The many benefits that accrue to individuals who participate in higher education are well documented. People with higher education typically have higher earnings, higher rates of employment, lower likelihood of unemployment and poverty, better health, longer lives, and more (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). The earnings premium realized by those with a college education has been growing since the mid-1970s (Carnevale & Rose, 2015), and the employment-related benefits of a bachelor’s degree were realized even during the Great Recession (Carnevale, Jayasundra, & Gulish, 2016).

Yet the opportunity to realize these benefits—as well as the many other economic and noneconomic benefits that tend to come with higher education—is unequal, as demonstrated by persisting differences in attainment across groups. College enrollment and completion rates are lower, on average, for individuals from lower-income families, individuals whose parents have not completed college, and African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians/Native Americans (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, & Santillan, 2018; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Higher education attainment also differs by place of residence, with variations across and within states (Perna & Finney, 2014; Perna & Ruiz, 2017). These and other differences in attainment contribute to the continued economic and social stratification of our society (Perna & Finney, 2014).

Ensuring that all people have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from high-quality higher education is important for reasons of social justice, as well as for the economic and social prosperity of our communities, states, and nation (Perna & Finney, 2014). Higher education provides benefits not only to participants but also to nonparticipants, because with higher rates of attainment come a higher tax base, less reliance on social welfare programs, lower rates of crime, and greater civic engagement (Ma et al., 2016). Society also benefits from having a workforce with the qualifications needed for available jobs. Sectors of the U.S. economy with more highly educated workers (e.g., health care, education, business services) are expanding, and technological changes are increasing the
Improving Research-Based Knowledge of College Promise Programs

Demand for educated workers across other sectors, including service and manufacturing (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). The United States needs higher levels of attainment to meet workforce needs and international competition, and the required levels of attainment cannot be achieved without raising attainment among groups that have historically been underserved by our nation’s educational structures and systems (Marcus, 2019; Perna & Finney, 2014).

A primary reason for persistent differences in educational attainment is unequal access to the resources needed to promote college opportunity and success. The availability of needed resources varies based on the structures in which people are embedded, including the places they live and the schools they attend (Perna, 2006). Illustrating the importance of considering the resources that are—and are not—available to people in different places, Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014) found, from their analysis of the incomes of more than 40 million children and their parents, that rates of upward income mobility in the United States are lower in commuting zones (that is, “aggregations of counties based on commuting patterns”) that have greater residential segregation by race and income, lower quality K–12 school systems, weaker social networks and community involvement, and more single parents. Other place-based resources that promote higher education opportunity and attainment but are unequally available include academically rigorous coursework in K–12 schools and geographic proximity to high-quality postsecondary options (Hillman, 2016; Iriti, Page, & Bickel, 2018; Perna, 2006).

Efforts to raise higher education attainment for people from historically underserved groups must also take into account the increasing costs of higher education for participants. Students make decisions about enrolling in college based on their assessment of their ability to pay the costs and their understanding of whether the benefits will exceed the costs (Perna, 2006). But the sticker price of college has increased dramatically over the past few decades. Published tuition and fees more than doubled between 1987–1988 and 2017–2018 (in constant 2017 dollars) at private not-for-profit institutions (rising from $15,160 to $34,740) and public two-year institutions (rising from $1,590 to $3,570) and more than tripled at public four-year institutions (rising from $3,190 to $9,970; College Board, 2017). Students are increasingly taking on debt to pay the costs of attending college, as both the share of undergraduates with loans and the average amount borrowed among those with loans have grown in recent years (Cahalan et al., 2018). In addition, many students are working for pay while enrolled in higher education, thereby reducing the time available to focus on academics (Perna, 2010b). In 2014, 7% of undergraduates age 16 to 24 who were enrolled as full-time students worked 35 or more hours per week and an additional 18% worked 20 to 34 hours per week (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

If students believe that attending college is financially feasible, then they may engage in other behaviors, such as taking courses that will academically prepare them for college and increase their likelihood of college success (Harris, 2013; Perna, 2010a). But understanding how much a given individual will actually have to pay to attend college is complicated both by the many different types and sources of financial aid that are potentially available and by the complexity of the financial aid application process (Dynarski & Wiederspan, 2012; Perna, 2010a). Most students do not learn their expected out-of-pocket costs of attendance until they have applied for admission, completed the Free Application for Federal Student
Aid (FAFSA), and received a financial aid offer from the college or university. Although the federal government mandates that colleges and universities have a net price calculator on their websites to provide prospective students with individualized estimates of expected college costs, the information that is presented is sometimes misleading and inaccurate, and the extent to which students and families use the tool is unknown (Cheng, Asher, Abernathy, Cochrane, & Thompson, 2012; Perna, Wright-Kim, & Jiang, 2018). Most students receive little assistance at their high schools in trying to understand actual college costs; the average K–12 school in the United States had 482 students per counselor in 2014–2015 (Clinedist & Koranteng, 2017), and few school counselors are trained as financial aid advisors (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2017; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008).

The College Promise Movement

College promise programs are an emerging approach to increasing the higher education attainment of people in particular places (Perna & Leigh, 2016). Catherine Millett and colleagues (this volume) contend that these programs, also known as “free tuition” and “free college” programs, provide a pledge, guarantee, and commitment that some portion of the costs of attending college will be covered. Advocates of free college (e.g., Eskow, 2014; Millett et al., this volume) maintain that public assurance that some costs will be covered is appropriate, given the importance of higher education to the well-being of individuals and society. Free college and college promise programs also signal that individuals have the right to higher education, just as they have the right to free public K–12 education.

Although the notion of free college is not new, many promise programs have emerged across the United States over the past two decades (Millett et al., this volume; Perna & Leigh, 2018). In 2015 then-president Barack Obama proposed America’s College Promise. With the goal of incentivizing the establishment of programs like the Tennessee Promise, the proposed $60 billion matching grant program would have eliminated tuition and fees for the first two years of enrollment at a community college (Executive Office of the President, 2015). Although the proposal was not enacted, programs with related goals have been created by state and local governments, colleges and universities, philanthropic organizations, and other entities. As of August 2016, there were 23 college promise programs in California alone, 13 of which were established in 2016 (Regional Educational Laboratory West, 2016). The state-sponsored free college programs in Tennessee, Oregon, and New York are other recently established initiatives. The movement now seems to be in full swing, as at least ten state candidates for governor in fall 2018 offered free college as part of their campaign platforms (Kreighbaum, 2018).

Whereas traditional financial aid programs (e.g., the Federal Pell Grant Program) award grants to students who demonstrate financial need or meet academic criteria, promise programs target resources beyond existing state and federal aid to individuals who live in designated places, meet local- or state-defined eligibility criteria, and/or attend specific K–12 schools (Perna, 2016). By offering a financial award to people who live in a designated neighborhood or attend specified K–12 schools, college promise programs may seek to improve college affordability and recognize variations in the magnitude and characteristics
Improving Research-Based Knowledge of College Promise Programs

of resources that are, and are not, available in the local community to promote higher education attainment.

How College Promise Programs May Improve Higher Education Attainment

Considerable research documents the fact that, to enroll and succeed in college, students need the financial resources to pay the costs, academic preparation to complete college-level work, and information and support to navigate our nation’s complex educational systems (Perna, 2006). Yet the extent to which students have the necessary financial resources, academic preparation, and knowledge and support varies based on their families’ resources, characteristics of the K–12 schools and higher education institutions they attend and the communities in which they live, and the characteristics of federal, state, and local government policies (Perna, 2006).

The chapters in this volume offer consistent conceptualizations of the reasons that college promise programs may improve higher education attainment. First, college promise programs may improve college outcomes by increasing the financial resources available to pay college costs, especially when the aid is available to students from low-income families (Perna, 2016). One defining characteristic of promise programs is the provision of a financial award that builds on existing federal and state grant aid programs (Perna & Leigh, 2018). By providing a financial award, college promise programs reduce the costs of college enrollment and persistence for the students who receive it. Who benefits from a program’s financial award will depend on the population targeted and other program eligibility requirements.

College promise programs may also improve higher education attainment by providing a clear message that at least some costs of attendance are covered (Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016; Millett et al., this volume; Perna, 2016). Research suggests there are positive effects on college enrollment when the criteria for receiving financial aid are simple, clear, and transparent (Dynarski, 2000, 2004). The benefits may be particularly great when the message is targeted directly to potentially eligible students and when the program provides a generous financial award (e.g., four years of free tuition and fees) to attend a well-regarded selective four-year university (Dynarski, Libassi, Michemore, & Owen, 2018).

College promise programs also have the potential to smooth students’ transitions across educational sectors and institutions (Perna, 2016). By adopting a cross-sector approach that connects communities, K–12 schools, and higher education institutions (Millett et al., this volume), college promise programs may encourage the structural changes that are needed to ensure that all students are academically ready for higher education without the need for developmental coursework and that all students can transfer between higher education institutions without losing academic credit (Perna & Finney, 2014).

The Many Variations Among College Promise Programs

Whether college promise programs address these issues and actually improve attainment, especially for individuals from underserved groups, will depend on the characteristics and design of the program. Prior to this volume, most research focused on identifying the
effects of a small number of relatively longstanding and comprehensive programs such as the Kalamazoo Promise. Miller-Adams (2015) labels the Kalamazoo Promise a “place-based scholarship program,” and describes place-based scholarship programs as “seek[ing] to transform their communities” by increasing college access and attainment, fostering “a college-going culture in both the K–12 system and community as a whole, and support[ing] local economic development” (Miller-Adams, 2015, p. 11). As Ritter and Swanson (this volume) hypothesize, an approach that improves K–12 academic achievement and encourages residents to move to or stay in a community may improve postsecondary education outcomes directly, as well as indirectly by improving students’ academic readiness for college and creating a college-going culture in the community. Research suggests that the Kalamazoo Promise raised academic expectations within K–12 schools (Miller-Adams & Timmeney, 2013; Miron, Jones, & Kelaher-Young, 2012) and increased the likelihood of college enrollment, number of college credits attempted, and probability of bachelor’s degree completion (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2015).

Although building research-based knowledge, findings from studies of the Kalamazoo Promise and other place-based scholarship programs (e.g., Pittsburgh Promise) are likely not transferable to the emerging variations of college promise programs. Place-based scholarships represent a particular category of college promise programs and differ from other categories in important ways (Perna & Leigh, 2018).

For instance, with the goals of transforming K–12 schools and encouraging local community and economic development, in addition to improving college enrollment, place-based scholarships exemplify a cross-sector approach. Many of the emerging college promise programs imply a cross-sector approach, but whether and how stakeholders actually work together is often not articulated or known. Moreover, unlike place-based scholarship programs, many of the newer programs do not pay explicit attention to increasing community and economic development; instead, they focus specifically on increasing college enrollment at a particular college or university. Programs that encourage students from designated high schools to attend a specified institution would seem to have the potential to smooth the transition from K–12 to higher education. Attention to this transition is important, given the numbers of students who now must complete developmental coursework before taking college-level courses (Simone, 2014). Programs that provide a financial award to attend a community college could also potentially include provisions that help reduce the loss of credits that many students now experience when they transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution (see Simone, 2014). Whether these programs have mechanisms that accomplish these goals has not been established.

Emerging college promise programs also differ from place-based scholarships in other ways that may influence program outcomes (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Millett et al. (this volume) assert that the financial award should cover at least the cost of tuition and fees, but some emerging programs offer an award that covers only a set (and seemingly low) dollar amount of costs. Whereas the Kalamazoo Promise allows students to apply the financial award to attend public and private two-year and four-year institutions throughout the state of Michigan, other programs limit use of the financial award to attendance at a designated four-year college (e.g., Illinois Promise) or a community or technical college (e.g.,
Improving Research-Based Knowledge of College Promise Programs

Tennessee Promise). Whereas the Kalamazoo Promise covers four years of tuition and fees regardless of other federal and state grant aid received (i.e., a first-dollar financial award), many of the more recently established programs provide an award for a shorter period of enrollment and/or reduce the financial award depending on the amount of federal and state need-based aid received (i.e., a last-dollar financial award).

Programs also differ in the amount of time students must live in the designated place to receive the full financial benefit. Whereas the Kalamazoo Promise requires residency from kindergarten through high school graduation and El Dorado Promise requires residency beginning at grade nine, more recently established programs tend to require only that students graduate from an eligible high school (e.g., Tennessee Promise). Variations in residency requirements may contribute to differences in the extent to which students and their families are aware of the availability of the promise program early in their educational pipeline, as well as differences in whether the students—and the schools they attend—are motivated by the availability of the scholarship to improve academic readiness for college.

College promise programs also vary in other characteristics, such as sources of funding, financial and political sustainability, scalability, and the provision of services to address nonfinancial barriers to college access and completion (Andrews, 2013; Hemenway, 2016; Millett et al., this volume; Perna & Hadinger, 2012; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Emerging qualitative research shows that concerns about financial sustainability can influence the implementation of a program, as well as how the program is perceived and experienced by students, families, and other stakeholders (Smith, 2019).

In an attempt to bring order to the array of existing and emerging college promise programs, Perna and Leigh (2018) used cluster analyses to identify categories of programs. Their analyses considered the characteristics of 289 programs that met the following criteria: Have a primary goal of increasing higher education attainment, promise a financial award to eligible students, limit program eligibility to people in a particular “place” (e.g., a state, school district, or school), and focus on the traditional college-age population. With the assumption that college promise programs are a variation of more traditional and longstanding state-sponsored grant aid programs, the analyses included both relatively new programs with the “promise” label and other state-sponsored need- and merit-based programs. These analyses point to several categories of programs, including state-sponsored need-based aid programs, state-sponsored merit-based programs, place-based scholarship programs, programs that limit the use of the award to attendance at a four-year institution, and programs that limit use of the award to a community college. Even within these categories, program characteristics also vary (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Table 1 shows some of the many variations in characteristics within and across programs categorized as place-based programs and programs that limit use of the award to attendance at a four-year institution or community college, and it offers examples of programs with particular characteristics.

Purpose of This Volume

To maximize the effectiveness of their efforts and investments, program leaders and policy makers need research-based evidence to inform program design, implementation, and
Table 1. Variations in Characteristics of Different Categories of College Promise Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Place-Based Promise Scholarship Programs&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Programs That Limit Use of Aid to a Single Four-Year Institution&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Programs That Limit Use of Aid to a Community College&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition of place:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Detroit College Promise</td>
<td>50th Anniversary PROMISE Scholarship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County/region</td>
<td>Say Yes to Education Guilford</td>
<td>Cooperman College Scholars</td>
<td>Garrett County Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School district</td>
<td>El Dorado Promise</td>
<td>LeBron James “I Promise”</td>
<td>West Sacramento Promise</td>
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<tr>
<td>College service area</td>
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<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Time of application to be eligible for full financial award:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Promise</td>
<td>ISU 4U Promise</td>
<td>Long Beach Promise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>Hammond College Bound</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Detroit College Promise</td>
<td>Illinois Promise</td>
<td>Hancock Promise</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school senior or graduate</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Eligibility criteria:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No need or merit criteria</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Promise, El Dorado Promise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anaheim Pledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial need or income</td>
<td>Say Yes Guilford</td>
<td>Illinois Promise</td>
<td>VanGuarantee Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>Arkadelphia Promise</td>
<td>American Dream Scholarship</td>
<td>Columbia College Promise</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school attendance</td>
<td>Pittsburgh Promise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community service</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAFSA completion</td>
<td>New Haven Promise</td>
<td>Bridging the Gap</td>
<td>Lone Star College Promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible institutions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Any accredited post-secondary institution</td>
<td>El Dorado Promise</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Any in-state public or private nonprofit institution</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Promise</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In-state community colleges</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>One four-year institution</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>One community college</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Table 1. Variations in Characteristics of Different Categories of College Promise Programs (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Place-Based Promise Scholarship Programs(^a)</th>
<th>Programs That Limit Use of Aid to a Single Four-Year Institution(^a)</th>
<th>Programs That Limit Use of Aid to a Community College(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costs covered by aid:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition and books</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Promise</td>
<td>Arizona Assurance</td>
<td>Inyo Promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collegebound Nebraska</td>
<td>Cabrillo College Promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to maximum dollar award</td>
<td>Richmond Promise</td>
<td>University of Minnesota</td>
<td>Palomar Promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid disbursement:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First dollar</td>
<td>Kalamazoo Promise</td>
<td>ISU 4U Promise</td>
<td>Shoreline Scholars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last dollar</td>
<td>Hartford Promise</td>
<td>Inspire Scholarship</td>
<td>MCC Future Fund</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: FAFSA = Free Application for Federal Student Aid. These programs were identified through a search of the Penn Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (Penn AHEAD) database of college promise programs (http://www.ahead-penn.org/creating-knowledge/college-promise).

\(^a\) The three program categories are identified in Perna & Leigh’s (2018) typology of programs.
evaluation. With the goal of addressing this knowledge need, this volume presents a collection of research studies that examine several categories and variations of college promise programs. These theoretically grounded empirical investigations use varied data sources and analytic techniques to examine the effects of college promise programs that have different design features and operate in different places. Individually and collectively, the results of these studies have implications for the design and implementation of promise programs if the programs are to create meaningful improvements in attainment for people from underserved groups. The authors’ efforts also provide a useful foundation for the next generation of college promise research.

In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of the chapters that follow, while in the final chapter of the volume we offer conclusions that cut across the chapters and identify implications for policy, practice, and future research. In the next chapter, Catherine Millett, Stephanie Saunders, Martha Kanter, and Robyn Hiestand build on this introductory chapter to offer additional grounding and contextualization for the included empirical studies. Millett and colleagues describe the characteristics of promise programs and highlight the important challenges that college promise programs seek to address, including the need to both increase the educational attainment of the U.S. population and reduce persisting gaps in attainment across groups. They also offer an overview of the history of the college promise movement and describe the engagement of the federal, state, and local governments, philanthropic organizations, and business leaders.

Two systematic reviews of research follow. Together, these two reviews establish the state of knowledge from research conducted prior to this volume on two different categories of programs. Elise Swanson, Angela Watson, and Gary Ritter first provide a systematic review of the effects of the subset of programs known as “place-based” scholarship programs on indicators of community development, K–12 achievement, and college attainment. Swanson and colleagues limit their attention to programs that meet the definition of place-based scholarship programs offered by Miller-Adams (2015), that is, programs modeled after the Kalamazoo Promise. From their review of 16 studies that met their criteria for methodological rigor and that were published between 2005 and 2016, the authors conclude that the examined place-based scholarship programs have attracted residents to their areas and improved postsecondary outcomes. They also conclude that, although the identified studies find positive effects of the examined programs on K–12 academic outcomes, available evidence is not conclusive.

In the second systematic review, Wendy Castillo, Gregory Collins, and Rebecca Maynard focus on prior research that examines a different subset of programs: those that offer financial assistance to offset college costs as well as some form of additional academic or social support for students who reside in designated areas or attend designated schools (e.g., counseling, academic enrichment, mentoring, social enrichment, and/or parental involvement). They identify eight independent impact estimates for six programs that meet specified inclusion criteria. The six programs all provide a financial award to attend college but offer different additional supports and target students in different places: Achieving a College Education (Maricopa County, Ariz.), Advanced Placement Incentive Program (Dallas, Tex.), Early College High School (various cities in the United States),
EXCEL (one metropolitan area in the Midwest), Learning Accounts & Future to Discover (New Brunswick and Manitoba, Canada), and Sponsor-A-Scholar (Philadelphia, Penn.). The authors conclude that, on average, the six programs increased college enrollment for participants by 10 percentage points. Effects on enrollment varied widely, as one program (the Advanced Placement Incentive Program) reduced college enrollment by 2 percentage points and another (Early College High School) increased college enrollment by 40 percentage points.

Together, the two systematic reviews identify the average effects of two different categories of programs, while also illustrating how program effects vary across programs with different designs and target populations. The next set of chapters presents the results of new empirical examinations of other variations of college promise programs. While many place-based scholarship programs (e.g., Kalamazoo Promise, Pittsburgh Promise, and New Haven Promise) seek to improve educational, community, and economic outcomes in urban contexts, Gary Ritter and Elise Swanson examine the effects of a place-based scholarship program that operates in a rural context: El Dorado Promise, in Arkansas. El Dorado Promise provides a scholarship to cover up to five years of tuition and fees at any accredited two- or four-year institution in the United States for students who are enrolled continuously in the El Dorado school district from the ninth grade and graduate from El Dorado High School. Using interrupted time series and comparative interrupted time series analyses, Ritter and Swanson found that the establishment of the El Dorado Promise in 2007 stopped the downward trend in K–12 school enrollment that the district had been experiencing. Using a student-level matching design and data from the Arkansas Benchmark exams, they show that the program’s implementation was associated with an increase in math test scores between 2006–2007 and 2010–2011. And, using a difference-in-differences design and data from the school district and National Student Clearinghouse, they conclude that the program increased both college enrollment and bachelor’s degree completion.

Like the El Dorado Promise, The Degree Project (a pilot program in Milwaukee, Wis., that offered scholarships to one cohort of students) was intended to increase college-related outcomes, in part by providing a clear message about the availability of funding to pay college costs. In a randomized controlled trial, first-time ninth graders in half of the high schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools district were promised that if they met academic and attendance requirements, they would receive a $12,000 last-dollar scholarship to attend virtually any two-year or four-year public or private college or university in Wisconsin. Drawing on data from multiple sources, Douglas Harris and colleagues found that The Degree Project increased the percentage of seniors planning to attend college but had little effect on the likelihood of enrolling in college after graduating from high school. The Degree Project had positive effects on persistence and graduation for those who enrolled in two-year colleges, with larger positive effects for students who received the financial award. Harris and colleagues conclude that the failure of the program to increase college enrollment was likely attributable to characteristics of the program’s design and implementation, including the academic eligibility requirements (which were high relative to students’ average performance prior to establishment of the program).
and limited communication about the program, as well as the small scale and temporary nature of the program.

Whereas El Dorado Promise and The Degree Project offer a financial award for students who attend particular schools in a designated community, the Tennessee Promise is available to all state residents who graduate from a Tennessee high school. The Tennessee Promise provides a last-dollar grant covering up to tuition and mandatory fees for up to five semesters to complete an associate degree, technical certificate, or technical diploma. To be eligible, students must complete a program application, file the FAFSA, attend a mandatory informational meeting at their high school, and complete eight hours of community service prior to postsecondary enrollment. To maintain the financial award, students must have at least a 2.0 cumulative grade point average or meet satisfactory academic progress requirements and complete eight hours of community service for each semester of enrollment.

Using a difference-in-differences approach, Emily House and Madison Dell show that the Tennessee Promise had a positive effect on total enrollment of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen at two-year public institutions. Their analyses also point to differences in enrollment effects for different groups of students, with a larger positive effect on enrollment for Whites than Blacks, and a positive effect for Black women but no effect for Black men. Descriptive analyses raise additional questions about the implications of the program for equity, as average family income and parental education levels increased at the community colleges after implementation of the Tennessee Promise.

Rather than creating a statewide program, the state of Michigan took a different approach. In 2009, Governor Jennifer Granholm authorized the establishment of 10 promise zones. School districts, cities, and towns were invited to apply. From the 15 applications received by April 2009, the Michigan Department of Treasury selected 10 promise zones. Although varying in eligibility requirements and other characteristics, all the promise zones award a last-dollar scholarship to graduates of a promise zone high school to attend at least a community college. Using an instrumental variable difference-in-differences design, Meredith Billings examined the effects of the first eight operational promise zones. The analyses suggest that eligible students were more likely to enroll in college, more likely to enroll in a community college, and more likely to persist to the second year of college. However, the 95% confidence intervals for the coefficients are large and include negative values, limiting the conclusions that may be drawn.

Other promise programs, like the Illinois Promise, provide a financial award for students who enroll in a designated four-year college or university. The Illinois Promise is a last-dollar grant provided by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to Illinois residents from low-income families. The grant covers the cost of attendance for fall and spring semester enrollment for up to four years but does not include a financial award for summer enrollment. Using propensity score matching and regression analyses, Susan Gershenfeld, Denice Ward Hood, and Min Zhan found that students who enrolled in at least one summer session were more likely to graduate in four years. Illinois Promise students who enrolled in more than one summer session were more likely to graduate in four years than Illinois Promise students with only one or no summer enrollment session, as well as low-income students who did not receive the Illinois Promise but who enrolled in multiple summer sessions. Interview data
collected from 14 Illinois Promise students enrolling in summer courses suggest the academic, economic, social, and cultural factors that may influence summer enrollment decisions.

The next two chapters examine the effects of yet another approach: promising a financial award to students who graduate from designated high school(s) and attend a single community college. Using a difference-in-difference analysis with data from 1998–1999 to 2015–2016, Amy Li and Denisa Gándara examined the effects of 32 such programs (a.k.a. “local programs”) that were operating across the United States. They found that fall enrollment of first-time, full-time credential- and degree-seeking students increased at institutions with promise programs after program implementation. Li and Gándara also capitalized on program variation, exploring whether effects on enrollment varied based on program design features. They found that programs with a need-based eligibility requirement were associated with smaller increases in enrollment than programs that did not have an income eligibility requirement. In addition, the effects on enrollment were not higher for programs with relatively more generous financial awards (that is, programs that provided first-dollar awards or that covered tuition for completion of a two-year degree).

Roman Ruiz, Elaine Leigh, Ashley Napier, and Manuel González Canché explored community-level educational impacts of three promise programs that provided a financial award to attend a designated community college to students who met a county-level residence or school attendance requirement: Santa Cruz County College Commitment (California), Great River Promise at Arkansas Northeastern College, and Louisville Rotary Promise Scholarship (Kentucky). The three programs all targeted traditional-age high school graduates but offered varying financial awards. Santa Cruz provided a first-dollar award of $500 for the first semester, Great River provided a last-dollar award up to the cost of tuition and fees for four semesters, and Louisville provided a last-dollar award up to the cost of tuition for 60 credit hours. Using difference-in-differences analyses, the authors found a negative but statistically insignificant effect of the selected programs on attainment rates at the census tract level for residents within the county of the sponsoring community college. Ruiz and colleagues note that a negative coefficient does not mean that attainment declined, but that increases in attainment in the three study communities were smaller than in the comparison communities.

The final empirical chapter sheds light on the factors that contribute to the establishment of promise programs that provide a financial award to attend a single specified college or university. Using event history analysis, Jennifer Delaney and Elaine Leigh examined the establishment of 49 promise programs between 1986 and 2014. The examined programs limited eligibility to students living in a particular school district or attending a specific high school and provided a financial award to students to attend one designated two- or four-year institution. The authors found that programs were more commonly established under three conditions: The colleges in question were two-year rather than four-year institutions; there was a philanthropic or government funder; and the program covered not only tuition but also room and board. Diffusion also appears to have played some role. Membership in a network like Achieving the Dream was not found to be related to the establishment of a program during the study period, but program establishment was more likely at institutions in states that had more promise programs.

In this volume’s concluding chapter, we identify and discuss conclusions that may be drawn from the studies presented in the preceding chapters. We highlight implications of
the studies for program design and point to questions that program administrators and policy makers should consider in design and implementation. Of particular importance is attention to understanding who benefits—and who does not benefit—from a promise program and other implications of program design for equity. Continued attention is needed to whether and how programs promote equity rather than perpetuate the stratification of higher education opportunity and outcomes. Program administrators and policy makers should also consider the availability of the nonfinancial supports that may enable students not only to enroll in college but to earn a degree; they should consider ways to promote a true cross-sector approach; and they should recognize the importance of data collection for determining if and how a program is working.

We also identify topics for future research, including the long-term effects of programs on outcomes for different groups of students and the implications of different eligibility criteria and approaches to the financial award for program participation and outcomes. We need to know more about program implementation and management, including financial and political sustainability, program leadership, and whether the benefits of programs with different designs exceed the costs. And we need more qualitative research if we are to better understand the mechanisms that contribute to program outcomes, including potential unintended consequences. Illustrating the value of qualitative inquiry are three case studies of Michigan Promise Zone programs, which examine how and why administrators may change program eligibility requirements and other features as programs are implemented (Smith, 2019). Smith’s findings show that some changes may have positive effects on college-related outcomes, while others may be problematic.

Our Approach to the Research That Follows

This introductory chapter offers a framework for conceptualizing and understanding the diverse array of college promise programs. New approaches to defining, categorizing, and evaluating such programs are still emerging, however. Rather than enforce a uniform approach, we allowed the contributors to this volume to articulate their own perspectives. As a result, inconsistencies arose. For example, Millett et al. take an inclusive approach and assert that more than 280 programs exist in the United States, while Swanson and colleagues identify only 82 programs as meeting the criteria for their review. Because of differences in program definitions and data availability, the contributors also focused on different program design features in their analyses.

These and other inconsistencies are not surprising, given the rapid growth of college promise programs and the emergent state of research about them. We hope the differing approaches represented here will help guide efforts to further refine and develop a shared understanding of meaningful categories. Even with inconsistencies in definitions and approaches, we believe this volume advances understanding of the variations among promise programs across the United States. We hope that insights from these chapters will be useful to policy makers, program administrators, and researchers, as college promise programs continue to be established, implemented, evaluated, and refined.
References


