

**ALYSSA RATLEDGE
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The Detroit Promise scholarship, administered by the Detroit Regional Chamber, allows the city’s high school graduates to attend local colleges tuition-free. But while the scholarship reduced financial barriers to attending college, many students faced other issues and dropped out before graduation. To help, MDRC partnered with the Chamber to develop a student success program based on proven-effective support services. The Detroit Promise Path (DPP) launched in 2016 to assist scholarship recipients at the five community colleges participating in Detroit Promise. [Early findings](#) from MDRC’s rigorous evaluation have shown encouraging impacts on students’ enrollment and persistence. (For more information about the evaluation and early findings, see www.mdrc.org/project/detroit-promise-path.) This Issue Focus provides more detail about the program model, outlines some elements of students’ experience, and shares early implementation lessons relevant to similar programs.

Detroit Promise Path



SCHOLARSHIP

Covers tuition and fees after financial aid is applied and assists students with summer tuition.



NEW SERVICES AND BENEFITS



Campus Coaching

Each of the five Detroit Promise community colleges has a DPP campus coach. Students meet with coaches for 15-30 minutes twice per month, typically in person, either individually or in small groups, beginning in the late summer before their first semester. Coaches reach out to students every week or two through phone calls, emails, and, most often, text messages. Each coach has a caseload of about 100 enrolled students and continues to reach out to students who did not enroll. Unlike academic advisers, coaches serve in a “big brother or sister” role for students, helping them manage competing responsibilities, adopt habits that can make them successful in school, and navigate personal issues.



Monthly Incentive

Students who meet with their coaches as directed receive \$50 per month to offset expenses not covered by financial aid, such as books and transportation. The money is put on a refillable Mastercard that can be used anywhere, and students are notified by text when the funds become available.



Summer Engagement

DPP makes a concerted effort to ensure that students stay engaged in productive summer activities and maintain their connection during the summer. Students are advised to enroll in summer courses (with tuition covered by the Promise), and those who need to work are connected to career-related job opportunities through local youth employment programs. Coaches continue to reach out to students throughout the summer to keep them engaged with the program.



Management Information System

Underlying all these components is a customer relationship management system that allows the staff to track interactions with students and run reports on student participation, response rates, and the completion of milestones such as registration. The software has a live text-messaging and email-tracking system that coaches use to communicate with students individually or in groups. For example, a coach might send a text reminder to all students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), then a few weeks later send another reminder to students who have not yet completed it.

Highlighted below are the top four implementation lessons from the first two years of the Detroit Promise Path. These lessons reflect student experiences that could be relevant to other College Promise and student success programs across the country. Updated impact findings from MDRC's evaluation of DPP will be published in late 2018.

1

STUDENTS STILL FACE FINANCIAL AID ISSUES

Even with the Detroit Promise scholarship in place, nearly half the students in DPP reported financial aid issues. FAFSA verification was singled out as a particular problem. Long aid processing times caused some students to be dropped from courses for not paying tuition, or even to miss enrollment deadlines altogether. Promise programs should not assume that their scholarships mean students won't face financial aid barriers to enrollment. Staff members should send students and colleges clear messages about financial aid requirements. Staff members can also institute a fail-safe system to check student lists before deadlines and make sure Promise students aren't dropped from classes.

2

PROGRAMS CAN HELP STUDENTS ENROLL IN FUTURE SEMESTERS BY STAYING CONNECTED

A noteworthy success of DPP was coaches' continued engagement with students who did not enroll, especially those who were unable to enroll due to financial aid issues. Many students who intended to enroll but experienced challenges felt discouraged and ready to give up until their coaches walked them through the process to enroll in the next semester. Continuously engaging with students can go a long way toward ensuring that the Promise is serving all eligible students. In DPP, the management information system allowed coaches to target students with different messages based on enrollment status, making it much easier for them to continue reaching out to these students.

3

STUDENTS WANT INDIVIDUAL HELP AND MOTIVATION

In DPP, coaches reached out to students "cold" for the first time in late summer by text and email, introducing themselves and encouraging students to set up in-person meetings to prepare for college. More than 95 percent of students responded, reflecting a tremendous appetite for assistance. Persistent, proactive outreach paid off: Some students who did not respond before school started came to coaches later when they faced questions or issues on campus. Coaches were able to provide individual assistance to students and boost their self-confidence by, for example, helping them practice talking to faculty members. Building students' motivation was especially important. Nearly all students reported that it made a big difference to them to have someone who understood the college's culture and who could keep them focused on the positive changes sure to follow from degree attainment. In particular, students valued having coaches who shared their socioeconomic background, as they felt they could discuss difficult issues without being judged.

4

PROGRAMS SHOULD PROVIDE CLEAR, USABLE INFORMATION

The promise of free tuition can reduce financial anxiety and help more students consider college — but students need to know what is covered and what they have to do to keep their scholarships. Many DPP students reported having trouble paying for things like textbooks and bus passes, and they relied on the \$50 monthly incentive to cover these expenses. DPP created a calendar for students with requirements and dates for each month's incentive, and the management information system now sends text messages when the \$50 cards have been refilled. This way, students know exactly when to expect funds and can plan accordingly.