



# Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Beginning with the high school class of 2015, Tennessee Promise will provide college coaching and last-dollar aid to every high school graduate making a seamless transition to community college. We examine the program that preceded this effort and evaluate its potential effect on college-going and college persistence. Knox Achieves originated in Knox County, Tennessee with the class of 2009. Eligibility was neither need-based nor merit-based, negating some of the application hurdles that accompany other aid vehicles. We find that program participation is strongly associated with an increased likelihood of graduating from high school and enrolling directly in college, albeit with a modestly lower chance of starting in a four-year college. The evidence suggests that aid *per se* is not the only lever by which Knox Achieves worked: college enrollment and college credit gains are largest among lower-income students who likely saw little to no scholarship aid from the program.

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## 1. Introduction

A large and varied research literature demonstrates that attending and completing college pays off in the long run,

in terms of both monetary and non-monetary benefits (Card, 1999; Oreopolous & Petronijevic, 2013). And yet, many students who might benefit from a college education fail to enroll because of financial need or inadequate support throughout the application processes for admission and aid.

Why do capable students choose not to pursue college? A host of federal, state, and institutional programs exist to alleviate students' financial need, and abundant research has shown that aid can increase enrollment.<sup>2</sup> But complex eligibility criteria can hinder the very students these programs are intended to benefit (Dynarski, Scott-Clayton, & Wiederspan, 2013), and aid programs that are conditioned on completing the FAFSA are not always successful at increasing students' access to college (Bettinger, 2004; Bruce & Carruthers, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> See Deming and Dynarski (2010) for a review.

College coaching is premised, in part, on the notion that aid eligibility is complex or poorly publicized. It would seem, then, that a simple and transparent financial aid program combined with college coaching would be particularly well-suited to push students into college who would have otherwise deferred. With this in mind, we examine the potential impact of Knox Achieves, a college coaching and financial aid program that was made available to every graduating high school senior in Knox County, Tennessee beginning with the class of 2009. After three years, the program – renamed Tennessee Achieves – expanded to more than twenty other counties throughout the state, covering over 40% of Tennessee's 2012–2013 high school graduates. The basic structure of Tennessee Achieves motivated the statewide, publicly funded Tennessee Promise, which will be available to every high school graduate beginning with the class of 2015.<sup>3</sup>

Recent experimental research suggests that college coaching (mentoring, assistance with federal financial aid applications, and other non-pecuniary interventions) late in high school can improve college enrollment.<sup>4</sup> Bundling FAFSA assistance with tax preparation increased college enrollment for families with dependent high school students (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). College counseling that targeted low-income students in the summer after high school graduation substantially mitigated the “summer melt” phenomenon, increasing the share of students who fulfilled their college intentions (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). Providing high-achieving, low-income students with application fee waivers and information about net price at selective colleges increased the likelihood of application to and enrollment in these colleges, substantially improving the quality of students' postsecondary institutions relative to the counterfactual (Hoxby & Turner, 2013).<sup>5</sup> A college coaching field experiment in New Hampshire increased college-going among treated females by 30 percentage points (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013). It is not clear, however, how interventions such as these would perform if scaled to cover an entire district or state. The success of even large-scale field experiments may be difficult to replicate across diverse settings. At the same time, spillover gains that may not manifest in an experimental partial equilibrium could yield dramatically larger treatment effects in a broad-based aid policy. It is possible that a program like Knox Achieves changes the college-going culture of a school, affecting program non-participants as well as participants.

Knox Achieves and its descendant programs provide last-dollar scholarships – i.e., covering the gap between the direct cost of enrollment (tuition and fees) and aid from federal, state, and institutional grants – to first-year community college students making a seamless, immediate transition between high school and one of the state's public community colleges or technology centers. Eligibility for Knox Achieves was limited only by geography, time, and age. Beginning in 2008–2009, any high school senior in Knox County was eligible, regardless of income or aptitude. Knox Achieves proved to be a very popular program: 23% of the Knox County high school class of 2010–2011 met with a mentor at least once, and of those, 56% stayed with the program through their initial entry into a community college. Though the program is generous in principle, in practice it is a surprisingly low-cost aid vehicle.<sup>6</sup> Half of program participants receive no financial aid from Knox Achieves. Their tuition and fees are covered by other grants and scholarships, but they nevertheless choose to engage fully with the program.

We examine whether Knox Achieves participation is associated with greater access to college and improved college persistence. We employ difference-in-difference and propensity score matching estimators to compare postsecondary outcomes of program participants with those of non-participating students elsewhere in East Tennessee. Both methodological approaches exploit plausibly exogenous variation in the availability of Knox Achieves mentorship and support, as determined by place and time. The nature of the program, which recruits high school students early in their senior year, probably sorts more motivated and more organized students into the treatment group. We would detect no change in the college-going rates of senior classes, relative to pre-program cohorts and relative to cohorts in ineligible schools from other counties, if these students would have enrolled in college in the absence of the program. Yet difference-in-difference analyses suggest that college enrollment rates rose significantly in the wake of Knox Achieves availability, and propensity score matching results indicate that program participants were much more likely to enroll in college than non-participants. To a great extent, the matching analysis rules out within-school selection bias by pairing participants with students in nearby districts who did not have access to the program. Findings show that participants are 24.2 percentage points more likely to enroll directly in college than matched students from ineligible districts in the same metro area. Given 17.6% participation rates throughout eligible senior classes, the 4.3-percentage point expectation for intent-to-treat effects aligns with the high end of difference-in-difference results.

Looking beyond college enrollment *per se* to the type of college chosen, we find that Knox Achieves is strongly associated with large gains in the likelihood of enrolling in a community college, with the caveat that the propensity to enroll in a four-year college or university is somewhat lower for participants. Treatment effect estimates for college enrollment are strongest for lower-achieving and

<sup>3</sup> Tennessee Promise, in turn, motivated “America's College Promise,” a 2015 White House proposal to fund the first two years of a community college education with a combination of state and federal grants.

<sup>4</sup> A notable exception is provided by Avery (2010), who shows that a college counseling pilot study in Boston had no discernible effect on the quality of students' applications to college.

<sup>5</sup> Some of this work highlights the importance of students' perceptions about the price of college in forming enrollment decisions, without full information on probable out-of-pocket expenses after aid. Hoxby and Turner (2013), in particular, provide compelling evidence that students are not completely aware of institutional aid opportunities at selective four-year institutions. Though institutional grants are shallower in two-year schools than in selective universities, quasi-experimental variation in community college tuition (i.e., the sticker price most readily observed by students considering whether to enroll) has been shown to affect enrollment decisions (Denning, 2014; Martorell, McCall, & McFarlin, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> The 2012–2013 scholarship cost per student was \$971. By way of comparison, merit-based Tennessee HOPE scholarships are worth \$2000 per year for two-year schools (excluding summer terms), and Pell grants were worth as much as \$5350 in 2009.

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