Postsecondary Opportunity Programs
Defining and Improving an Educational Policy Innovation

By Elizabeth Stransky Vaade

Key Recommendations

This policy brief provides four recommendations to consider when strengthening existing or creating new postsecondary opportunity programs.

1. Invest in evaluation.

2. Make postsecondary success the primary focus.

3. Increase college support services.

4. Provide programs for adults seeking postsecondary education.

About the Author

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Introduction

Many students and families face significant barriers to postsecondary education, including college costs, a lack of understanding of admissions requirements and financial aid options, and the absence of a pervasive *college-going culture*.[1] Underrepresented students, such as first-generation, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and racial minorities, are particularly vulnerable to this problem. Research demonstrates that these students tend to be less academically prepared for postsecondary education and lack adequate *college knowledge*.[2] As a result, higher education applications, enrollments, and graduation rates fall short of desired levels, and this deficit impairs economic and community viability.

In response, concerned stakeholders have enacted policies and programs designed to confront this problem. Called postsecondary opportunity programs (POPs), these state, county, municipal, institutional, and private programs and partnerships aim to increase educational attainment by confronting the barriers to postsecondary access, persistence, and success. Many of these programs identify educational attainment as a means to economic and community development. They exist under many names, including promise programs, compacts, covenants, and commitments.

> Postsecondary opportunity programs (POPs)...aim to increase educational attainment by confronting the barriers to postsecondary access, persistence, and success.

To be classified as a POP, a program must:

- Have dedicated funds, available only to students enrolled in the program, that provide full or partial financial assistance for postsecondary education expenses

- Be need-based, a combination of need- and merit-based, or universally accessible

- Provide or facilitate non-monetary benefits, or leverage other programs providing these benefits,[3] which include at least one of the following:

  » Precollege support services

  » College knowledge

  » Guaranteed enrollment at a postsecondary institution

  » College support services

POPs participants must fulfill certain eligibility requirements to access program benefits.

In conducting research on POPs, WISCAPE focuses on the past 20 years. Within this timeframe, the postsecondary education landscape has been altered significantly by shifts in student demographics, increased emphasis on expanded access and completion, rising college costs, and more recently, a deep recession. POPs have arisen and evolved to confront these issues in three overlapping phases.

In the first phase, states looked to provide POPs for their residents, beginning with the Indiana Twenty-first Century Scholars program in 1990. Second, institutions began to craft programs designed to help increase access for particular student groups, as exemplified by the announcement in 2004 of the Carolina Covenant at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Third, cities, counties, and school districts adopted the POPs framework as a way to increase the educational attainment of residents and jumpstart economic growth. The Kalamazoo Promise, started in 2005, stands as the leader among these programs.

POPs are becoming increasingly prevalent, and while a great deal of policy innovation and diffusion has occurred in this area in recent years, no clear definition of these programs exists. WISCAPE constructed the POPs definition to help researchers and policymakers group, describe, compare, analyze, and evaluate these programs.

This brief provides an introductory overview of POPs nationwide based on more than 50 qualifying programs (see Appendix)—selected from an exploration of over 120—led by

Indiana's Twenty-first Century Scholars Program represents the first state-run postsecondary opportunity program.

Image source: http://www.in.gov/ssaci/

> [POPs] are designed to cultivate a more highly educated populace which, in turn, brings numerous private and public benefits.

municipalities, counties, states, or institutions, that aim to enroll and graduate students at two- and four-year institutions.[4] The brief gives the reader a sense of the programs' goals, eligibility guidelines, benefits to recipients, and funding sources.

This analysis does not offer suggestions on the successes or shortcomings of any particular program. Further research will explore POPs in greater detail. The brief concludes with four policy recommendations to consider as these programs continue to develop.

Goals

Each POP identifies goals, which demonstrate the key priorities of the program and help determine program characteristics. They also frame conversations and serve as political scaffolding upon which to build public awareness and support. This analysis identifies six key goals:

1. Increase educational attainment
2. Promote economic development
3. Develop well-rounded citizens
4. Increase access to postsecondary education for targeted populations
5. Strengthen pride in education
6. Foster collaboration

These goals are described in greater detail below.

In order to measure progress toward each goal, some programs identify and utilize *impact categories*; others publicly articulate goals without specifying how they will be assessed. The impact categories listed below— some conceptual, others identified by existing programs—demonstrate how some POPs currently measure progress, as well as how goals could potentially be operationalized.

Increase Educational Attainment

Almost all POPs make increasing educational attainment an explicit goal. They are designed to cultivate a more highly educated populace which, in turn, brings numerous private and public benefits.

While most programs focus on helping students enroll in postsecondary education, they do so by prioritizing different educational outcomes throughout the process. Some programs concentrate on high school education, viewing gains in secondary education achievement as an indirect way to boost postsecondary enrollment. Others prefer to measure educational effects after students enroll in postsecondary education, using indicators such as semesters completed or graduation rates.

Impact categories for educational attainment include:

- Increase high school graduation rates

- Increase high school GPA

- Increase the number of students taking the SAT and/or ACT

- Help students access other available precollege support services, such as state scholarship programs, federal scholarship programs, private scholarship programs, TRIO, GEAR UP, and Upward Bound

- Enroll, complete, and pass rigorous precollege preparation programs, including:

  » College-ready coursework

  » Advanced Placement courses

  » College placement courses

- Increase the number of students completing and submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

- Increase the number of students completing and submitting a postsecondary education application

- Increase the number of students enrolling in postsecondary institutions

- Increase the number of completed semesters of postsecondary education

- Increase the number of students graduating with a two-year or four-year degree

- Increase the number of postsecondary degree recipients in the community

Promote Economic Development

Some POPs aim to advance economic development. These programs focus on acquiring the benefits of an increasingly educated population, such as increased home ownership, community involvement, and influx of business opportunities. All of these factors make an area a more attractive place in which to live and work and help recruit new businesses.

Impact categories include:

- Reduce migration out of the area

- Increase migration into the area

- Attract new businesses to the area

- Retain existing high-wage and high-growth businesses in the area

- Increase pride in the community

- Increase home ownership and property valuation

Develop Well-Rounded Citizens

Proponents argue that POPs can help develop well-rounded citizens.

> Some POPs seek to minimize or eliminate [postsecondary enrollment] gaps by specifically targeting underrepresented groups.

For instance, some POPs contracts include "good behavior clauses," which require participating students to stay out of trouble. Other programs focus on involving students through community service and internships.

These activities aim to increase community welfare and instill in youth the value of giving back.

Impact categories include:

- Increase the number of students engaged in community service
- Increase the number of community internships offered to students
- Instill in youth the value of volunteerism
- Reward students who display good character and judgment
- Reduce crime among youth

Increase Access to Postsecondary Education for Targeted Populations

Research suggests that particular subsections of the high school student population, even if academically qualified, enroll and persist in postsecondary education at much lower rates than their peers.[5] Some POPs seek to minimize or eliminate these gaps by specifically targeting underrepresented groups. Other programs choose to confront this problem by removing the barriers to postsecondary access and success, such as college costs and the absence of a college-going culture.

Impact categories include:

- Increase the number of underrepresented students applying to, enrolling in, and completing postsecondary education, including first-generation students, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-income students
- Increase the number of returning students enrolling in and completing postsecondary education, including the recently unemployed and the working poor
- Increase the diversity of students enrolling in postsecondary institutions
- Make postsecondary education affordable for low- and middle-income students

Strengthen Pride in Education

Proponents of POPs see pride in education as a catalyst to further development in K-12 schooling. For example, a community's investment in postsecondary education may influence practices within the elementary and secondary schools, helping create a college-going culture. Leaders believe that POPs can help promote real change in K-12 systems, fostering everything from increased teacher retention to more financial support for building renovations. Many communities develop POPs as a way to slow migration out of their public school districts and keep schools open.

Pride in education can be measured through these impact categories:

- Instill in children the belief that they will achieve more than their parents
- Increase community support for education
- Improve local schools by attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and staff and increasing teacher morale
- Increase volunteerism in the schools
- Increase family involvement
- Increase giving to local schools
- Create and maintain a culture of excellence in schools

- Achieve state and national recognition for quality schools
- Retain district residents and those attending local schools

Foster Collaboration

Finally, POPs aim to foster collaboration among key groups. Since POPs involve both secondary and postsecondary education, they increase opportunities for K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions to engage in real dialogue about aligning curriculum, coordinating educational messages, and creating uniform standards. Some POPs contain provisions that encourage or require students to access existing state and federal resources for postsecondary education.

> Many communities develop POPs as a way to slow migration out of their public school districts and keep schools open.

The search for funding sources for POPs can also lead to collaboration among different levels of government and public-private partnerships. State, county, or municipal governments may work with private foundations and corporations to seek out opportunities for sustained funding.

Impact categories for fostering collaboration include:

- Increase the number of public-private partnerships

- Increase the number of students taking advantage of existing resources

- Coordinate efforts among various levels of schooling, including pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, secondary, and postsecondary education

- Increase communication among various levels of schooling

- Align secondary and postsecondary curricular standards and expectations

- Connect students to existing postsecondary assistance programs at the campus, system, state, and federal levels

Eligibility and Benefits

The eligibility and benefits of each POP are tailored to its specific goals.

Each program uses a different set of characteristics to define elgibility. These requirements determine whether a student can enroll in the program and to what extent he or she can access benefits.

POPs participants receive various benefits for successful program completion. All POPs include some financial support, which must come from dedicated funds accessible only to program participants.

POPs also provide or facilitate at least one other type of benefit to the recipient. Additional benefits include pre-college support services, college knowledge, guaranteed enrollment, or college support services. POPs do not necessarily need to cover these benefits within their program: in many instances, POPs partner with other organizations to provide these services.

Table 1 on page 8 displays a comprehensive listing of the various eligibility requirements and benefits used by the 50 programs included in this analysis.

Funding Sources

POPs require a significant level of funding and draw from a variety of public and private revenue sources. Many programs rely on private philanthropic donations from corporations, foundations, and individual donors. Others use public funds through the reallocation of existing public dollars, the creation of new taxes, or the distribution of lottery and casino revenues. POPs may also leverage federal, state, or institutional dollars to cover some costs.

Table 1
Examples of Eligibility Requirements and Benefits of Postsecondary Opportunity Programs

ELIGIBILITY

Demographics
- Low-income
- First generation college student
- Racial or ethnic minority

Geography
- Live within particular area at time of K-12 schooling
- Parents work within particular area at time of K-12 schooling
- Attend particular school district

Residency/Citizenship
- Resident of city, county, or state
- U.S. citizen

Age at Enrollment
- Early commitment (sixth to ninth grade)
- Recent high school graduates
- Enrolled postsecondary students

Academic Requirements
- Minimum high school GPA
- College preparatory coursework
- SAT or ACT completion
- Access existing state or federal college preparatory programs
- Admitted to postsecondary institution
- Full-time course load while enrolled in postsecondary institution
- Minimum postsecondary GPA
- Satisfactory academic progress

Accessing Other Aid
- Complete FAFSA
- Apply for existing state or federal aid
- Apply for available local scholarships
- Apply for institutional aid

Good Behavior
- No convictions for major crimes
- Engage in volunteer activities
- Attend school regularly (no truancy)

College Knowledge
- Campus tours
- Summer programs at postsecondary institutions
- Financial aid counseling, including help with filling out the FAFSA or applying for additional grants and scholarships
- Assistance with college applications

BENEFITS

Financial Support for Postsecondary Education
- Postsecondary costs, including a combination of tuition, fees, books, and room and board
- May have a pre-set scholarship amount, or may have funding that is capped at a particular level
- Must be from a dedicated source of funds
- May be prorated based on eligibility, such as years of residency or academic achievement
- May be first-dollar (benefit added to the student's financial aid package before any other aid is awarded), last-dollar (benefit added after all other sources of financial aid up to the award cap), or additional dollar (adds benefit on top of any existing financial aid and therefore could exceed the cap)
- May vary in length of support by semesters or years
- May require student to attend particular postsecondary institution, or institutions, within a particular area

Pre-College Support Services
- Tutoring in high school
- Access to upper-level and college preparatory coursework
- Cover test-taking fees for SAT, ACT, or AP tests
- Offer SAT or ACT preparation courses at reduced or no cost

Guaranteed Postsecondary Institution Enrollment
- A specific institution may be specified
- May offer place within larger state postsecondary system without a guaranteed spot at a particular campus

College Support Services
- Financial aid counseling while enrolled
- Dedicated advisors monitoring students' academic progress
- Tutoring for difficult courses
- Mentoring

Recommendations

The high visibility of certain POPs, such as the Kalamazoo Promise, has inspired many institutions and governments to consider similar investments in postsecondary education. The recent economic crisis, coupled with the long-term trend of rapidly rising postsecondary costs, has ushered these investments to the top of many agendas. As institutions and governments move forward in constructing new programs or strengthening existing ones, they should consider the following four recommendations.

> Existing programs need to invest in evaluation to make sure they achieve their goals in the most efficient and equitable way.

Invest in Evaluation

Evaluation plays a minimal role in many current and emerging POPs. Outcomes analyses have been used to inspire donations or justify current expenses, but these evaluations have been structured after program formulation and implementation.

In the coming years, existing programs need to invest in evaluation to make sure that they achieve their goals in the most efficient and equitable way. Independent evaluation, if possible, allows for more objective feedback. New POPs should build mechanisms for short-term and long-term evaluation into the structure, funding, and continuous improvement of the program.

Make Postsecondary Success the Primary Focus

Established programs have the opportunity to shift their primary focus from postsecondary *access* to postsecondary *success*. To do so, program literature and advocates must stress the importance of persistence to degree. This shift has already begun to take place, but could be furthered in the coming years.

The success mindset would not require major changes to existing programs—many give funding to students for at least eight semesters—but would change the nature of discussions surrounding them. By making degree attainment the ultimate goal, these programs would focus student efforts on completing postsecondary education.

Increase College Support Services

To make postsecondary success possible, POPs must provide, facilitate, or leverage existing college support services. Many programs include extensive pre-college support services as part of their benefits package. These services help students find ways to afford postsecondary education,

understand the college admissions process, and receive academic support for college preparatory courses and admissions tests.

Both new and existing POPs should create a similar support system for recipients attending postsecondary institutions. In particular, programs focused on increasing the college-going rates of underrepresented students must build these services into the program. Research shows that these students need support throughout the postsecondary experience to ensure they achieve their degrees.[6]

Provide Opportunities for Adults Seeking Postsecondary Education

Up to this point, most POPs have focused exclusively on middle and high school students looking to attend postsecondary education. Yet research shows that adult learners—either returning to finish a degree or attending college for the first time—need postsecondary education as much as recent high school graduates.[7] In a time of high unemployment and underemployment, many adults can see the value in additional education but struggle to find the support necessary to make this a reality. Communities, institutions, and states looking to serve these individuals should tailor POPs to their needs.

Appendix: Postsecondary Opportunity Programs

Program	State	Initiated	URL
Academic Challenge Scholarship	AR	1991	http://acs.adhe.edu/
Access UVA	VA	2004	http://www.virginia.edu/financialaid/access.php/
All Iowa Opportunity Scholarship	IA	2007	http://www.webster-city.k12.ia.us/hs/scholarships/others/AllIowa/
Arizona Assurance	AZ	2008	http://www.azassurance.org/
Arizona State University President Barack Obama Scholars	AZ	2009	http://promise.asu.edu/obamascholars/
Ayers Foundation Scholars Program	TN	1999	http://www.cfmt.org/scholarships/listing/ (unofficial)
Campus and Community: Together for Good	MI	2009	http://beta.hancock.k12.mi.us/district/uploads/campus___community_together.pdf/
Carolina Covenant	NC	2004	http://www.unc.edu/carolinacovenant/
College Bound Scholarship Program	IN	2006	http://collegebound.gohammond.com/index.php/
Collegebound Nebraska	NE	2004	http://www.collegeboundnebraska.com/
CollegeInvest Early Achievers Scholarship	CO	2005	http://www.collegeinvest.com/default.aspx?pageID=5/
Denver Scholarship Foundation	CO	2006	http://www.denverscholarship.org/Page.aspx?pid=210/
Detroit Promise	MI	2008	http://www.detroitcollegepromise.com/
Early Commitment to College	CA	2009	N/A
Educate and Grow Scholarship Program	TN	2001	http://educateandgrow.com/
El Dorado Promise	AR	2007	http://www.eldoradopromise.com/
Garrett County Scholarship Program	MD	2006	http://www.garrettcollege.edu/GCSP/index.html/
Governor Guinn Millennium Scholarship Program	NV	1999	http://nevadatreasurer.gov/MillenniumScholarship.htm/
Hathaway Merit Scholarship	WY	2006	http://www.uwyo.edu/hathaway/
Hopkinsville Rotary Scholars	KY	2008	http://www.hopkinsvillerotary.com/qcms/index.asp?Page=Eligibility%20Requirements/
Illinois Promise	IL	2005	http://www.osfa.uiuc.edu/aid/promise.html/
Jackson Legacy Program	MI	2008	http://www.jacksonlegacyprogram.org/
Kalamazoo Promise	MI	2005	https://www.kalamazoopromise.com/
Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES)	KY	1998	http://www.kheaa.com/website/kheaa/kees?main=1/
Knox Achieves	TN	2009	http://www.knoxachieves.org/index.php/
Long Beach College Promise	CA	2008	http://www.lbschools.net/Main_Offices/Superintendent/Success_Initiative/college_promise.cfm/
McHenry County College Promise	IL	2009	http://www.mchenry.edu/promise/index.asp/
Minnesota Achieve Scholarship	MN	2008	http://www.getreadyforcollege.org/

Appendix: Postsecondary Opportunity Programs (Continued)

Program	State	Initiated	URL
Muskegon Opportunity	MI	N/A	http://www.muskegonopportunity.com/
Northport Promise	MI	2008	http://www.northportpromise.com/
Ohio Access Initiative	OH	2007	http://www.jcu.edu/aidjcu/afford/ohio/ohio.htm/
Oklahoma's Promise	OK	1992	http://www.okhighered.org/okpromise/
Pack Promise	NC	2006	http://www.ncsu.edu/packpromise/
Passport for Foster Youth Promise Programs	WA	2008	http://www.hecb.wa.gov/financialaid/other/ Passportprogram.asp/
Passport to College Program - Delta	CA	2006	http://deltacollege.edu/dept/passport/index.html/
Pathway Oregon	OR	2008	http://pathwayoregon.uoregon.edu/
Peoria Promise	IL	2008	http://www.peoriapromise.org/
Pittsburgh Promise	PA	2007	http://www.pittsburghpromise.org/
Promise for the Future	AZ	2001	http://www.centralaz.edu/Home/About_Central/ Foundation/Promise_For_the_Future.htm/
Purdue Promise	IN	2009	http://www.purdue.edu/sats/purdue_promise/ index.html/
Regents Scholarship	TX	2004	http://scholarships.tamu.edu/news. asp?NewKey=172/
San Franciso Promise	CA	2009	http://www.sfpromise.org/
Say Yes to Education: Syracuse	NY	2009	http://www.sayyessyracuse.com/
South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship	SD	2004	http://www.sdbor.edu/OpportunityScholarship/ sdos.htm/
Success Scholarship Program/UT Guarantee (Blue and Gold Scholar Award)	OH	2009	http://www.tps.org/content/view/380/1/
Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)	LA	1998	http://www.osfa.state.la.us/schgrt6.htm/
TEXAS (Towards EXcellence, Access and Success) Grant	TX	1999	http://www.collegeforalltexans.com/index. cfm?ObjectID=E81912E0-DF96-53C5- 8EE1C469C7298F15/
The Power of You	MN	2006	http://savvy.minneapolis.edu/powerofyou/ index.cfm/
Tulsa Achieves	OK	2007	http://www.tulsacc.edu/page.asp?durki=5018/
Twenty-first Century Scholars Program	IN	1990	http://www.in.gov/ssaci/2345.htm/
Venture College Promise	CA	2006	http://www.venturacollege.edu/departments/ student_services/promise/index.shtml/
Washington College Bound Scholarship	WA	2007	http://www.hecb.wa.gov/collegebound/
West Virginia Promise (Providing Real Opportuniites for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence) Scholarship	WV	2002	http://wvhepcnew.wvnet.edu/

Notes

[1] *College-going culture* refers to "the environment, attitudes, and practices in schools and communities that encourage students and their families to obtain the tools, information, and perspective to enhance access to and success in postsecondary education." See College Tools for Schools: Helping California Schools Prepare Students for College and Careers, "Advancing College-Going Culture," University of California, Berkeley, http://collegetools.berkeley.edu/resources.php?cat_id=6 (accessed September 18, 2009).

[2] *College knowledge* refers to an understanding of the steps students need to take to prepare for and succeed in postsecondary education, including the application process and the utilization of financial aid. See Joel H. Vargas, *College Knowledge: Addressing Information Barriers to College* (Boston, MA: The Education Resources Institute, 2004), http://www.teri.org/pdf/research-studies/CollegeKnowledge.pdf.

[3] Research suggests that students who receive support beyond financial aid have a higher probability of enrolling and excelling in postsecondary education; this is particularly true for underrepresented students. See Donald E. Heller, *Condition of Access: Higher Education for Lower Income Students*, ACE/Praeger Series on Higher Education, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002); Vargas, *College Knowledge: Addressing Information Barriers to College*; David T. Conley, *College Knowledge: What it Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*, (San Franciso, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008); and Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto, *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students* (Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2008), http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/Moving%20Beyond%20Access.pdf.

[4] To systematically research these programs, WISCAPE has created a database for programs that could potentially be classified as POPs. This database includes a wealth of information on each program and is updated continually by WISCAPE staff.

[5] See Thomas G. Mortenson, "College Participation Rates for Students from Low-Income Families by State, FY 1993 to FY 2006," *Postsecondary OPPORTUNITY* 188 (February 2008); Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Convergence: Trends Threatening to Narrow College Opportunity in America* (Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, April 2006); Patrick T. Terenzini, Alberto F. Cabrera, and Elena M. Bernal, *Swimming Against the Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education*, Research Report No. 2001-1 (New York: College Board, 2001); Engle and Tinto, *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*; and Laura W. Perna, "Racial and Ethnic Group Differences in College Enrollment Decisions," *New Directions for Institutional Research* 107 (Fall 2000).

[6] See Engle and Tinto, *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*; Heller, *Condition of Access: Higher Education for Lower Income Students*; and Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal, *Swimming Against the Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education*.

[7] Brian Pusser, David W. Breneman, Bruce M. Gansneder, Kay J. Kohl, John S. Levin, John H. Milam, and Sarah E. Turner, *Returning to Learning: Adults' Success in College is Key to America's Future*, New Agenda Series (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education, March 2007).

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