

Evaluation of Lake Tahoe College Promise Program

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I never really thought I'd go the college route. It [the Promise Program] just gets rid of the financial stress because now you [know] that they're paying for your tuition, so now, I ... just really focus on classes."

Current Promise Scholar (Male, FirstGen, Latinx, Fall 2021 Cohort)

Overview

Students tend to decide whether to pursue a college education by weighing the cost of college, an assessment of their ability to pay in the present, and perceived benefits after graduation (Perna, 2006). This calculation is hardest for students from historically underserved backgrounds as they and their families may have incomplete knowledge about the net cost of college or of benefits post completion (e.g. expanded career options and higher salaries). Incomplete knowledge serves as a barrier to accessing a college education. A low-cost (or almost free) education can take the guesswork out of the student's calculation to pursue college. While Promise programs are part of the "Free College" movement, there is no singular college Promise model and these programs vary significantly in how they support participating students (Millet, Saunders, Kanter & Hiestand, 2020). In some instances, colleges may offer financial aid alongside robust non-financial supports including intensive advising, career services, special first-year experiences courses, and requires that students attend school full-time (Dynarski, Nurshatayeva & Scott-Clayton, 2022). Promise programs also vary in length, anywhere from one semester to three years (Rauner & Smith, 2020) and in funding models. Monies for programs come from private, state, and federal sources and in some cases are supplemented by college foundations. This assortment of funds reflects the uniqueness of each program and the students they serve (Billings, Gándara & Li, 2021).

In 2021, Lake Tahoe Community College contracted with UC Davis' Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research to evaluate the Lake Tahoe College Promise Program. The goal of the evaluation was to provide insights into: (1) how well the Promise Program has worked and is working for students, (2) students' experiences with the various components of the program, and (3) where program elements can be strengthened. This report presents the results of a comprehensive mixed methods evaluation of the program. We provide insights into student outcomes and students' experiences with the various components of the LTCC College Promise Program based on:

- Administrative data for all first-time students enrolling between Fall 2018 and 2022 and student exit reasons for the 2019 Cohort
- 15 interviews with current scholars and alumni of the program, and interviews with college administrators and staff as well counselors from partnering high schools

This evaluation is framed around three general areas: (1) program design, delivery, and coordination, (2) student participation in the program, and (3) student experiences and outcomes.

First, this report presents an overview of the program's design and components. Second, we describe the methodology of this evaluation, including both the qualitative and quantitative components and describe participation in the program. Next, we provide insights into student experiences of the program and capture both quantitatively through analysis of administrative data and qualitatively through student voice. We also share findings of a qualitative inquiry to better understand which Promise Program components are most helpful to students and which could be improved.

Finally, we provide LTCC with ideas for their consideration to help build greater efficiencies with their current human and financial resources to create additional opportunities for Promise staff to get to know students and anticipate their needs in order to minimize students leaving the program before completion.

Program Design, Delivery, and Coordination

The LTCC College Promise Program is modeled after the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program and Skyline College's Promise Program. Since 2007, CUNY's ASAP program has offered associate degree-seeking and financially-eligible student tuition and fee gap scholarships resulting in free college tuition, in addition to assistance with transportation (i.e., unlimited New York City MTA MetroCards) and financial assistance that greatly reduces (or eliminates) textbook costs (CUNY, n.d.a). ASAP students are required to attend full-time and also receive comprehensive and personalized advising that helps them navigate personal, social, and academic support, ultimately strategically guiding students through their college experience, plans for the future, and any challenges that may arise (CUNY, n.d.b).

Lake Tahoe's Promise Program design, implementation, and funding moves away from an enrollment strategy and towards centering student completion among a demographically diversifying student body. In 2018, LTCC received a replication grant from Skyline College to explore multi-year success programs modeled after CUNY's ASAP. Concurrently, exposure to CUNY's comprehensive support program solidified the College's decision to implement and repurpose external funding (i.e., fundraising by the college's foundation) to supplement general fund investments in personnel and State funds (e.g., California College Promise Grant- formerly the Board of Governors fee waiver).

LTCC's College Promise Program provides eligible first-time degree-seeking college students with three years of guaranteed tuition along with other financial support. All first-time¹ students are potentially eligible for LTCC's Promise Program, as long as they are California residents or Nevada residents in the Tahoe Basin, and able to attend at least some courses on campus. To participate, students are then required to enroll full-time in 12 or more units and complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA). Additional financial supports include free bus passes, bookstore gift cards, and priority access to textbooks within a lending library. In addition to financial support, the program also structures students' transition into the college with first-year experience courses, a cohort model, regular meetings with designated Promise Counselors, and requires students to have a comprehensive education plan and enroll full-time. LTCC markets the program to the community at large (via billboards, TV, and radio) and within the high schools. LTCC currently works closely with high school counselors (at South Lake Tahoe High School and Mt. Tallac High School within California) and begins marketing the program via informational sessions on high school campuses to students as early as the 11th grade.

¹ First-time is defined as initial enrollment in the College. High school students participating in dual enrollment programs (special admits) are excluded.

Methodology

In this evaluation, we employ a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the following research questions:

1. How do the outcomes of LTCC Promise students compare to students who do not participate?
2. How do LTCC students, alumni, and staff experience the program?
3. How do students perceive the first-year experience course?

The data for this paper include both administrative data and qualitative interview data. Quantitative data for this project is comprised of student level administrative data from LTCC on enrollment, demographics, financial aid, degree attainment, and four-year transfer. These data were provided for all students who initially enrolled in the Promise Program, in addition to all first-time students enrolling between Fall 2019 and Spring 2022. For this analysis, we use three main comparison groups:

1. First-time part-time students (6–11.9 units in the first term) who did not participate in Promise
2. First-time full-time students (12+ units in the first term) who did not participate in Promise
3. Students who enter the Promise Program

Qualitative sources of data included interviews with key college administrators, college staff, and students (current and alumni) and administrative data documenting student exit reasons during the pandemic. We interviewed 15 current students and former alumni who have successfully navigated the Promise Program. Table B1 shows the largest share of students interviewed were White (47%), followed by Latinx/Hispanic (40%), and 13% are mixed race. Four of the fifteen participants (27%) are Pell Grant recipients and 13% of the students are first-generation college students.

Because the sample does not include students who exited the program without completing the requirements, these findings are not representative of all students who have participated in the Promise Program. But they provide important insights into how students experience the Program and what can be improved. Our original evaluation plan included interviews with students who had left the program without finishing their studies. Several attempts were made to reach these students but they were unresponsive to our recruitment efforts (via email and texts). Instead, we analyzed data compiled by the initial Promise Director, that captured the reasons students in the 2019 Cohort left the program before completing their studies.

In addition to our interviews with students, we also conducted a round of qualitative implementation research. This included interviews with program staff and two high school counselors. The goal of the interviews was to broadly assess how the program is implemented and to identify general areas for deeper inquiry by Lake Tahoe Community College that account for the evolving landscape created by the pandemic. We include a more in-depth description of our research methods in Appendix A: Data and Research Methods.

Findings

Participation in the Program

Table C1 shows that between Fall 2019 and Winter 2022, 1,306 students enrolled at LTCC for the first-time, and 553 students (42%) enrolled full-time in 12 or more units. Of these full-time students, 284 (51%) entered the Promise Program and 269 students (49%) did not. In general, the Promise student population was more Latinx and less White compared to the full population of first-time LTCC students. Promise and first-time full-time students were also younger than the overall first-time student population. The average age of Promise students at time of entry was only 19.1, compared to 21.4 for first-time full-time students. Only 30% of first-time students enrolling full-time are former special admits- enrolling at LTCC as high school students before entering as first-time students. But 65% of all Promise students participated in dual enrollment while in high school, which likely gave these students a preview of life at LTCC.

Of these non-Promise students enrolling full-time in their first term, almost half submitted the FAFSA- ostensibly already fulfilling two of the main Promise requirements for full-time enrollment and FAFSA submission. Furthermore, only 49% of non-Promise first-time full-time students received the California College Promise Grant (formerly the Board of Governors fee waiver). The students not receiving the CCPG fee waiver are likely paying for fees out of pocket- which at \$31 per quarter unit, totals over \$372 for full-time enrollment each term.

These fees would be covered in full if the student participated in the Promise program. This lack of participation among students meeting the requirements for the Promise program presents an opportunity to recruit additional students to the program.

Student Experience and Outcomes

Finding 1: Promise students do well in the short-term.

Promise students are required to enroll full-time (defined as 12 or units), but the majority (57% for all cohorts and 64% of the Fall 2019 cohort) actually enrolled in 15 or more units in their first term (Table C2). In comparison, among the first-time full-time students not enrolled in Promise, 73% enrolled in 12-14.9 units- meeting the definition of full-time according to financial aid eligibility but not reaching the threshold for normal time-to-degree of 15 units a quarter. Despite Promise students taking more classes, they passed the courses at better rates than full-time non-Promise students, on average completing 82% of all units attempted in their first term, compared to 74% for full-time non-Promise students. This finding mitigates concerns that a higher unit load might lead to Promise students not succeeding at the same rate.

Promise students also showed high persistence rates; 89% enrolled in the second term (e.g., Winter quarter for a student first entering in Fall), compared to 57% of first-time full-time non-Promise students and only 31% of all first-time students who initially enrolled part-time. By the end of their first year, Promise students had earned over 29 total units, compared to only 21 units for first-time full-time students not in Promise and nine units for non-Promise students who initially enrolled part-time.

Finding 2: Current students and alumni show high levels of satisfaction with the Promise program.

“I think the program has done [an] immense job at...helping students, you know, who financially struggle and realize their potential to achieve their education.”

– Nate, current student, entering cohort of Fall of 2020

Interviews with current and alumni scholars revealed high levels of satisfaction with the financial, social, and academic support of the program. Students and alumni described how financial supports reduce their stress, how the College’s learning environment is supportive as stemming from high social connectedness, and how academic (non-financial) supports such as counseling, educational plans, and priority registration help them build confidence.

Financial Support Reduces Stress

When asked if students could only keep one of the benefits of the program, most students cited free tuition. Students associated tuition savings with lowering their financial stress and tempering their doubts about the value of a college degree and fears of student loan debt. Students expressed worry over the cost of a college education (e.g. tuition, housing, food, textbooks, and transportation) and they saw their participation in the Promise Program as a means towards delaying and accruing less debt for the first two years of college when they are also uncertain of their career path, enabling them to explore their interests in a low-stakes manner. Some students were also able to save money on housing by living with parents. The Promise Program’s textbook lending library and quarterly bookstore credit also helped defray costs associated with textbooks and school supplies.

Similarly first-generation college students shared feeling less stressed by the financial support but they also described how their decision to attend college resulted from their access to the Promise Program. Miles, a first-generation college student states “I never really thought I’d go the college route” adding that the support offered by the program “just gets rid of the financial stress, because now you [know] that they’re paying for your tuition so now, I...just really focus on classes.”

High Social Connectedness, Support, and Expectations

From a social and academic standpoint, students describe the College’s overall learning environment as having a culture of caring. Students described small classes that lend themselves to personalized attention and support from professors. Students often described LTCC as welcoming, “like a family” with high levels of social connectedness between students, staff, and faculty. Samantha, an alum, describes her experience as a Promise Scholar, “They made you feel like you were very important. Everything I did, every teacher I had, they made me feel like, no matter what everyone is going through, I was still special.” Students described their LTCC experience as an opportunity to learn and practice how to be a college student. Students shared learning time management skills and how to ask questions and help from faculty. Learning how to communicate with faculty was especially helpful for students who felt intimidated by attending a 4-year university after high school.

These social, academic, and financial benefits were more pronounced among students who felt underprepared for postsecondary studies, whether they attended college directly after high school or after taking time to work. Students saw the Promise Program as a second chance to access a college education in a low-stakes manner (i.e., without debt) and for some to prepare, both academically and financially, for a transfer pathway to a 4-year university.

Academic (Non-Financial) Supports Build Confidence

Equally important compared to free tuition, students and alumni view required meetings with counselors and their educational plans as a resource that gives them peace of mind and confidence that their chosen path is in line with their developing learning interests. Counselors help students strategically choose transferable classes that match the requirements of majors and universities of their interest. Counselors also help students build manageable course loads that account for non-academic demands (e.g., family or work) on their time and energy. The combination of education plans and priority registration helps students feel they are not wasting time taking (and paying) for classes they do not need. For example, Jocelyn, a College Promise student highlights the importance of having a counselor guiding her college experience stating, “The counselor I had ... was great ... really took me, step by step, and really sat me down and said Okay, so your plan you’re wanting to graduate in two years, and I said yeah that would be the plan.”

In addition to sharing similar sentiments around confidence, first-generation college students also reported that access to counseling and support around the development of educational plans enabled them to have new visions of themselves and their future which implies that first-generation college students draw a greater benefit and value from counseling and their educational plans. The required counseling sessions also seem to help first-generation college students develop self-efficacy and other help-seeking behaviors as their counselors (along with other Promise staff and navigators) serve as accountability partners, reliable and timely sources of support when they need it.

Students also associated the Promise Program with the qualities of a one-stop resource center that helped them navigate challenges related to school and financial aid in a timely manner. If program staff or Promise Navigator could not answer their questions, they were connected to campus resources that could help. Students also described support from Promise Navigators and program staff as proactive. For example, during the pandemic some students described outreach efforts by staff and navigators to let students know they were available to help and provide resources and guidance. These interactions provided students with the personal connections many cite as a key component to their success during this time.

Finding 3: Many Promise students left before completing a degree or transfer.

For longer-term outcomes, we focus on the Fall 2019 cohort, which was the first Promise cohort to have three years to earn a degree or transfer (Table C3). Forty-two percent of Promise students left LTCC in their first year without earning a degree or transferring to a four-year institution. But this is lower than the 50% exit rate for first-time full-time students not in the Promise Program and 72% exit rate for non-Promise who initially enrolled part-time. But by the end of Year 2, 64% of Promise students and 62% of full-time non-Promise students were no longer enrolled. But for degree attainment, twice as many Promise students (25%) earned an associate degree within 3 years compared to full-time students not in Promise (12%).

It is important to note that this time period was also the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with mandatory shelter-in-place orders and lockdowns during the students’ first year at LTCC. Our analysis of the qualitative data about student exit reveals that the pandemic was a key reason students left the Program. It affected students academically in their ability to connect with campus resources, navigate the transition to an online teaching modality, or mental health or medical challenges triggered by the pandemic. For example, student records documenting exit reasons capture student choices to defer their studies due to campus closures, their dislike or unpreparedness for online teaching modalities, mental health or medical challenges due to illness.

Other common reasons students left the program include:

1. **Academic challenges:** This term captures students who struggled and failed classes and did not meet the program's requirements around satisfactory academic progress. The reference to failed course work was often accompanied by notes documenting that the student needed to retake courses, had received a financial aid warning or that their financial aid had been terminated.
2. **Excused withdrawals:** During the pandemic, students who expressed struggling with their studies were often given an excused withdrawal as a way to emotionally support students. Prior to the pandemic, excused withdrawals would have been used sparingly. The liberal use of these withdrawals led to numerous students disconnecting from college.
3. **Financial aid:** The term captures instances in which students were warned of their financial aid being terminated due to low academic performance, timing out of the program, or not completing a financial aid requirement such as completing their FAFSA.
4. **Work:** This term was used to document when students struggled to balance their employment off campus with their studies.
5. **Family challenges:** This category captures students who struggled academically due to a familial situation that made it difficult for students to attend class and succeed in school. Among the reasons noted were illnesses of family members, the need to care for elderly family members, the responsibility of older siblings to care for younger siblings, a lack of parental support for higher education, or a need for students to work to support families financially.
6. **Tutoring challenges:** Students in this category needed assistance with specific class materials such as math, diagnosing a learning disability and securing special accommodations, or help with classes in general due to English language proficiency.
7. **Housing:** This category captured students who experienced housing insecurity due to income and housing affordability issues in the Lake Tahoe area.

In many instances, student records conveyed that students struggled with multiple issues. While the notes do not provide insights into which of these reasons ultimately caused the student to stop out, it is likely that students experienced a challenge early in their studies that went unaddressed which caused the student to struggle academically thus increasingly placing the student at risk of losing their financial aid and exiting the program. Conversely, some students may have started their studies with financial vulnerabilities (such as food or housing insecurity or juggling multiple jobs and school) and this may have caused them to deprioritize their studies making it harder for them to complete their school work or secure tutoring, and thus failing their classes.

Areas for Improvement

As part of our inquiry to understand student and alumni experience with the various components of the program, we asked interviewees to share what parts of the program could be improved. Interview participants expressed lacking a clear understanding of the various program components and benefits (especially the bookstore credit), mixed views regarding the full-time enrollment and mandatory events, and a desire for added counseling support (both mental health and career counseling).

Finding 4. There is a lack of clarity about program components.

Both current students and alumni of the program expressed unfamiliarity with the various components that make up the Promise Program at LTCC- especially around how to use the bookstore credit provided to students every quarter. For instance, a student shared “I didn’t know, we had like money in the bookstore, but I didn’t know how to, I still don’t know how to use it”. Although some students know the credit is available, many do not have a full understanding whether the credit is attached to their student identification, if their identification can be used as payment at the bookstore, and are also unclear if items such as food or drinks are included as part of the credit.

Finding 5: Students expressed mixed views regarding full-time enrollment and mandatory events.

Students have mixed views regarding a desire for greater flexibility around the requirement of full-time enrollment and mandatory events which aim to help students build community with other Promise scholars. Some students view the full-time enrollment requirement as a motivator to take a full class load which helps them stay on track to graduate in two or three years. For example, Kathy, a member of the 2019 cohort, credits the requirement with “Making sure that I was on the right track to graduate ... this is my goal that I need to be out of here within two years”. Nate, a student in the 2020 cohort, was among those that credited the requirement with helping them develop time management skills stating, “if I was able to do part-time I would not be building my educational time management skills”. Students who described the requirement as a stressor, noted that life outside of school (e.g. work, family commitments) could preclude them from taking a full load which could lead to dismissal from a program. Relatedly, some students thought the full-time requirement may also be a cause for some of the more financially stressed students to self-select out of participating in the program. Even though the full-time requirement is mandatory, there are often creative ways, unbeknownst to students, to structure class loads in ways that would allow some students to work and attend college. This lack of knowledge may lead some students, especially first-generation and students of color, to opt out of the program as they and their families are less likely to advocate for alternative ways of navigating the full-time requirement.

Students had similarly mixed views regarding mandatory Promise events geared towards helping students build community. For the most part, students viewed the events as helpful and a welcomed incentive to participate citing the events helped them come out of their shell and made college less intimidating. For instance, Robert credits mandatory events with forcing him “to be a bit more sociable than [he] usually [is]”. Some students like Ella, an alum from the 2018 cohort, desire more events in the first year of the program to help them meet Promise staff and navigators. These students described receiving a multitude of emails and that events would really help in “putting a face to the names in the emails”. Students who took time between high school and college to work found the events least helpful as they shared being more independent in their ability to connect with others or they simply could not attend because of prior commitments (e.g. work and/or family obligations).

Finding 6: Students desire more mental and career counseling support.

Students desire greater flexibility and expansion around counseling topics and services beyond academics. Promise scholars highly value resources that support their academic progress such as development of educational plans with help from their Promise counselor. However, students described needing “having more mental health support” to help them navigate balancing cultural, identity, and family transitions alongside new college demands. The desire for mental health resources was more acute among students of color who transitioned directly from high school to LTCC. Related to the financial stressors of college debt, Promise scholars are also interested in learning more about career paths that match their educational interests and are financially viable. In March 2021, LTCC expanded its counseling services to include a new career counselor. LTCC also added TimelyCare, a free 24/7 mental health provider that focuses on supporting students to ensure they can thrive in school and in life. Last year, LTCC also added a new career counselor to help bridge academic studies with career options and began providing free and expanded mental health support through TimelyCare.

Finding 7: There is an opportunity to improve student connections in counseling and in the first-year experience course.

Interviews with Promise staff led us to believe the first-year experience course heavily focuses on the mechanics of college and provides a lot of information quickly over the course of a quarter. Interviews with current and alumni students corroborated this assessment. Several students described the class as helpful but also as repetitive and lacking engaging and interactive activities. As one student noted “Especially since there’s no hands-on things like you know you’re just going to sit there and listen and do nothing.” Another student shared wanting “More time to talk with like one on one with everybody.” Relatedly, the counseling function also seems to exclusively focus on helping students design their educational plan. But this approach might not be addressing the resources that certain students need (e.g., those struggling with food insecurity or other personal or financial vulnerability). For example, the first-year experience class curriculum includes content such as healthy eating and money management. Students who come from limited financial means cannot solve their lack of money by budgeting and students who are food insecure may struggle to buy healthy foods. In addition, students who have multiple jobs may struggle finding time to cook healthy meals. A lack of awareness of students’ lives and financial circumstances by Promise staff, while not deliberate, could be alienating students (who are likely to struggle academically for one reason or another) thus making it more difficult for students to trust staff and ask for help. These missed connections are likely hampering the creation of learning environments where students, especially from marginalized or historically underrepresented populations, can feel a sense of belonging and ask for help.

Finding 8: There is less structure and social connectedness in year 2.

Opportunities for Promise staff to build relationships with students are plentiful in the first year of the program as a result of the first-year experience course that incoming Promise students take in their first or second term. The class provides opportunities for social connectedness between students and staff and among students. But the second year of the program is less structured, and thus offers fewer opportunities for staff to connect with students to foster trusting environments where students who need help can be vulnerable in asking for help. The pandemic likely eroded, more acutely, some of these social connections for students who started college with a vulnerability (e.g., belonging uncertainty, academic under-preparedness, learning disability, holding multiple jobs, or housing insecure). With fewer opportunities for staff to connect with students and help them navigate their challenge(s) in the second year, these pre-existing vulnerabilities may lead the student to spiral into academic probation and ultimately stop out.

Recommendations

It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of disentangling the effects of contextual changes such as campus closures (due to the pandemic, fires, and construction) and the switch to online education had on program implementation and student outcomes for the inaugural Promise cohorts. But we have some recommendations for LTCC's consideration as the pandemic restrictions and construction projects come to an end to facilitate more interactions between staff and students and among students.

Recommendation 1: Improve program recruitment in the local high schools.

To meet the unique needs of first-generation students that often need additional support in understanding higher education opportunities, Promise recruitment and information sessions need to start when students enter high school. We recommend that Promise staff work with high school counselors to demystify the full-time enrollment requirement for students, including presentations by current LTCC Promise students that can connect to youth. Given that two-thirds of Promise students were former special admit students in high school, LTCC can also use dual enrollment as a strategy to recruit more students into the Promise program after graduation. In addition, LTCC may want to consider delivering in-class presentations in partnership with high school counselors during homeroom/advisory periods to bring awareness to Promise program requirements and how students and their families can start preparing for college life when they enter high school. These presentations could be delivered by Promise Navigators.

Recommendation 2: Improve first-year experience course.

The Promise Program requires entering Promise scholars to attend a first-year experience course in their first or second quarter at LTCC. The class therefore has a captive audience of Promise students. One way to make the class more interactive or hands-on would be to embed a field trip to the bookstore as part of the course curriculum as a great way for new students to familiarize themselves with campus facilities and also the bookstore credit in particular. Enabling students to map and understand campus resources during their first-year transition has been shown to ease student transitions into college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). With the pandemic subsiding, Promise staff (such as the Director, Financial Aid Tech, and Counselor) now visit the class in person to raise awareness of the various resources, and program benefits available to students (including how to access services and benefits and why they are useful). Promise staff are also using these visits to raise their visibility and establish relationships with students. Some additional enhancements, to use the course more strategically, can include:

- Impart the importance of students checking and answering college emails
- Teach students life skills, such as advocating for themselves when they need help, and of the importance of asking for help early no matter their challenge. For example, it is easier to help students find a tutor to pass a class than it is to help a student emerge from academic probation.

- Have the first-year experience course instructor and the Promise counselor incorporate a belonging story into their interactions with students. A belonging story is a short story that depicts previous students' challenges (or staff's challenges in college if applicable) and concerns about belonging in the classroom and how they adapted, which has shown to reduce academic outcome gaps for historically marginalized groups (e.g., racially minoritized students, women, first-generation college students) (Murphy et al., 2020; Murdock, et al., 2019; Yeager, et al., 2016; Walton et al., 2015; Walton et al., 2011).

Recommendation 3: Consider recruiting new Promise Navigators among students who struggled in their first year of the program but persisted.

To continue strengthening the relationship between Promise students (especially those who struggle) and the College, LTCC may want to consider focused recruitment and hiring of Promise students who persisted in their first year of academic studies despite academic or personal challenges to be Promise Navigator. These Navigators can help inspire other struggling students but may also make it easier for vulnerable students to ask for help. In order to bolster recruitment efforts, offering a salary that's above the service industry wages might help these students switch from working off campus to working on campus. A secondary benefit of this strategy is that these Promise Navigators (and 2nd year students) will also spend more time on campus, have greater flexibility in their own schedules and perhaps reduce the likelihood of having to hold multiple jobs. In order to fund these student salaries, LTCC can explore federal-work study programs.

Recommendation 4: Provide more connection after the first year.

To continue deepening the relationships built between the student and the College in the first year of school, LTCC may consider offering one-time workshops that address relevant and timely topics based on student needs and at strategic times during the year. Attendance at these events could be coupled with a small monetary incentive (e.g. \$50/month or \$100 for the academic term) for attending a minimum number of workshops throughout the term, which has been shown to be effective at incentivizing students to attend coaching sessions (Ratledge, et al., 2021). Beginning this year, the LTCC counseling department will begin offering a class on how to transfer to a four-year university in the second year of the program. LTCC counseling staff may consider offering this class in the Spring quarter of the first year of the cohort to fill the gap in social connectedness as no other cohort-based course is offered at that time. Offering this class in the first year of college would also give students more time to plan their academic class schedules for transfer to a four-year university.

Recommendation 5: Enhance program systems and structures to proactively help students who struggle academically (or with other issues) early.

Our analysis shows that many students who stopped out during the pandemic faced a complex set of circumstances affecting student performance. In order to anticipate and better understand student needs in their first year of school, LTCC could implement an early warning strategy to counteract their reactionary approach to helping students. The early warning strategy could include implementation of a survey within the first-year experience course that identifies which students need help securing a learning accommodation, who might

have multiple jobs off campus, who might be experiencing financial (e.g. housing or food) or family hardships, or who needs help completing their FAFSA or other financial aid procedure. This information could be used in multiple ways – reaching out to students to provide resources or grouping them to provide support to the group as opposed to individual students. An alternative early warning strategy to consider involves the instructor of the first-year experience course to track which of their students has not completed their first few assignments and to follow up with each student to understand the student's need for help and resources. This strategy could be used in tandem with the survey or on its own. Insights from either of these early warning strategies could be distributed among Promise staff to contact and help students connect to resources.

The reasons why students left college before completing their studies were documented by the inaugural Promise Director. LTCC may want to consider resuming similar efforts, but the current Director already has many responsibilities. Instead, this function could be assigned to the counseling staff and/or financial aid staff who would benefit from understanding why students stop out and perhaps find ways to help students earlier in their struggles. Relatedly, counseling staff and financial aid could also help document why students who meet (or are close to meeting Promise requirements) are not interested in the program. This division of labor would allow the current Director to do more recruitment of high school students. Related, documenting reasons for why students are not interested in the Promise Program or do not complete their studies offer additional opportunities for Promise staff to understand their students.

Conclusion

The LTCC College Promise Program has enabled the college to reconfigure existing resources (including both funding and personnel), to create its flagship college completion program which aligns with LTCC's initial motivations to create a program to increase enrollment but also better serve its diversifying population. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the Fall 2019 cohort in the middle of their first year. Not surprisingly, many students from this cohort exited LTCC before earning a degree or transferring. Those students who persisted through their first three years succeeded in graduating or transferring to a four-year institution. Current and former students also generally report positive views of the Program, but there are some areas for LTCC to improve the College Promise Program. Overall, these results demonstrate that it might not solely be financial aid or student supports offered independently, but instead the combination which could provide the biggest benefits to helping students through to completion.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Data and Research Methods

Promise Program staff identified current students and alumni of the program using their databases and student records. Promise Program staff sent emails and text messages to current students, stop-out students, and alumni inviting them to participate in the study. Students were offered a \$25 gift card as incentive to participate in an interview. Interested participants were asked to share their contact information and availability via a Google form. Individuals who responded to the initial email were contacted to schedule an interview. Criteria for inclusion in the study included being a current Promise student, an alum of the Program, or having begun the Promise Program and not finished for any reason (i.e., stop-out student). A total of 15 individual interviews were conducted: 8 current students and 7 alumni.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were video recorded and transcribed. To focus participants on their community college experience and the Promise Program, students and alumni were asked: *What was your favorite thing about being a student at LTCC?* The opening question encouraged and helped participants recall memories related to their time at LTCC and the Promise Program. To learn more about their experiences with the program, interviewees were asked to reflect on what drew them to the program, the impact the program had on them as a student, and which aspects of the program were most useful and least useful, and how the program could be improved.

We then coded the data inductively and deductively using a 3-step process to identify emerging patterns and themes across student interviews.

Step 1: Data Processing and Descriptive Coding (first cycle coding)

Transcripts generated from student interviews were uploaded to Dedoose, a web-based application. Transcripts were read multiple times by the authors to assign descriptive coding inductively. When coding disagreements emerged, the authors discussed the differences and reached a consensus.

Step 2: Analytic/Pattern Coding (second cycle coding)

To move from descriptive coding to analytical coding, transcripts of the interviews were reviewed through an iterative process by the authors. This second round of coding identified student responses that addressed the research questions, a form of deductive coding which resulted in a robust codebook.

Step 3: Pattern Identification

In this final step, we reviewed the data corpus and coding results to create a set of emerging findings that directly address the research questions. For example, many students expressed their appreciation for having a counselor guide them through the creation of an education plan that keeps them accountable to their academic goals and enrollment units.

In this cycle, the authors also identified areas of potential growth. These included participants' desire for greater clarity around how to spend the \$100 bookstore credit (i.e., how those monies can be accessed or what items can be purchased). Capturing students' perspectives of the program provided valuable explanations of how students experience the program and ways in which their experiences can be further enhanced.

Appendix B: Interview Participants Characteristics and Outcomes

Table B1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	First Generation	Pell Receipt	Dependency Status
Dwayne	Male	White	Unknown	Yes	Dependent
Diana	Female	Latinx/Hispanic	No	No	Dependent
Kathy	Female	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes	Yes	Dependent
Nate	Male	Latinx/Hispanic	No	No	Dependent
Jocelyn	Female	Latinx/Hispanic	No	Yes	Dependent
Willie	Male	White	No	No	Unknown
Ella	Female	White	Unknown	No	Dependent
Mary	Female	Mixed race	No	No	Unknown
Miles	Male	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes	No	Unknown
Dave	Male	White	No	No	Dependent
Violeta	Female	Latinx/Hispanic	Unknown	No	Unknown
Heather	Female	Mixed race	No	No	Unknown
Ryan	Male	White	No	No	Dependent
Samantha	Female	White	No	Yes	Independent
Robert	Male	White	No	No	Dependent

Note. First generation (Firstgen) status is defined as a student with parents (or guardians) who have not earned more than a high school degree and have no college experience. Pell receipt is defined as having received a Pell Grant at least once during their academic trajectory. Dependency status highlights whether the student was financially dependent on their parents or financially independent. All names are pseudonyms.

Table B2. Academic Transitions

Pseudonym	Alumni / Student	Entered Program	Special Admit	Program Completion (as of December 2022)
Dwayne	Student	2020	Yes	In progress
Nate	Student	2020	Yes	In progress
Robert	Student	2020	No	In progress
Willie	Student	2021	Yes	In progress
Mary	Student	2021	Yes	In progress
Miles	Student	2021	Yes	In progress
Violeta	Student	2021	Yes	In progress
Heather	Student	2021	Yes	In progress
Ella	Alumni	2018	Yes	Transfer to private nonprofit university
Dave	Alumni	2018	No	Transfer to CSU
Kathy	Alumni	2019	Yes	Transfer to UC
Jocelyn	Alumni	2019	Yes	Transfer to CSU
Diana	Alumni	2019	Yes	Transfer to UC
Ryan	Alumni	2019	No	Transfer to UC
Samantha	Alumni	2019	No	Transfer to UN

Note. All students (except Dwayne) entered the Promise Program in the Fall each respective year. Dwayne entered the program in Winter. California State University (CSU). University of California (UC). University of Nevada (UN).

Appendix C: Promise Student Characteristics and Outcomes

Table C1. Promise Take-Up and Student Characteristics

	2019–2021 Cohorts			2019 Cohort		
	First-Time 6–11.9 Units (No Promise)	First-Time/ Full-Time (No Promise)	Promise	First-Time 6–11.9 Units (No Promise)	First-Time/ Full-Time (No Promise)	Promise
Age at Entry	23.43	21.44	19.13	22.23	21.45	19.26
Latinx	31%	27%	53%	36%	30%	56%
White	50%	48%	35%	48%	42%	30%
Other Race	14%	19%	11%	11%	20%	12%
Missing Race	5%	5%	1%	5%	6%	2%
Female	50%	50%	55%	45%	50%	57%
First Gen	41%	32%	38%	44%	34%	39%
Former Special Admit	25%	30%	65%	26%	28%	62%
FAFSA – Term 1	56%	53%	90%	59%	53%	93%
CCPG – Term 1	49%	49%	91%	56%	47%	95%
Number of Students	171	269	284	61	80	122

Note. Students initially entering in Fall or Winter quarters. Other race includes Black, Asian, Other, and More than One Race. First generation is defined as parental education of high school graduate or less. FAFSA is submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and CCPG is receipt of the California College Promise Grant fee waiver, which did not have data available for the Fall 2021 cohort.

Table C2. Student Outcomes

	2019–2021 Cohorts			2019 Cohort		
	First-Time 6–11.9 Units (No Promise)	First-Time/ Full-Time (No Promise)	Promise	First-Time 6–11.9 Units (No Promise)	First-Time/ Full-Time (No Promise)	Promise
Units Enrolled, Term 1	8.75	13.84	14.35	8.53	13.69	14.91
Units Earned, Term 1	5.3	10.3	11.7	4.48	10.18	11.5
Enrolled in 12–14 Units, Term 1	0%	73%	36%	0%	76%	34%
Enrolled in 15+ Units, Term 1	0%	27%	57%	0%	24%	64%
Persist, Term 2	31%	57%	89%	25%	55%	88%
Persist, Term 3	31%	50%	79%	21%	46%	74%
% Units Completed, Term 1	61%	74%	82%	52%	75%	77%
% Units Completed, Term 2	73%	82%	77%	73%	83%	72%
% Units Completed, Term 3	71%	82%	76%	78%	83%	76%
Cumulative Units, Year 1	9.17	21.15	29.37	7.07	20.33	27.61
Number of Students	171	269	284	61	80	122

Note. Students initially entering in Fall or Winter quarters.

Table C3. Longer-Term Student Outcomes: Fall 2019 Cohort

	First-Time 6–11.9 Units (No Promise)	First-Time/ Full-Time (No Promise)	Promise
Cumulative Units, Year 1	7.07	20.33	27.61
Cumulative Units, Year 2	9.86	28.92	45.91
Cumulative Units, Year 3	11.95	35.04	56.55
Total Units Earned	12.07	35.11	62.73
Exit, Year 1	72%	50%	42%
Exit, Year 1 or 2	79%	62%	64%
Exit, Year 1, 2 or 3	89%	72%	71%
Earned Associate Degree	7%	12%	25%
Earned Certificate	3%	1%	4%
Earned Associate or Certificate	7%	12%	27%
Transferred to 4-Year	7%	19%	10%
Earned Associate Degree or Transfer	10%	28%	28%
Number of Students	61	80	122

Note. Students initially entering in Fall 2019 or Winter 2020.



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