

**California Higher Education – Are the California Promise Programs Contributing to
Student Success and more Diverse Institutions?**

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MPP Essay

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Abstract

In 2011 the California State University (CSU) system's overall four-year graduation rate was 16 percent, which is far below the national rate of 26 percent among similar institutions. In response to the low graduation rate, the California legislature passed 2 statutory bills meant to further expand access, while improving college readiness and graduation rates at the same time. Considering these goals, this paper seeks to establish whether the California Promise Programs are contributing to student success and more diverse institutions. Central to this research are the Promise programs run by the two divisions of the California Public Postsecondary Education: (i) the California Community Colleges Promise program (CCC) spawned by Assembly Bill 19 - under the administration of the President and Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges; and (ii) the California State University (CSU) Promise program SB 412 - administered by the Trustees of the California State University. For each program, the paper shall examine the Legislative intent for initiating the program, the legal framework and provisions of the statute, specified guidelines for host campuses, student eligibility guidelines, conditions for student continued participation in the program, appropriations and a summary description of any significant commonalities and differences in the implementation of the two programs.

Introduction

According to the Social Construction and Policy Design framework (SCPD), as Public Policy cycles come and go; they confer benefits or burdens from government on various policy target groups in society. While policy benefits include economic opportunities for personal advancement, tax breaks, subsidies, welfare benefits, financial resources; burdens come in the form of limited opportunities for personal growth, inadequate resources, or complete marginalization of certain populations by the law. A case in point is the persisting problem of the underrepresentation of minorities on campus, which might have largely resulted from the uneven allocation of opportunities and resources by the government. To address the problem, the California legislature passed AB 19 and SB 412, whose main goals are to widen college access, ensure that enrolled students stay in school and increase the rate of degree completion across state institutions. Through the lenses of the Social Construction and Policy Design framework (SCPD), this paper seeks to evaluate whether the various California Promise programs contribute to student success and more diverse institutions.

Literature Review

According to Smith and Larimer (2017), the Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD) framework asserts that the social construction of target populations implies that policymakers purposefully construct policy designs based on a “burden/benefit” analysis of political opportunities and risks to be assigned to different target groups in society. Schneider and Ingram (1997) concur that the distribution of policy benefits or burdens is premised on both the social construction of deservedness and the political power held by policy target populations. Positing policy design as the dependent variable and social construction as the independent variable, Schneider and Ingram (1997), argue that how individual groups are socially constructed

(deserving or undeserving) ultimately affects policy design (the distribution of policy benefits and burdens).

During policy formulation, social constructions are used to connect policy targets to their contribution to society or conversely to their burdens to society. Individuals and groups associated with negative social constructions are portrayed negatively by the media and in the social and political discourse. As a result, they are usually conferred with burdens. For example, illegal immigrants and gangs are classified under this category. The SCPD framework assumes that the distribution of benefits and burdens to various target populations depict and reinforces political power relationships, as it is based on the extent of power and the negative or positive social construction of the target groups on the deserving and undeserving axis (Ingram et al., 2007). Central to the framework is its ability to address the question of who gets what, when, and how.

According to the Schneider and Ingram's matrix (See Figure 1), which consists of political power and deservedness (deserving and undeserving), there are four main types of target groups; advantaged, contenders, dependents and deviants. The advantaged groups include, business owners, senior citizens, middle class taxpayers and the military. Schneider and Ingram (1997), assert that although perceived as less deserving than the advantaged group, contenders, have a lot of political power. Examples include labor unions, gun owners, and the insurance industry. The dependent groups alluded to in the matrix include those groups which lack political power but are positively socially constructed. For example, students, mothers, children, and the mentally disabled.

Social Construction

		Positive	Negative
<i>Power</i>	Strong	Advantaged Group (Strong) <i>e.g., veterans, small businesses</i>	Contender Group (Strong) <i>e.g., Insurance industry, big banks</i>
	Weak	Dependent Group (Weak) <i>e.g., children, students, mothers</i>	Deviant Group (Weak) <i>e.g., drug dealer, illegal immigrant</i>

Figure 1. Schneider and Ingram's Social Construction Matrix

According to Schneider and Ingram (1997), the last category is that of deviants, who constitute groups that lack both political power and a positive social construction; thus, they are perceived as politically weak and undeserving of any benefits. A few examples could be gangsters, drug dealers, and illegal immigrants. However, of the many groups under the independent category, this paper shall focus exclusively on college students and their struggles for participation in higher education. Schneider and Ingram (1993 pg. 345), affirm that, although benefits distributed to dependent groups (such as students) tend to be more explicit than those allocated to the contenders, dependent groups are also the first to have their benefits cut in times of fiscal crisis, or when political expediency reflect that doling out benefits is a political risk (i.e., as was the case in 1996 when Proposition 209 effectively ended race-based admissions in public institutions).

However, according to Schneider and Sydney (2009), these socially constructed groups are fluid and not static. There are no clear-cut or hard and fast empirical boundaries between target groups. Ingram and Schneider (1991) argue that policy has the capacity to create opportunities

for change in social constructions (e.g., Promise Programs), and it is possible for leaders to successfully advocate on behalf of disadvantaged populations that can be deemed as powerless as well as not dangerous. Similarly, college students are: (i) positively socially constructed, (ii) powerless, and (iii) not dangerous and they look up to political leaders and policymakers to advocate on their behalf.

California Higher Education System

While most developed countries maintain some form of Federal Ministry of Education bearing the responsibility of running all levels of education including tertiary level education, the US Constitution prescribes no role for the federal government in higher education (Heller, 2011). Although the federal government has long had a role in funding higher education, authority for operating the nation's post-secondary institutions has always been the responsibility of states and other private entities. Heller (2011), adds that many of the states are characterized by public institutions with higher tuition rates and state-funded scholarship programs, which provide large amounts of assistance to students attending public and private institutions. However, states do differ in their financial support for higher education.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) asserts that California has a history of free tuition at all levels dating back to the state's earliest years. However, the AASCU alleges that because the CSUs received no constitutional or legislative mandate for free tuition, they went ahead and charged tuition fees for "materials and services" in 1954. Similarly, due to financial strain the UCs had long been assessing fees for non-instructional expenses since the 1890s. However, according to the State Coordinating Council for Higher Education, in contrast, California's community colleges had a firmly established "no tuition" policy as they were considered an extension of the K-2 sector writes the.

However, (Heller 2011), contends that due to everchanging market dynamics, colleges and universities have a daunting challenge of constantly positioning themselves in terms of market appeal, tuition charges, curricular offering, extra-curriculum activities, and alumni success. For a period spanning 3 decades, there has been a perpetual rise in the costs of higher education and Heller (2011) stresses that affordability is the key determinant of access to college, particularly when considering students of different background characteristics such as income and race. While Heller (2011) attributes the ever-increasing costs to declining state subsidies and family income, varying college endowments, costly tenured faculty remuneration, the quest to keep up with rankings and the growing use of technology among other reasons, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) argue that decades of state disinvestment in public higher education have led to the current inordinate tuition increases and heavier student debt burden.

However, the AASCU claims that, due to state funding cuts, California like in any other state increased fees at the UC and CSUs in the decades following the adoption of the Master Plan. The two university systems (UCs and CSUS), formally replaced fees with standard tuition charges in 2010. Similarly, due to budget shortfalls, the Community colleges started charging instructional fees in 1984. However, despite being the lowest instructional charges in the nation, California decided to call them fees. The state's two public university systems (combined) are near the national average for published tuition charges. In-district fees at California's Community Colleges averaged \$1,420 in 2015-2016, while the state's four-year universities charged in-state students an average tuition of \$9,270.

Obligated by its long-standing tradition of "free education" in 2017 California adopted a Kalamazoo type Promise Program to widen college access for underserved communities.

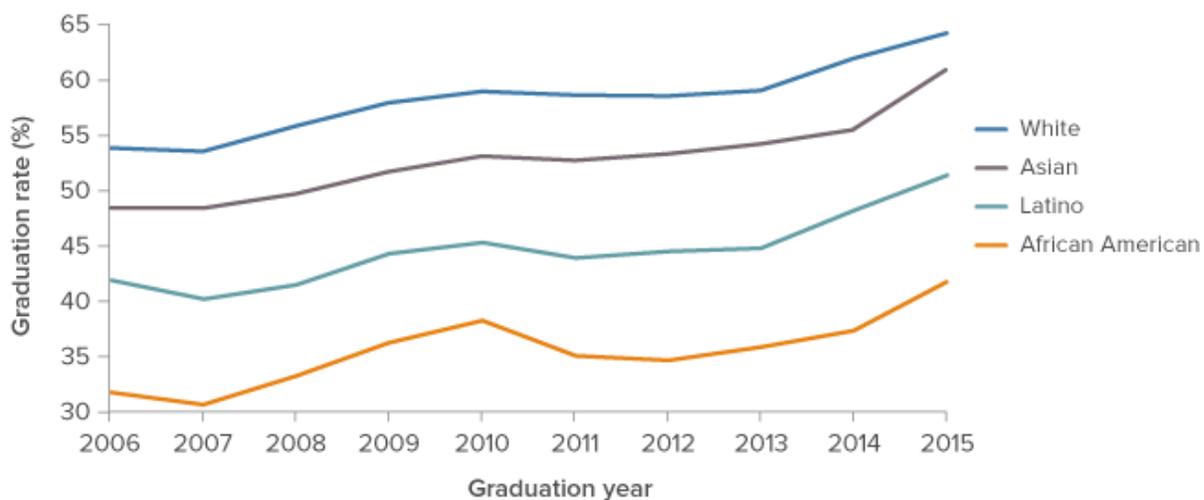
However, unlike Michigan's Kalamazoo program whose eligibility is based not on merit or need, but on place (Kalamazoo School District), the California Promise program supports statewide students who enroll in the campuses of the California community colleges and state universities in obtaining associate degrees within two academic years, and baccalaureate degree programs within four academic years.

As a sign of its ongoing commitment to higher education, the California Legislature previously created the 1978 California Student Opportunity and Access Program (Cal-SOAP), a program which incorporated K-12 school districts, all three public higher education sectors (i.e., community colleges, California State Universities and the University of California system), and a large consortium of independent colleges to scale up their student enrollments in higher education. Now the legislature has followed this legislation up with the California Promise program.

Going back to community colleges, the California Public Policy Institute (CPPI) attests that even though low income community college students have been covered by the Board of Governors (BOG) fee waiver since 1985 and that the California College Promise Grant waives the per-unit enrollment fee currently standing at \$46 at all community colleges, California still needs to increase the number of college students successfully graduating and advancing to four year institutions. The PPIC argues that there exists a gap between the enrollment and completion rates especially at the CSUs where Latinos and African Americans constitute 49 percent of the overall enrollment, but account for only 38 percent of degrees awarded. Surprisingly, with high student support services, graduation rates of African American and Latino students hover around 73 and 77 percent respectively at the University of California (UC) schools. These outcomes reflect a missing dimension in the CSUs schools and that dimension is student support services.

The CSU Chancellor's Office notes that a 2016 statewide survey indicated that 85 percent of Californians are worried about college affordability, despite all the efforts to cushion vulnerable populations in higher education. The PPIC concurs and laments that more students enrolling, but few graduate in California community colleges, adding that on average only 13 percent of California Community College freshmen complete their associate degree within two years, 31 percent do so within three years, and about 47 percent of community college students attain an associate degree or certificate, transfer to a four-year school, or complete at least 60 transferrable units within six years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Graduation gaps remain in place as graduation rates rise for all racial groups



SOURCE: [CSU Analytic Studies](#).

NOTE: System-wide six-year graduation rates. "Asian" includes Pacific Islanders.

CSU Analytic Studies and the PPIC concurred in acknowledging that there were completion gaps among racial/ethnic groups, with Asian American and white students more likely than their African American and Latino classmates to finish. Although the graduation rates of underserved students rose to 50 percent, the CSU university system (as a whole) did not manage to

close the persistent graduation gaps between racial/ethnic groups (See Table 1). Despite the 6-year steady improvement in graduation rates across the races/ethnicities since 2000, graduation gaps largely remained intact. However, system-wide, the gaps between American Indians, African Americans, Latinos, and their white and Asian counterparts, shrank slightly from 14 percentage points in 2008 to 13 percentage points in 2015. Notably, several campuses did register a significant narrowing of graduation gaps. Fresno State, East Bay, San Bernardino, and Chico and Maritime Academy, all reduced their gaps by 5 or more percentage points. San Bernardino's graduation gap shrank from 7 percentage points in 2008 to only 1.5 points by 2015. Overall, during this initiative, 14 campuses shrank their graduation gaps, while eight campuses saw their gaps grow (See Table 2).

The California Promise Program

The introduction of California Promise program has since changed the fortunes of most these college students overnight. While both AB19 and SB 412 bequeath substantial benefits to college students, each program shall be reviewed separately, starting with the California Community College (CCC) based Promise programs. According to the California Budget and Policy Center, AB 19 establishes the California College Promise program, which provides state funding to community colleges to improve college readiness, increase program completion rates, and close achievement gaps.

According to CollegePromise.Org., criticism have already been leveled against the Promise programs from an equity standpoint for awarding scholarships on a last-dollar basis, after Pell grants and other need-based aid have been applied, and they cover only the cost of tuition and fees. This implies that a low-income student will receive no new money from the statewide program because tuition and fees are already covered by Pell grants. First-dollar funding

approaches are preferable to last-dollar approaches because they allow students to use Pell grants to cover living expenses, which are the most expensive component of community college attendance.

Table 2. Most Campuses saw graduation gains, but not all met their target

Campus	Target growth 2006–2015 (% points)	Actual growth 2006–2015 (% points)	Difference (% points)
System-wide	8	11	3
Campus met or exceeded target			
Chico	6	10	4
Fresno	6	13	7
Fullerton	6	13	7
Long Beach	7	19	12
Los Angeles	10	11	1
Monterey	14	18	4
Northridge	9	10	1
Pomona	10	15	5
San Bernardino	6	8	2
San Diego	6	10	4
San Francisco	8	9	1
San Jose	9	15	6
San Luis Obispo	9	9	0
San Marcos	7	13	6
Sonoma	6	8	2
Campus did not meet target			
Bakersfield	6	-3	-9
Dominguez Hills	7	2	-5
East Bay	6	2	-4
Humboldt	13	1	-12
Maritime	18	4	-14
Sacramento	9	4	-5
Stanislaus	6	5	-1

SOURCES: [CSU Analytic Studies](#), [CSU Graduation Initiative website](#).

NOTES: Channel Islands was a new campus as of fall 2003 and did not have a six-year graduation goal, but the campus is included in the system-wide calculations. East Bay, Maritime Academy, and Dominguez Hills had higher graduation rates before the end of the initiative, but none met its campus goal at any point during the initiative.

Although the College Promise programs in California vary in funding, implementation and overall structure, they generally incentivize college attainment, reward participants who meet specified criteria, and encourage community colleges to adopt best practices in support of student enrollment and completion, while also providing an opportunity for community colleges to earn

additional funding. Assembly Bill 19 establishes the legal framework for the College Promise program and is funded through and administered by the Office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges.

California Community College Promise Program

The Legislative Goals of AB 19

According to the California Legislative Counsel's Digest, Assembly Bill 19 seeks to support California Community Colleges in accomplishing the following goals:

- a. increase the number of college-bound high school students who are ready to be placed directly into transfer-level Mathematics and English courses at Community college.
- b. to increase the number and percentage of high school students who attain associate degrees or go for career technical education certificates.
- c. boost the number of students who successfully transfer from community college to the California State University or the University of California thereby increasing the percentage of students who graduate from college with a bachelor's degree.
- d. Work towards reducing and eliminating regional achievement gaps and achievement gaps for students from groups traditionally underrepresented at the California Community Colleges (CCC), including but not limited to, underrepresented students, low income students, students who are current or former foster youth, students with disabilities, formerly incarcerated, undocumented students, students meeting the requirements of Assembly Bill 540 of the 2001-2002 Regular Session of the Legislature, and students who are veterans.

Host Campuses

As part of the certification requirements for participation by the Community Colleges Board of Governors' and the Chancellor, community colleges should advance the following program goals:

- a) partner/collaborate with one or more local educational agencies to establish an Early Commitment to College Program, as prescribed in the California Education Code.
- b) partner with one or more local educational agencies to support and improve high school student preparation for college and reduce postsecondary remediation.
- c) utilize evidence-based assessment and placement practices at the community college to improve outcomes for underprepared students.
- d) participate in the California Community College Guided pathways grant program, as stipulated in the California Education Code.
- e) maximize student access to need-based financial aid by leveraging the California Promise Grant, to ensure students complete the Free Application for Federal Aid (FAFSA), Cal Grant Application, or Dream Act application, and participate in a federal loan program authorized under Title IV of the Federal Higher Education Act of 1965.

According to the Chancellor's Office, School Districts have the discretion to choose whether they want to waive fees for first time, fulltime students or utilize the funds in other ways that still satisfy the goals of the legislation. However, the Chancellor warns that whatever Districts do, their focus should not stray too far from the intended legislative goals of (i) improving college readiness, (ii) increasing degree completion rates and (iii) closing achievement gaps.

For continued participation in the College Promise program, student must be enrolled full time i.e. carry 12 or more semester units or the equivalent and be a first-time student.

California State University Promise (CSU) Promise Program

The Legislative Goals of Senate Bill 412

Unlike the voucher-based Colorado State program, which doles out state subsidies directly to students in the form of vouchers, or the Kalamazoo Promise of Michigan, which limits participation to students from the Kalamazoo Public School District only, the California Promise program supports statewide students who enroll in the campuses of the California Community Colleges and State Universities in obtaining associate degrees within two academic years, and baccalaureate degree programs within four academic years. Spawned by Senate Bill 412, the California State University (CSU) Promise program among other things requires that a specified number of CSU campuses establish the California Promise program by entering into pledges with students who meet specified criteria, and support them in earning their bachelor's degree within 4 years or 2, if they transferred from community college with an Associate's degree.

This policy intervention comes as a Legislative response to recent reports citing that only 19 percent of California State University students currently graduate within four academic years and that California's graduation rate was 16 percent in 2011, way below the national average among similar institutions. In addition, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) projects that without strong interventionist policies, California will incur a skills gap in the job market by the year 2030. According to the California Legislative Counsel's Digest, SB 412 seeks to create of a pathway to graduation from a four-year institution by providing the regulatory framework whose legislative oversight requires CSU trustees to submit periodic recommendations to the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the Legislature on their efforts to make the program more broadly systemic.

In addition, the bill seeks to ensure that the graduation rates for low-income students, first generation students, and students from underrepresented populations are improved as early as possible. Pertaining to diversity, SB 412 stipulates that the composition of students in the California Promise program should be reflective of demographic patterns where the campuses are located and that policy benefits be provided equitably among the populations attending each campus. While a minimum of eight campuses initially piloted the Promise Program between 2017-2018, the number almost doubled by the 2018-2019 academic year, a minimum of twenty campuses are expected to have established the program. The bill also assigns the task of reviewing each Promise Program to a Graduation Initiative Advisory Committee at the campus or a committee with similar functions designated by the president of the campus.

Host Campuses

Senate Bill 412 stipulates that a campus shall guarantee participation in the program to, at a minimum, any student who is any of the following:

- a. A low-income student as defined under Section 89292 of the California Education Code.
- b. A student who has graduated from a high school located in a community that is underrepresented in college attendance.
- c. A student who is a first-generation college student.
- d. The California Program at each campus should accommodate as many students into the program as feasible and in consideration of availability of funding.
- e. A transfer student.
- f. Support provided to students in this program should include, but not necessarily be limited to the following: Priority registration in coursework; A student who qualifies for priority registration under another policy program shall not be a beneficiary of priority

registration in the Promise program; A Graduation Initiative Advisory Committee, or a similarly designated committee at each campus shall preside over pre-existing priority registration policies

- a) Academic advisement shall include;

Student Obligations for Continued Participation

The Legislative Counsel's Digest reports that for continued participation in the California Promise Program, a student may be required to demonstrate both of the following:

- b) Completion of at least 30 semester units, or the quarter equivalent, in each prior year
- c) Attainment of a grade point average in excess of a standard set by the institution

As California and other states take corrective measures towards eliminating disparities in higher education, they should be mindful of the fact that the narratives underpinning the politics of select group entitlement to state benefits should not perpetuate divisions between groups.

Schneider and Ingram (2005) add that rather than challenging such disparities with positive counter narratives, reformers tend to use a 'cure worse than disease' argument, which often leads to major unintended policy consequences. For example, removing school entitlement may increase juvenile delinquency and worsen crime. The Social Construction and Policy design framework asserts that social constructions of deservedness and entitlement create both (a) 'positive identities and increased participation' in politics by recipients, and (b) feelings of unworthiness, alienation, resignation, and reluctance to participate politically' in those allocated with policy burdens (Ingram and Schneider, 2005c: 289).

However, the introduction of the California Promise program is consistent with the Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD) framework's assumption that PD framework that policy has its way of uplifting previously disadvantaged groups. In California, in the immediate

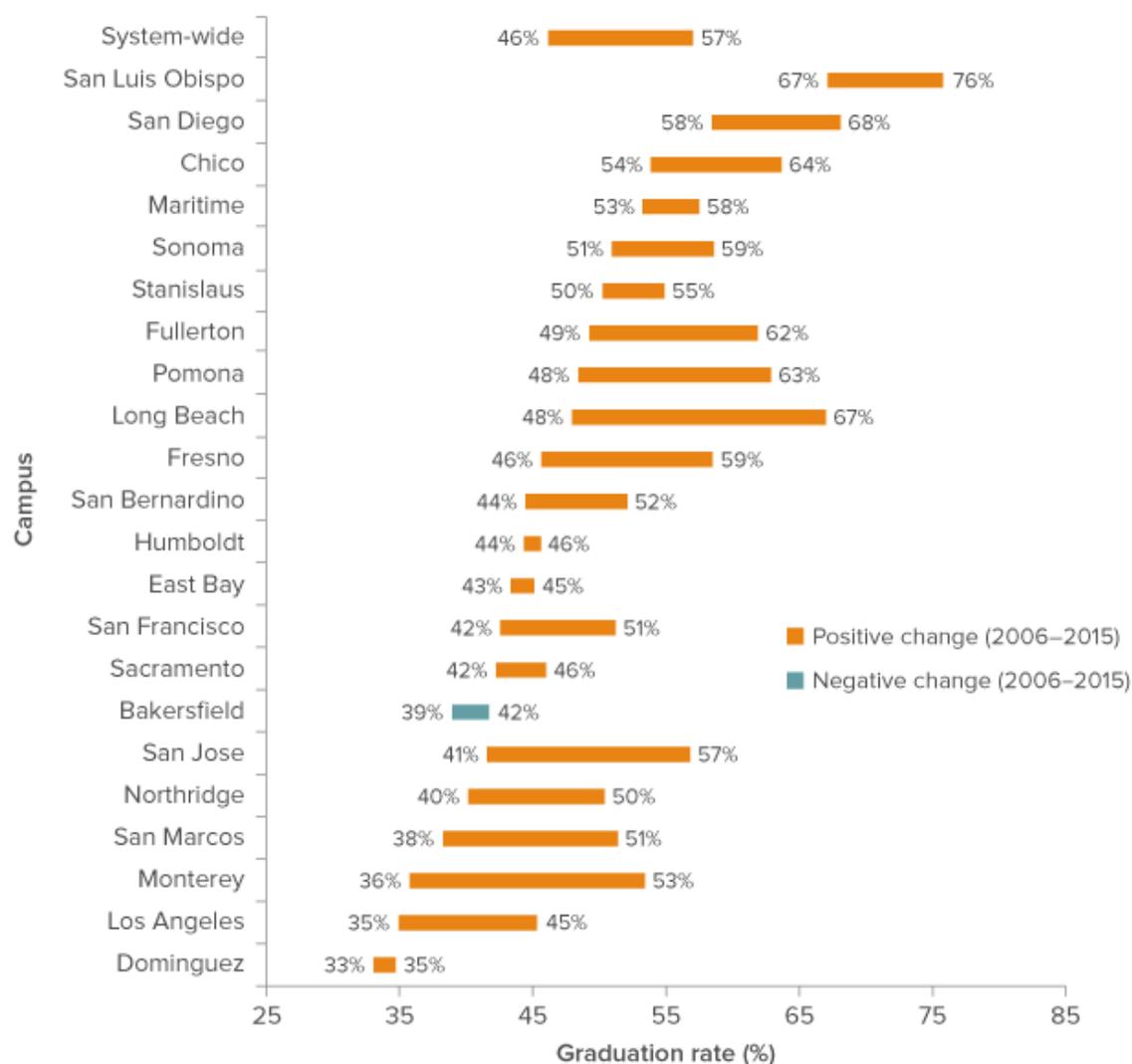
aftermath of eliminating affirmative action in admissions, enrollment of the underrepresented minorities significantly declined in relation to that of the advantaged groups due to many reasons. According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), less than one in five first-time freshmen graduate from California State University (CSU) within four years. Because students who graduate on time require less state investment, tend to graduate with lower loan amounts and start earning income sooner, and open space for other students, CSU has made it a priority to boost four-year graduation rates.

The California Legislative Counsel's Digest alleges that the economic impact of low graduation rates includes lower salaries and wages, lower taxes, and fewer graduates in the job market. However, the PPIC acknowledges that over the years, CSU campuses have worked hard to increase their graduation rates through a combination of campus efforts and system-wide coordinated actions. From 2009 to 2015, the CSU system had raised its graduation rate from 51 to 57 percent and now the CSU system is already close to achieving its ambitious Graduate Initiative 2025. The PPIC contends that CSU Chancellor's Office set different goals for all the campuses benchmarked on the top quartile of graduation rates among similar institutions nationwide. Accordingly, campuses with graduation rates farther from the top quartile in their peer group had bigger goals compared to campuses with graduation rates closer to this top quartile. Campuses already in the top quartile were given a generic goal of increasing their graduation rate by 6 percentage points.

The CSU Chancellor's Office affirms that campus graduation rate goals varied considerably, from 6 to 18 percentage. Overall, fifteen, institutions met or exceeded their goals, while seven failed to meet their targets (See Table 3). Monterey moved from 36 -53 percent, Pomona from 48-63 percent, San Jose from 41-57 percent and Long Beach from 48-

67 percentage points, registering the biggest change in graduation rates with increases between 15 and 19 percentage points from 2006 to 2015. However, six campuses namely Humboldt, East Bay, Sacramento, Bakersfield, Los Angeles and Dominguez failed to meet their targets.

Table 3. Campuses had different starting points, but most increased graduation rates during the 2009-2015 Graduation Initiative



Some of the factors which prompted the legislative interventions (AB 19 and SB 412) include:

- (i) the fact that some CSU campuses failed to meet their targets during the 6 year Graduate Initiative between (2009-2015);
- (ii) only 19 percent of CSU students currently graduate within

four years and that California's graduation rate was 16 percent in 2011, way below the national average among similar institutions; (iii) that the CSU system as a whole was failing to close completion gaps; and (iv), minority students continued to be disproportionately underrepresented across the higher education system (CCs, CSUs and UCs).

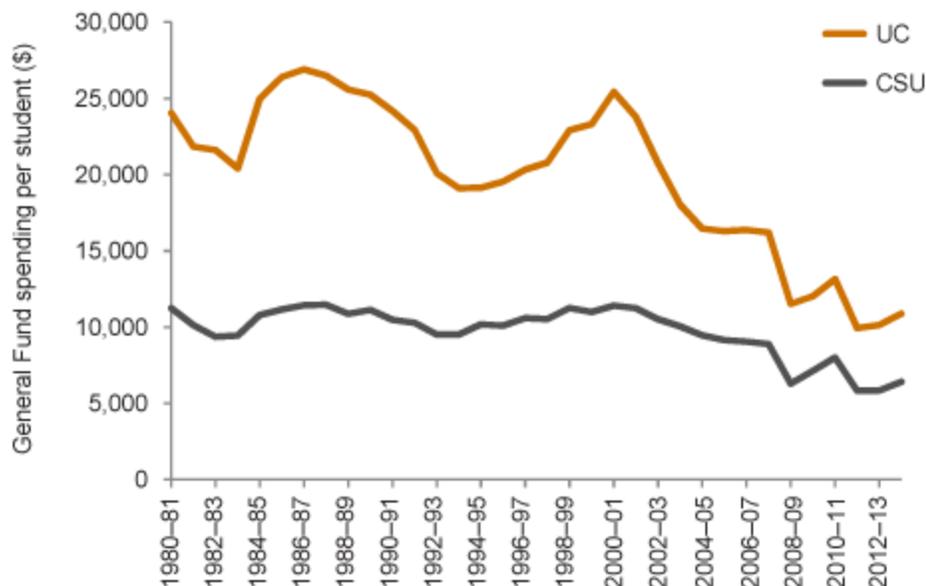
According to the California Public Policy Institute (PPIC), since California relies on Community Colleges as a point of entry into postsecondary education more than any other state, it was not acceptable that only 12 percent of community college students received their Associates Degrees in two years, and that only 29 percent graduate within 3 years. In addition, less than half of college students intending to transfer end up doing so, and only 4 percent do so in two years. There remains completion gaps among racial/ethnic groups at community colleges, with Asian and White students more likely to complete their studies than Latinos and African Americans was worrisome. SB 412 complements the efforts of AB 19 in creating a pathway toward four-year graduation. Apart from the Legislative intervention with the California Promise program, the CSUs are working on a new Graduation Initiative. They launched a follow-up to their recently completed Graduation Initiative in January 2017; the new program aims to close these graduation gaps while substantially increasing both four- and six-year graduation rates by 2025

Tuition Costs

Baldassare et al. (2017) argue that a key concern about the state's reliance on tuition to replace reductions in state funding is the impact on affordability. Californians are concerned about the cost of college and how much students must borrow to attend college. More than half (56%) of Californians think affordability is a big problem, and a vast majority of Californians (79%) think students are borrowing too much to pay for their college education (Baldassare, 2017). Reduced

state funding has left both the UC system and CSUs with three options: increasing tuition, finding additional funding, and cutting expenses (See Table 4). The institutions ended up increasing tuition and cutting expenses by restricting the growth of enrollment, among other measures. The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) adds that in 2002–03, state General Fund allocations made up 75 percent of all core revenues at UC and 79 percent at CSU; by 2012–13 the state share had fallen to 45 percent at UC and 50 percent at CSU. Between 2002 and 2012 the decline in state support has been mostly but not completely offset by increases in revenue from tuition increases.

The California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) concurs that as tuition rises across all segments of higher education, so do other related costs. With transportation costs, books, room and board, and other associated costs constituting more than half of the total cost of attending college, participation is negatively impacted. Currently at the UCs, the total cost of attendance averages over \$32,000 annually, with tuition and fees accounting for 42 percent of that total. However, at CSUs, the average total cost of attendance (\$14,840) is less than half of UC's—and tuition and fees represent only a third of costs. On the other hand, California's community colleges, tuition accounts for only 12 percent of the average \$10,150 cost of attending.

Table 4. SOURCE: California Budget Project, *From State to Student*.

The California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) argues that most costs of attending a community college are unrelated to tuition and more to living costs, transportation and fees. However, LAO also argues that during the last two decades, UC and CSU institutions have become increasingly reliant on tuition revenue, and college costs for students have risen significantly. While it is undeniably true that such conclusions might have come as a result of the inordinate tuition increases experienced during the 2007 - 2008 recession, today, yearly tuition and fees for in-state students total about \$14,000 at the University of California (UC) and \$7,000 at California State University (CSU). However, tuition at the California Community Colleges (CCC) is only about \$1,100 annually. The PPIC contends that for the state, tuition entails difficult trade-offs. Higher levels of tuition provide revenue to increase enrollment and improve the quality of educational programs and services, but it can come at the cost of affordability for

students. Keeping tuition low helps make college more affordable, but less tuition revenue could lead to reduced access or quality.

A 1996 report by the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) quoted in Heller (2001), indicates that a review of the performance indicators conducted on a school by school basis, reflected a continued pattern of differing outcomes for the various racial and ethnic groups in California schools. The groups underrepresented in higher education remain concentrated in the least performing schools with ratios indicating that out of every five students in these schools, four are either African American, American Indian or of Latino origin. Unfortunately, these are the same populations underrepresented at both the CSU and the UC campuses. Usually students from schools in this category are less likely to go to college, let alone more selective institutions. Heller (2001 pg. 93), contends that higher education opportunity is inextricably tied to the priorities and incentives (explicit and implicit) that affect government's support of students and institutions.

Methods

This study is limited to evaluating how the California Promise program has fared so far at 10 randomly selected California State Universities (CSU). Although no special criterion was used in the selection of campuses for investigation, proximate distance from Sacramento was a factor in determining which institutions to visit (see Figure 2). At each campus, the researcher conducted 30-40 minutes face-to-face interviews with Admissions Directors /Senior Staff directly involved with the Promise Program and randomly picked program participants. Although initially scheduled to interview at least one respondent per campus (especially Program Directors, Admissions Directors or Academic Advisors), at times to get a full picture of the program at

particular campus, more than 1 people had to interviewed. At Sacramento State - 2 respondents (the Program Director and 1 Senior Academic Advisor), Chico State – 3 respondents (Program Coordinator and 2 participants, San Jose State – 2 (Academic Advisor and 1 participant), San Francisco State – 3 (Academic Advisor and 2 participants), Bakersfield State – 1 (Program Coordinator), Channel Islands State -2 (Academic Advisor and Admissions Counselor), Sonoma State - 2 (Program Director and 1 Academic Advisor), Northridge State – 1 (Senior Admissions Counselor), Long Beach State – 1 (Program Director) and San Diego State – 3 (Admissions Director and 2 program participants). In all, the researcher interviewed 20 respondents. As a guide to the interviews, a set of similarly phrased semi-structured questions (for purposes of consistency), targeting different categories of respondents based on their designations were administered (see Appendix A).

The advantage of using semi-structured interviews is that the interviewer remains in control of the process of obtaining information from the respondents but is free to follow new leads as they arise (Bernard, 1998). It is the author’s assumption that the findings at these ten institutions would to a considerable degree, when generalized, represent what is happening at other CSU campuses in California. During this investigation, the author’s evaluation of the program was based on the information gathered during interviews, undergraduate admissions records, and retention rates between 2017 and 2019 when the Promise program started.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Sacramento State University | 6. Sonoma State |
| 2. Long Beach State | 7. Chico State |
| 3. Northridge State | 8. San Francisco State |
| 4. Channel Islands State | 9. San Jose State |
| 5. San Diego State | 10. Bakersfield State |

Figure 2 California State Universities included in the Study

Findings

Several themes related to the goals of the Promise Program emerged during the interviews including issues with institutional autonomy, benchmarks for minority numbers, funding, student retention, and community outreach and partnerships.

Prescribed Eligibility Guidelines vs. Institutional Autonomy

Before each interview, the researcher reminded the respondents about the goals and provisions of Senate Bill 412. Within the provisions of the bill are prescribed student eligibility guidelines to be used by each host campus in recruiting Promise program participants. Asked about program organization and whether they are following the explicit guidelines provided by the bill, 7 out of 10 (70 percent) of the respondents acknowledged so and the remaining 30 percent confessed to integrating the new program into preexisting in-house programs with similar goals. These pre-existing programs were inhouse arrangements adopted in the aftermath of affirmative action to serve the same goals as the California Promise program.

However, two critics of the program; one from San Jose State and another from San Diego State University candidly articulated their concerns. The first one was concerned with the preservation of institutional autonomy from state intervention and the second critic preferred policy formations that emanated from within the institution, not those imposed by external stakeholders. Another sentiment was that enough was being done already to help the underrepresented communities. Campus after campus, a range of questions and comments were made and these included, “Why not improve on the existing programs than start something new? Why don’t current lawmakers respect the sovereignty of higher education’s admissions procedures? Is this another veiled attempt to introduce race-based admissions after Proposition 209 banned such an approach? What is government going to do next? We are tired, by now

everybody should be on their feet. No clutches anymore. One Academic Advisor commented, “If we were not a more diverse institution, I doubt we would be getting any funding at all in a place like California, where everything is about political correctness.” Another respondent commented that, “The California Master Plan for higher Education sets the eligibility already, what’s wrong with it now?” All were valid questions. However, 80 percent of the respondents validated the concerns of the legislature and shared their optimism and willingness to accept the shared vision of expanded college participation.

Program Organization

Travelling from one CSU campus to another, the researcher learned to appreciate the importance of good information management systems. It was unbelievable that for whatever reason, four out of ten campuses did not have designated Promise Program Coordinators, or anybody acting as a resource person for the program. While in most cases Academic Advisors stepped up and were eager to answer some of the questions, the daunting task remained that of chasing after student records scattered across departments and trying to pry meaningful information out of the ever-busy department heads. Without the semblance of order that only comes with proper information management systems, the overall picture of the Promise programs at such institutions remained hazy and ill-defined.

Despite setting appointments and faxing lists of questions ahead of time, some respondents could just not provide any specifics to certain questions. Excuses ranged from, “I cannot answer that question.... I need to refer you to....I am not sure..., I don’t have that information with me right now... Head of departments have that information...to...we need to update our records first before we can tell you....” Such were the evasive responses the author frequently received from some of the respondents. It was excuse after excuse. Those who were ill-prepared for the

interviews mostly sought refuge in generalizations and were quick to make referrals. At times it was just hard to catch the right person in the office or get the right answers in an interview. Some respondents seemed uncomfortable to answer certain questions, especially questions on funding. However, in a few cases, respondents were ready to have you sit down and prove themselves. One memorable incident was when a visibly frustrated Academic Advisor retorted, “There is no Promise program Coordinator here, anything you want to know, please go to the Head of departments.”

Benchmarks for Minority Numbers

Apart from providing what the SB 412 demands, none of the campuses has set any other goals or benchmarks for the numbers of underrepresented students entering the program. Responding to that question, one Admissions Counselor quipped, “At this campus, there is no need to benchmark or set target numbers for any group - the Promise program is putting almost everybody on priority registration.” Another respondent chimed, “We have enough of those benchmarks already We need to concentrate on the other students.... Although equally special, these students seem to be getting too much attention lately...these kids have the same drive , the same everything as the others and we are crippling them” Understandably so, most of the respondents felt that it was not necessary, given that the enrollment guidelines explicitly favor minorities. Their argument was that as long as they stick to the prescribed eligibility guidelines, they wouldn’t go wrong. The programs would capture the desired populations.

Funding

Despite the promised appropriations, respondents across the ten campuses were skeptical about the consistency of state funding in the face of increased demand for support services and additional infrastructure. Four out of ten campuses already claim that the new program is putting

a strain on the meager resources at their institutions. As much as institutions desired to identify and provide the much-needed differential support to individual students coming from underserved communities, lack of funding was already becoming a hurdle.

It sounded familiar to hear a Promise Program Coordinator saying, “With the little state funding we are getting, where the hell does the state think we get the money from? If this program is another ploy, then we will do what we have to do to survive. If appropriations decrease, or increase we respond accordingly.” Another Admissions Director commented; “We can’t help it. Until the external conditions causing tuition inflation are corrected, little can be expected to change. High tuition fees remain inevitable.” Three participants interviewed said that they opted to stay out of campus because boarding facilities were too expensive. One participant commented that, “People always talk about tuition ...and yet they forget we pay a lot more... Besides room and boarding, we pay athletics fee, technology fees, textbooks and other little things as students.Do you work for Congress? Tell them....they are punishing us ...we cannot have fun because everything is expensive for us. Everything is contingent upon funding. Although respondents from all the CSU campuses claim to be doing their best to integrate the Promise Program into pre-existing structures, they argued that not everything could be accommodated. For example, to meet the desired counseling and academic advising regimens, staff numbers need to be scaled up and, in some cases, additional structures need to be erected.

Student Retention Rate

On a positive note, seven out of ten CSU campuses boasted of good student retention rates, with San Francisco State at 100 percent. Although not statistically very significant, there were three institutions with poor student retention rate, namely San Jose, Chico and Bakersfield. A notable moment was when the researcher asked whether a poor student retention rate wasn’t a reflection

of inadequate or poor academic advisement, to which the Academic Advisor quickly retorted, “Believe me, we are doing our best, it’s just that nobody takes free things seriously.” These campuses’ contention was that students with low GPA, or those who switched majors should be placed on academic probation rather than face expulsion. However, participants should seize and utilize this opportunity productively. Understandably so, the issue turned out to be a major bone of contention with the few participants the researcher chatted with on the sidelines after major interviews. One participant commented, “ Our whole lives are consumed by this program...they tell us when to do this when to do that ...the program is too regimented. Academic Advising is even mandatory here... they throw you out if you don’t do it....It’s like you are in a boot camp. But it’s good they pay for us.

Asked about meeting the required GPA to stay in the program, only two participants felt it was the student’s responsibility to maintain the required GPA, or risk being withdrawn from the program. The rest of the participants wanted it easy, they made a variety of comments including, “In this program we live on borrowed time...there is no second chance. We deserve to be put on probation, not to be thrown out...they forget that we young and we need to have fun... Isn’t it a waste to throw somebody out of the program after they have come this far?” However, it was encouraging to learn that two out ten campuses have already amended the policy and put such students on probation, six were considering doing so, and two were still not decided on the matter.

Community Outreach and Partnerships

All the respondents cited several Community Outreach programs their campuses are engaged with. Respondents cited how their respective institutions have developed, implemented, and administered hundreds of outreach programs serving K-12 and community college students. In

addition, CSU campuses are increasing college opportunity awareness by reaching out to future students in their neighborhoods, churches, homes, and communities. Most respondents talked of partnerships between youth leaders and the K–12 system administrators and the deliberate targeting of underserved student communities to make them realize that the possibility of attending college is within their reach. However, asked about community outreach, one respondent avoided specifics and said, “We have had enough outreach and believe that those willing to go to college have heard our call. If you want more details, I can refer you” This was a common response the researcher always got when respondents were not prepared enough for the interview.

Some respondents cited how their campuses were using different languages including Spanish, English, Chinese, Korean, Hmong, Khmer, Vietnamese in their "How to Get to College" posters. These informative posters are then distributed to middle and high schools. In addition, although the researcher encountered many versions of the California Promise program and other inhouse support services for vulnerable student populations, none was more striking than the dynamic partnership between the California Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach City College, California State University and the Long Beach Port Industries.

Established on a solid foundation of Seamless Educational Initiatives back in 1994, the Long Beach partnership is akin to the Ohio and Kentucky states initiatives that were established to provide support to community and technical colleges in their efforts to create career pathways to mature students in school. However, in both states many community colleges participate in these initiatives whose goals are to strengthen relationships between community and technical colleges and outside entities including the labor market.

Similarly, CSU Long Beach (CSULB) in partnership with the City of Long Beach, Long Beach Foundation, the Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network, and other players in the labor market including the Pacific Gateway, Long Beach City's federally funded Workforce Development Bureau, established a program aimed at bridging the gap between local talent and local career opportunities. A million dollars has been set aside for CSULB in consultation with the College of Professional and International Education (CPIE) to open downtown classrooms that offer classes in project management, cybersecurity, social work, and other innovative areas of study. More funding shall be earmarked for the project.

Promise Program Implementation

There seems to be as many variations of the Promise program as there are CSU campuses in California. In some cases, these program variations extend to enrollment guidelines, program design, and implementation. However, to comply with the new statutory requirements, campuses either incorporated the new guidelines into preexisting programs or adopted the new eligibility guidelines exclusively. Sixty percent of the campuses opted to start the program with Associate Degree transfer students as they are mature, more focused and less susceptible to switching majors or failing to meet their academic obligations than the freshman.

Out of caution, early adopters of the program piloted it with Associate degree transfer (ADT) students only, before opening the program to freshman cohorts. For example, graduating in the Spring of 2019, are CSU San Francisco's 509 ADTs and Sonoma State's 215 ADTs. Chico State opened the program with both ADTs and freshman but limited the program to four majors only. However, CSU Sacramento and Bakersfield State universities boldly hosted both ADTs and four-year pledgers from the program's point of inception. Currently Sacramento State boasts of 4,200 students already in the system and anticipates another 2,700 to come on board in

the Fall of 2019. While Sacramento State is still to hold its first graduation in May 2019, Bakersfield State had its first 21 ADT graduates in 2018 and Bakersfield has 33 ADTs due for graduation in May of 2019. San Francisco and Long Beach State universities have the most ADTs compared with other institutions.

One of the Academic Advisors told the researcher that at their campus, they do things their own way. Higher Education institutions function well when given the leverage to solve their own problems. Universities should have the respect and trust of the policymakers as well as the general public. Although the California Promise programs differ in many ways, they do subscribe to the same goals of widening college access, making higher education more affordable and addressing gaps in college attendance by race and socioeconomic status. However, because most of these programs are too new and at different stages of the implementation phase, they have not yet yielded much of the desired results. Although the provisions of SB412 do provide a substantive information baseline for evaluation, the variations among the programs make it hard to generalize any findings including the program's impact to higher education at this juncture

Conclusion

With a skills gap looming on the horizon, and college access remaining uneven due to high tuition costs, the best course of action for California was to lift the underutilized dividend of underrepresented students by widening college access and increasing graduation rates. Efforts to widen college access for underrepresented communities whose economic circumstances preclude their participation in higher education can be increased, but the bigger challenge is that of ensuring that enrolled students stay in school until they graduate. Simply eliminating financial barriers to college access will not suffice. Without increased resource allocation for community

outreach, not only are students from low-income backgrounds less likely to enroll, but if they do, disproportionately need remedial help. The concept of opportunity does not end with access, or the opportunity to enroll, but it encompasses much more than that. Without deliberate improvements in the learning process and attainment levels, opportunity and access become hollow gestures. Students need the opportunity to achieve their educational goals, not simply the opportunity to enroll. It is therefore critical to realize that any targeted educational outcomes such as those of the Promise program need to recognize and attend to the problems for which they were established.

On the other hand, if the current momentum about the Promise Program continues, one of the unintended consequences of the program is that high student participation levels in the program has the potential to syphon resources and attention from students outside the program, thereby jeopardizing their chances of success. While campuses are preoccupied with the recruitment of new students, expanding advising, priority registration, and standardizing requirements across majors, they should not forget that students outside the program deserve an equal measure of attention and resources. Such ineptitude would be tantamount to shooting oneself in the foot.

Although some of the respondents interviewed did not provide definitive responses to some of the questions, the researcher conceded that the California Promise program has real utility. However, any valid evaluation of the program must contemplate on and provide enough room for the many situational and contextual variations in the various programs. Based on the interviews conducted with the various respondents, more than 70 percent of Promise Program participants at any of the 10 institutions investigated were drawn from underserved communities with a sizable number being first generation college students in their families. This amply

demonstrates that the Promise Program is undoubtedly contributing to more diverse higher education institutions in California. In addition, if retention rates are a good indicator of student progress towards graduation, of the ten institutions visited by the researcher, only three had poor retention rates. Overall, early outcomes from a few campuses provide grounds for optimism. It is, therefore, arguably true that the California Promise program contributes to both student success and diverse institutions.

Policy Recommendations

While it is understandable that program design is influenced by availability of resources, it would benefit low-income students more if the California Promise Program adopted the first dollar approach. Since college related costs claim more than half of the tuition costs, Promise programs using the first-dollar design apply scholarship dollars to the tuition first, before federal and state grant aid. Low-income students can then use need-based state and federal grant aid to cover any remaining tuition or fees (if they were not eligible for 100 percent of the scholarship) or for living expenses, books, transportation, and other educational supplies. Under the first-dollar design, low-income students receive more money than they would have otherwise received. As it is now, low-income students do not get much money from the last-dollar approach because most expenses are already covered by Pell Grants and other Funds. As a result, the Promise program tends to subsidize middle- or high-income students because they are not eligible for federal and/or state grant aid.

Funding for the program should be secure and long term to avoid program changes that create uncertainty and discourage participation. Instead of cutting aid to low-income students in private institutions, the state should increase aid given these private institutions' high four-year completion rates. Since students who enter college unprepared often take remedial courses,

making use of Summer bridge programs will inspire and give confidence to entering freshmen needing any remediation. Academically prepared students are much more likely to graduate. It would be beneficial for the CSU system to review and adopt strategies that shorten the time it takes to graduate and work towards increasing the number of transfers from community colleges. How about linking funding to student outcomes as an incentive to institutions? State funding should be tied to measures of student outcomes such dropout/retention rates, transfer and program completion rates.

Instead of concentrating on institution-level integration and internal reforms, the California higher education sector should establish a career pathways model that builds bridges between academic and technical colleges and the main industrial players in the local economy. Colleges and CSUs should work closely with the local labor market in identifying trades that provide immediate employment and long-term career trajectories for their graduates. Only the public policy of opportunity for all, not exclusionary policies can close opportunity gaps in higher education. In the absence of institutional commitment to reduce tuition costs, externally imposed cost reduction measures by the state of California should be instituted.

For easy access of information by daily users and visitors, there should be a stipulation demanding host campuses to designate a fulltime Promise program Coordinator who becomes the Contact Person in any matters related to the program at each campus. That way, student data can easily be drawn, aggregated, reorganized, updated, and analyzed for use by daily users and visitors.

Given that higher education receives a lot attention from politicians, to earn more broad-based political support and become less susceptible to political changes, the Promise Program should shift to universal eligibility rather than the current exclusionary approach. Exclusionary

policies tend to divide the nation e.g. affirmative action policy. What happens when the Promise Program overcompensates? Just as the SCPD framework suggests, the use of public policy by policy-makers to advance, legitimate, extend or carve distinctive populations some of whom are extolled as deserving and entitled, while others are socially constructed as undeserving and ineligible only leads to what the Promise program is trying to correct.

Unless challenged by social movements or countervailing public policies, social constructions of deservedness and entitlement can lead to path dependence (Ingram and Schneider, 2005). What the Promise Program is fighting today are the enduring effects of policies used as a primary tool with which to prop up or undercut certain populations.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you describe how your Promise Program is organized in general?
2. What criteria does your university use to determine eligibility?
3. Does your university have any Promise Program goals/benchmarks for the number of historically underrepresented students?
4. What has been the impact of your university's Promise Program on students (e.g. graduation rates, placement rates, matriculation to degrees)?
5. What has been the impact of your university's Promise Program on your institution (e.g. diversity of students, financial impact etc.?).
6. Does your university have special academic advising /tutoring resources available for Promise students?
7. Have there been any unintended consequences of program design? Have you changed any aspects of program design since implementation? If so, can you explain these?