

Diverse Issues in Higher Education, January 6, 2011 (Page 1 of 3)

## **Cities take up challenge of helping increase college completion rates**

by David Jesse, The Hechinger Report, January 6, 2011

KALAMAZOO, Mi. – When Simon Boehme landed President Barack Obama as commencement speaker for his high school graduation last spring, he knew exactly what the president would highlight—the city’s unique college scholarship program, now being emulated in cities across the U.S.

“America has a lot to learn from Kalamazoo,” Obama said at Boehme’s commencement, praising the anonymous donors who in 2005 started the Kalamazoo Promise in this former manufacturing stronghold of 73,000. Already, 1,250 Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) graduates, or 81 percent of those eligible, have taken advantage of free or vastly reduced tuition to any public college or university in Michigan, which costs the anonymous donors about \$20 million a year in tuition fees. Students pay their own fees, books, room and board.

Just 54 percent of the first recipients are either still in college or have graduated, a stark reminder that it will take more than money to achieve the president’s ambitious goal of leading the world in college attainment by 2020. Nationally, getting students through college has long been a challenge: only half of those who start certificate or degree programs at two- and four-year institutions finish within six years, U.S. Education Department data show.

“We took the first hurdle down [not having money for college] and now can see all the hurdles behind it,” said Michelle Miller-Adams, a visiting scholar at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Kalamazoo and author of the first comprehensive study of the initiative.

Cities from Hammond, Ind., and New Haven, Conn., to Denver and Pittsburgh have launched similar programs at a time when, Obama frequently rues, the U.S. has fallen from first to ninth place in the world in the proportion of young people with college degrees. Fifteen to 20 such programs—some of which are regional or statewide—exist nationally, a number that is growing.

There aren’t consistent data available with which to compare the results of various promise-style programs. In Pittsburgh’s program, the percentage of scholarship recipients who return to their public four-year colleges after freshman year trails the state average by nearly three points, said Saleem Ghubril, executive director of the Pittsburgh Promise, which launched in 2007 with a \$100 million commitment by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. The picture for community college students on Pittsburgh Promise scholarships is brighter: 70.3 percent return for their second year, about 10 points above the national average. Graduation data are not yet available because the program is so new.

In Denver, half of the 199 students in the first class eligible for that city’s promise-style program came back for their fourth year of college, said Rana Tarkenton, director of student services at the Denver Scholarship Foundation.

A defining feature of most promise-style scholarships is that they are not based on need or merit, unlike most scholarships. Rather, the main requirement is residency—whether a student has lived in a specific school district or state for a sufficient amount of time. Some programs also set minimum grade-point averages or college-entrance exam scores. In the Kalamazoo program, students who graduate from KPS and have resided in the district for four years receive 65 percent of the full scholarship amount. Each additional year of continuous attendance and residency increases the scholarship amount by 5 percent, so KPS students who have attended continuously since kindergarten receive 100 percent.

## Diverse Issues in Higher Education, January 6, 2011 (Page 2 of 3)

To keep their scholarships, Kalamazoo Promise students must be enrolled full time in a two-year or four-year college and maintain a C average. The program's graduation rates are lowest at two-year colleges, as they are in the rest of the U.S.: only a third of the Class of 2006 who attended community college had graduated by the fall of 2010, program statistics show. The following year's class didn't do much better. Nationally, just 11.6 percent of students at public two-year colleges complete degrees within six years.

"What we're seeing more clearly now is that we need to address the other hurdles," said Miller-Adams. Obstacles include insufficient academic and cultural preparation for higher education, said Stan Jones, president of Complete College America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit.

"It's especially hard for students who come from poor areas and don't have support networks," said Jones, one of the founders of Twenty-First Century Scholars, a promise-style program founded in Indiana in the 1990s. "Just giving them the opportunity to go to college isn't enough. They need support once they get there—mentoring, ways for students to connect."

Students without parents or family members who've attended college may not know how to navigate a college system, said University of Michigan freshman Adwoa Bobo, a pre-med student on a Promise scholarship. In addition, they still may struggle financially when they arrive.

"I think that the reason why so many students have dropped out is because, although tuition and fees are paid for, room and board is not," said Kalamazoo Promise student Bobo. "These students still have to worry about books, computers and many other expenses."

Bobo has friends who've dropped out of the program for a variety of reasons but she is determined to get her degree.

"The hardest adjustment for me is being able to manage my time and being able to study effectively," Bobo said. "In high school, I was able to pass through without studying too much. In college, you cannot get good grades without taking notes and studying every night for each class and reading your books thoroughly. You must work hard. I've been told that college was harder than high school, but you never know what they mean until you're here."

Concern about the effectiveness of promise-style programs hasn't slowed their spread. A group of volunteers in Milwaukee is trying to replicate the program in Wisconsin. The New Haven Promise, financed primarily by Yale University, announced an offer last month to pay the tuition of any New Haven graduate with at least a 3.0 grade-point average wishing to attend public college or university in Connecticut.

Promise programs have been spurred in part by the deep recession and daunting costs of higher education that's made it out of reach for many low-income students, and strained the middle class as well. Tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities have outpaced inflation at an average annual rate of 5.6 percent over the last decade; annual total costs at a four-year public university average \$16,140, according to the College Board. The comparable figure at four-year private universities is \$36,993, although some institutions charge upward of \$55,000. Promise officials in Kalamazoo and other cities also see the programs as an economic development strategy.

In Kalamazoo, school officials are trying to figure out what else—beyond free tuition—students need to be successful in college, said Janice Brown, executive director of the Kalamazoo Promise and former superintendent of Kalamazoo Public Schools. Enrollment in the district is up since the Promise program began, with families from outside the district's limits moving to take advantage of the free tuition offer.

## Diverse Issues in Higher Education, January 6, 2011 (Page 3 of 3)

She and Miller-Adams both stress that all results from the program are early and not definitive.

“We are working to change a culture here,” said Brown. “We’re having conversations about what types of support systems we ... need for our students, both from the community and from families.”

David Dugger, director of the Early College Alliance at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, said the key to boosting the number of graduates lies in more preparation for “the culture of college.”

“It’s not just coming up with more money that students need,” Dugger said. “They also need help with life-management skills, like how to negotiate their way through academic life.”

More than two-thirds of Kalamazoo students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a key poverty indicator. About 64 percent graduate from high school in four years. Those who’ve received scholarships under the Kalamazoo Promise mirror the school district’s demographics: roughly 45 percent African-American, 45 percent Caucasian, and the remaining 10 percent either Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American. Sixty percent enroll at four-year universities, while 40 percent head to community colleges. Civic leaders in Kalamazoo have high hopes that the promise program will add to the pool of both high school and college graduates in a city where two-thirds of adults aged 25 or over don’t have college degrees, according to census data.

The city is home to Western Michigan University, which enrolls 25,000 students, and its unemployment rate of 10.6 percent is about two percentage points lower than the state average in recession-torn Michigan. The city is still struggling to recover from the loss of hundreds of pharmaceutical and auto industry jobs in the 1990s. The town is also the headquarters of the Stryker Corp., one of the largest players in the \$35.6 billion worldwide orthopedic market.

Since 2006, 56 Kalamazoo Promise graduates have obtained a four-year bachelor’s degree and 21 have graduated with associate degrees. The Promise gives students 10 years to complete degrees.

Justin Hamilton, a spokesman for U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, said the Obama administration welcomes the proliferation of promise-style programs, even if early results are mixed.

“These partnerships are an opportunity,” Hamilton said. “We recognize there is a pipeline issue. Not enough kids are graduating ... college- and career-ready, so we have to do what we can to make them well prepared.”

Boehme, now a freshman studying political science and business at the University of Michigan, said the program has at the very least changed the conversation in his hometown of Kalamazoo.

“I don’t exactly know what it was like before the Promise, but now everybody in high school is talking about where they are going to college,” Boehme said.

*Liz Willen and Justin Snider contributed to this story.*