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The Promise of Free College

Ingrid Johnson, University of Michigan

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Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan

Ingrid Johnson

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The Promise of Free College

It seems strange, that of all the cities, towns, and communities across America, Kalamazoo, Michigan would be chosen to make history in education. The relatively small city with the funny name, famous for innovations in the pharmaceutical field and the producers of New York City's checker cabs, put itself on the map by giving free college to all students in the city's public school system. In 2005, the Kalamazoo Promise was announced and people were shocked. To this day, people are still shocked. Free college? Simply for graduating from KPS? The Kalamazoo Promise was created by anonymous, private donors to encourage economic growth in the city of Kalamazoo and stop the flood of families leaving the city and its school systems. As long a student enrolls in Kalamazoo Public Schools by 9th grade, they are eligible for 65 percent of their college tuition and fees paid for at any university or community college in the state of Michigan, and up to 100 percent if they have attended KPS from Kindergarten. As long as they graduate high school, there is one simple form to receive the Kalamazoo Promise for tuition at any college in Michigan. The results were powerful. For a city with over 30 percent of residents living below the poverty line (in 2006), the free college program, delivered in a simple and generous form, was a game changer (Kalamazoo County Health and Human Services, 2012). Researchers in Kalamazoo jumped on the project and in 2015, a study was released by a local think tank (W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research) that indeed, the

Kalamazoo Promise was positively impacting the schools and community of Kalamazoo in many ways.

The Kalamazoo Promise is defined as a place-based scholarship: a scholarship given based on place, rather than merit or need, though recently some programs have emerged which are similar to the Kalamazoo Promise but have differing requirements. Kalamazoo was the first community in the country to do anything like this program, and in the years afterward, the idea and possibility of free college have spurred change and innovation across the country, leading to other Promise programs. I take great pride in being from Kalamazoo, and because of the Kalamazoo Promise, I am extremely passionate that all children deserve the right to an equal chance at an excellent education, one that prepares them for college, careers, and beyond. There is innovation happening all across the educational policy arena, especially surrounding programs to help students afford higher education. Since the Kalamazoo Promise was announced in 2005, other communities have tried to make free college a reality. In 2009, Governor Granholm created ten Promise Zones in high poverty areas of Michigan, including Detroit and Flint. Benton Harbor was also one of the ten Promise Zones. Under Promise Zone legislation, a private organization must fund the first two years of the program, then state money can kick in, in the form of increased property tax revenue from the State Education Tax (Zaniewski 2016). I propose that local governments continue to partner with private organizations in order to expand Promise Zones to include 4 year degrees. Additionally, the majority of the Promise zones right now are for urban areas. While that is important, there is a significant number of low-income students from rural areas in Michigan who are unlikely to attend college. There should also be development of promise programs for rural areas.

The Kalamazoo Promise was a program for the students of Kalamazoo, but it was also a program designed to revive the city of Kalamazoo itself. In the years leading up to the announcement of the program in 2005, Kalamazoo had suffered a slow but steady loss in manufacturing jobs, a 20 percent population decrease, and in the Northside of Kalamazoo, a poverty rate of 37 percent – higher than Detroit at the time (Burke 2014). As the middle class slowly left Kalamazoo, enrollment shrank in Kalamazoo Public Schools, and money began to dry up. According to Cassie Walker Burke, an executive editor at *Chicago Magazine*, African American students, who make up over 40 percent of Kalamazoo Public Schools were “some of the lowest scorers in Michigan” (Burke). The school system’s superintendent at the time, Dr. Janice Brown, had been asked to meet with a group of local philanthropists to discuss the city’s economic trends; they discussed the connection of education and the economy. People aren’t sure if the Kalamazoo Promise improved Kalamazoo’s housing market, but it stopped the flow of people out of the city and out of the school system. In a 2015 article from the W.E. Upjohn Institute, *Promise Nation*, Michelle Miller-Adams cited that “enrollment in the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) grew 24 percent between 2005 and 2013. The availability of the Promise led to a reduction in suspensions, an increase in credits attempted, and, for African-American students, a higher GPA. Recent data show a 33 percent increase in college completion among Kalamazoo students, with especially large benefits among minority and low-income students” (Miller-Adams 2015). Though the Kalamazoo Promise did not solve all of Kalamazoo’s problems, the program has had a positive impact on the schools and the city. There is a sense of ownership of the city, an energy to help students, and responsibility to improve the schools and community.

Ten years after the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, the W.E. Upjohn Institute released the results of their study which had been tracking the effectiveness of the Kalamazoo Promise. For years, people had wondered if the program had any substantial impact on the community of Kalamazoo, besides being a generous gift to students. In 2015, the impact of the Promise on the school system and its students was proven to be quite significant. The results showed that compared to pre-Promise peers, Promise students “are a third more likely to graduate college within six years of finishing high school” (Mack, 2015). Not only that, but the college graduation numbers are just as strong for low-income and minority students. The study also found that students are taking more college level courses before they graduate, which helps to prepare them for college-level coursework.

In today’s economy, it becomes increasingly more important to obtain not only a high school diploma, but some form of higher education. According to *The Education Trust*, college graduates tend to earn more and are “less likely to be unemployed” (Haycock, 2015). A college degree can also be a way to rise above the poverty level. With only a high school diploma, a little under half of all children in America will remain poor as adults, however, with a college degree, those numbers fall to 1 in 6 children who will remain poor as adults (Haycock 2015). Additionally, for African American males, “Among those who don’t complete high school, 68 percent will be imprisoned by age 34. With a high school diploma, that rate falls to 21 percent; with a college degree, to 6 percent” (Haycock 2015). These concerning statistics should motivate educators to find ways to have students to stay in school, graduate high school, and go on to receive some sort of degree which can lead to a decent job. This should be especially true for minority and low-income students, who are often stuck in schools with limited resources and high teacher turnover. Educational policy today in the U.S. should be ensuring that all students

are prepared for their future careers and that all students have an opportunity to attain an education which serves them well. Additionally, according to a study done by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in its report, “With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them,” one of the biggest barriers of attending college is finances (Erickcek 5). Education on financial aid resources and bringing the cost of college down are both issues that need to be examined in education policy.

Why should states care about who is able to go to college in their state? If the government is going to partner with local organizations and communities, they should know that there are benefits for individuals to go to college, but there are also benefits for the whole state. According to an *Economic Policy Institute* article, “A Well-Educated Workforce Is Key to State Prosperity,” high wages are tied to educational attainment and “states can increase the strength of their economies and their ability to grow and attract high-wage employers by investing in education and increasing the number of well-educated workers” (Berger & Fisher 2013). Additionally, the authors of this report found that educational attainment of citizens is actually good for a state in the long run because “workers with higher incomes contribute more through taxes over the course of their lifetimes” (Berger & Fisher 2013). This is why place-based scholarships should expand across Michigan. Expanding current programs to include four-year universities (like Kalamazoo does) will only increase the benefits.

Some people may question the need for a place-based scholarship if there are already many federal loan and financial aid programs, including PELL grants and FAFSA. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Tennessee’s program director for the Tennessee Promise, Krause, said that first-generation college students “aren’t necessarily familiar with the FAFSA or Pell Grants, or how to get them. Tennessee Promise’s makes it clear that college is an option for everyone... and that

there's a spelled-out pathway for how to achieve it" (Deruy 2015). It makes a big difference to families unfamiliar with the college application process that scholarships such as the Kalamazoo Promise are simple, straightforward, and the school system is on board with the application process. In Kalamazoo, a student simply needs to attend a meeting held in the Fall or Spring, fill out a one-page form with straightforward questions, and the Kalamazoo Promise will connect with the college or university to pay the tuition when it is billed. Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, everyone in Kalamazoo Public Schools is familiar with the Kalamazoo Promise. All the teachers know what the program is, how to apply, and administrators are constantly discussing it at all levels, but especially for juniors and seniors in high school. There are also mass meetings for parents to ask questions. It is a program which doesn't have many hoops to jump through and is universal for all students (who meet the residency requirements). A common counterargument to funding free college is that colleges and universities simply must lower their tuition. While this is valid, the issue is much more complex than simply mandating all colleges lower their tuition.

Place-based scholarships aren't the only program in the debate of making college affordable. There is discussion of making college free on the national level, as well as on the state level. It was a topic in the 2016 election, as both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders had plans to make college free for the whole country. Tennessee and Oregon have adopted state-wide Promise programs. When a program like this expands to a larger scale, policymakers must take into account the issues of affordability and sustainability. If the programs are not entirely funded by the generosity of private donors, the tax payers will have to debate if they wish to pay for free college, what types of programs to cover, and how much of the bill the country can afford to pay.

Sanders had a free college plan which gained a lot of support while he was on the campaign trail for president, and after winning the nomination, Clinton adopted aspects of the plan into her own policy to try and win over the Sanders' base of the Democratic party. There is a significant amount of support for free college tuition and people across party lines are calling for solutions to the extreme amount of debt college students are taking on in today's society. Many think that free college is inevitable sometime in the future. However, there is also a fair amount of criticism of Clinton's and Sanders' plans for free college. In a *Washington Post* article, authors Feldman and Archibald argued that "the Sanders policy rewards bad behavior at the state level" because states across the country have varying levels of subsidized higher education, and national funding for college would give a bigger break to families in some states (Feldman and Archibald 2016). Additionally, "since states must contribute one-third of the revenue needed to make tuition disappear, all will have to prioritize higher education more than they currently do. This will require tax increases, or it will force states to move existing resources into higher education and away from other state priorities like health care, prisons, roads and K-12 education" (Feldman and Archibald 2016). It would be difficult for states to take a significant amount of money away from so many important programs. Educational policymakers should also be examining a way to slow the tuition hikes that are causing college to become so expensive.

There are positive and negative arguments on the debate of state promise programs, as well. The state of Tennessee funds its free community college program through income made by the lottery. However, an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* discussed that other states that used lottery money to support higher education programs had issues making the programs sustainable in the long-term, because the lottery money could not keep up with the rising cost of

college (Kelderman 2014). People also take issue with the fact that the money from the lottery would have otherwise gone to K-12 programs in the state. It is imperative that the overall K-12 education system must be strong so that children are actually prepared to move onto college and careers. George Erickcek, a researcher with the W.E. Upjohn Institute, said that the academic success of students is strongly influenced by performance in elementary school and the quality of a pre-K education (Erickcek 2013). He also cited that many students who attend college do not complete their studies, but that this is especially true for students attending community colleges (Erickcek 2013). A degree from a community college or a technical school is still better than just a high school degree, but there should also be additional support systems in place for students who are attending community college, so that they persist in their studies.

Unfortunately, many people believe that schools are not preparing students to do well in college. There is a survey which is sent to local officials across the state of Michigan twice a year by CLOSUP in the Michigan Ford School. In spring of 2012, the Michigan Public Policy Survey asked local officials across the state of Michigan “how good of a job does your local K-12 education system do in preparing students for college?” to which only 33% of local officials in Southwest Michigan and statewide thought their schools were doing a very good job (CLOSUP, 2012). Figure 1 below shows the answers to the CLOSUP 2012 education question in terms of population density (compiled in the program Stata).

Figure 1

Local K12 preparation for: College	Population Density			Total
	Low <100	Mid	High >800	
A very good job	26.09	36.89	45.55	33.52
A fair job	54.91	49.18	41.99	50.39
A poor job	13.04	9.29	8.90	11.04
Don't Know	5.96	4.64	3.56	5.05
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Figure 2, below, is an Excel graph to show the same information in bar chart form.

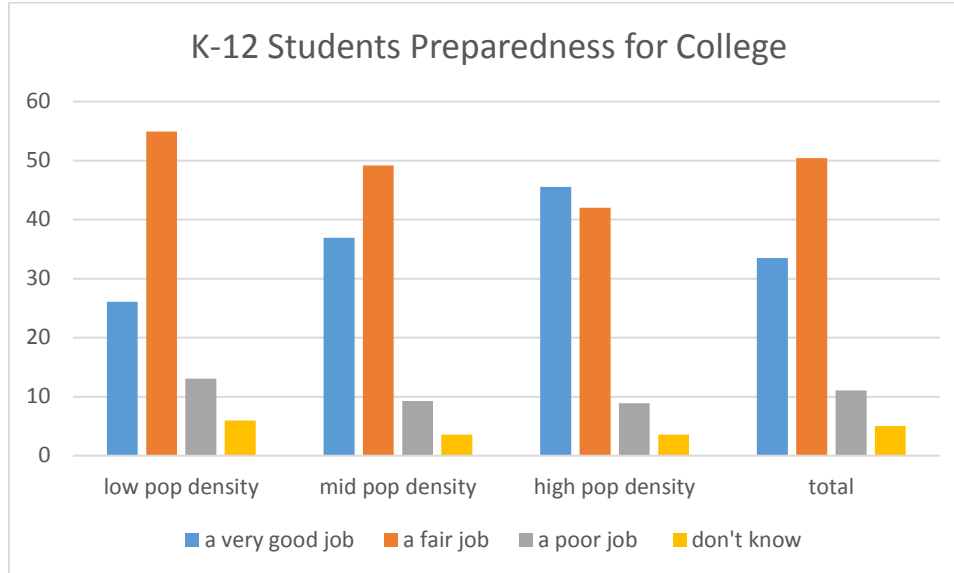


Figure 2

What is especially concerning about viewing the responses in terms of population density is that over half of areas with low population density responded that their schools were doing a fair job, and thirteen percent responded that their K-12 schools were doing a poor job. Granted, about a quarter of respondents in low population density areas responded that their schools were doing a very good job. However, it speaks to a larger trend in educational policy: many policies are directed at low income students in large, urban areas – for good reason. But there is also a significant amount of low income students in rural areas of the U.S. who also need assistance affording college and attending schools which will prepare them for college. Study after study cites the best indicator of financial success is a college degree, yet students must be prepared for the difficulty of college level courses. If there is to be a place-based scholarship – or any sort of scholarship – there also needs to be significant progress by K-12 schools to ensure all of their students are on track to do well in college.

So how do school systems better prepare their students for college degrees? A 2013 *Forbes* magazine article “Motivation Matters: 40% Of High School Students Chronically Disengaged From School” cited that, as the title suggests, a high percentage of students aren’t motivated to in their schoolwork. The author, Crotty, emphasizes that merely promising scholarship money is not enough, students must be immersed in a “college-going culture,” which includes “providing academic, social and other supports, making clear why college was important, and outlining a path to get there” (Crotty 2013). The Kalamazoo community and KPS have embraced the college-going culture: there are “class of 2025” labels outside elementary school classrooms, college readiness classes in high school, day trips for to the local university, and many visits to the schools from Promise scholars and alumni in college. More Advanced Placement classes are being offered, immersing high school students in college-level coursework. The Promise encourages students to take harder classes and to think about college from a very young age. This motivates students to graduate from high school, get into college, and as the Kalamazoo study indicates, it encourages them to graduate from college. K-12 schools should be preparing students to succeed after graduation. Though the Michigan Public Policy Survey remains confidential, so one cannot examine exactly which cities or towns feel their schools prepare students for college, the MPPS reveals that across Michigan (even in 2012, as Promise programs have been implemented and continue to be implemented), local officials doubt whether their schools are really preparing students to succeed in college. This is a policy area which must be addressed in addition to financial assistance for college. The 2015 study on the Promise indicated that Promise scholars are more likely to remain in college and graduate within six years (Miller-Adams 2015). The study shows hope, at least, that putting faith in students and immersing them in a college-going culture can improve their success in college.

State-wide programs similar to the Tennessee Promise, and even national free college, may be a reality in the coming years, but as the scale gets larger, I suspect there will be more heated debates over funding and taxes. This is why I recommend the continued expansion of current Promise programs and the expansion to other cities across the United States. I think it is easier to implement free college programs community by community, instead of forcing a top-down approach from the national level. Focusing on Michigan specifically, I recommend that there is a focus put on rural schools and an expansion of current Promise programs to include 4-year universities. Private donations will most likely not be enough to fund all programs across the U.S., even though Kalamazoo is an example that with great generosity, full private funding of a place-based scholarship program is possible. In places where it is not possible to have entirely private donations, the government will need to assist with funds, as well. Tennessee, for example, uses the money gained from the lottery to fund their two-year community college. Policy-makers should also work with the universities to make college more affordable across the board. Schools need to prepare their students for college so that the students can succeed in college and come back to invest in their community.

Benton Harbor is a city already in a “Promise Zone,” but currently only offers free tuition for 2-year community college programs. Whereas Kalamazoo has approximately 75,000 residents living in the city, Benton Harbor is much smaller, with only 10,000 residents in the city. Benton Harbor is an area often on lists of the top poorest cities in Michigan and cities with the highest crime rates in the country. Additionally, in a stark contrast of inequality, directly across the river is St. Joseph, a town with significantly more wealth. Because of the proximity to St. Joseph, there are many philanthropists in the area who are already donating to Benton Harbor’s Promise Zone. But the Promise Zone should be expanded to include additional years at

a community college when necessary, as well as four years at a university. A two-year offer of free college may risk students dropping out after the assistance runs out. Offering tuition for four-year universities would encourage more students to pursue a degree at those institutions. It may also start a cycle of education for generations to come, because according to *greatschools.org*, only 26 percent of first-generation students apply to college, but if students had at least one parent who went to college, 71 percent of those students are more likely to apply to college themselves (Great Schools Staff). Another reason that Benton Harbor is an area with high need and great urgency to help its schools is that in June, the Benton Harbor Area Schools received an emergency loan from the State of Michigan, and they have two years to “evidence change” (Peterson 2016). On November 28th of this month, Detroit announced that it has expanded their current Promise program to include four-year universities. The program has some stipulations, including a 3.0 GPA requirement, minimum of a 21 on the ACT, and it will only cover tuition costs not covered by other scholarships. The Promise Zone legislation currently requires a private organization to fund the first two years of scholarships before the government will pay for the program with taxes. Officials said the MEEF and the Detroit Regional Chamber “will continue to fund the scholarships until the Detroit Promise Zone tax capture is permitted in 2018. Officials have said that beginning in 2018, Detroit Promise will be funded by increases in property tax revenue based on the 6 mills of the State Education Tax; the program will capture half of any increase in property tax revenue from the education tax” (Zaniewski 2016). In the eleven years the Kalamazoo Promise has been in existence, 4,948 students have used the Promise (according to their website), and the donors have spent approximately \$66 million (Mack 2015). This is a huge program, but the city of Kalamazoo is hopeful that the Promise will bring families

and jobs to the area, spurring economic growth. Partnerships with private organizations are, therefore, vital to the survival and growth of place-based scholarships across the state and nation.

Therefore, I recommend that state and local governments partner with private organizations to expand the current Promise Zones, and expand Promise Zones to rural areas of the state. Detroit is a good model of a city (so far) successfully expanding its community college scholarships to four-year university scholarships. Detroit did this by implementing an additional tax, and understandably, people across the state may not wish to increase taxes or use already limited budgets for higher education. I recommend that when possible, cities expand their private partnerships, searching for donors, or increasing grants. The Kalamazoo Promise is funded entirely by private donations, but Kalamazoo may be one of the lucky few in the generosity and ability of businessmen and women in the area to donate the amount of money they have given. Ideally, people across the country would come together to fund college for their communities, but that is probably not possible in every city and certainly not possible in every small town. Therefore, the government needs to help fund these programs, because the benefits extend to students, families, and the health of the state. The Promise Zones in Michigan should also be expanded to rural areas of the state, using the current urban areas as a model, perhaps beginning with a community in the Upper Peninsula. Michigan should strive to be a model for education and a symbol of hope for students across all socioeconomic barriers. A college degree allows families to pull themselves out of what may be a vicious cycle of poverty. But the most powerful lesson from place-based scholarships is that they allow the many different students of a public school to see that they all have the same opportunities ahead of them, regardless of where they are from.

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