Universal or Targeted Eligibility for Postsecondary Opportunity Programs: Implications for Efficiency, Equity, and Feasibility

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Purpose of Study

This collective case study examines the eligibility decision for 10 postsecondary opportunity programs (POPs) across the United States. The eligibility decision refers to the program design choice that creators make between employing universal eligibility and targeting a particular subset of students, such as those students who are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education. The study will explore the factors that affect the eligibility decision for 10 programs.

What are POPs?

POPs are comprehensive college access and success programs offering a combination of funding and support services to eligible students. They exist under many names, including promise programs, compacts, covenants, and early commitments.

Why study POPs?

Deliberations over eligibility decisions for POPs echo long-standing discussions in public policy and education literature about the most efficient, equitable, and feasible structure for social programs. The recent development of POPs means they have not been the subject of extensive investigation. POPs are proliferating rapidly nationwide, and dozens of communities across the nation are seeking advice from experts on eligibility. Accordingly, POPs are an ideal subject, allowing for the investigation of current trends and parallels between literature and practice while producing high-demand information to aid program design.

Methods

Research question
- What factors did these programs consider when deciding whether to employ universal or targeted eligibility?

Methodology
- Collective, instrumental case study
- Maximum variation sampling strategy

Methods
- Created detailed program and community profiles
- Conducted two rounds of semi-structured telephone interviews with more than 40 POPs stakeholders, including program staff, board members, funders, and practitioners
- Used unstructured follow-up interviews with participants via phone and email
- Collected program data, including marketing materials, reports, and media coverage

Analysis Techniques
- Assembled rich case descriptions with program and community information, verified by primary contact for each program
- Conducted cross-case synthesis, looking for similarities and differences between stakeholders’ responses
- Created an analysis grid design to help identify patterns in findings

Findings

POPs stakeholders identified four factors influencing the eligibility decision.

1. Context

All POPs stakeholders identified contextual factors that played a role in their eligibility decision, including changing demographics, enrollment trends in K-12 schools, achievement and attainment gaps, and economic concerns.

2. Conceptualization of Problem

Universal programs focused on population-wide problems within the community while targeted programs tended to include strategies to confront the barriers to college attendance for specific individuals.

3. Background of Leaders

For targeted programs, program leaders tended to possess the distinguishing characteristics on which programs were targeted. Universal stakeholders, however, did not mention leaders’ backgrounds as an influential factor.

4. Implications for Efficiency, Equity, and Feasibility

Universal and targeted stakeholders demonstrated varying levels of agreement with the chief implications of eligibility decisions for efficiency, equity, and feasibility, summarized in the table below.

In addition to these factors, we found that POPs did not always have clear-cut eligibility, and many chose to modify their eligibility after implementation.

Lessons Learned

The eligibility decision is contextual, complex, and adaptable

Policy decisions reflect complicated situations that require the flexibility to adapt over time. While an approach might make sense for one community, in another context or at another time that eligibility decision may no longer be suitable. In addition, approaches that make sense when a program begins may prove inappropriate after implementation. Programs can change their approach without losing sight of their central mission and goals.

Stakeholders see strengths but not weaknesses of their approach

Both universal and targeted programs agreed overwhelmingly with the benefits of their approach identified in the literature and disagreed with the concomitant drawbacks. We suggest two possible explanations. First, the weaknesses outlined in the literature may not be truly prevalent in practice for POPs. Second, the designers and stakeholders of POPs may be so invested in their programs’ success that they do not always observe potential weaknesses in their program design, especially because many serve a dual role as both administrators and advocates.