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Place-based scholarships: Catalysts for systems reform to improve postsecondary attainment

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about the rate of postsecondary attainment in the US compared to the projected education requirements of future jobs has prompted a range of policy and practice interventions aimed at barriers to postsecondary access and success. As both a largely local phenomenon and a complex systems issue, improving postsecondary attainment for all students has proved to be a daunting challenge. Financial interventions have been a key focus of reform. One of these, place-based scholarships, attends both to the primarily local nature of college going and to the complex set of challenges that cross educational and workforce sectors. In this paper, we describe place-based scholarship programs that are currently catalyzing within-sector reforms and cross-sector coherence building. We discuss policy implications associated with the long-term sustainability of place-based scholarships as a strategy for improving college access and success.

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1. Introduction

The United States faces a pressing need to develop policies and strategies to increase the rates of higher education access and attainment to meet the changing needs of the American labor market. Many current efforts focus on students from lower income households who often would be first in their family to attend college. Such students face significant hurdles in choosing, accessing, and persisting in a postsecondary education pathway. In this paper, we posit that many interventions have, separately, focused on a narrow slice of what we characterize as a systems challenge that an emergent model of place-based scholarships may be relatively better positioned to address coherently. We first summarize the many barriers to postsecondary access and success that such students face. Research has more recently begun to shed light on the many non-financial barriers to college¹ success, including informational and logistical challenges as well as those grounded in psychosocial, behavioral and cultural factors. In contrast to this emerging literature, evidence on financial barriers and potential policy solutions is comparatively more robust. We

briefly review some of these financial instruments to help situate the difference between such approaches and the focus of this paper, place-based scholarships.

Place-based scholarships represent one current policy strategy to improve college affordability and access by directing scholarship dollars to students in a particular geographic area (e.g., graduates of a particular school district) with the potential of simultaneously activating the systems that deliver education and supports. Such place-based policies align with the reality that in the US higher education is a local phenomenon for many students, particularly those from low income backgrounds. That is, for many students, the locale in which they complete high school is also where they attend higher education and enter the workforce. We then describe several examples of place-based scholarship efforts where the offer of postsecondary financial support in a targeted geographic area has led to improved college outcomes for students. We further discuss the change efforts that go beyond addressing college affordability to reforms aimed at mitigating other non-financial barriers to access, persistence, and attainment. We offer descriptions of such place-based investments that have the potential to catalyze systems changes both within the educational sector (e.g., improvements in PK-12 supports) as well as across sectors (e.g., higher education working with regional employers and/or community-based organizations) that have a vested interest in a well-educated citizenry. We discuss the implications that these initiatives have for local, state and national policy makers.

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¹ In this paper, we use “college” broadly to include wide range of postsecondary education options such as traditional 4-year college, 2-year programs, certificates, and licensing programs.

2. Higher education access and attainment in the U.S.

In the U.S., concern has been growing over the discrepancy between rates of higher education attainment and the education needs anticipated for the near future labor market. Two- and four-year degree attainment rates of the adult US population in 2014 were about 40% while projections for the 2020 labor force needs estimate that 65% of jobs will require some form of postsecondary certification (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015; Carnevale et al., 2013). This suggests that current postsecondary attainment rates will fall short of the education demands of the near future labor market. While certain students earn postsecondary credentials at fairly high rates, gaps in postsecondary access and attainment by family income are pronounced and growing (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011; Belley and Lochner, 2007; Kena, et al., 2015). Recent analyses find that even when academic performance is controlled, only 41% of students from low-income families who initially enroll in postsecondary attain a bachelor's degree while 74% of their counterparts from high-income families do so (Kena et al., 2015).

In response to this higher education landscape, the federal government, state agencies, education institutions, foundations, and non-profit organizations have developed numerous programs and policies aimed at improving rates of postsecondary access and attainment. These interventions target various barriers to access and attainment, sometimes for specific students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We turn now to a description of these barriers.

2.1. Barriers to higher education

Students can encounter a host of challenges to postsecondary access including aspirational, informational, academic, cultural, structural, and financial barriers. We briefly discuss each type of barrier in turn, while acknowledging that they are highly interrelated.

2.1.1. Aspirational

In the past, student educational aspirations were identified as a general predictor of academic behaviors (see for example, Boatwright, et al., 1992; Eccles et al., 1983; Palavin and Kane, 1990). More recently, data suggests the majority of US students recognize the benefit of postsecondary education and report intentions to continue their education and training beyond high school (ACT Inc., 2013; Roderick et al., 2008). However, for particular demographic subgroups, nurturing postsecondary aspirations remains a critical need (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006; Bohon et al., 2006; Wei-Cheng and Bikos, 2000). Despite the generalized increase in postsecondary aspirations, there remain significant challenges in supporting students' educational aspirations in ways that lead to attainment. In particular, the alignment of student aspirations with their own performance, with parents' expectations, and with teacher expectations may determine whether the students' aspirations are ultimately realized (Gallagher, 2015).

2.1.2. Informational/behavioral

Even if aspirations for college are well developed and aligned with performance and familial support, the pathway to successful matriculation is complex. It is important that students have broad exposure to the opportunities available to them so that their aspirations are not constrained to a narrow set of options that offer no opportunity for social mobility (Avery and Kane, 2004; Social Impact Research, 2010). Students from lower income families may have limited opportunity to learn about careers that require college education, and exposure to college life from their own families and community networks may be unavailable, thus limiting the range and extent of initial postsecondary aspirations. Gray (2009) noted the importance of middle and high school

students having postsecondary aspirations that are grounded in a mature career interest; this, he argues, provides an intrinsic motivation for academic endeavors in both secondary and postsecondary education.

Higher education options are quite varied with a complex set of costs and benefits and multiple dimensions on which students might make choices. Challenges such as understanding the factors involved in an informed choice (e.g., academic major, admission requirements and one's academic preparedness, fit issues, institutional quality, etc.), the logistical steps for timely completion of applications, and the financial information necessary to make informed choices are well documented in the literature (Roderick et al., 2008). Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) observe:

Young people—particularly those from lower-income, immigrant, and/or non-college educated families—may lack good information about the costs and benefits of enrollment, as well as about the process of preparing for, applying to, and selecting a college. Informational failures are arguably increasingly important as program and financing options have multiplied over time.

Lack of information about the actual costs of college (or misperceptions about the cost) is commonplace and disproportionately affects students from lower-income families (Hoxby and Turner, 2015). The advent of new tools such as the US Department of Education College Scorecard is a move in the right direction, but much work remains to support families in making good use of the more transparent data on college costs and outcomes. Hurwitz and Smith (2016), for example, discouragingly find that already well-resourced students are most responsive to the earnings data now available in the College Scorecard. The early evidence from these authors suggests that only for these better off students are decisions about where to apply shaped by the availability of the enhanced scorecard information.

2.1.3. Academic

Students' high school academic preparation is among the strongest predictors of bachelor's degree attainment (The American Diploma Project, 2004). Exposure to and mastery of a strong high school curriculum that includes four years of challenging mathematics and grade-level English is a hallmark of college-preparatory tracks. Yet, underserved students often lack access to this level of rigorous high school coursework (The American Diploma Project, 2004). This contributes to a lack of alignment between the students' high school academic preparation and the demands of postsecondary coursework (ACT Inc., 2007; Conley, 2007; Kirst, 2004; Kirst and Venezia, 2004). In addition to traditional indicators of academic preparedness, such as college entrance exams and high school grades, Conley (2007) has identified core academic skills (such as critical thinking, problem-solving, writing and research skills) along with non-cognitive skills (such as help-seeking and behavioral management) as equally important predictors of success. Yet, such skill sets are also not well supported in primary and secondary education settings.

When underprepared students continue to postsecondary education, they often must take remedial or developmental courses. This results in lower motivation levels, a prolonged time to graduation and lower persistence and attainment rates (Noble and Sawyer, 2013). For example, few students who begin college in need of remediation ever even "graduate" to college-level coursework, about 20% of those referred for mathematics remediation and 37% of those referred for reading (Bailey et al., 2010).

2.1.4. Cultural/contextual

Conley first highlighted the importance of "contextual skills and awareness" as its own college readiness domain (2007, p. 17). This includes the norms, values, and conventions of interaction in the college context and the relationship skills needed to effectively

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