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Abstract

Objective: In this qualitative study, we explored why students in a free community college environment in Tennessee chose not to enroll in college or dropped out of college shortly after enrolling. **Methods**: We conducted 27 in-depth interviews with individuals who were eligible for the Tennessee Promise. Perna's (2006) conceptual model for college access and choice guided our analysis. We analyzed data using a three-tier approach, which included open/emergent coding, followed by *a priori*/theoretical analysis. **Results:** We identified 15 emergent themes common among interview participants, which we then categorized into the four constructs of Perna's model. **Conclusions**: The Tennessee Promise increases access to and enrollment in postsecondary education for many students. Our study highlights potential gaps policymakers and practitioners can address to continue improving the Tennessee Promise and other student supports. We provide our recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

Keywords

Promise Programs; Policy; Student Support; Financial Aid; Enrollment; Access

"*If I go, I'll probably end up dropping out too*": College enrollment choices in a free college context

According to the most recent data, 283 free-college programs across the nation offer free or reduced tuition for two-year and technical college-bound students, including 199 local and 84 statewide initiatives (College Promise, 2023, April 24). Known as college promise programs, these initiatives are designed to increase college going and completion rates by closing educational attainment gaps. The most significant growth areas for college attainment are among marginalized (e.g., low-income, first-generation, and racially diverse) students (Nguyen, 2020). Obtaining a college diploma enhances the earnings potential of marginalized students if afforded the opportunity (Carnevale et al., 2018).

Even within the two-year college context, students must still choose to enroll and persist to completion to graduate. There are varied reasons that affect students' decisions to enroll in higher education – such as sociodemographic traits, academic performance and preparedness, and dispositions – as well as multifaceted reasons that students decide to persist once enrolled that are determined by organizational factors and student experiences (Bell, 2021; Crisp, 2010; Feldman, 1993; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Reason, 2009). To increase student enrollment and persistence in community colleges, policymakers and program administrators need a clearer understanding of the lived experiences of students who either did not enroll immediately following high school or departed college after enrolling. This article presents findings from a qualitative study of the first statewide college promise scholarship programs, Tennessee Promise. We focused on students' decisions not to enroll in postsecondary education or to drop out in their first year of enrollment.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore why students in a free community college environment in Tennessee did not enroll or dropped out of college during or immediately after their first year. As such, the focus of this study is not to critique the implementation of the Tennessee Promise program, rather, to use the experiences of eligible students who did not enroll or dropout to highlight potential areas for supporting students beyond scholarship funding. For the purposes of this study, we operationalized the concept of college choice to mean the decision to not enroll or to stop out. Interviews, with questions grounded in literature and theory on college choice, were conducted with individuals to illuminate rationales and perspectives. The following research questions guided the study.

1. What factors contribute to students' decisions not to enroll in postsecondary education after completing all Tennessee Promise requirements?

2. What factors contribute to Tennessee Promise-eligible students' decision to drop out of postsecondary education after enrolling?

Background

Enacted in 2014, Tennessee Promise covers tuition and mandatory fees[2] on a last-dollar basis (i.e., after all other state and federal aid has been applied) for students who pursue a certificate or associate degree at in-state, public colleges. Eligibility requirements for the scholarship include residency status in Tennessee, high school graduation or equivalency, attendance at mandatory meetings, and participation in a mentoring program. Tennessee Promise

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[2] Non-mandatory fees include course-specific fees, books, or other college expenses (housing, childcare, etc.).

is targeted at recent high school graduates and is only available immediately following high school graduation or completion of a GED/HiSET (if earned prior to the student reaching 19 years of age). To maintain Tennessee Promise eligibility in college, students must attend full-time, continue to participate in mentoring, and perform 8 hours of community service prior to each term the award is received (Carruthers & Fox, 2016).

Initially, students who received the Tennessee Promise enrolled at higher rates, accumulated more college credits, stayed enrolled longer, and earned more credentials than their peers – especially in Tennessee community colleges (Nguyen, 2020). In addition, researchers found participation in Tennessee Promise reduced the percentage of students borrowing, as well as overall loan amounts (Odle et al., 2021). However, the most recent state evaluation showed a enrollment during 2021 for the first time since the program began, and slightly fewer students remained on track to graduate in 2017 than in 2015 (Podesta & Spires, 2022). The two most common reasons why Promise-eligible students did not maintain their eligibility for the program were failure to attend mandatory mentor meetings and to complete required community service (Spires, 2022).

Although many factors influence college choice (Perna, 2006), financial barriers, including the cost of tuition, have been the most consistent reason students do not enroll or persist in postsecondary education (Collom et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2004; Kelchen, Hosch, & Goldrick-Rab, 2017), especially at community colleges. Further, Ritt (2008) identified personal, professional, and institutional barriers that negatively affect community college student success. Luedke et al. (2019) considered reasons why students choose to attend college, focusing on aspects related to self-efficacy as moderated by personal context. This extension of Bourdieu's

(1984) habitus, or the belief in what one can achieve based on their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, included college-specific considerations such as institutionalized racism and oppression. Further aligned with the requirements of Tennessee Promise, scholars (see Antonio et al., 2000; Astin & Sax, 1999; Chesbrough, 2011) have found that community service positively effects academic outcomes such as GPA, general knowledge, and persistence – while also increasing civic responsibility and moral/ethical development (Dalton & Crosby, 2010).

Tennessee Promise also requires mandatory mentoring for scholarship recipients (Carruthers & Fox, 2016). While there is limited research exploring the effect of Tennessee Promise mentoring requirements, previous research points to their potential benefits. In a study focused on mentoring among community college students, Crisp (2010) found a direct positive impact of mentoring on academic and social integration, as well as commitment to earning a degree. In a related study, Deil-Amen (2011) found teacher-student relationships, especially in the classroom, were instrumental for student integration at two-year colleges. This was particularly true for students with limited engagement on-campus due to having families of their own, working, helping their families of origin, commuting, and maintaining close relationships and obligations to family members (see also Choy, 2002). The most successful students form relationships with faculty or staff that led them to be more inspired and committed to educational goals (Deil-Amen, 2011). Contemporary research affirms that these struggles continue to affect community college student success and that overcoming these challenges depends on personal connection (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Wasssamer & Galloway, 2023).

Although many promise programs, including Tennessee's, increased college enrollment, persistent limitations and remaining barriers exist, especially for low-income and marginalized populations (Brockman et al., 2023; Perna et al., 2020). Further, even when students enroll, many of the same limitations may influence the decision to drop out (Collom et al., 2021; Collom & Cooper, 2022). Peer relationships are often cited as beneficial for college students and particularly racially Minoritized students (Luedke et al., 2023). However, it is still uncertain what approaches to increasing peer contact and support are effective. In a randomized control trial, Kramer (2020) tested if text-based behavioral messaging affected maintenance of Tennessee Promise scholarship eligibility. In the study, the experimental group received text messages framed to encourage students to engage with their peers about the Tennessee Promise and enrolling in college, rather than the purely informational text messages typically sent to potential Tennessee Promise recipients. Overall findings from the study showed that the peer-focused text messages did not affect enrollment or persistence and yielded negative effects for Black participants and students intending to enroll in a two-year technical college (Kramer, 2020). Further investigation is needed to determine what policy mechanisms (if any) and institutional practices may increase peer interaction and support, and enrollment and retention, among two-year college students.

College student mental health problems increased significantly in the past decade and are associated with negative college enrollment and persistence outcomes (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Lipson et al., 2022). In their analysis of a nation-wide survey of over 350,000 students across 373 college campuses from 2013 – 2021, Lipson et al. (2022) found that students from racially minoritized groups experienced increased self-reported mental health problems when compared to white students; further, racially minoritized students were less likely to seek or receive

treatment from college mental health services. The impact of worsening college students' mental health may be exacerbated at two-year campuses, where institutional support may be restricted by staffing and limited budgets (Broton et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework

Perna's (2006) theoretical model for college choice served as the conceptual framework for this study. The model proposes college choices are shaped by four layers. Layer one represents habitus, or the belief in what one can achieve based on their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, and other factors such as institutionalized racism and oppression (Bourdieu, 1984; Luedke et al., 2019). Layer two is the school and community context. This layer reflects, "the ways in which social structures and resources facilitate or impede college choice" (Perna, 2006, p.177). Layer three is the higher education context and reflects the role postsecondary education institutions have in college choice through marketing and admission practices. Lastly, layer four reflects the macro-level effects on college choice due to social forces, economic conditions, and public policies.

Tennessee Promise included unique components such as mandatory mentoring (10-15 hours/academic year) and community service (Carruthers & Fox, 2016). While previous research points to the positive effects of mentoring on habitus (layer one; Luedke, et al., 2019) and of community service on schools and communities (layer two; Chesbrough, 2011), it is unclear what effect, if any, mentors had on enrollment and persistence among Tennessee Promise students (Nguyen, 2020). Perna's (2006) framework was implemented during three phrases of this study. First, it was used prior to data collection to develop the questionnaire; second, the layers were used during data analysis as *a priori* codes; finally, the framework was revisited for

the discussion and recommendations to consider congruence and nonconformities with the theory as informed by participant perspectives.

Research Design and Methods

We used semi-structured interviews, guided by college choice theory and research (Perna, 2006), to give voice to the lived experiences of Tennessee Promise-eligible students. Personal stories provided deeper insight into the challenges students faced, which would not have been attainable using closed-ended questions (Collom & Cooper, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What factors contribute to students' decisions not to enroll in postsecondary education after completing all Tennessee Promise requirements?
2. What factors contribute to Tennessee Promise-eligible students' decisions to drop out of postsecondary education after enrolling?

Participants

The study population was comprised of the first five Tennessee Promise cohorts (fall 2015 through fall 2019) who either *did not enroll in postsecondary education in the fall after high school* or *who enrolled but departed before completing a degree*. Contact information for participants was provided by Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) staff. The final contact list included 114,335 participants who did not enroll in a postsecondary institution the summer or fall after high school graduation and 23,250 recipients who initially enrolled in the summer or fall following graduation but were no longer enrolled in the following fall. In fall

2021, we sent potential participants an invitation email describing the study and offered a $25

gift card as compensation for participating in the online interviews. Sixty-four individuals

responded with interest in interviewing and were sent an informed consent document and

scheduled for an interview, 40 signed the informed consent document, and 27 completed the

interview. Table 1 shows select demographic information for participants compared to the

overall Tennessee Promise population.

Table 1: Study Participant and Tennessee Promise Population Demographics

Study Participants		Tennessee Promise Population	
Female	55%	Female	52.3%
Male	45%	Male	46.7%
White	59%	White	74%
Non-White	41%	Non-White	26%
Average Age	22	Average Age	N/A
Primary Caregiver	15%	Primary Caregiver	N/A

*Tennessee Promise enrollment data retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/thec/research/tn-promise-annual-report.html.

Instrument

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol to collect study data. The protocol

consisted of six broad questions intended to elicit conversation about participant experiences

with Tennessee Promise. Questions in the protocol included topics such as what worked well,

what could have been done differently, and other feedback about the program. The most

important questions focused on the decision to enroll or to depart from college with prompts to

elaborate on the decision process and how access to Tennessee Promise funding impacted the

participant's decision. Probes consisted of key elements from the four layers of the conceptual

framework (Perna, 2006), such as habitus (belief in success), school and community context

(preparation), higher education context (market knowledge), and external forces (social and economic forces). We provided several example questions and prompts below:

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
    a. What was your experience with education prior to graduating high school?
    b. How does your family view education?
    c. How does your friend group view education?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences with TN Promise?
    a. *Prompt: What was your experience with the requirements of the program?*
3. What do you think worked/s well with TN Promise?
4. What do you think could have been done differently?

Data Collection

Interviews were recorded and conducted virtually by members of the research team. Our research team consisted of one tenured faculty member, one postdoctoral researcher, and three doctoral students. Prior to data collection, all researchers completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification training. Further, doctoral student researchers observed one interview conducted by the PI or Co-PI prior to conducting their own data collection.

We conducted several pilot interviews to ensure the length and appropriateness of the questions and refine the survey instrument. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes in duration and interview lengths ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. While reviewing the notes after each interview, some inconsistency was noted in questions (for example, a specific area was not fully probed). Several individuals participated in brief follow-up interviews for clarification. We transcribed interviews by reviewing the virtual platform's AI-generated transcript while listening to audio recordings and editing as needed.

Data Analysis

We utilized a modified version of Anfara, Brown, and Mangione's (2002) three-tiered coding structure to analyze study data. In the first tier, we coded the transcripts using a surface content analysis to generate initial codes, also referred to as *emergent coding* or *in vivo* coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the second tier, we grouped the initial codes into 15 emergent themes. For example, *military service*, *first-generation*, and *college preparation* emerged as common themes among participants. By inductively interpreting the data in the first two tiers of analysis, we allowed for findings to emerge from the data collection and analysis prior to applying theoretical interpretation (Charmaz, 2008). A basic approach to emergent coding, as Biddix (2018) outlined, includes:

1. Reviewing transcript data and underlining words or phrases (codes) appearing frequently.
2. Grouping codes into representative groups, or themes.
3. Review transcripts to ensure the codes and themes accurately reflect participant experiences and identify representative quotations.

In the third tier of data analysis, we deductively analyzed our emergent findings while considering Perna's (2006) theory. As a research team, we discussed the emergent themes and how they related to the core tenants of our theoretical model. Following, we grouped emergent themes based on their relationship to the theoretical model (see table 2).

Table 2: Emergent Themes and Theoretical Categorization

Layer 1: Habitus	Layer 2: School and Community Context	Layer 3: Higher Education Context	Layer 4: Macro-Level Effects on College Choice
Military Service Post High School	Work Responsibilities	Information on TN Promise and other Financial Aid	Macro Level Impact of TN Promise
First-Generation	College Preparation	Institutional/Programmatic Support	COVID
Regrets Based on Enrollment Decision	Mental Health Struggles		
Familial Encouragement Toward Education	Financial Concerns		
Values Education	Individual/Family Health or Trauma		
	High School Supports		

Findings

Findings are organized by the four major areas of Perna's (2006) college choice model, habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and macro-level effects on college choice. We provide a brief overview of the theoretical area and the related emergent themes. We then provide representative quotations from participants for each theme.

Layer One: Habitus

Habitus is the belief in what one can achieve based on their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Five emergent themes fit into this category: Military service, first-generation, regrets based on enrollment decision, familial encouragement toward education, and values education.

Military Service. Six participants referenced military service when explaining their decision not to enroll or to drop out of college. Participants viewed military service as a realistic pathway for them and an alternative to college that would provide them with job stability and

career prospects. Wade explained to us his choice to enlist in the military rather than attend college following high school graduation:

> *I always knew straight out of high school that I wanted to enlist. And at the time, I was already enrolled in the pool program for the military. I just wasn't really something that I thought about after signing my name, you know?*

While Wade explained that Tennessee Promise made him consider his choices and whether he wanted to attend college, his decision was always going to be enlisting in the military.

Other participants shared their view that the military offered an opportunity to remove themselves from their current situation that college would not. For example, Logan shared how he enlisted for the stability of the Air Force and to remove himself from his home life and college during the COVID pandemic:

> *I was going to go to college. But a lot of things happen with my home life. And I needed stability and to be able to provide for myself. So, I joined the Air Force instead of going to college.*

First-Generation. Study participants referenced being a first-generation student 11 times when explaining their college choices. Vandy had a negative view of education in general and shared his extended families' experiences with education:

> *I don't think many people my family ever got very far [in] school because I think my grandmother dropped out sometime in high school, because I think back in like the 60s, you could do that. My mother went to college, she tried to graduate in some sort of art*

class long time ago. And she's not a famous artist or anything like that. She never made it

anywhere with that. Only my cousin went with the Tennessee Promise. He's a year older

than me and he dropped out immediately. All my friends that I knew who did go to the

Tennessee Promise [dropped out]. I probably could have fared better, if I cared to go,

everyone I knew had dropped out and I was like, "Well, if I go, I'll probably end up

dropping out too."

Holly also shared how her family had difficulty navigating the college enrollment process:

My parents didn't have the college experience…applying for colleges and figuring out

how you're going to finance your education. That was something that we kind of had to

figure out on our own as it came up.

Vandy and Holly's experiences are not uncommon among first-generation students. While both

individuals sought support and guidance from their family, they found navigating the complex

structure of a higher education institution difficult. Vandy assumed, based on his family history,

that he would be unsuccessful in college, while Holly and her parents were uncertain how she

would finance college.

Regrets Based on Enrollment Decision. A commonly discussed topic (referenced 15

times) among participants was regretting their initial choice to either not enroll or stop out of

college, the desire to either return to college, and/or how they have already enrolled/re-enrolled

in college. Harmony explained to us how she enjoyed college and would love to return someday:

I would love to be able to do it…to go to college and get a degree. I would change my

major, too. I would want to be an elementary school teacher because I taught pre-K for

five years, and I loved it. But I would love to be able to go back to school and start

teaching kindergarten or first grade.

Harmony experienced a tragic death in the family the week before final exams of her first semester. While she tried to come back and complete the semester, she "*just wasn't mentally in the headspace to be there at all…I just couldn't deal with it…I just didn't even go and take my finals.*"

Several other participants, such as Mariah, initially enrolled in college, stopped out, and later returned to a community college. Mariah initially enrolled in an out-of-state private college and said if given the second chance to make her initial choice after high school, "*I would take [Tennessee Promise], I would do it for sure.*"

Familial Attitudes Towards Education. Participants referenced familial attitudes towards education 14 times as a key factor in their initial choice to either not enroll or stop out of college. Vandy told us that his family "didn't value education that much" and described how he only knew of one family member with a college degree. Similarly, Chey stated that her family did not prioritize education. This forced her to navigate the process by herself and her eventual choice to not enroll in college.

Values Education. The value of education was referenced nine times by participants as a key factor in their initial choice to either not enroll or to stop out of college. Miguel, who took two years to travel abroad before enrolling in an out-of-state college, stated that:

Education unlocks a lot of doors you won't have if you just jump right into the workforce. And so yeah, that's kind of been like my big view growing up. Education is important. For

a little while, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But I knew getting a formal education

was part of it. So, after I got done with high school, I just started doing college.

While Miguel saw education as important, he did not see the benefit of immediately enrolling in college after high school, even with the availability of the Tennessee Promise.

Layer Two: School and Community Context

Layer two reflects "the ways in which social structures and resources facilitate or impede college choice" (Perna, 2006, p. 177). This facet of Perna's framework was prominent in participant narratives. Seven pattern variables were included: work responsibilities, college preparation, mental health, financial concerns, unclear career path, individual/family health, and high school support.

Work Responsibilities. Participants indicated their work responsibilities as a key factor 9 times. Ben explained that, although he loved college, he was forced to drop out due to working full-time while also attending college full-time:

I had to work full time in college, and I had to work full time at work, because I have bills

to pay. I ended up just getting burned out. And it was pretty horrible. I didn't really know

of any other way because I couldn't afford to cut hours at work. So being forced to go to

school full time wasn't the best for me. I ended up deciding to drop out. The way my work

schedule and school schedule…I was only getting about four to five hours of sleep a

night. And it was it was rough.

College Preparation. Participants mentioned their preparation for college 17 times as a key factor in their college choice. Ruby explained how she initially felt prepared for college due to participating in Upward Bound and college preparation programs, but underestimated how difficult college could be:

> *I was always a straight-A student from kindergarten all the way through high school. And college kind of kicked my butt in a sense. I was never really taught how to study or anything like that, because I didn't have to study for those classes. If I showed up and did the bare minimum and turned my work in, I was a star student. It was very easy to be a star student. But then college hits, and it's a whole different ballgame.*

Flower also shared how college was different for her than high school:

> *So obviously, who wouldn't take advantage of [Tennessee Promise]. But I think it was a bit harder, just college in general, because you're out there on your own. And then everything moves so quickly. And it was hard to understand. And my friends were like, 'obviously, we're going to college'. But once we got there, [it] was a bit harder than what we had expected. Everything moved so quickly, as far as like writing papers and things like that. I mean, of course, that's college life, but it was something that I definitely wasn't prepared for. I guess I want to say discouraged me a lot, just because I felt so out of place.*

Mental Health. Participants indicated their mental health was a key factor in their college choices 13 times. Vandy shared his story and how his mental health impacted his choice not to enroll following high school graduation:

But like, 2016, through probably early 2019, were like, just like the worst years of my life,
really. And when you're having such a bad time, and people want you to go to school…you're
not really thinking about going to college, or anything like that. It was just too much.

Harmony also shared that her struggles with home life and finances resulted in, "*not wanting to*
do anything but lay in bed all day".

Connor, similarly, shared his experience with mental health and its impact on his decision
not to enroll in college:

But a few months after high school, it became apparent that I had OCD. It was a major
mental health crisis at that time, a few years ago. I had to go to the psychiatric hospital
and get on medication and go to therapy. That was something that I couldn't have
foreseen like that completely got in the way of my gap year. Everything is all right now, if
you're wondering. I'm very good right now and looking to go to college.

Financial Concerns. Participants referenced financial concerns as key factors in their
college choice 15 times. May was unsure of whether she was eligible to receive Tennessee
Promise funding and joined the army. She was reluctant to take out student loans to help offset
the costs of college. Vandy stated that even though Tennessee Promise was marketed as *free*
college, he knew it "*wasn't free, you still have to pay for books and the driving there.*" He lived
45 minutes away from the nearest college campus and did not feel the cost of the daily drive was
worth it.

Susan shared with us how her family did not work and how they became reliant on her
for family support when she graduated high school:

I was living with my mom. So, we were in a transition point for our family. Everything

was dependent upon me. I had to make sure bills were paid. I kind of got thrown into

adulthood. And I just really didn't have I would say, I guess that structure just yet, that

balance of how to balance school and balance work at the same time. I think just the

stress of making sure everything was paid. and doing that kind of it went over like that

was more of my main focus rather than going and furthering my education.

Individual/Family Health and Trauma. Participants referenced how situations involving their own or their family's health/traumas impacted their choice to not enroll drop out of college 13 times. Holly shared with us her mother's health struggles and the impact it had on her education:

Also...my mom got really sick at the time. That is really the main reason why I left school

was to just kind of help take care of her and like be more present in my family. And also,

just like a bunch of family stuff happen after I withdrew from State College, I took the

better part of four years off to be with my family, and then to work for a little bit after

that. So yeah, I didn't think I'd be eligible again.

Many participants stated that they had the responsibility to take care of their family when an unexpected health issue arose. This responsibility often either directly impacted their ability to attend college or led to their own struggles with mental health.

High School Support. Participants suggested the support provided by their high school was pivotal to their college choice 10 times; 5 indicating supportive high school environments and 5 comments indicating unsupportive high school environments. Holly shared that her

experience with a high school counselor and the support she received, which she felt was valuable:

> *When I was in a position where I was inexperienced, uneducated, about the whole process of applying for colleges. And my guidance counselor at school helped a little bit. But I think for people who don't have a lot of external influences and like resources, helping with helping them with that, I think it was really valuable.*

Elizabeth explained how she thought her high school counselor limited her and other students' ability to access college financial aid:

> *I felt very out of my league when I initially went into college, as far as the Tennessee Promise goes. I was not made aware of the program, until the program had already started for other students, because I had a counselor, who at one point quite physically had gotten up out of her seat to shut her door in my face.*

Mariah attended what she referred to as a high-achieving high school and explained how the pressure to attend a prestigious college impacted her college choices:

> *I felt this pressure to go to a top-30 school. I really had no idea about the cost of college or how much that was going to impact me later on down the road. And what that looked like for my future, it was really just pushed like 'you're a pretty high-achieving student, so you should be going to this upper-echelon school.' And that was the end of the conversation. I do really remember my guidance counselor being like, 'you don't even need to look at [the local community college], it's not really an option for you, you're way far advanced, you don't need to go there'.*

Mariah ended up dropping out of her initial institution and later re-enrolling at a community college in Tennessee while paying her tuition without scholarship aid. She shared that if she could, she would have taken advantage of the Tennessee Promise initially.

Layer Three: Higher Education Context

Layer three is the higher education context and reflects the role postsecondary education institutions have in college choice through marketing and admission practices. Two pattern variables were included in this layer: information on the Tennessee Promise and other financial aid and institutional/programmatic support.

Information on Tennessee Promise and Other Financial Aid. Participants referenced this category 14 times when explaining their college choices. The information provided to students was often unclear, and at times incorrect. Conner spoke with us about his high school's mandatory meeting for Tennessee Promise:

> *However, I never met my counselor. We didn't get one, he never showed up. So, in that Tennessee Promise meeting, I think that was a requirement to be in that meeting. We just sat and there was no one there.*

Taylor enlisted in the military initially and was told she would still be able to use Tennessee Promise funding after her first year in the military:

> *Someone mentioned to me that I if I did one tour service, and got out, I would still be eligible for the Tennessee Promise, as long as I did it after my first tour service. So, once I did my first tour service, I really looked into that. I emailed so many people, I was on*

deployment, like right before we got out. So, I emailed a lot of people, and it was hard to

email at the time because of the internet. And nobody got back to me. I emailed several

different schools, went on websites, I don't even remember all the people I emailed but

nobody got back to me on that. So, I wasn't able to apply for aid and didn't know what to

do. But after my first war, I did want to get out. Going to college was my first option.

Garnet spoke about how she needed assistance with basic needs such as food, gas money, and other necessities; however, as an early high school graduate enrolling in the spring semester of college, she was told she could not apply for extra support:

But they said that you have to apply before college begins. And it was practically like the

ability to have food, the ability to have gas money, and it was all just like college bundle

that is offered. And I had no idea until I was already struggling. And I think that that

would be very nice to have advertised for Tennessee Promise students. Let them know

what [assistance] you might also qualify for.

Mariah enrolled in a prestigious private institution immediately following high school. She explained while their financial aid package seemed to cover most costs her first year, she felt like the institution did a "bait and switch" and removed much of her funding afterward. She eventually transferred back to a local community college to continue college education.

Institutional/Programmatic Support. Participants referenced institutional and programmatic support ten times. Specifically, many participants reflected on how the mandatory mentoring program played a role in their college success. Becky shared with us her experience with her mentor and although she was "*really nice,*" she only met once in a large group at the

high school. Elizabeth shared how she received little to no support, and was left to figure out college on her own:

> *Nobody in high school told me anything about scholarships or anything. Nobody wanted to speak with me about. They need to have better communication among Tennessee Promise and other scholarships, and especially have regards towards their education because it's not being treated seriously.*

Layer Four: Macro-Level Effects on College Choice

Layer four reflects the macro-level effects on college choice due to social forces, economic conditions, and public policies. We included two pattern variables in this layer; macro level impact of Tennessee Promise and the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section provides broad observations based on participant interviews.

Macro Level Impact of Tennessee Promise. The implementation of Tennessee Promise resulted in significant increases in college enrollment including positive increases for Black and Hispanic students (Nguyen, 2020), decreased dependence on student loans (Odle et al., 2021), and diverted enrollment away from private colleges and to Tennessee Promise-eligible public institutions (Bell, 2021). Participant experiences in our study supported the findings. Many participants indicated that without the Tennessee Promise, they would not have considered going to college. Further, many participants who dropped out of college still held favorable views of the program.

The COVID-19 Pandemic. Participants only mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic five times during interviews. Our sample of participants was recruited from the 2016-2019 cohorts,

and it is likely that very few potential participants experienced college during COVID; however, future analyses must explore how the pandemic impacts enrollment decisions for individuals eligible for Tennessee Promise. For further analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on students in a free college context, see Collom & Cooper (2022).

Discussion

As a free community college tuition program, Tennessee Promise provides several benefits to community college students within the state. Research indicates that financial constraints are often cited as a primary barrier for students attending community college (Perna et al., 2018). Moreover, additional research also demonstrates the importance of mentoring/mentorship and community service as important aspects for assisting students with persisting through postsecondary education (Crisp, 2010; Collings et al., 2014; Deil-Amin, 2011; Moschetti et al., 2018; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2021). Among these benefits, those particular to the Tennessee Promise program are related to eliminating the need to accrue debt related to tuition and fees and increasing students' likelihood of staying enrolled in postsecondary education and obtaining a credential (Spires, 2020). However, challenges remain for some students who attempt to utilize the program. Such challenges include balancing care-giving roles with coursework and program requirements, managing work-related responsibilities with coursework and program requirements, having reliable transportation, and financial needs above and beyond tuition and fees. Navigating these challenges is especially difficult for low-income students, of whom the program is especially designed to benefit (Spires, 2020). In this study we chose to analyze the perspectives of students who chose not to apply, enroll, or otherwise drop out of community college. The aim of our approach was to provide additional context to this

population of students, as it may aid the ability of policy makers to craft solutions within the Tennessee Promise program to further support students in similar circumstances.

Mental Health

Our analysis of participants' experiences indicated that mental health was a major concern in their decision not to enroll in postsecondary education immediately after high school. Participants not only expressed feelings related anxiety, depression, and hopelessness about the future as it related to attending community college and its subsequent costs beyond promise funding—some participants also relayed their decision not to attend due to mental health diagnoses and needing to receive additional support. Community college students who experience mental health issues are less likely than their four-year college attending peers to have the resources available for treatment (Katz & Davidson, 2014). Katz and Davidson (2014) assert that community college are less likely than their four-year college peers to report or name mental health issues like anxiety or depression, but more likely to report having more serious mental health issues such as schizophrenia, eating disorders, suicidality, and substance abuse. Despite community college student populations being more likely to report having higher rates of serious mental health issues, community colleges themselves are less likely have adequate information regarding mental health and the resources to provide mental health care than better resourced four-year institutions. Low-income students, of whom the Tennessee Promise program is designed for, are more likely to experience mental health issues due to a myriad of sociocultural and financial factors. This increases the likelihood that they will choose not to attend postsecondary education due to the increased burden of navigating college.

Personal Responsibility

Apart from concerns about mental well-being and attending community college, participants also expressed that their responsibilities as caregivers prevented them from choosing to enroll in community college. While many participants may have had the moral support from family members to attend college (Braxton et al., 2014; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Mwangi, 2015), financially, these students are viewed as primary breadwinners, or primary caregivers of children or adults in their household. For example, Holly decided to drop out of school after her mom became ill to take care of her and "be more present" in her family. Should a parent lose a job or become ill the responsibility of providing care or income then falls on the student. Our analysis demonstrated that not only did students feel they had the responsibility, financial or otherwise, they also felt the mental and emotional toll of having to do so.

Finances

Finances or thoughts about finances also played an important role in the participants' decision not to enroll or drop out of college. Financial concerns are a major barrier for Tennessee Promise eligible students (Perna et al., 2018), and our analysis demonstrates those concerns often intersect with mental health (e.g., increased anxiety about paying for college, not knowing the full extent of the financial aid package or meeting basic personal needs) and personal and familial responsibility (e.g., being the primary caregiver/breadwinner in a family). In their evaluation of the Tennessee Promise Program, Spires (2020) found that despite the promise of the program, low-income students were less likely to receive Promise funds because they qualified for other need-based scholarships, and that Promise funds did not cover non-mandatory fees such as books, supplies, or lab fees. For students who could afford the fees not covered by Promise funds, they faced additional challenges due to the community service and mentorship

time commitment, with relation to their work and caregiving responsibilities. All concerns that are similarly highlighted in our analysis.

Implications

The Tennessee Promise Program is a program that has the potential to increase the number of students who enroll and graduate from college with a credential. However, without understanding the needs of underserved and traditionally marginalized students who are eligible for the program, there will continue to be students who are eligible for community college and choose not to enroll because of their perceived lack of support. To best serve these students, policy makers should look to bolster support for community college infrastructure—improving mental health support services, library resources, and campus advisors who support Promise program students. Doing so would address a critical need for students who need to receive mental health support, or aid in navigating course and college requirements. Enhancing library resources in the form of opensource texts and technology (e.g., computers, portable Wi-Fi, Laptops) would ease the financial burden of students purchasing those items. Policy makers should also look to ease the restrictions on the use of Promise funds to include non-mandatory fees that are associated with college enrollment. This eases the financial burden of students to meet those needs that could also be provided by the promise of "free" community college.

Conclusion

The Tennessee Promise program's impact on student enrollment suggests important considerations for future adjustments to the program. Improvement of high school educational programs focused on understanding costs and funding for college, academic expectations, and the critical role of high school environments. Many participants in this study decided to attend

college during or immediately following their senior year of high school. Respondents also cited how the high school counselor significantly impacted the student's decision to attend college and which college to attend. These findings underscore the critical role high school environments have on student college-choice decisions and the need for additional resources to support other college-choice programming and assistance.

Although many participants expressed feelings of regret regarding their choice to not enroll or drop out of college, participants who enroll and later drop out are experiencing elevated levels of stress related to their decision to enroll. With this finding in mind, leaders/policymakers should consider stress reduction steps during Tennessee Promise participants' college decision-making process. Steps such as flexible deadlines and rolling applications/enrollment periods can reduce the pressures experienced. In addition, counseling, mentorship, and encouragement are essential to reducing the distress participants experience during the luminal period.

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