

Increasing Degree Attainment of Low-Income Community College Students: Preliminary Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial

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Community colleges have the potential to be powerful vehicles for social mobility in the U.S. They enroll nearly half of all post-secondary students in the U.S., a significant number of whom are first-generation or low-income, and the benefits incurred by their graduates are well-documented (Carnevale et al., 2014; The White House, 2015). However, roughly two-thirds of these students do not graduate within three years (Kraemer, 2013).

A better understanding of how to close the completion gap is needed to inform policy. One Million Degrees (OMD), a Chicago nonprofit that supports low-income community college students, may provide key insights into a workable solution. OMD implements the only Chicago-area program that uses a comprehensive approach to serve community college students. Operating in all seven campuses of the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) and Harper Community College, its program supports students financially, academically, personally, and professionally through last-dollar scholarships, skill-building workshops, advising, and coaching. OMD students meet monthly with program coordinators, who work with scholars to encourage academic and personal progress. Students also attend monthly workshops that include meeting with a volunteer coach and activities designed to build professional skills. Program coordinators are embedded on the college campus, allowing students to meet with them on campus and enhancing program coordinators' ability to connect students to additional resources and services through the college.

OMD's wraparound approach is consistent with the limited studies of successful interventions (Scrivener et al., 2015; Sommo, Cullinan, Manno, Blake, & Alonzo, 2018; Evans, Kearney, Perry, & Sullivan, 2017). OMD's oversubscription of applicants presented the opportunity to conduct a randomized controlled trial of the program. In the spring of 2016, we randomly assigned 1,452 community college-intending students to either receive an offer of a spot in the OMD program or to the control group. The following spring an additional 2,822 students were randomized. The research team will present year 1 findings for both cohorts of students. Drawing on data from the National Student Clearinghouse, we find that students offered a spot in the program were more likely to enroll in college, enroll full-time, and persist from fall to spring by a substantial and statistically significant margin. Notably, these differences seem to be driven by students that enroll in the program directly from high school.

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Analysis of administrative data from CCC and Harper is underway and will provide a richer picture of credit accumulation, grade point averages, and progress towards degree as well as utilization of campus services, including advising, tutoring and career supports. Data from focus groups with scholars, volunteer coaches, and program coordinators will provide initial insights into what might be leading to early results.