

# College and University Commitments to Student Access and Success: An Overview of Institutional Postsecondary Opportunity Programs

By Elizabeth Stransky Vaade

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief provides four recommendations for administrators and campus leaders to consider when implementing or improving institutional postsecondary opportunity programs:

1. Prioritize evaluation
2. Carefully consider the impact of the program's administrative home
3. Coordinate and communicate within institutions
4. Collaborate outside institutional walls

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Introduction

The federal and state governments are placing greater emphasis on postsecondary attainment while concerns about rising college costs for students and families surge. Both groups are calling on institutions to do more to help improve student access and achievement rates. Further, recent research and policy have put pressure on institutions to admit more students (particularly those from underrepresented groups), address rising tuition, and help students persist to completion. The recession has also led institutions to think of new or enhanced means of contributing to local economic development.

To meet these latest demands and roles, postsecondary institutions have begun designing and implementing *postsecondary opportunity programs (POPs)*. These programs and partnerships aim to increase educational attainment by confronting the barriers to postsecondary access, persistence, and success; some specifically identify educational attainment as a means to economic and community development.

POPs are administered at the state, county, municipal, district, institutional, or private level. This brief focuses on *institutional POPs*, which are situated at the center of postsecondary learning and therefore uniquely positioned to address the nation's educational attainment challenges.

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POPs exist under many names, including promise programs, compacts, covenants, and early commitments. POPs are distinct among these programs, however, because they meet three specific conditions:

1. They have dedicated funds, available only to students enrolled in the program, that provide full or partial financial assistance for postsecondary education expenses
2. They are need-based, a combination of need- and merit-based, or universally accessible
3. They provide or facilitate non-monetary benefits, or leverage other programs providing these benefits, which include at least one of the following:
  - a. precollege support services
  - b. *college knowledge*<sup>1</sup>
  - c. guaranteed enrollment at a postsecondary institution
  - d. college support services

This combination of elements—financial assistance and support services—creates a more comprehensive approach to college opportunity and economic improvement.

Created and administered by colleges and universities, institutional POPs have developed recently as a subset of this broader policy movement. The

oldest of these began in 2004, and 16 of the 22 programs examined for this brief launched within the past four years. The Carolina Covenant at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) remains the most influential among these programs; staffers from other institutional POPs frequently reference it as a key influence on their own program's development.<sup>2</sup> Established in 2004, this program makes it possible for low-income students to attend UNC without loans or outstanding bills. The emergence of programs like the Carolina Covenant has led to the diffusion of institutional POPs throughout the country as other colleges and universities recognize the potential of the POPs model to address current challenges.

This brief explores the goals, eligibility requirements, benefits, and revenue sources of 22 institutional POPs selected from a database of over 150 programs nationwide (see Appendix for a list of the institutional POPs examined and Figure 1 for an overview of their geographic locations). Sixteen of these programs are located at four-year institutions, three at two-year institutions, and three within state-wide university systems or at multiple institutions.

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Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of Institutional Postsecondary Opportunity Programs



Note: Map created by Bo McCready.

While other institution-based scholarship programs have similar goals or structures, these 22 fit the existing POPs definition by providing financial and non-monetary support either universally or targeted with a need-based component.

This brief does not provide an assessment of the successes or shortcomings of these programs; further research will explore these issues in greater detail. It concludes with four recommendations for institutional POPs administrators to consider as they move forward.

## Goals

Institutional POPs aim to achieve many of the same goals as POPs generally, but they do so with an emphasis on the institution, its students, and the local community. This analysis identifies three prevalent goals:

1. Increase postsecondary attainment rates for all students
2. Increase postsecondary access and success for targeted student populations
3. Promote economic development

While these goals, described in greater detail below, are the most common among institutional POPs, individual programs do not necessarily aim to accomplish all three. Instead, they may choose to only focus on the goals that fit the priorities of their respective institutions.

### **Increase Postsecondary Attainment Rates for All Students**

All institutional POPs aim to increase postsecondary attainment by making it easier for students to successfully access their institution and persist towards completion of a degree. Some of these programs look to help all students and families confront the economic barriers and other challenges that prevent college enrollment and completion. Within the surrounding community, POPs seek to cultivate a *college-going culture*, in which students typically have higher educational aspirations and levels of college knowledge and graduate from high school at higher rates.<sup>3</sup> They also aim to provide students with more college and career options.

### **Increase Postsecondary Access and Success for Targeted Student Populations**

Rather than simply focusing on increasing attainment for all students, many institutions use POPs to target student populations that are historically underrepresented within the institution or postsecondary

education in general. They tend to focus on low-income or first-generation students, helping them confront the economic and informational barriers traditionally impeding their progress toward postsecondary enrollment and degree completion.

POPs offer students financial assistance to help them cope with rising college costs and student debt, thereby ensuring that academically capable students have the financial capacity to attend postsecondary education. Many programs aim to help low-income students graduate debt-free, espousing a belief that ability, not finances, should dictate student success.

Some institutional POPs offer additional support services designed to help students increase their college knowledge, academic success, and engagement once enrolled. They make it easier for students to acclimate to the college environment, providing *cultural capital*, which research cites as vital to student integration and success.<sup>4</sup> Institutional POPs aim to ensure that targeted student groups have the financial, academic, and social support necessary to graduate.

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### Promote Economic Development

Through efforts to increase postsecondary access and success, some institutional POPs also strive

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to promote economic and community development to help their cities, counties, and states develop into vibrant places to live and work with thriving economies and high-growth industries.

Community and government leaders are looking to institutions to help strengthen the economy by educating local students

and improving local workforce development. Institutions see POPs as a way to connect with their local communities, further entwine their respective futures, and help students develop a lasting bond with the area so that they stay after graduation.

### Eligibility

Institutions set their eligibility criteria for POPs in a variety of ways.<sup>5</sup> Most institutions have *place-based eligibility*, offering the program to students within a particular city, high school, school district, county, or state,

while others consider all students admitted to their particular institution or postsecondary system. Some combine these two forms of eligibility, considering only admitted students who reside within particular geographic areas.

Most institutional POPs do not specify any academic prerequisites or high school GPA requirements for entrance into the program, most likely because admission to the institution ensures a minimum level of academic achievement.

The majority of institutional POPs target students with specific demographic characteristics (low-income students, in particular). Of 22 programs, 15 target low-income students and only four offer universal eligibility.

Entry into most programs is not competitive, and all students who qualify receive benefits. A few POPs operate on a first-come, first-served basis, accepting all eligible students until program funds are spent. The majority do not require a separate application: students are automatically considered for entrance into the program when they apply to the institution. As one might expect, almost all programs require completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).





## Benefits

Benefits vary greatly among institutional POPs. While all programs offer some type of financial aid, the amounts and durations of the awards differ. Nine programs offer a comprehensive financial package, covering tuition, fees, room, board, and books. Five offer tuition only while five others offer tuition and fees. The remaining three give students a preset scholarship amount that they can use for any expenses.

Almost all programs offer *last-dollar benefits*, which means they only allocate funds after all other forms of financial aid have been exhausted. This type of funding may mean that institutions actually pay much less than the stated benefit amount because they only cover what remains after federal, state, and other institutional aid are applied.

The benefit durations also differ among programs, though to a lesser extent. The majority of programs offer benefits for four years, while others provide benefits for one, two, or five years. Two programs fund students through degree completion. This variation is partially explained by institutional type (two-year vs. four-year). As expected, students must use monetary benefits at the institution(s) or system where their institutional POP is based.

To supplement financial awards, institutional POPs provide precollege or college support. As with financial

benefits, the types and durations of support services vary. Most programs extend some form of college support, which can include mentoring, advising, workshops, campus liaisons, financial counseling, orientations, social and cultural activities, and family transition support services. Some institutions offer personalized support services, available only to program participants, while others connect students to existing campus services through referrals, print materials, or websites.

A few institutions provide precollege support services by reaching out to K-12 students through information sessions, mentors, or workshops designed to increase college knowledge and aspirations. Some institutional POPs reach out to students before they arrive on campus and follow them through graduation, while others focus benefits primarily on the first or second year on campus.

Most institutional POPs require enrolled students to maintain progress toward a degree to remain eligible. These requirements vary among programs, although most include some combination of satisfactory academic progress (as defined by the institution), full-time enrollment, and minimum grade-point average. Only three programs do not make students meet any of these requirements to remain eligible.

## Funding Sources

The funding sources for institutional POPs mirror those of POPs in general. Most programs rely primarily on private philanthropic donations either to a designated fund or through the institution's general giving campaign. Some are funded through a mixture of sources, including federal, state, and

other public dollars.

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Most [POPs] rely primarily on private philanthropic donations either to a designated fund or through the institution's general giving campaign. Because most of these programs offer last-dollar funding, they count on federal and state grants, loans, and work-study; this helps minimize costs to the institution and allows them to serve a broader base of students. Most institutions also contribute existing institutional resources to help fund POPs.

## Recommendations

Institutional POPs have become more prevalent in the past decade, and colleges and universities nationwide will likely continue to adopt these programs. As administrators and campus leaders think about implementing or improving POPs, they should consider the following four recommendations.

## Prioritize evaluation

Evaluation is a crucial component in successful policy and the best method for continuous improvement.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, institutions are uniquely positioned to design and conduct assessments, as they often have easy access to in-house data and experts with the technical skills to conduct rigorous evaluation.

Institutional leadership and POPs staff should prioritize evaluation, putting funding and time towards conducting quality assessment. To do so, institutions should recruit faculty and staff to identify the best evaluation techniques, conduct the research, and identify areas for enhancement.

### Carefully consider the impact of the program's administrative home

Colleges and universities should design POPs to provide the best possible student support both prior to and during enrollment. To this end, they should carefully evaluate where to house the program and how this decision will affect its administration.

The choice to locate the program within the financial aid office instead of the admissions office, for example, could affect program visibility, ease of access, student and family perceptions, and the efficiency of service delivery.



**Coordinate and communicate within the institution**

Regardless of a program's administrative home, institutions must facilitate coordination among campus units to increase institution-wide recognition and understanding of the program. Colleges and universities are complex organizations that can be difficult to navigate, so students and families need quick answers to their questions about POPs from their initial point of contact.

To accomplish this goal, staff from multiple units on campus—especially financial aid, admissions, orientation, and advising—should understand the program. Institutional POPs staff should communicate program goals and structure to all campus units, which will help promote administrative, faculty, and student support. Coordination will also help institutions make strategic choices about whether to replicate support services or leverage existing offices to help students succeed.

**Collaborate outside institutional walls**

Successful POPs engage as many partners beyond the postsecondary sphere as possible to help students become aware of and navigate successfully through the K-16 educational pipeline. Institutional POPs need to cultivate collaborative partnerships with K-12 districts and communities. These relationships help maximize the program's visibility and impact and improve the odds of success for all students.



## Appendix: Institutional Postsecondary Opportunity Programs by Initiation Year

Program	Institution	Initiated	URL
Collegebound Nebraska	University of Nebraska System	2004	<a href="http://www.collegeboundnebraska.com">http://www.collegeboundnebraska.com</a>
Regents Scholarship	Texas A & M University	2004	<a href="http://scholarships.tamu.edu/tamu_scholarships/freshman/regents.aspx">http://scholarships.tamu.edu/tamu_scholarships/freshman/regents.aspx</a>
Carolina Covenant	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	2004	<a href="http://www.unc.edu/carolinacovenant">http://www.unc.edu/carolinacovenant</a>
AccessUVA	University of Virginia	2004	<a href="http://www.virginia.edu/financialaid/access.php">http://www.virginia.edu/financialaid/access.php</a>
Illinois Promise	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	2005	<a href="http://osfa.uiuc.edu/aid/promise.html">http://osfa.uiuc.edu/aid/promise.html</a>
Life Impact Program	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	2005	<a href="http://www4.uwm.edu/lifeimpact">http://www4.uwm.edu/lifeimpact</a>
The Power of You	Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, and Saint Paul College	2006	<a href="http://beta.hancock.k12.mi.us/district/uploads/campus_community_together.pdf/">http://beta.hancock.k12.mi.us/district/uploads/campus_community_together.pdf/</a>
Miami Access Initiative	Miami University (OH)	2006	<a href="http://www.units.muohio.edu/sfa/mai.htm">http://www.units.muohio.edu/sfa/mai.htm</a>
Pack Promise	North Carolina State University	2006	<a href="http://www.ncsu.edu/packpromise">http://www.ncsu.edu/packpromise</a>
Florida Opportunity Scholars	University of Florida	2006	<a href="http://fos.ufsa.ufl.edu">http://fos.ufsa.ufl.edu</a>
Passport to College	San Joaquin Delta College	2006	<a href="http://www.deltacollege.edu/dept/passport/">http://www.deltacollege.edu/dept/passport/</a>
Ventura College Promise	Ventura College	2006	<a href="http://venturacollege.edu/departments/student_services/promise/index.shtml">http://venturacollege.edu/departments/student_services/promise/index.shtml</a>
Ohio Access Initiative	John Carroll University	2007	<a href="http://www.jcu.edu/aidjcu/afford/ohio/ohio.htm">http://www.jcu.edu/aidjcu/afford/ohio/ohio.htm</a>
Emerald Eagle Scholars Program	University of North Texas	2007	<a href="http://essc.unt.edu/finaid/scholarships_emeraldscholars.htm">http://essc.unt.edu/finaid/scholarships_emeraldscholars.htm</a>
Cardinal Covenant	University of Louisville	2007	<a href="http://louisville.edu/financialaid/cardinal-covenant">http://louisville.edu/financialaid/cardinal-covenant</a>
Pathway Oregon	University of Oregon	2008	<a href="http://pathwayoregon.uoregon.edu/">http://pathwayoregon.uoregon.edu/</a>
Long Beach College Promise	Long Beach City College or CSU-Long Beach	2008	<a href="http://www.lbschools.net/Main_Offices/Superintendent/Success_Initiative/college_promise.cfm">http://www.lbschools.net/Main_Offices/Superintendent/Success_Initiative/college_promise.cfm</a>
Arizona Assurance	University of Arizona	2008	<a href="http://www.azassurance.org">http://www.azassurance.org</a>
Purdue Promise	Purdue University	2009	<a href="http://www.purdue.edu/sats/purdue_promise/index.html">http://www.purdue.edu/sats/purdue_promise/index.html</a>
Campus and Community: Together for Good	Finlandia University	2009	<a href="http://www.finlandia.edu/index.php?id=3071">http://www.finlandia.edu/index.php?id=3071</a>
McHenry County College Promise	McHenry County College	2009	<a href="http://www.mchenery.edu/promise/index.asp">http://www.mchenery.edu/promise/index.asp</a>
ASU President Barack Obama Scholars	Arizona State University	2009	<a href="http://promise.asu.edu/obamascholars">http://promise.asu.edu/obamascholars</a>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *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>.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews conducted for postsecondary opportunity programs research project, August 2009 – February 2010, WISCAPE, <http://wiscape.wisc.edu/research/>. For more information on the Carolina Covenant and the program's Access Initiatives Clearinghouse, see: <http://www.unc.edu/carolinacovenant/>; Shirley A. Ort, "A Practitioner's View—The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: The Impact of Tuition and Student Aid on College Access, Affordability, and Success" (presentation, University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice's Inaugural Conference, Los Angeles, August 2008); Shirley Ort and Lynn Williford, "Carolina Covenant 2009 Program Update" (prepared for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Board of Trustees, March 2009, <http://www.unc.edu/carolinacovenant/research.php>); Carolina Covenant, "Institutional Initiatives to Improve Access and/or Affordability for Students from Low- to Moderate-Income Families, As Reported by Institutions, Fall 2008," <http://studentaid.unc.edu/pdf/misc/CollegeAccessInitiatives.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *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](http://collegetools.berkeley.edu/resources.php?cat_id=6) (accessed April 16, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> *Cultural capital* refers to the transmission of language skills, attitudes, and knowledge of a system that gives a person the advantage to succeed in that setting. For more information on the role of cultural capital in postsecondary education, see Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Patricia M. McDonough, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997); and William G. Tierney and Linda S. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Increasing Access to College: Extending Possibilities for All Students* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> Institutional POPs utilize many of the eligibility requirements and benefits employed by other POPs. For a list of examples of these requirements and benefits, see Table 1 in Elizabeth Stransky Vaade, *Postsecondary Opportunity Programs: Defining and Improving an Educational Policy Innovation*, WISCAPE Policy Brief. (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education, 2009), <http://wiscape.wisc.edu/publications/>.

<sup>6</sup>See National College Access Network, *Training Module: Data Management and Evaluation Preparedness* (Cleveland, OH: National College Access Network, 2007), <http://www.collegeaccess.org/publications.aspx> (accessed April 16, 2010); Data Quality Campaign, *The Next Step: Using Longitudinal Data Systems to Improve Student Success* (Washington, DC: Data Quality Campaign, 2009), <http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/NextStep.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2010); Lumina Foundation, *Making the Numbers Add Up: A Guide for Using Data in College Access and Success Programs* (Philadelphia, PA: OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2009), [http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/Results and Reflections-Making the numbers add up.pdf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/Results%20and%20Reflections-Making%20the%20numbers%20add%20up.pdf) (accessed April 16, 2010).





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