

If We Build It, Will They Come? Fielding Dreams of College Access

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Abstract

This article describes the ISU 4U Promise, an innovative college access and affordability initiative. Through this early-commitment partnership program between Iowa State University and Des Moines Public Schools, youth from two urban elementary schools are eligible for tuition awards when they enroll as undergraduates at Iowa State University. Drawing on a review of promise programs in the educational scholarly literature, this article identifies what makes the ISU 4U Promise distinctive among promise efforts in terms of contextual antecedents, implementation processes, and potential institutional outcomes. Unique features include its early childhood focus; sole university sponsorship; “wide-net” reach; and collaborative, critical orientation to education and evaluation. With a bidirectional understanding of knowledge and a bivalent orientation to social justice, the ISU 4U Promise is a promising pathway for universities aspiring to update their approach to college access outreach.

Keywords: college access, affordability, promise programs, urban education, university engagement

Introduction

In the film *Field of Dreams* (Gordon & Gordon, 1989), Ray Kinsella builds a baseball diamond among the cornfields. It is Kinsella’s way of grappling with a troubled past relationship with his father that continues to haunt him. Urged on by a whispered promise—“If you build it, he will come”—Kinsella builds his field of dreams, confronts his ghosts, and transforms the landscape of his Iowa farm. “Is this heaven?” Kinsella’s father asks as he emerges from the stalks and beholds the new playing grounds. “No,” Kinsella replies. “It’s Iowa.”

The subject of this article is an innovative educational initiative at Iowa State University called the ISU 4U Promise; it is our own field of dreams. A partnership between Iowa State University and Des Moines Public Schools, the ISU 4U Promise seeks to increase university access and affordability for low-income youth from historically excluded backgrounds. We describe the ISU 4U Promise’s institutional mission to transform educational and eco-

conomic opportunity in its partner schools. Built upon the hope these youth would come to Iowa State University, the ISU 4U Promise stands as our own “diamond in the cornfields.”

We begin by providing details about the ISU 4U Promise initiative. We contextualize the initiative broadly within the changing history of the land-grant university and its positioning in terms of knowledge production and power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. We provide this broad context to emphasize the bivalent change framework guiding the ISU 4U Promise work, one that acknowledges the need for both representational and redistributive efforts in effecting social transformation (*Fraser, 1997*). We then contextualize it more narrowly with respect to similar promise program initiatives. We situate the ISU 4U Promise under the broad categories of contextual antecedents, implementation processes, and institutional outcomes. A literature review of existing promise programs allows us to highlight particular features of the ISU 4U Promise and discuss them as innovations for university-based engagement. We examine areas of relative strength and weakness in the existing promise program scholarship and call for new directions of study. These include addressing the research and evaluation challenges of what is essentially design-based research (DBR). DBR involves work taking place in a real-life setting affected by multiple variables. It is characterized by a flexibility to respond to the complex, dynamic, socially interactive, multidimensional, and collaborative elements of its site of implementation (*Barab & Squire, 2004*). These elements require new approaches to measuring and communicating impact and findings. In this article, we describe the early stage of ISU 4U Promise research and evaluation activity, indicate challenges, and highlight lessons learned that are relevant to other DBR promise program efforts. We conclude by summarizing the ISU 4U Promise as an example to consider in pursuing the social imperative for public institutions of higher education to manifest the democratic ideals of diversity, equity, and justice through engagement efforts.

Iowa State University’s ISU 4U Promise: Redressing Historical Exclusion Through a Bidirectional and Bivalent Knowledge and Change Framework

As a land-grant institution, Iowa State University has a responsibility for the democratic ideal of the public good. Federally funded land-grant institutions were established through the Morrill Act of 1862 to provide “a broad segment of the population with a practical

education that had relevance to their daily lives” (*Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2012, p. 1*). In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act charged land-grant universities with educating beyond the bounds of their campus and student body, utilizing cooperative extension services to “deliver useful knowledge and training to farmers and other state residents” (*Brown, Pendleton-Jullian, & Adler, 2010, p. 9*). This paradigm was one of “technical rationality” (*Fear & Sandmann, 2001–2002, p. 29*) in which the well-reasoned “scientific” insights of the university were brought to bear upon the “naïve” practice-based conceptions of the public. It resulted in a one-way model of engagement “in which knowledge is created on campus, then ‘transferred’” to those who use it (*Brown et al., 2010, p. 11*). Operating from this paradigm, engagement units at land-grant universities developed several programs intended to serve the public. Over time, these programs came to promote health and nutrition, financial well-being, school engagement, and positive youth development, as well as best practices in the area that remains most iconic of the land-grant institution today—agriculture.

Approaches to university engagement through programs like these continue at Iowa State University. However, as is the case with institutions of higher education nationally, changes have been underway. These changes reflect the broader societal multicultural turn of the U.S. civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and their ongoing legacies. With growing support for societal multiculturalism as a living value of the nation’s professed pluralism, universities have been forced to respond, as Lubiano (1996) describes, “to the demands of traditionally marginalized cultures for the inclusion of individuals, for group power, and for some reorganization of these institutions” (p. 68). Iowa State University reflects its legacy as a historically predominantly White institution with a student body in which almost 12% of enrolled individuals are from U.S. underrepresented groups (*Iowa State University Office of Admissions, 2017*). Members of major underrepresented ethnicities within Iowa, Hispanic or Latino and Black or African American students constitute nearly 5% and 3% respectively of university and undergraduate enrollment (*Iowa State University, 2016*). Although these figures mirror those of Iowa’s population (*Iowa State Data Center, 2015*), they are not reflective of the diversity of the state’s largest school district located within an hour of Iowa State University’s campus. Total preK-12 enrollment for the academic year 2016-2017 of the Des Moines Public School District includes 25.7% Hispanic students and 18.8% Black students (*Iowa Department of Education, 2017*). There is a gap between the diversity of the student population at Iowa

State and that of the schools in its metropolitan neighbor. For the university to recruit more underrepresented students, inclusion, power, and reorganization challenges need to be addressed.

For engagement efforts, this means the one-way paradigm of “technical rationality” (*Fear & Sandmann, 2001–2002, p. 29*) is giving way. There are calls to dismantle traditional barriers that privilege some groups and their ways of knowing over others, posing instead the paradigm-shifting question of how land-grant institutions are to “serve the people who support them” (*Brown et al., 2010*) and acknowledge their “funds of knowledge” (*González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005*).

In response to this question, new models of engagement seek to dismantle traditional power relationships between the university’s knowledge and that of the people. These require confronting multiple barriers: “barriers between teaching, learning and research; between academic disciplines; and between traditional and non-traditional forms of learning” (*Brown et al., 2010, p. 11*). Dismantling such barriers allows for recognition of resources that exist in diverse urban centers and redistribution of resources toward new programs that leverage existing social capital to strengthen communities in culturally relevant ways (*Nelson-Smith, 2011; Robinson & Meikle-Yaw, 2007; Ward & Webster, 2011*). In higher education, this process challenges the “gate-keeping function of our ‘research base’” (*Hassel, 2004*) because it is one of humility about what we at the university do *not* know.

Work on the ISU 4U Promise at Iowa State University proceeds through a collaborative leadership configuration and an innovative stance toward our land-grant mission. It strives to take a bidirectional view regarding the circulation of knowledge between the university and the community. In our building efforts, this has meant making space to learn about the concerns and constraints of our partners. Upon implementation of the ISU 4U Promise, we did not approach our partners with preconceived ideas or plans that had to be adopted to participate. We asked teacher teams at each school how they envisioned the ISU 4U Promise influencing activities with students and used these conversations to guide the university’s efforts the following year. We formed a community alliance to organize and network the resources of community agencies to streamline interaction with the university and to inform the process of ongoing development. This bidirectional view and practice of knowledge is grounded in an understanding of societal multiculturalism that is bivalent (dual-pronged) in its orientation to the process of change (*Fraser, 1997*). The ISU 4U Promise seeks

to pave a pathway to include students from historically excluded groups to enhance their representation at the university. To do so requires that we *redistribute* institutional resources. This bivalent approach differentiates substantive from superficial approaches to diversity and equity.

Pluralism demands not just the cultural recognition of the multiple (racial, ethnic, and other) identities associated with historically excluded populations but also their political parity (*Newfield & Gordon, 1996*). For students from historically excluded populations to participate on par with their dominant-culture peers at the university, they must be accorded equal respect as knowers and learners, and they must be allocated equitable (not just equal) resources to expand their knowing and learning. Equity instead of equality considers a need that is on the whole greater—due to historically produced social and economic disparities—than the need among dominant-culture students. It requires greater (not just “the same”) resources for amelioration. Universities that seek to actively concern themselves with the disproportionate underrepresentation of students on their campuses must attend to the structural imbalances in material conditions and the disconnected relationships that reproduce underrepresentation (*Giroux, 1994*). We aim for bivalent representational *and* redistributive equity through the collaborative configuration of the ISU 4U Promise.

The Social Justice Agenda in Higher Education, Promise Programs, and the Added Potential of the ISU 4U Promise

Much of the scholarship on higher education and social justice is insular; it is undertaken in institutions of higher education by scholars of higher education about higher education. The research is self-centered—focused on the institution and how organizational performance within recruitment, enrollment, and retention processes could be altered to respond to calls made by the social justice agenda (*Brennan & Naidoo, 2008*). This research places confidence in the overall structure of the institution to be able re-form itself around diversity and equity principles and practices and effect change in student experiences and outcomes.

Other scholarship, however, points out the limitation of insularity. Since disparities in student performance have their root in societal conditions outside the institution, “new forms of relationship between institutions of higher education and the societies of which they form a part” are required (*Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, p. 298*).

These new relationships stand to transform institutions of higher education as they connect their diversity and equity interests to preexisting disparities in K-12 schooling and society. Higher education can intervene in and interrupt disparities through a social justice agenda implemented beyond the institution's walls. This is the work of the ISU 4U Promise.

The ISU 4U Promise is an example of what are referred to nationally as "early commitment" or "promise" programs. Promise programs seek to establish a promise of postsecondary possibility via an early commitment of financial aid to support a student's aspirations. The promise is between the student and the program, which assures financial assistance contingent upon completion of specific actions associated with college preparation (*Blanco, 2009*). Promise programs are a response to the long-standing interrelated patterns of class, educational, and racial/ethnic stratification in college access. These patterns indicate that individuals with low family incomes, whose parents have not received higher education, and from historically excluded racial/ethnic groups such as African Americans and Latinos are less likely to enroll in college (*Perna, 2006*).

Promise programs have three overarching characteristics: (1) guaranteed financial aid (2) to students of low-income backgrounds (3) who are identified for program participation in elementary, middle, or early high school (*Blanco, 2009*). *Andrews (2014)* defines a promise program as a "local place-based scholarship program that offers near-universal access to funding for post-secondary education" for which notification of access occurs "well in advance" of the decision to pursue postsecondary education (*p. 56*). Implicit is that the place targeted by the promise is otherwise lacking financial resources to support college-going. In this way promise programs are interventions into the economic structure of college access that function by enhancing its affordability. Since the economic landscape of the United States is historically racialized, as a core corollary, promise programs also stand as interventions into the nation's racial landscape. All facets of the labor market include "Black-White" disparities: a growing pay gap, continued occupational segregation, and disproportionate unemployment rates of Blacks (*Reskin, 2012, p. 21*). Insofar as promise programs extend to individuals from historically excluded groups opportunities that will enhance inclusive representation on college campuses and in corporate boardrooms, as well as redistribute investment in local and national economies and governance, they stand to contribute significantly toward dreams still embattled for an integrated society

(*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2013).

Promise programs are not new. The first known program (the Daly Education Fund) was established in 1922 in Lake County, Oregon (*Cities of Promise*, *n.d.b*). The earliest mention of a program in the scholarly literature appeared in 1990 (*St. John, Musoba, & Simmons*, 2003). It is not surprising that research specific to promise programs is limited. Our efforts to understand the ISU 4U Promise in relation to other such programs has revealed that information is largely concentrated on websites and in the news media. Notable media attention was given to President Obama's 2010 commencement address at Central High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in which he referred to the Kalamazoo Promise program as a "rare and valuable chance to pursue your own passions, chase your own dreams without incurring a mountain of debt" (*Remarks by the President at Kalamazoo Central High School*, 2010). In terms of scholarly attention, however, documentation of implementation and outcomes is lacking. We undertook a literature review and searched for articles on school, community, and university partnerships published within the last 10 years in six major education-related journals (*The American Educational Research Journal*, *Anthropology of Education Quarterly*, *Education and Urban Society*, *The Journal of Extension*, *Journal of Higher Education*, and *Urban Education*). We found none that spoke specifically to promise programs. When we expanded the review beyond these major journals and pushed back the time boundary to encompass all extant literature, we retrieved three peer-reviewed journal articles (*Harris*, 2013; *Mendoza & Mendez*, 2012–2013; *St. John et al.*, 2003). Two were focused on the role of promise programs in supporting student enrollment, retention, and completion in higher education—the purpose of the ISU 4U Promise at Iowa State University.

There is a gap between the number of promise programs in existence—the *Cities of Promise* website highlights 81 programs (*Cities of Promise*, *n.d.a*)—and those documented in the research literature. This suggests that although promise programs continue to grow in number—eight programs have been established since 2014 (*Cities of Promise*, *n.d.b*)—we know little about their impact. By presenting the ISU 4U Promise we hope to contribute to the available literature and provide information in service of future promise efforts at higher education institutions.

We identify defining characteristics of promise programs and explain the features of the ISU 4U Promise that make it unique. We present our review of promise program characteristics using

the broad domains of contextual antecedents, implementation processes, and institutional outcomes. Further program dimensions are from those identified by Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) in their model of college preparation program effectiveness (i.e., contextual antecedents = location and target population; implementation processes = mission, funding, delivery, programs, and evaluation; and institutional outcomes = student persistence).

This two-tiered approach highlights the areas of relative strength and weakness in terms of information available about the characteristics of these programs. We have some knowledge about the contextual antecedents that spur promise program creation, more about the processes involved in promise program creation and implementation, and relatively little about these programs' achieved versus intended institutional outcomes. We note that evidence of promise programs' long-term economic impact on communities is not addressed in the literature. Since promise programs are undertaken and understood as economic development initiatives (Blanco, 2009). We conclude by recommending interdisciplinary research approaches examining educational advancement and economic development as interrelated forces in community life. This is necessitated by a bivalent approach to societal multiculturalism, one that examines universities' efforts to increase representation of underrepresented students on their campuses through early commitment promise incentives in tandem with the effect of those promises on the redistribution of economic resources in families and communities.

Contextual Antecedents: Who Do Promise Programs Serve?

In this section, we situate the ISU 4U Promise within what the literature reveals about preexisting contextual antecedents or realities of implementation. We review the locations that constitute their size and scope and the grade-level audiences they target. As a school-centered, community-based program with a focus on the early childhood years, the ISU 4U Promise is unique among its promise program peers.

Location: State or Community?

The locations of promise programs reported in the literature are associated with either the state or the particular communities they serve. Historically, promise programs have operated at a state level. Most notable among state-based promise programs are Indiana's

21st Century Scholars program and Oklahoma's Promise program. Both serve students through scholarships awarded by the state to qualifying residents as part of a financial-aid package. Beginning in 2005, promise programs were replicated in local communities through support from individual donors, businesses, and foundations. In a report published by the Pathways to College Network, Blanco (2009) identifies community-based promise initiatives, such as those in Kalamazoo, Michigan; El Dorado, Arkansas; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as serving "limited geographic areas" in which partnerships are driven by "coalitions formed around economic and workforce development goals" (p. 4). The identified geographic areas may be bound to a particular city, a school district, or "several schools that are in the same county" (Andrews, 2014, p. 57). Although each community program is unique, "common elements include reliance on local funding sources rather than state funding and eligibility requirements that exclude students from outside their school districts" (Blanco, 2009, p. 4).

The ISU 4U Promise is, by this definition, a community-based program. The local funding source it relies on is primarily that of the tuition awards provided by the university. Not only does it exclude students from outside its central partner, the Des Moines Public School District, the only eligible students are those who graduate fifth grade from two elementary schools within particular neighborhoods of the city of Des Moines. Therefore, the ISU 4U Promise is unique as a community-based program that is more narrowly school based.

Efforts to promote college-going among historically excluded populations typically focus on what are often framed as individual deficiencies: academics, affordability, and access. They are student-based "enhancement programs that supplement a school's regular activities and are aimed at low-income youth who otherwise might not be able to attend college" (Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002, p. 2). In school-based college access programs, the focus is on "changing schools so that the schools are capable of being the primary vehicle of mobility for the students" (Gándara, 2002, p. 84).

The ISU 4U Promise is not a typical college access program; its aim is not to enhance regular school activities but to provide a catalyst for the transformation of what is regular at school. Teacher leadership teams at each school have identified a set of artifacts that students contribute to a K-5 performance portfolio. These artifacts reflect grade-appropriate understandings of college readiness and provide a means for teachers to begin conversations about higher education futures at an early age. This is not meant to be an addi-

tion to existing school structures and activities, but a transformation from within of teachers' roles and routines and students' perceptions of themselves as college-goers. With the schools' active participation in the partnership, students throughout the schools are positioned to reap the benefits (*Gándara, 2002*).

With this school-based theory of change, the ISU 4U Promise is unlike many other promise programs in which individual students are identified through a selective procedure. School-centered programs like the ISU 4U Promise are, according to *Gándara (2002)*, harder to implement. They require the sustained cooperation of many people in the school, people who may be overworked and underpaid (*pp. 85–86*). An aspect of the ISU 4U Promise's theory of change is that the additional effort of a school-based program will bring additional effect. Like community-based promise programs that exist to support local economic development goals, the ISU 4U Promise has the potential to significantly impact the economic context of the two neighborhoods in which the partner schools are located. By providing tuition awards to assist with college affordability and then helping shape school cultures to further reinforce the possibility of college-going, the ISU 4U Promise stands to alter the economic trajectories of youth and families in these neighborhoods.

Located in Polk County, the ISU 4U Promise neighborhoods are the most densely populated area of Iowa. Reflective of the county at large, these neighborhoods have experienced significant growth in their Hispanic and African American populations. The Hispanic population has increased from just over 6,000 in 1990 to nearly 33,000 in 2010, and the African American population increased from 14,800 to almost 26,000 (*U.S. Census 2010, 2016a, 2016b*). For example, nearly one third of residents in the River Bend neighborhood identify as Hispanic and one fourth identify as African American (*River Bend Neighborhood Plan, City of Des Moines, 2015, p. 8*). The rapid ethnic diversification and densification of the ISU 4U Promise neighborhoods reflects broader demographic changes.

Although total student enrollment in Des Moines Public Schools barely increased from the 2011–2012 school year to the 2015–2016 school year, the African American student population increased from 5,454 to 6,128 (12%) and the Hispanic student population increased from 7,034 to 8,339 (18%) (*Iowa Department of Education, 2016*). Accompanying these racial and ethnic differences in the ISU 4U Promise neighborhoods is economic disparity. The median household income in River Bend is \$32,479 compared to \$44,178 for the city of Des Moines. The River Bend neighborhood

also has 18.5% unemployment and 35.3% poverty, rates drastically different from the respective 8% and 18% cited for the city (*City of Des Moines, 2015, p. 9*). At both schools approximately 95% of students are eligible for free lunch (*Des Moines Public Schools, 2017b*).

This is the community context of the ISU 4U Promise. In providing a pathway to higher education for populations gaining in numbers but low in economic gain, the initiative is a means of injecting resources in a location where they can begin to spring-board an individual child, family, and community out of poverty.

Target Population: Secondary or Elementary?

In terms of students served by promise programs, the ISU 4U Promise is unique in its focus on the elementary years. Blanco (2009) states that “current early commitment programs target eligibility to middle and high school youth” (p. 5). Indiana’s 21st Century Scholar program and Oklahoma’s Promise program enroll students in eighth grade (*Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013; St. John et al., 2003*), and the Degree Project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, enrolls in ninth grade. There is the explicit expectation that early awareness of aid will “reduce students’ concern and uncertainty about college costs and therefore encourage them to better prepare during high school” (*Harris, 2013, p. 105*). This is in line with the Pathways to College report that recommends promise programs provide students the “advantage of time to achieve essential programmatic goals” like academic preparation, family engagement, and “personal motivation and encouragement” (*Blanco, 2009, p. 11*). The early outreach that the ISU 4U Promise provides to youth and families as early as the kindergarten years is noteworthy.

Our review of the literature identified no other program in which students officially enroll as early as fifth grade. Because of our early enrollment process, the promise to the students is not just a tuition award guarantee, but potential for long-term academic preparation with a focus on postsecondary opportunity. Signature features of the ISU 4U Promise are students’ contribution of academic artifacts throughout their elementary experience to a work portfolio and the submission at fifth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade graduations of a “letter of intent” to Iowa State University. These activities are designed to form an ongoing affiliation with the university and embed the ISU 4U Promise into the routines of teachers, students, and families so they may capitalize on the “advantage of time” in college preparation.

Implementation Processes: What Do Promise Programs Do?

What we referred to as contextual antecedents in the section above constitute the broad outlines of purpose against which a promise program sets itself—to promote college access and affordability for youth and their families. Decisions made about mission, funding, delivery, programs, and evaluation fill in the picture of any promise program. Here we situate the ISU 4U Promise within what we learned from the literature about these institutional processes to highlight the uniqueness of its wide-net, university-sponsored, highly collaborative, research-informed, and feedback-responsive features.

Mission: Narrow or Wide Net?

The ISU 4U Promise is a “wide-net” promise program: Minimal requirements are placed on students for them to qualify, maximizing the program’s potential to promote college access among target youth and their families. The basic eligibility criteria are minimal: students must complete fifth grade at one of the two ISU 4U Promise elementary schools, remain in the Des Moines Public School district through high school graduation, and be admissible by regular standards to Iowa State University. There are no restrictions based on students’ racial or ethnic identities nor their income. The fact of near-universal free lunch eligibility at the two schools establishes financial need. It also establishes the primary mission of the program to make college affordable and therefore accessible for youth and families experiencing a lack of economic resources that we understand to be historically construed. In this way, the ISU 4U Promise is positioned as a historical corrective to a legacy of racialized privilege and penalty.

The origins of promise programs are tied to attention to economic disparity. Many promise programs began when states were moving from needs-based financial aid programs to merit-based programs (Doyle, 2006). Described by Doyle (2006) as “one of the most pronounced policy shifts in higher education in the last 20 years,” state resource allocations to merit programs more than doubled—from 12% to 26%—between 1980 and 2002 (p. 259). These merit-based programs promoted access to higher education through an emphasis on intentional academic preparation that often overlooked the reality of financial need (St. John et al., 2003). Promise programs sought to emphasize “financial need *and* [emphasis added] aspects of merit that motivate preparation,”

thereby still promoting access via affordability for academically qualified students specifically (*St. John et al., 2003, p. 104*). Indiana's 21st Century Scholars program and Oklahoma's Promise program are hybrid programs that combine needs-based financial aid and merit in this way (*Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013*). In Indiana's 21st Century Scholars program, all students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch are eligible for the program, but the greatest financial award is provided to students who complete honors programs (*St. John et al., 2003*). Similarly, Oklahoma's Promise program requires students to "meet certain academic and disciplinary benchmarks . . . including a pre-college curriculum" and family income requirements (*Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013, p. 397*). By not imposing similar additional academic qualifications, the ISU 4U Promise casts as wide a net as possible.

From our literature review of existing promise programs, only one approximates this "wide net." Like the ISU 4U Promise, the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign's I-Promise program has only one academic qualification: admission to the university. However, that program also requires that students meet multiple income criteria such as an expected family contribution per the Federal Application of Financial Student Aid of \$0, family income below the poverty level, and less than \$50,000 in family assets (*Vaade, Connery, & McCreedy, 2010*). Given that the ISU 4U Promise does not require families to submit evidence of financial need, effectively "adopting" the entire student population at the two partner schools, the net cast is distinctively wide. This emphasizes an approach to change driven more by structurally transformative philosophy than mere individually oriented philanthropy. The ISU 4U Promise's mission is one of community-wide socioeconomic enhancement through formal and informal education to support college-going, with university-sponsored tuition support as an integral though not independent agent of systemic change.

Funding: Federal, Combined, or University Sponsored?

Most college preparation initiatives lack the funding to provide financial support (*Gándara, 2002*). However, delivering an early commitment of financial support to students is an integral process characteristic of promise programs.

The ISU 4U Promise differs significantly from previous college access and affordability initiatives. Perhaps the most recognizable are Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services—

three federally funded programs commonly referred to as “TRIO” programs (*Campbell, 2010*). In 1998, Congress established funds for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (“GEAR UP”). These federal funds are available to state governments and to partnerships of at least one elementary and one secondary school, one institution of higher education, and at least two community organizations. GEAR UP included the 21st Century Scholars or High Hopes program that notifies low-income students in Grades 6–12 of their expected eligibility for federal Pell Grant assistance (*Swail & Perna, 2002*). The movement away from federal ownership of college access and affordability initiatives has evolved in more recent years to increasing involvement of the private and nonprofit sectors. The most prominent foundation established for this purpose is the I Have a Dream Foundation. Established in 1982, the Foundation has supported over 200 projects in over 60 U.S. cities. It currently comprises 36 programs in 15 locations, including one in Des Moines (*Des Moines “I Have a Dream” Foundation, 2016; Swail & Perna, 2002*).

The source and administration of funding for promise programs varies according to their nature. Statewide programs that serve all students are typically integrated into financial aid packages, administered by a state agency or an established nonprofit organization (*Blanco, 2009*). The financial support promised to students is made available through state appropriations. An exception is Illinois’s I-Promise program. The university coordinates funding provided through federal, state, and institutional funds, augmented by individual and corporate donations; funds are administered by the university as a collaboration between the offices of the Provost and Student Financial Aid (*Vaade et al., 2010, p. 8*). The ISU 4U Promise is most like the I-Promise although with a community-based location for implementation. This is a unique feature, as most community-based programs are administered either by sole school districts or school districts operating in collaboration with local private or nonprofit organizations (*Blanco, 2009*).

An example of a community-based collaborative model is that of the Pittsburgh Promise, which operates as a nonprofit community-based organization with state government, school district, higher education, and private foundation links. Similar to the ISU 4U Promise, it was established with a mission of economic development in which college-funding assistance played an important role (*Ghubril, 2013*). Its particular partnership model has succeeded in accruing a \$50 million endowment. Other examples of community-based promise programs operating in partnership

with private funding sources are the Wisconsin Covenant program, established as a nonprofit with an initial endowment of \$40 million and challenged to raise matching funds from businesses and philanthropists, and the El Dorado Promise program in Arkansas, established and funded by Murphy Oil Company (Blanco, 2009). The private foundations that partner with promise programs work across different state and community locations. The Eli Lily and Lumina Foundations have supported programming in multiple locales (Blanco, 2009). With no such funding partners from the private sector, Iowa State University's sole responsibility for the ISU 4U Promise is a distinctive feature that underscores this institution's status as an outreach-intensive land-grant institution charged from its inception with making education accessible for local populations.

Delivery: Restrictive or Inclusive?

The delivery of funding is another source of variation among promise programs. Regarding determination of a student's ISU 4U Promise tuition award, the Promise's practice is aligned with that of some other programs; the value of the award is accrued through a student's enrollment history. ISU 4U Promise students accrue a 20% tuition award for every full year of enrollment at the partner schools; a student enrolled from first through fifth grade will receive a 100% award on admission as an undergraduate. Since committed funds will expire within 6 years of high school graduation, students may spend 2 years at a community college or in the military before enrolling, with the expectation that the bachelor's degree is completed within a 4-year period. Although this 2-year sunset period for enrollment strikes a middle ground between the 15 and 36 months required by other promise programs (Harris, 2013, p. 102), the ISU 4U Promise is again an outlier in terms of additional requirements students must meet to receive the tuition award deliverable.

Most promise programs have multiple student requirements. Beyond high school graduation, some require a specific grade point average (Ghubril, 2013; Harris, 2013; Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013; St. John et al., 2003), a specific number of credits earned or courses completed (Ghubril, 2013; St. John et al., 2003), and/or a specific record of school attendance (Blanco, 2009; Ghubril, 2013; Harris, 2013). In Indiana, a failure to complete an honors curriculum may cause a reduced award from the 21st Century Scholars Program (St. John et al., 2003).

Students participating in promise programs are also often required to meet pledge criteria. Many programs, such as Indiana's 21st Century Scholars Program and Oklahoma's Promise, require that students pledge to be crime-free during their high school career (*Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013; St. John et al., 2003*). Some programs, such as Illinois's I-Promise, require that students maintain a specific GPA and/or course load during college (*Vaade et al., 2010*). The ISU 4U Promise has no additional academic requirements beyond university admissibility for students to receive their promised tuition awards.

In its exclusive application to tuition costs, the ISU 4U Promise is more like other state programs, rather than community programs, that cover costs associated with books, room and board, and fees (*Blanco, 2009*). These additional costs for an ISU 4U Promise student will likely be covered by additional forms of financial aid such as Pell Grants. When a student eligible for the ISU 4U Promise award is considering multiple ISU-funded scholarship offers, the one of most value will be applied by the university. The ISU 4U Promise award is not, in this way, combinable with other ISU scholarship offers and has no "in pocket" value once tuition needs are met. At 2017 tuition rates, the value of a 100% award for a resident undergraduate's 4 years of enrollment stands at approximately \$28,392. Since 5th grade graduation from one of two specific elementary schools and completion of high school within the same district are required, enrollment data drives estimations of the program's total future award payout. This necessitates a close relationship with Des Moines Public Schools, one formalized through a memorandum of agreement between the two institutions.

The ISU 4U Promise is not a state-funded program. Such programs typically allow students to utilize promise-sourced financial aid to support enrollment at several within-state institutions; some may allow choice among that state's private and community colleges, whereas others may restrict enrollment to that state's public 4-year institutions (*Andrews, 2014; Blanco, 2009*). ISU 4U Promise students must attend Iowa State University to utilize the tuition award. In some ways, this is similar to other programs such as Campus and Community: Together for Good in Hancock, Michigan, and the Peoria's Promise Program in Peoria, Illinois, which provide promise funding only to the one institution of higher education designated in the program. However, these programs are not solely university funded. In its creation of tuition awards that are institution restricted and institution supplied, the ISU 4U Promise is taking active financial interest in the diversification of its future

student body. Other promise programs, such as Arkadelphia Promise, in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and the El Dorado Promise, in El Dorado, Arkansas, allow students to attend any U.S. college or university, or in the former program, any U.S.-accredited postsecondary institution (Blanco, 2009; Vaade et al., 2010). These privately funded programs spur college access broadly without being tied to a specific university's interest in its own diversity enrichment. Here we see most clearly the bivalent nature of the ISU 4U Promise as a mechanism for societal multiculturalism; to increase representation of diversity on campus, the university has undertaken, through the ISU 4U Promise, structural resource redistribution.

The way the ISU 4U Promise tuition awards act as a magnet pulling students to the university affords it the chance to develop a closer relationship to its target students than many other promise programs. Conversely, in large statewide programs, such as those in Oklahoma and Indiana, the multiple postsecondary options provided to students hinder university-specific affiliation (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013; St. John et al., 2003). The ISU 4U Promise challenges Ghubril's (2013) assertion that large universities, simply by virtue of their size, will be more removed from promise program activities than smaller colleges. Although Iowa State is a large university, its direct partnering with two elementary schools enables relationship formation that protects against operating as "a business opportunity" to ensure student recruitment (Ghubril, 2013, p. 41) and instead promotes its possibility to act as a partner for social and economic change.

Important to the relational capacity of the ISU 4U Promise with its external partners is the strong foundation built by the internal initiating partners. The Office of Financial Aid, the College of Human Sciences, and Iowa State University Extension and Outreach were the units originally designated to design the program and administer its implementation. Together these units deliver the financial and in- and out-of-school social and academic supports to assist youth and families in the ISU 4U Promise schools and communities. Although other university-administered promise programs, such as Illinois's I-Promise, appoint financial aid as the central program unit, the ISU 4U Promise designated the College of Human Sciences and Iowa State University Extension and Outreach as having complementary roles to assist with achieving the college access mission.

Programs: Removed or Responsive?

Promise programs are defined by the early commitment of financial support for college. When serving audiences historically excluded from higher education because of social processes like racism, institutional discrimination, and poverty, this may not be enough to counter a legacy of educational disenfranchisement and erosion of trust in schooling. The educational opportunities that promise programs provide to build supportive family relationships and develop social and academic competencies that ensure college success are essential in making sure the promise is not an empty one.

The nature of programming provided through promise programs is unclear. Ghubril (2013) writes that the Pittsburgh Promise understands college readiness to have three components, “academic readiness, college knowledge, and the aspirations, dreams, behaviors, and habits of students” (p. 40), and notes that the school district enables data sharing about student progress toward these goals. Although the Pittsburgh Promise’s website explains programming provided, including outreach, school-based mentoring, internships, and career launch events (*Pittsburgh Promise, n.d.*), it reveals little about the university’s role. The nature of involvement of the promise sponsor and the role played by community-based organizations and families in providing programming is missing in the promise literature. Harris (2013), writing about Milwaukee’s Degree Project, notes it developed an extensive communication plan for outreach to families, but it did little to engage them in a two-way conversation.

The programming offered to support promise programs stands to reveal much about their orientation to societal multiculturalism. Programs should target youth and families of historically excluded groups in ways that relate to them with cultural integrity; that is, programming must take an additive and affirmative approach to the relationship between their cultural backgrounds and college, not one that expects their ultimate assimilation (*Knight & Oesterreich, 2002*). “Without cultural integrity,” Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) explain,

students will not respond either because the programs do not meet their specific needs, or because they do not feel the programs are actually designed for them. Students approach school with multiple identities and if programs are to be successful they need to honor

those identities in culturally specific ways so that learning fits. (p. 6)

The challenge is one of finding the right fit between cultural integrity and the reality of the standardized processes related to teaching and testing that define U.S. public schools today and, by virtue of their status as achievement norms, sit at the center of successful precollege programs (*Swail & Perna, 2002*). Promise-related programming should promote academic intensity as the number one variable in college preparation and predictor of degree completion (*Adelman, 2002*).

Not only does the ISU 4U Promise seek to be bivalent in its approach to social change, proceeding from value placed on college access as a representational and redistributive issue, it also seeks to be bidirectional in terms of value placed on knowledge. The ISU 4U Promise promotes college readiness by responding to locally expressed resources and needs and by valuing the knowledge in homes and communities that is the basis for building youths' identities as learners. Reflecting its character as a university-sponsored promise program, the ISU 4U Promise is creating responsive programming through the grant activity of faculty working on education-related themes in the target schools and communities.

Programming provided under the auspices of the ISU 4U Promise includes projects targeting a family-connected approach to mathematics in kindergarten, ambitious science teaching with a connected summer program for upper elementary students, the application of STEM-based principles to understanding flight and glider design as well as youth participatory action research in the community for middle schoolers, and college readiness for families. These activities involve teachers, teacher education students, counseling staff at the schools, and interdisciplinary teams of Iowa State University faculty and staff and business and community partners. The reach of these programs is limited to a particular host context (e.g., school, neighborhood, or grade level). As the ISU 4U Promise grows, we aim to increase the number of programs and further the work to tailor content in response to what we learn from teachers, community-based educators, families, and youth. To this end, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach convenes meetings of the ISU 4U Promise Community Alliance, a network of community-based organizations in the partner neighborhoods, which was formed specifically to provide a means of articulation between grassroots community concerns and ongoing project development.

Institutional Outcomes: What Effect Do Promise Programs Have?

The goal of promise programs is ambitious: to provide an underserved population identified at the state, community, or school level with resources to attend college. Although several promise programs have received national attention in both media and public policy, the “praise has somewhat outpaced the evidence” (Harris, 2013, p. 101). The evidence that does exist does not speak to these programs’ defining goal of promoting college access and affordability but addresses the impact on persistence themes such as college retention and completion rates (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013; St. John et al., 2003). How promise programs achieve their core goal of helping students come to college, and how they change an individual’s demonstrated perception of self as a potential college student (Harris, 2013), remains to be seen.

Persistence: Funding or Failure?

Outcomes of the Oklahoma Promise indicate that students who receive promise program funding alone or in addition to other aid sources (Pell Grants and/or Stafford Loans) are more likely to persist from their freshman to sophomore year compared to students who do not receive promise funds (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013). Additionally, in the transition from sophomore to junior year, students with financial aid packages that included promise grants were the ones most likely to continue. Such impact was not evident in the transition from junior to senior year (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012–2013), suggesting that the “pull” of a promise toward college-going does not outweigh the “push” effect of a challenging college experience.

This possibility is supported by the evaluation results of the 21st Century Scholars program in Indiana, which indicated that the program helped ensure that low-income students received financial aid and therefore promoted access through affordability of higher education. Further, debt was negatively associated with persistence by freshmen, supporting the important role that promise programs can play in student retention. However, results indicated that inadequate academic preparation trumped financial incentive. Failure to succeed, not lack of funding, was the ultimate cause of student dropouts (St. John et al., 2003).

Economic Revitalization: Direct or Indirect Evidence?

A corollary goal of promise programs is related to economic development. The possibility that they will increase the human capital of residents, increase their employability, and make the community business-friendly drives businesses to invest. Many programs, in partnership with businesses, see the role of the institution of higher education as one of keeping students—or potential future employees—local. According to our literature review, however, there is a lack of evidence for such impacts on economic revitalization.

Campus and Community Together for Good in Hancock, Michigan, provides an example. A vacant middle school building and athletic fields were transferred from Hancock Public School District to Finlandia University in return for tuition waivers for Hancock Central High School students for 12 years (Vaade *et al.*, 2010). Given Hancock's decreasing population and below-average household income, the tuition waivers supported students who might not otherwise have attended college. Although the collaboration sought to "revitalize Hancock's lagging economy and encourage families to move to town and stay" (Vaade *et al.*, 2010, p. 14), direct evidence of such revitalization in the local economy is lacking.

The evidence that exists to support the positive economic impacts of promise programs can be drawn indirectly from data such as housing markets and school enrollments. Residents of communities with promise programs have experienced a 7% to 12% increase in housing prices relative to the surrounding communities (LeGower & Walsh, 2014). These increases, however, were not consistent for all home values; growth was most likely to be experienced for properties in the top 50% of the price distribution. The economic benefits of promise programs may not be reaped equitably across residents of target communities, which constitutes a substantive challenge to their redistribution potential.

Since most promise programs require attendance in a specific school or district, their economic potential can be indirectly assessed through changes in enrollment (LeGower & Walsh, 2014). Prior to the start of the Pittsburgh Promise program, the city had lost 60% of its population, with a concomitant 60% decrease in district enrollment. Since the program's beginning, the population is experiencing growth for the first time in 50 years. This growth has persisted for 2 consecutive years, with increasing kindergarten

enrollments. When families enrolled their children in middle school, the Pittsburgh Promise was most often identified as the reason (*Ghubril, 2013*).

Building a Promising Literature Base

Promise programs are relatively new and ambitious attempts to interrupt a history of educational exclusion in the United States. There is need for a literature base on which to assess their success or failure in responding to the contexts they are set to serve, the processes they use to do so, and the effects they have. Our review of the current scholarly literature made it clear that there are opportunities to build a strong foundation for future efforts.

This article contributes to the literature by documenting the characteristics of the ISU 4U Promise that make it unique among existing programs. In terms of contextual antecedents, these are a focus on serving elementary schools, not just individuals. Every student enrolled in our partner elementary schools, regardless of social identity or academic profile, is eligible for the program. This allows us to work in partnership with these schools toward a goal of coevolving a shared culture of college-going in the early childhood years. In terms of processes, this speaks to a wide-net approach and responsive, coparticipatory programming as other unique aspects. With respect to the latter, the ISU 4U Promise solicits involvement from its various school, community, and university stakeholders. To create a culture of college-going in the schools, we work with a teacher liaison team that provides essential input into the direction of the in-school work. This includes ideas for professional development; in-classroom resources, such as grade-level lesson plans matched to opportunities available in each of ISU's colleges; and role modeling whereby ISU undergraduates assist teachers in talking with elementary students about college life. The ISU 4U Promise Community Alliance is organized by leaders of community-based organizations elected by their peers to synergize available local resources to support out-of-school family and school programming. These resources may include activities made possible through funded projects undertaken by ISU faculty, staff, and students. A small, internally funded project consists of middle school youth mapping their neighborhoods' learning spaces and making suggestions for changes, suggestions that are then communicated back to school and community stakeholders. A larger project with funding from the National Institutes of Health involves preparing youth to perform citizen science in the urban ecosystem. In this way, the ISU 4U Promise benefits faculty, staff, and students at ISU

who want to practice engaged scholarship in support of youth and family populations traditionally not well served by the university. Because it is a university-wide initiative, it has helped facilitate outreach by individuals in such diverse fields as education, event management, journalism, mechanical engineering, and physics.

In terms of outcomes, it is too early to proclaim in what ways these ISU 4U Promise activities, collectively, have made an impact toward the goal of college-going. In line with a DBR model, we have been building the program as we implement it such that none of the cohorts have received the same “dose” of any in- or out-of-school programming. Since the first fifth-grade cohort of ISU 4U Promise students won’t arrive at ISU until 2021, we will not know until then how well the “intervention” of the ISU 4U Promise has paved the way. At its most basic, the intervention of the ISU 4U Promise and other programs is the promise of tuition awards. To document the outcome of that intervention requires tracking eligible youth through the K-12 trajectory and conducting “within” or “across” comparisons by examining student data in partner schools before and after the identified year of promise implementation to determine any significant shifts; it will also involve examining significant differences in student data between partner and nonpartner schools with similar demographics. This would include ascertaining how many students come to the university through nonpromise pathways such as community college transition or direct enrollment, and how many stay through graduation.

The evaluation plan for the ISU 4U Promise includes both this summative approach and more formative components. The summative component of the ISU 4U Promise evaluation plan largely follows an objectives model in which measureable milestones consistent with ISU 4U Promise program goals, such as successful ISU enrollment, are identified and assessed. Within this approach, proximate outcomes, including school success and other factors indicative of academic progression, are monitored. In addition, distal student outcomes consistent with long-term Promise goals, including not only college admission but also advancement and graduation, also must be monitored and evaluated. Although much of the summative evaluation component follows a traditional outcomes evaluation approach, the contextual complexity of implementation does not fit easily into an objectives-oriented model, making a “simple” approach to evaluation anything but.

Given the complex interplay of the student, family, school, and community contexts in which the ISU 4U Promise is embedded, the formative aims of the evaluation plan take a developmental

approach. Gains regarding information delivery and program understanding are assessed routinely, but at different times, among students, their parents, and teachers within the ISU 4U Promise schools. Information from these assessments not only tracks gains in program process but also identifies areas for potential changes in program emphases that are shared collaboratively between evaluators and the ISU 4U Promise team. This interactive approach to monitoring process and adapting programming as needed in ongoing time, as opposed to a single grand assessment at year end, provides an opportunity to shape and develop process initiatives to best achieve the overall goals of the ISU 4U Promise.

Incorporating context into the ISU 4U Promise evaluation presents a current challenge toward which the evaluation team is presently working. We are now hearing anecdotal accounts from our community partners indicating that students are starting to see themselves as college-goers: One such incident involves a partner telling us that for the first time in 17 years students are asking about the diploma hanging on her office wall. Such accounts provide evidence of the need for evaluation that implements a participant-focused approach to identify relevant community indices and characteristics, such as frequency of college conversations. Per DBR, this type of evaluation will help us assess and develop the basis for an adaptive evaluation strategy that can potentially capture community-level impacts of the ISU 4U Promise.

This need for evolving methods of evaluation indicates the broader demand of promise programs. It is not just that changing the whole system requires changing its parts but also that we need theories and methods to help us see and learn from the interlocking phenomena of change. The “basic” approach of providing an accounting of the correlations produced between the tuition awards and student data would not answer the most important questions for our understanding of these programs as part of the educational landscape. An approach is needed that extends to an exploration of how the tuition award affects perceptions and behavior related to college-going, requiring more flexible theoretical and methodological educational research paradigms. Since the tuition awards are implemented as part of a context with simultaneous changes happening in formal and informal educational contexts, an approach to evaluation is needed that can embrace and examine the many variables at play. For this reason, DBR and “in-depth qualitative techniques and sophisticated quantitative methodologies are necessary to capture the link between process and outcomes” (*Nora, 2002, p. 68*). The ability of the ISU 4U Promise

to engage in this type of evaluation will reflect the way it is able to live up to its bidirectional and bivalent change orientation. Acknowledging the contexts of implementation—homes, schools, communities—as possessing their own repositories of knowledge that interact with the promise as *a part of it*, not *apart from it*, is how the university can affirm an engagement orientation to the communities it serves. This evolving strategy has representational and redistributive dimensions as we create places around the table for new perspectives, initiating conversations about how we can know the world we study that don't rest upon a notion of singular positivist objectivity but one enriched by value placed on multiplicity and learning from the margins (*Harding, 1998*). This approach is an example of how we can change the whole system by changing its parts. As Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) write, increasing access to college means grappling with “how to engage those institutions and groups that hold capital to become more responsive” to those who don't (p. 5), especially when “[faculty] for the most part are neither ready nor rewarded for greater engagement with local communities” (p. 5).

Conclusion

Reilly (2003) writes,

The distinctive mark of a great public institution in the 21st century, when campuses no longer hold the exclusive charter for the discovery and dissemination of knowledge, will lie in how the institution uses public service to inform its research and inspire its instruction. (p. 30)

The rise of promise programs provides an opportune time for universities to examine their public service missions and strengthen traditional outreach with models that recognize what is to be gained by taking in diversity of experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors of historically nondominant groups. For student recruitment this means conceptualizing multicultural and college-going identities as the same. “Efforts to mold low-income Latino and African American students into applicants who fit the university's current narrow constructions of eligibility are not likely to bring significant new diversity to the university” (*Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, and Morrell, 2002, p. 109*). What the 21st-century university needs are students who have gained “confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing one's own identity and connections

with one's home community" (Oakes et al., 2002, p. 108). One goal of college access as a lever for social change—enhanced representation—works in tandem with the other—enhanced redistribution. The students who come to campus are not just diverse in cultural identity but also in intellect, substantively enriching the learning environment for others, especially those for whom they serve as role models, further opening doors that have for too long been closed.

We, like Kinsella in *Field of Dreams*, hope that if we build it, they will come. The ISU 4U Promise is our own diamond in the cornfields, an early-commitment college access and affordability program intended to spur educational and economic opportunity and achieve social equity for students underrepresented at the university because they have been underserved in schools and society. These are the ghosts that our own professional backyard project is trying to expel. Like Kinsella's, our effort requires razing some long-planted practices and undertaking something that is unique among our university neighbors. In this article we have situated those efforts within what the literature reveals about the state of similar endeavors. In doing so we seek to catalyze additional scholarship around promise programs and their intentions, impacts, and inquiries, in hopes that, with time, promising pathways for universities aspiring to update their approach to college access will be clear.

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