

What Does the Research Say about Early Awareness Strategies for College Access and Success?

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Introduction

Postsecondary early awareness strategies are a fast-growing component of college access to attainment efforts. Broadly defined, these programs and policies encourage low-income and first-generation students to gain the information, skills, and resources they need to successfully take part in higher education. They focus on students in fifth through eighth grades, to communicate that education beyond high school is an option, and to help them understand the steps they must take to prepare.

The primary goal of this report is to provide information that will be the basis for future program creation and policy discussions about early awareness interventions. Early awareness programs fall into one of several categories:

- information programs,
- scholarship programs,
- the federal GEAR UP cohort model, and
- college savings accounts.

Current evidence suggests that each of these models can be successful, but at varying degrees and with a wide range in cost.

A secondary goal emerged during evaluation of available early awareness research: to encourage additional rigorous, longitudinal evaluations of early awareness programs. The majority of early awareness interventions are at the state and local level, and the quantity and quality of program reviews vary greatly. In some cases within this paper, we rely on data from internal evaluation or qualitative information due to a lack of data from controlled evaluation methods. In particular, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of early awareness programs and their end goal - matriculation and attainment in higher education - because of additional interventions and factors that students experience during high school. Additionally, following students from their time in early awareness programs throughout their time in higher education requires more than a decade of longitudinal tracking. Interim success outcomes, such as enrolling in college preparatory curriculum or taking standardized tests in junior year, should be considered.

While the research demonstrates that early awareness strategies should continue to be part of the college access and success continuum, it is also clear that any intervention should be designed with specific indicators and outcome measures. Additionally, policy-makers should be wary of any one particular program or intervention that promises to be a silver bullet and rather view early awareness strategies as the first step of an integrated plan for student success.

Report Goals

1. To provide information that will be the basis for future program creation and policy discussions about early awareness interventions.
2. To encourage additional rigorous, longitudinal evaluations of early awareness programs.

Informational Programs

The key component to early awareness is in its name: awareness. In a report from the Michigan Higher Education Assistance Authority, Antonio Flores points out that many students lack awareness about the “costs of college, the availability of student aid, the job market, or the economic gains of college attendance” (Flores, 1993). When low-income students aren’t fully aware of the benefits of college or the availability of resources to help them complete college, they already start further behind on the path to college than their higher-income peers. Alisa Cunningham, Christina Redmond, and Jamie Merisotis, of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, describe the importance of government policies to target economically disadvantaged students, stating that “a range of non-financial variables influences college enrollment behavior” (Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003). Flores and Cunningham, Redmond and Merisotis’ work both indicate that policies and programs must focus on low-income students because they lack not only the resources to pay for college but access to college information.

A second component of early awareness is also in its name: early. Middle school is a critical time for college awareness curriculum because students will soon make choices that affect where they can attend college. In a paper written by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the researchers demonstrate a gap between what middle school students say about college and what their college behaviors actually look like. Students may not realize that the choices they make as eighth graders can affect their college-going goals, particularly because “Middle-level students who earn low grades or whose parents have less education have even less information about what is required of them to graduate from high school and in general feel less prepared to succeed once they get there” (NASSP, 2007). The NASSP survey demonstrates that not only is college awareness crucial, but beginning that message before high school is key.

There are two primary methods for delivering college awareness information to middle school students. One type of information campaign is conducted at the local level through school districts or college access programs working directly with students. The second is through outreach via government programs

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Awareness information must not only focus on the academic path to college, but also how to pay for it. Research from Sandy Baum, and her team of Sarah Minton and Lorraine Blatt, at the Urban Institute in “Delivering Information about College Financial Aid” discuss the importance of presenting college financial aid information to low-income families and using innovative techniques to make that information accessible. She indicates that the “lack of awareness of financial aid, limited understanding of the system, and the tendency to overestimate the price of college” (Baum, Minton, & Blatt, 2015) is a more prevalent problem among the economically disadvantaged, and other researchers indicate that low-income families are particularly vulnerable to misconceptions concerning the cost of colleges (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). If parents are unable to correctly identify the true costs associated with sending their child to college, they are less likely to tell

their children that college is in their future. Many families aren't aware of the help available to them until it's too late.

One successful example of how to conduct an early awareness program comes from I Know I Can (IKIC), a college access program in Columbus, Ohio, that was founded in 1988 and serves all of Columbus City Schools. Through IKIC's *Blueprint:College* workshops, sixth, seventh and eighth graders and their families attend a three-part workshop series about preparing for and planning for college. IKIC uses College Path from Learning Circle Education Services to keep robust internal records of its program. Internal data on two cohorts of these students show promising results from the program. Students, who participated in *Blueprint* as eighth graders and are now college freshmen, matriculated to college at a rate of 67.2 percent. This is higher than the district enrollment rate of 44 percent. A second, younger, cohort of students who participated in the program, are outpacing their peers 3:1 on taking standardized tests needed for college by the end of their junior year. An external evaluation also confirmed the value of these programs for parents. Evaluators found sizeable gains in parental knowledge of necessary middle and high school academic courses, the college-selection process, college-related terms, and college planning, as well as a decrease in anxiety over how to pay for college (Strayhorn, Barrett, Johnson, Kitchen, & Tillman-Kelly, 2014). Bringing students and families together and using a well-planned curriculum is getting results in Ohio.

Guaranteed Tuition as Early Awareness

One of the primary goals of early awareness interventions is to create expectations in the minds of young people that they will go to college. Offering guaranteed tuition or other types of "promised" scholarships in advance is one catalyst that helps set the expectation. Offering the money early piques interest and in many cases, it provides structure when delivering the information to students. Furthermore, knowing in advance that there is at least some funding for college can prevent a family from opting out of higher education preparations due to financial reasons alone.

Statewide Grant Programs

Indiana began its statewide tuition policy in 1990 with the Indiana 21st Century Scholars. This early commitment was similar to a promise-style program, offering full tuition and fees to scholars, but there were two qualifiers: the students must come from a family that lives under the income threshold and sign a pledge to meet specific academic and behavioral requirements. Indiana has researched the effects of this study over time, and in its most recent report "21st Century Scholars: Past, Present, and Future," it reviewed the 25-year history of the program. During that time, more than 70,000 students have used a scholarship with over 30,000 students completing degrees and 110,000 students still enrolled (IHCE, 2015). The report lists challenges of the program: 15 percent on-time graduation and a 33 percent graduation rate in 150 percent program time (IHCE, 2015); however, it should be noted that these success factors are far higher than the 10 percent completion benchmark used for low-income students in higher education. In "Effect of Twenty-first Century Scholars Program on College Aspirations and Completion," researchers found that Scholars "may well have increased the odds that these low income, often first-generation students beat the odds and were more successful than they should have been throughout their postsecondary educational experience" (Toukoushian, Hossler, DesJardins, McCall, & Canche, 2013). Because the 21st Century Scholars requires a commitment in seventh grade, this statewide policy has become an important early-awareness strategy specifically geared towards low-income students, and the report, even with several limitations, demonstrates that 21st Century Scholars is

“wise public policy... to make sure that low income students do not graduate with large levels of debt” (Toutkoushian, Hossler, DesJardins, McCall, & Canche, 2013).

Oklahoma Promise (OK Promise) is a statewide initiative developed in 1992 that offers eighth-grade students under the \$50,000 income cap an opportunity to “earn a college tuition scholarship” (Promise). The full tuition is offered on a sliding scale based on the number of credits for which a student enrolls. It covers full tuition at public colleges and universities, as well as a portion of tuition at accredited private institutions and programs at public technology centers that qualify for community college credit (OK Promise, 2015). Through its various iterations over the past few decades, some elements have remained constant: students promise to maintain a GPA of at least 2.5, take 17 credit hours of college preparatory coursework, and follow the behavioral rules throughout eighth grade and high school (Knapp). Annual reports for the Oklahoma Promise are available from 1996-97 through the 2014-15 academic year. The most recent annual report reflects a decline in program participation, but does not state why enrollments are declining, which could be related to fewer students meeting either the qualifications or the income requirements. The persistence rates of OK Promise enrolled students were higher than their non-promise peers and remain consistent (Year-End Report, 2016). This report also demonstrates that in students under the \$50,000 threshold, OK Promise students scored two points higher on the ACT, and scored one point higher overall, than their non-Promise peers (Year-End Report, 2016). With higher scores and consistent enrollment, the report also demonstrates that OK Promise students have a higher six-year degree completion rate than non-Promise students. Forty-five percent of OK Promise students graduate within six years, while only 35 percent of non-Promise students graduate within six years (Year-End Report, 2016). This scholarship requires annual appropriation from the legislature, and although changes are proposed frequently, the mission has bipartisan support from the state legislators (McNutt, 2015). It is encouraging that the Oklahoma Promise has dedicated internal program evaluation practices, especially since program participation levels are fluctuating and Promise students are graduating at a higher rate than non-Promise students.

Washington state established the College Bound Scholarship in 2007, which was modeled after Indiana’s 21st Century Scholars program. College Bound offers an early-commitment scholarship to low-income seventh graders who sign a pledge with the Washington Student Achievement Council (Long, 2012). The pledge has three sections: to graduate with a “2.0 or higher, have no felony convictions, and apply for financial aid at both the state and federal level...The scholarship, combined with other state aid, covers tuition at public college rates” (Cafazzo, 2015). Members from the first eligible class will begin graduating college in 2016, which is a prime time to evaluate the program. Currently, the best source available is internal data from the Washington Student Achievement Council’s “Roadmap Report,” which describes the state of higher education attainment in Washington State. Though only briefly mentioned in the report, College Bound is noted to have steadily increasing “signups,” a term that refers to students who submitted applications for the scholarship. These signups have increased by 34 percentage points since College Bound’s inception; the number of eligible students submitting applications is now at 91 percent (Washington State Achievement Council, 2015). College Bound’s website also provides data that demonstrates a relationship between the scholarship program and high school graduation rates. “Three-quarters [75 percent] of the students who signed up in 2010...graduated from high school in 2014. In comparison, the 2014 graduation rate for [non-College Bound] students was 62 percent” (College Bound, 2015). In addition to the grant, all eighth graders in Washington must participate in the High School and Beyond Plan, which requires setting goals for their future, reviewing them with a counselor, and then having them signed by a parent or guardian. The National Association of State Boards of Education calls Washington state a “leader in college awareness standards” and states the “institution of college awareness standards [as] most likely to ensure that all students in a state learn what they need to know about their postsecondary options.” (Lorenzo, 2016).

In “State Early Commitment Programs: A Contract for Success?” the American Association of State Colleges and Universities describes the key for success in these policies as being the contract in middle school: “This ‘early-commitment’ facilitates timely information sharing to students and parents and provides a key opportunity to chart a path of rigor before making selections on high school coursework...This process helps students avoid the mistake of failing to complete required college preparatory coursework until late in their high school career” (Harnsich, 2009). When reviewing these statewide commitment programs, it is important to note that all are showing some level of success through the combination of an early commitment and a financial incentive. For those with graduation rate data, the numbers in a vacuum may not appear to show program success, but when compared with either the national average of low-income students or peers not participating in the programs, the programs are moving the needle.

Local Scholarship Programs

The state-based early commitment programs all require that eligible middle school students demonstrate an element of need, as well as require action from participating students. A growing number of communities now implement scholarships “not based on merit or need, but on place” (Miller-Adams, 2015). These local programs are often titled “Promise Programs,” because they offer a guaranteed sum for college, and in some cases, provide full-tuition scholarships, without an element of merit or need. However, as more communities attempt to establish these expensive scholarships, some have moved away from providing the full-tuition promise, and have introduced a need- or merit-based element.

Of those programs that do offer the full scholarship to all students, they have “sent more than 15,000 students to college for free or close to it” (Miller-Adams, 2015) and have also inspired research surrounding their effectiveness. Research has continued to show that these programs increase college enrollment rates, especially among students with low GPAs or non-white students (Bangs, Davis, Ness, Elliot, & Henry, 2011). Promise programs and the similar guaranteed tuition programs are considered part of early awareness because “kids are more aware of their opportunities” (Semuels, *The Town That Decided to Send All Its Kids to College*, 2015) when their district or town promises them funds for college years in advance of enrollment. These kinds of programs establish an expectation of attending college at a young age, which also transforms elementary and middle schools to gear their curriculum and attitudes towards college success.

Perhaps the most notable Promise program is the Kalamazoo Promise, implemented in 2005 in Kalamazoo, Mich., following a generous anonymous donation. This Promise funds students who attend Kalamazoo high schools for four continuous years and then enroll in Michigan postsecondary institutions, either public or private, that join the Michigan College Alliance. Timothy Bartik, Brad Hershbein, and Marta Lachowska in the Upjohn Institute report “The Effects of the Kalamazoo Promise Scholarship on College Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion” points out that the Kalamazoo Promise is ideal for study because of the four-year residency requirement and specific start date in 2006. This created two groups

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of students; one eligible for the full scholarship and one eligible for nothing. When comparing these two groups, Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska found the following in high school graduates eligible for the Promise, it increased their college enrollment by 14 percent, increased cumulative credits by 15 percent, and increased the percentage of students earning a postsecondary degree by 12 percentage points (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2015). College completion prior to the Promise was 36 percent and increased to 48 percent once the Promise program was implemented (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2015). Most importantly, the success measures are “statistically indistinguishable and quantitatively similar” for students regardless of income status and are as great and often greater for non-white students (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2015). Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska write that “the Promise has led to intensive effects, by both KPS school officials and many in the Kalamazoo community, to encourage a more “college-going culture,” (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2015). Because the money was guaranteed to all graduates for college, the public school system had to prepare all students to succeed in college.

For the first decade of the program, program eligibility required students to attend a Michigan public college or university. The effect of this criterion changed the landscape of college attendance. In a separate Upjohn Institute report written by Michelle Miller-Adams, she explains that the percentages of students attending in-state institutions “rose from 38.6 percent to 67.4 percent” (Miller-Adams, 2010) because of the Promise. Starting with 2015 graduates, students can now attend private institutions that are part of the Michigan College Alliance (Kalamazoo Promise, 2015). The future shift of attendance patterns will be important information for other communities that seek to start Promise programs and design eligibility criteria for both students and institutions.

Following the creation of the Kalamazoo Promise, the state of Michigan created Promise Zones within its tax structure. The original law called for ten promise zones throughout the state which are funded “through private contributions and a mechanism called tax capture” (Kirney, 2015), which means that after three years of the zone’s establishment, the zone can collect “one-half of the growth in the state education tax” (Terry Stanton, 2009) for which its township qualifies. Michigan is the only state to establish promise scholarships in this way.

Baldwin Promise Zone is one example of the original ten. In this promise program, every student in the town with a population of 1,200 people is offered a tuition scholarship at any university in Michigan. The program runs much the same as the Kalamazoo Promise – students must graduate from a district public school, fill out a simple application stating postsecondary plans, and attend a university within the state. Both Baldwin and Kalamazoo have sliding award amounts depending on the years spent in the public school system, and although Baldwin is significantly smaller than Kalamazoo, their programs run similarly (Semuels, *The Town That Decided to Send All Its Kids to College*, 2015). According to interviews with the Baldwin Promise Zone staff, early indicators show that Baldwin’s FAFSA completion rate has increased to nearly 94 percent since the introduction of the promise, and out of an average of 30 high school graduates per year, about 25 are utilizing the scholarships (Richardson, 2015).

Following the success in Michigan, promise programs began in other parts of the country. The city of Pittsburgh started the Pittsburgh Promise, but introduced additional requirements beyond residency. Students must fulfill higher academic requirements and it does not guarantee full tuition. As long as they “attended a Pittsburgh traditional public or charter school continuously since 9th grade, maintained a GPA of 2.5 and an attendance record of 90 percent, and achieved specified scores on the Pennsylvania student assessments or the SAT, [students] may earn a scholarship of up to \$20,000 total to attend any accredited institution in the state” (Gonzalez, Bozick, Tharp-Taylor, & Phillips, 2011). This is a place-based scholarship with merit requirements that “finds mixed evidence supporting” (Bozick, Gonzalez, &

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Engberg, 2015) program efficacy as the college enrollment rate did not increase but the percentage of scholarship-eligible students attending four-year institutions did (Bozick, Gonzalez, & Engberg, 2015). Bozick, Gonzalez, and Engberg state that “students positively respond to the provision of tuition subsidies...but the Pittsburgh Promise provides only a partial subsidy” (Bozick, Gonzalez, & Engberg, 2015). Matching the \$5,000 annual scholarship with a Pell Grant, the Pennsylvania State Grant, and a small Stafford Loan, should cover most, if not all, tuition and fees at a public college in Pennsylvania; however, the less-than-full scholarship does not appear to have the same effect on students who were not planning to enroll. Bozick, Gonzalez, and Engberg point out though that the “Promise may redirect students to more ambitious postsecondary options” considering the

increase in four-year institutional enrollment (Bozick, Gonzalez, & Engberg, 2015). It is possible that the additional funds enable students who desire to go to a four-year college and are eligible to do so, to make the financial commitment necessary to enroll.

In Denver, Colo., the Denver Scholarship Foundation (DSF) formed in 2006. It includes a promise scholarship and student supports. To be eligible for the scholarship, students must earn a 2.0 or 2.75 GPA (depending on program type), attend a high school within Denver Public Schools for four consecutive years, and demonstrate financial need (Denver Scholarship Foundation, 2015). The size of the scholarship varies based on the Expected Family Contribution, the type of school the student attends, and the number of credits attempted with a maximum award of \$3,400 (Denver Scholarship Foundation, 2015). Since the establishment of the DSF, Denver Public Schools has “improved graduation rates amassing a 22 percentage point improvement since 2006, and...the number of students pursuing college immediately after graduation has increased by nearly 30 percent” (Pell Institute, 2015). This study conducted a cost-benefit analysis and projected economic outcomes, equating to a “positive economic impact of more than \$6 million annually” (Wallace, 2015). Additionally, 76 percent of DSF scholars have completed a postsecondary credential and 800 have graduated from college (Pell Institute, 2015).

In addition to setting expectations and providing a financial pathway to college, the promise programs also aid in establishing a college-going culture within the community. Students hear the message that everyone is expected to plan for their futures beyond high school and to consider college as an option. Alana Semeuls of *The Atlantic* states that “the Baldwin Promise came with a change in the way the community talked about education, something that may have been more valuable than cash” (Semeuls, *The Town That Decided to Send All Its Kids to College*, 2015). Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska state that “the Kalamazoo community and KPS [Kalamazoo Public School] have used the Promise to encourage a more college-going culture among parents and students, and have added services to increase the likelihood of college success” (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2015).

Role of Merit in Guaranteed Awards

For a variety of reasons, communities may create promise programs that do not provide full tuition for every student. First and foremost, it is very expensive to make this offer to all students, so introducing a need- or merit-based element helps to control costs. Ralph Bang, Larry Davis, Erik Ness, William Elliot,

and Candice Henry explain that “broad-based scholarship programs help many more college students than programs with limited eligibility” (Bangs, Davis, Ness, Elliot, & Henry, 2011) and references many scholarships including the Georgia HOPE Scholarship, which was merit-based with full tuition. Findings indicate that “increased white college enrollment by 12% and middle-and upper-income enrollment by 11% but slightly reduced or caused no change in black and low-income enrollment” (Dynarski, cited in Bangs, Davis, Ness, Elliot & Henry, 2002). These numbers stand in stark contrast to the programs above that moved the needle for the low-income and minority students. Bangs, Davis, Ness, Elliot, and Henry argue that “Full-tuition universal programs provide substantial benefits...and can double the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in higher quality colleges” (Bangs, Davis, Ness, Elliot, & Henry, 2011). For those states or communities looking to control costs for these programs, they should closely examine whether using a need- or merit-based limit yields better outcomes toward their goals.

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)

GEAR UP “is a product of federal legislation designed to increase high school completion and college attendance of low-income youth. It is a federally funded discretionary grant program that is planned, organized and operated at the state and local level” (NCCEP, 2015). The programs “provide academic and co-curricular support services to students at risk of dropping out of school and provide students and families with information demonstrating the advantages of pursuing higher education, as well as options for financing higher education” (NCCEP, 2015). GEAR UP is offered to an entire class, starting in the seventh grade, and then the program moves with students as they progress through school.

The federal government has not regularly evaluated the GEAR UP program; however, there is an evaluation from Abt Associates, Inc, under way at the time of publishing (Federal Business Opportunities, 2012) Externally, a handful groups have conducted national studies on GEAR UP. Most recently, the College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium (CCREC) was formed to evaluate the federal GEAR UP program. CCREC released its first results in 2015 after examining college enrollment rates for high school seniors who participated in GEAR UP programs from six states during the 2012-13 academic year. Of those approximately 9,000 students, 56.9 percent enrolled in college. The enrollment rate was lower than the national average of 66.2 percent for all students, but 6 percentage points higher than the average for all low-incomes students (50.9 percent) (Tillery, Cruce, & Cole, 2015).

Prior to CCREC, Westat published reports in 2003, and a more robust study followed in 2008. In the Westat report “Early Outcomes of the GEAR UP Program,” prepared for the Department of Education, Kim Standing, David Judkins, Brad Keller, and Amy Shimshak conducted a comparison-group study across early GEAR UP middle schools and found that “a pattern of imbalances emerged...there were a number of indications that students in the comparison schools had better attitudes about school, their parents were better educated and more connected to the schools...On the other hand, both students and parents in the GEAR UP schools reported a much richer set of college-related services and more knowledge about college” (Standing, Judkins, Keller, & Shimshak, 2008). While comparison group students are better connected to school in general, GEAR UP focuses on college preparation services, leading to better outcomes in the future. The Westat report also found that “GEAR UP students reported having more discussions about college with parents and other adults and about planning the courses they needed to take than did non-GEAR UP students” (Standing, Judkins, Keller, & Shimshak, 2008).

More recent research focuses on specific states or regions. In 2015 in Rhode Island, the College Crusade of Rhode Island GEAR UP had a third-party evaluation conducted that also used a comparison-group design. The evaluators in this impact study discovered that “In the fall of 2014, nearly 70% of Rhode Island GEAR UP high school graduates had enrolled in college compared with 56% share of...the matched comparison group. GEAR UP participants who graduated from high school were 25% more likely to enroll in college than their counterparts in the matched comparison group,” (Fogg & Harrington, 2015) In Washington state, the 2012 report “Making the Dream a Reality,” the authors determined that GEAR UP students had “more positive outcomes on virtually all measures of enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment. For example, first year college attendance for GEAR UP participants was 68% higher than in the comparison group – including 117% higher four-year college attendance.” (Mann, 2012). In a 2006 review of the City University of New York (CUNY) System GEAR UP, evaluators analyzed data in a quasi-experimental study and also conducted qualitative research. Through data analysis, they found that there were statistically significant relationships between participation in GEAR UP on high GPA and high attendance rates, and even found “a significant correlation between the number of GU activities and both outcomes (GPA and Attendance Rate). In other words, the more a student participated, the greater the impact” (Mann, 2012).

Utilizing Financial Services to Enhance Early Awareness

Early knowledge of how to pay for college helps to build college-going expectations. Financial services such as college savings accounts are important aspects of college planning and that some programs seek to use more frequently. College savings accounts have typically been features for middle class families, but that may change as creative savings programs like Individual Development Accounts increase in use. College savings accounts for low-income families can assist with both financial planning and development of an attitude that contributes to college-going culture.

William Elliot in “At-risk Children’s College Aspirations and Expectations” explains the connection between college expectations and income. He states that “college expectations are more likely to change depending on children’s social and economic circumstances” (Elliot, 2008). He looks at how those gaps can be narrowed through different strategies, including utilizing savings accounts. His research “suggests that there are substantial differences in the expectations of children who have savings for college and children who do not” (Elliot, 2008). At Washington University in St. Louis, Sondra Beverly and William Elliot III find that “youth with savings accounts...of their own were more likely to expect to graduate (Beverly & Elliot, 2010)”. Savings can account for shifts in attitude among low-income students as they become aware that money exists for college planning. In a report in US News, the author writes that “a college savings account with even \$1...will increase the likelihood a child will enroll in college from 45 percent to 71 percent.” The attitude shift develops more from the act of saving than the amount saved. Creating a savings account for college reflects the notion that in many places, the promise of having a scholarship was responsible for a cultural shift; it helps “prospective college students form a “college-bound” mentality, enabling young adults to focus their efforts and make responsible decisions in advance” (JP, US News, 2013). Encouraging young students to create savings accounts can be part of early awareness programs that are simple and beneficial.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 acknowledged the value of college savings accounts by instructing the U.S. Department of Education to conduct a pilot project for GEAR UP states to test the effectiveness of college savings accounts, which was announced in the Federal Register in 2012 (Federal Register, 2012). As of this writing, there was no grantee list announced or evidence available

that the experiment is under way. Future programs to institute and test college savings accounts, particularly at the federal level, should learn more about why this experiment did not take place.

Policy Implications

The available literature shows that early awareness can be an effective strategy for increasing college access and success. Policy-makers at various levels, and even funders looking to support private programs, should consider how to incorporate early awareness into their postsecondary support pipeline. Those who do so, however, should understand that the research on these programs is still emerging and that there is no silver bullet solution. Early awareness must be viewed as the first step in a series of student outreach and support activities through the educational journey.

When deciding which policies to implement or programs to fund, decision-makers should consider the best way to use available resources, so as to maximize their effect on low-income, first-generation students and students of color, who are on their path to a college degree. As with any new policy or program, it is paramount that outcomes are measured so that the results can be evaluated. Degree attainment at the postsecondary level is a long way off from the sixth grade. Evaluation of early awareness programs should include intermediate measures of success. In addition to tracking the long-term goal of degree completion, decision-makers should consider tracking enrollment in college preparatory curriculum, completion of the SAT/ACT, participation in AP/IB courses, completion of the FAFSA, application to at least four colleges, on-time high school graduation, and immediate college matriculation (National College Access Network, 2015). Evaluations should be designed to track both these interim goals and the long-term goal of college completion.

Several of the examples discussed in this paper have measurable results. Others show promising practices that either need further expansion to test their effectiveness, or more rigorous evaluations. This area of the college access and success field is ripe for both expansion and for additional third-party evaluation and research. Policy-makers, institutions of higher education, K-12 educational systems, college access programs, and researchers should all take an increased interest in early awareness so that services to students can be advanced and improved.

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