adapt program structures and student supports in response to changing student needs and local conditions. Rather than implementing promise programs as static policy designs, the actors in our study continually adjusted how programs operated. Some of these changes were prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including shifts toward virtual advising

and service delivery that persisted after campuses returned to more in-person operations. These changes reflected practitioners' efforts to remain responsive to student preferences and logistical constraints. At the same time, virtual services created new implementation challenges. For example, practitioners at Eucalyptus and Mulberry observed that students were sometimes distracted during virtual appointments, prompting Eucalyptus to institute a policy requiring students to be on camera for their virtual meetings.

These examples illustrate how organizational culture, student-centered values, and practitioner discretion shaped implementation. Consistent with policy implementation theory, practitioners acted as street-level bureaucrats who interpreted program goals and adjusted services in response to local constraints and student needs (Byun & Bastedo, 2025; Lipsky, 1980; Nienhusser, 2018; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). However, our findings extend this framework by showing that discretion was not limited to minor adjustments in service delivery. In several cases, implementers made more substantial changes to program operations, including revising application deadlines, adjusting course sequencing, and providing warning alerts earlier in the semester to struggling students to get them back on track. These findings suggest that promise program implementation is best understood as an ongoing process of adaptation, learning, and recalibration.

Implications

This study highlights several implications for higher education, community, and state leaders who are adopting, scaling, or modifying promise programs. Across sites, our findings underscore that the effectiveness of promise programs depends not only on promise program design but also on implementation capacity, particularly staffing, coordination infrastructure, and the extent to which promise functions are integrated with existing student support systems.

Our first implication is that staffing and capacity matters, as we found that many of our promise programs are implemented without adequate staffing—sometimes with only one administrator. In several cases, promise responsibilities were absorbed into existing advising and student services structures, increasing caseloads and constraining appointment availability. Under these conditions, the quality and timeliness of services may decline not only for promise students, but also for non-promise students who rely on the same services. The added responsibilities placed on practitioners also raise concerns about workload, well-being, and employee retention; these factors can further destabilize implementation over time.

Relatedly, our findings point to potential unintended consequences for non-promise students when new promise cohorts are introduced without commensurate capacity investments. Promise students may be prioritized for scarce appointments or access (e.g., through priority registration or appointment availability), which can disadvantage other students who are navigating the same institutional systems, especially at community colleges where resources are already scarce. Policymakers and practitioners should anticipate these externalities, especially at colleges with larger total enrollments. At a minimum, program leaders should monitor whether the introduction or expansion of a promise program changes wait times, appointment access, and utilization patterns for non-promise students.

Given these capacity challenges, we recommend that program designers and institutional leaders plan staffing as a core design feature. Where feasible, program designers should pursue additional resources to hire staff with protected time dedicated to promise students, particularly when the program includes requirements that necessitate frequent contact (e.g., mandatory advising or progress monitoring). In addition, our findings support the practical importance of having at least one identifiable promise official on site at each campus, especially in statewide or

multi-campus programs where administration may otherwise be centralized and physically distant from students and day-to-day service workflows.

A second implication concerns the importance of connecting students to a constellation of supports without relying on a single staff member's personal knowledge to figure out what services and resources exist. Promise program effectiveness could depend on their ability to intentionally connect to existing campus (and, where relevant, community-based) services. Findings from this study suggest that promise programs can function as coordinating structures that help students navigate the institution, make warm handoffs to specialized units, and ensure that students do not get lost between offices.

Finally, findings from this study suggest several directions for future research. Given the capacity challenges identified here, future studies should examine how promise program effects vary by staffing levels and other capacity-related conditions. Research should also assess whether advising caseloads, appointment availability, and service wait times change after promise implementation, as these factors may mediate program effectiveness.

In addition, future research should examine the effects of promise program implementation on populations not directly targeted by these programs, including non-promise students at promise-eligible institutions and the staff members responsible for implementation. Examining non-promise students would provide insight into whether promise programs produce negative externalities by diverting or dividing limited resources and services to fulfill program support mandates. Studying staff members would extend understanding of how promise implementation shapes workload, job experiences, effectiveness, attitudes, and well-being, particularly given documented burnout among student support professionals (Soria et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This study addresses a gap in the literature, as few studies have examined student support services within promise programs, despite their importance for meeting program goals (Dickason et al., 2024; Perna et al., 2020). Our findings show that local promise programs benefit from geographic proximity, which fosters in-person connections between students, promise staff, and other practitioners. We also find that community colleges' capacity to deliver support services to promise students depends on their existing institutional resources, including the availability of other student support services. However, this dynamic can stretch resources thin, sometimes to the detriment of non-promise students, who may receive less attention. As a result, outcome statistics for promise students may appear positive while masking potential negative impacts on other student populations, a finding that warrants further examination. Finally, our findings offer insight into how the implementation of student support services have evolved in recent years and how student affairs practitioners have responded to shifting environmental conditions and student needs. In doing so, this study highlights both the structural constraints that shape colleges' ability to serve promise students and the efforts of practitioners to support all students despite these limitations.

References

American Association of Community Colleges. (2025). *Fast facts 2025*.

https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AACC2025_Fact_Sheet.pdf

American Council on Education (ACE). (2025). *2025 Carnegie Classification fact sheet*.

<https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Carnegie-Classifications-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

Authors, 2020.

Authors, 2021.

Authors, 2025a.

Authors, 2025b.

Authors, 2025c.

Baum, S., & Kurose, C. (2013). Community colleges in context: Exploring financing of two- and four-year institutions. In The Century Foundation (Ed.), *Bridging the higher education divide: Strengthening community colleges and restoring the American dream* (pp. 73–108). The Century Foundation Press.

https://productiontcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2016/03/08200527/20130523-Bridging_the_Higher_Education_Divide-REPORT-ONLY.pdf

Bell, E., & Meyer, K. (2024). Does reducing street-level bureaucrats' workload enhance equity in program access? Evidence from burdensome college financial aid programs. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 34(1), 16-38.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muad018>

Bell, E., & Smith, K. (2022). Working within a system of administrative burden: How street-level bureaucrats' role perceptions shape access to the promise of higher education.

Administration & Society, 54(2), 167-211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211027535>

Brockman, S. L., Camo-Biogradlija, J., Ratledge, A., O'Donoghue, R., Baum, M. Y., & Jacob, B. (2025). Forging a path to college persistence: An experimental evaluation of the Detroit Promise Path program. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 47(2), 549-576. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241230474>

Byun, B. K., & Bastedo, M. N. (2025). Admissions officers as street-level bureaucrats: Exercising discretion to enact competing conceptions of equity. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Advanced online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737251371706>

Carruthers, C. K., Fox, W. F., Guerrero, D., & Pratt, E. (2023). Knox Promise and Nashville GRAD: An early look at college outcomes. Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Tennessee Knoxville.
<https://haslam.utk.edu/publication/knox-promise-and-nashville-grad-an-early-look-at-college-outcomes/>

Carruthers, C. K. & Pratt, E. (2023). *Knox Promise: College persistence and completion for the first three cohorts*. Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Tennessee Knoxville. <https://haslam.utk.edu/publication/knox-promise-college-persistence-and-completion-for-the-first-three-cohorts/>

Carruthers, C. K. & Pratt, E. (2024). Going beyond free college: Initial findings on college success with supplemental coaching and grants. Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Tennessee Knoxville.

<https://haslam.utk.edu/publication/going-beyond-free-college-initial-findings-on-college-success-with-supplemental-coaching-and-grants/>

Dickason, C.N., Heinrich, C. & Smith, M. (2024). Delivering on the promise: The role of supplemental promise programs in reducing barriers to college success. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 95(1), 92-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2195770>

Felix, E. R. (2021). Improving racial equity in community college: Developing a plan, implementing the vision. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 43(3), 419-444. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373721996729>

Felix, E.R. & Nienhusser, H.K. (2024). Humanizing policy implementation in higher education through an equity-centered approach. In L. W. Perna (Eds.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (vol 39, pp. 1-54). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38077-8_11

Gilliam, W. S., Ripple, C. H., Zigler, E. F., & Leiter, V. (2000). Evaluating child and family demonstration initiatives: Lessons from the comprehensive child development program. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(1), 41–59. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(99\)00041-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(99)00041-1)

Gonzalez, Ángel de J., Burgos-López, L., Felix, E. R., & Nienhusser, H. K. (2021). Policy implementation as a tool for advancing equity in community college. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 29, 25. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.6689>

Hillman, N. (2020). *Why rich colleges get richer & poor colleges get poorer: The case for equity-based funding in higher education*. Third Way. <https://www.thirdway.org/report/why-rich-colleges-get-richer-poor-colleges-get-poorer-the-case-for-equity-based-funding-in-higher-education>

- Kahlenberg, R. D. (2015). *How higher education funding shortchanges community colleges*. The Century Foundation. <http://tcf.org/blog/detail/how-higher-education-funding-shortchanges-community-colleges>
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lu, A., & Matheny, K. T. (2026). Equal inputs, unequal outputs: How capacity limits policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 48(1), 189-213. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241310832>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, C., & Weiss, M. J. (2021). Increasing community college graduation rates: A synthesis of findings on the ASAP model from six colleges across two states. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 44(2), 210–233. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737211036726>
- Miller-Adams, M. (2015). *Promise nation: Transforming communities through place-based scholarships*. W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. <https://doi.org/10.17848/9780880995061>
- Millett, C. M., Saunders, S. R., & Fishtein, D. (2018). *Examining how college promise programs promote student academic and financial readiness* (Research Report No. RR-18-41). Educational Testing Services. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12229>
- Monaghan, D. B., & Attewell, P. A. (2023). College promise programs as symbolic politics. *Sociology of Education*, 96(4), 301–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407231183459>
- Monaghan, D. B., & Hawke, E. A. (2025). *What are promises made of? The design of local college affordability programs* (EdWorking Paper: 25-1169). <https://doi.org/10.26300/HWRK-TV90>

- Nienhusser, H. K. (2018). Higher education institutional agents as policy implementers: The case of policies that affect undocumented and DACAmented students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 41(3), 423-453. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0014>
- Nienhusser, H. K., & Connery, C. (2021). Examining the undocumented college student policy implementation environment through a contextual interaction theory lens. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 43(4), 615-646. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737211009240>
- Nguyen, H. (2020). Free college? Assessing enrollment responses to the Tennessee Promise program. *Labour Economics*, 66(101882). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2020.101882>
- Odle, T. K. & Monday, A. B. (2021). Spending more or spending less? Institutional expenditures and staffing in the free-college era. *AERA Open*, 7(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211034491>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th edition). Sage Publications.
- Perna, L. W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. W. (2020). Is a college promise program an effective use of resources? Understanding the implications of program design and resource investments for equity and efficiency. *AERA Open*, 6(4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420967633>
- Perna, L. W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. W. (2021). Will college promise programs improve or reduce equity? Understanding the contextual conditions that influence program implementation. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 29(26), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.5436>

- Pressman, J. L. & Wildavsky, A. (1973). *Implementation: How great expectations are dashed in Oakland; or why it's amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the economic development administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes*. University of California Press.
- Ratledge, A., O'Donoghue, R., Cullinan, D., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2019). *A path from access to success: Interim findings from the Detroit Promise Path evaluation*. MDRC.
<https://www.mdrc.org/publication/path-access-success>
- Rauner, M. & Smith, A. (2020). *College promise programs: A description of the California landscape*. WestEd. <https://californiacollegepromise.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CCPP-Research-Brief-2-022720-final.pdf>
- Reason, R. D. (2009). An examination of persistence research through the lens of a comprehensive conceptual framework. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 659-682. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0098>
- Sabatier, P. & Mazmanian, D. (1980). The implementation of public policy: A framework of analysis. *Policy Studies Journal*, 8(4), 538-560. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1980.tb01266.x>
- Soria, K. M., Kokenge, E., Heath, C. A., Standley, E. C., Wilson, S. J., Connley, J. R., & Agramon, A. I. (2023). Factors associated with academic advisors' burnout. *NACADA Journal*, 43(2), 105-120. <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-23-14>
- The Century Foundation Working Group on Community College Financial Resources. (2019). *Restoring the American dream: Providing community colleges with the resources they need*. The Century Foundation Press.

- Weiss, M. J., Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., & Gupta, H. (2019). Supporting community college students from start to degree completion: Long-term evidence from a randomized trial of CUNY's ASAP. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 11(3), 253–297.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20170430>
- W. E. Upjohn Institute. (2023). Promise research at the Upjohn Institute.
<https://www.upjohn.org/promise/>
- Willard, J., Vasquez, A., & Lepe, M. (2019). *Designing for success: The early implementation of college promise programs*. MDRC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594448.pdf>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th edition). Sage Publications.
- Yuen, V. (2020). *The \$78 billion community college funding shortfall*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/Community-College-Shortfall6.pdf>