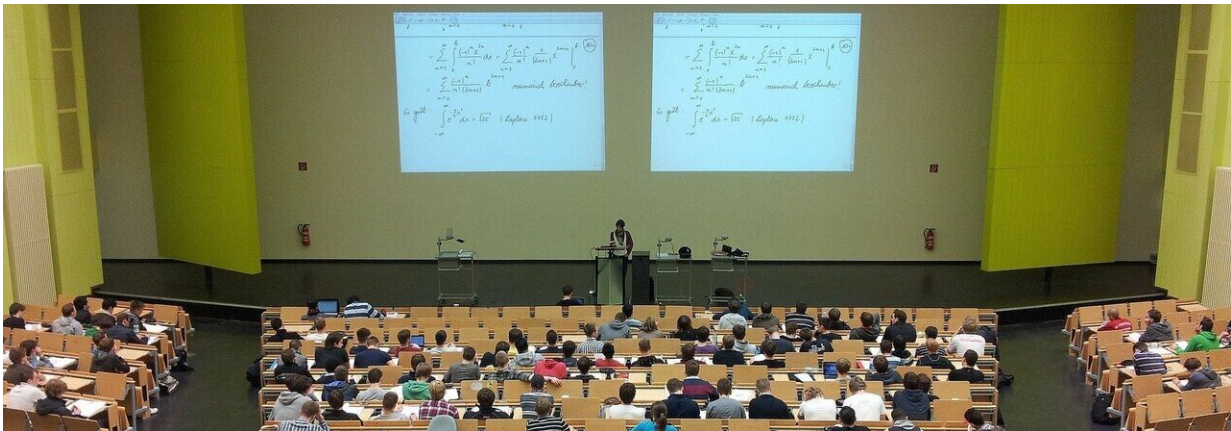


Free-college programs have led to large enrollment increases at two-year institutions

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A study of 33 public community college promise programs, or free-college programs, across the United States found that they are associated with large enrollment increases of first-time, full-time students—with the biggest boost in enrollment among Black, Hispanic, and female students. The results come as the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is leading states to tighten higher education budgets, as low-income students are forgoing their postsecondary plans at higher rates this fall than their wealthier peers, and as community colleges are experiencing larger enrollment declines than four-year universities. The study was published today in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research

Association.

The research, conducted by Denisa Gándara at Southern Methodist University and Amy Li at Florida International University, is the first on this topic to examine the effects of multiple promise programs on [enrollment](#) at [community colleges](#) across the United States. For their study, the authors analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, for academic years 2000-01 to 2014-15, to examine the impact of 33 promise programs at 32 community colleges.

Gándara and Li found that, on average, overall enrollments at the community colleges with promise programs increased 23 percent more than at the seven geographically nearest public community colleges without promise programs. Compared to the nearest seven community colleges, promise colleges experienced a 47 percent greater enrollment increase of Black males, a 51 percent greater enrollment of Black females, a 40 percent greater enrollment of Hispanic males, and a 52 percent greater enrollment of Hispanic females. (These increases occurred at different times, depending on when each [college](#) had a promise [program](#) between 2000 and 2015.) The only groups that did not, on average, experience an enrollment boost associated with promise programs were Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (API) males and females.

"Prior to the pandemic, promise programs were an increasingly popular mechanism for enhancing college entry and postsecondary attainment," said Gándara, an assistant professor of education policy and leadership at Southern Methodist University. "Our study offers compelling evidence, and reinforces evidence from prior research, of the benefits of such programs in achieving college enrollment goals."

"Our overall findings also offer encouraging evidence that promise

programs can help more historically underserved students enroll in college," said Gándara.

In addition, Gándara and Li noted that the effects on enrollment for different demographic groups differed based on program design features and eligibility criteria. These included whether the programs were merit-based or need-based, whether they paid partial or full tuition, and whether the amount of the financial support provided was determined before ("first dollar in") or after ("last dollar in") students' other sources of aid were considered.

Programs with merit-based requirements yielded higher enrollments of White males and females as well as API females, compared to programs without merit-based requirements. Programs with need-based criteria were associated with smaller enrollment increases among all demographic groups, compared to programs without need-based criteria, with the exception of Black males, who showed no difference in effects.

Programs that were "first dollar in" had a significant positive effect on the enrollment of White students but not on other demographic groups. Programs that covered full tuition, as opposed to partial tuition, had a significant positive effect on the enrollment of API students.

"These findings suggest that programs that are more generous might be more likely to attract students categorized as White or API," said Li, an assistant professor of educational policy studies at Florida International University.

"Programs with income criteria have consistent negative effects on enrollment of all groups, except for Black male students," Gándara added. "This could be related to the higher administrative burdens for students, such as requiring proof of income. This potential burden for students should be weighed against the benefits of targeting promise aid

to students who need it most."

Findings from the study also reinforced prior research that found promise programs had a greater effect on enrollment than reductions in tuition and fees.

"In addition to reducing price obstacles, promise programs can foster the college-going culture in schools and communities, and change students' perceptions of affordability," Gándara said. "The universal 'free college' and 'college for all' messages that generally accompany promise programs can be especially impactful for racial minority students, who are often subject to lower educational expectations from teachers and counselors and who are more likely to perceive college as unaffordable."

"The budget pressures facing states are very real, as is the developing crisis in college enrollment among the country's least advantaged students," said Li. "Given such encouraging evidence of the effectiveness of community college promise programs on initial college enrollment, working to protect them should be among the top priorities of policymakers."

More information: Denisa Gándara et al, Promise for Whom? "Free-College" Programs and Enrollments by Race and Gender Classifications at Public, 2-Year Colleges, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2020). [DOI: 10.3102/0162373720962472](https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720962472)

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