

The MATC Promise Evaluation: Perspectives from Milwaukee Public Schools Counselors *A Preliminary Implementation Report*

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Introduction

In the 21st century, fostering a dynamic local economy requires a well-educated population. Researchers estimate that even in the near term over 60% of new jobs will require some education beyond high school.¹ However, many cities -including Milwaukee- continue to lag behind in terms of educational attainment. Whereas 41% of Wisconsin's population aged 25-34 has at least an associate degree, this is true of only 34% of Milwaukee residents.² Currently, only 37% of Milwaukee public high school graduates enroll immediately in any postsecondary institution, compared to 58% statewide.³ Without a ready supply of skilled workers, it will be difficult for Milwaukee to attract and retain employers, and the jobs that are created will go to better-educated people from outside the city.

Providing young people with quality education is thus a matter of urgent necessity for the city, and Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) aims to play a significant role in this regard. As the only two-year public college in the area, MATC is the major portal of access to post-secondary training for low-income city residents. Its tuition and fees (\$4,360) is less than half that of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and it offers technical training and certification as well as pathways to transfer to a four-year college. Yet MATC, like many public two-year colleges around the nation, struggles to move its students to completion. Only 13% of its enrollees complete any credential within three years.⁴ There are many reasons for this, not the least is the precarious economic situation of many MATC students. Research conducted recently at MATC by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab revealed that 39% of surveyed students were either highly or marginally food insecure, and that 20% worried that they might have to drop out of college for financial reasons.⁵

1. Carnevale, et al., Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.ES_Web_.pdf
2. Success for Every Child: Milwaukee Succeeds Milestone Report 2014. <http://milwaukeesucceeds.org/files/6514/0422/4872/Milwaukee-Succeeds-Milestone-Report-2014.pdf>
3. Wisconsin Information System for Education, <http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/portalHome.jsp>.
4. NCES College Navigator, <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.
5. Wisconsin HOPE Lab, *The WiscAid Study First Year Student Experience: Milwaukee Area Technical College*. Available upon request.

Last fall, MATC unveiled a program intended to boost completion rates and to improve the city's stock of educated workers. Entitled "The MATC Promise", the program will enable eligible students graduating from Milwaukee-area high schools to attend MATC without paying any tuition or fees for up to four semesters. MATC officials describe the Promise as a way to increase enrollment and retention at the college as well as among low-income Milwaukee youth overall. They hope that the offer of free tuition will encourage more students to enroll immediately after high school and to persist for four consecutive semesters. To support this latter goal, the college plans to provide a comprehensive battery of wrap-around services to address students' needs.

In addition to graduating from a Milwaukee-area high school, eligibility for the MATC Promise is determined according to financial and academic criteria and contingent on the timely completion of specified

tasks. Specifically, applicants must 1) have an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of \$3,000 or less, 2) have at least a 2.0 GPA and a 90% attendance rate in their senior year of high school, 3) score at least a 16 on the ACT, and 4) graduate on-time. Additionally, the 2016 graduating class was required to apply to MATC by December 1, 2015 and file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by March 15, 2016.

In launching this program, MATC is joining a national movement by municipalities, postsecondary institutions, and even states taking initiative to boost participation and completion among lower-income youth in the absence of federal action. Modeled after pioneering programs in Kalamazoo, Michigan, El Dorado, Arkansas, and other localities, "Promise" programs offer free or substantially reduced tuition to lower- and lower-middle-income young people residing in specific areas and meeting minimum academic benchmarks.⁶ The Upjohn Institute reports that over 80 Promise programs have been created since the late 1990s.⁷

The Role of School Counselors

Though MATC launched a considerable media campaign to inform the public about its initiative, its primary recruitment strategy focused on local high schools. Within high schools, the most critical staff involved in recruitment endeavors were school counselors. This is why counselors in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) District (by far the largest district in MATC's catchment area) were among the first to be explicitly informed about the Promise.

This report presents findings from interviews with fifteen counselors in MPS high schools. We describe how counselors became aware of the Promise, their initial reactions, what they did to encourage students to sign up and to meet deadlines, major obstacles they faced in recruiting students, and their concerns about the program and its implementation. We found that most counselors are supportive of the goals of the Promise and felt that its presentation as "free college" was simple and appealing for students and their families. The program led them to focus their efforts around specific Promise-related goals and deadlines and provided a framework for discussing post-graduation options with students. They reported working hard to inform students about the program and encouraged students to meet deadlines. However, some counselors worried that the program was not targeted at "their" students – namely low-income urban youth, many of whom struggled academically during high school. They emphasized that their students would need considerable support during college, and felt that while MATC indicated that it would be providing supports, it had not sufficiently communicated

6. Miller-Adams, *Promise Nation: Transforming Communities through Place-Based Scholarships*.
<http://www.upjohn.org/sites/default/files/WEFocus/promise-nation.pdf>.

7. The Upjohn Institute, Database of Promise Programs.
<http://www.upjohn.org/sites/default/files/promise/Lumina/Promisescholarshipprograms.pdf>.

specific information about the type and quality of the supports. This left them concerned, even as they worked to fulfill the Promise.

Methods

Given the crucial role of high school counselors in informing potential students about the Promise and encouraging them to apply, we felt that a full evaluation of the program's implementation had to incorporate these individuals' perspectives. Better than nearly anyone else, they have insight into how the program's existence impacted students' plans for the year after high school graduation and into their college-preparation behaviors. Moreover, they are in a position to take stock of unforeseen difficulties and complications which could impede students from taking advantage of the program. Because the Milwaukee Public School District accounts for more than half of the total K-12 enrollment of the MATC Technical College District, we elected to recruit counselors solely from within MPS.⁸

To select counselors to interview, we obtained a full list of all 67 MPS high school counselors and stratified it according to the category of high school at which the counselors worked: comprehensive, test-in, charter, at-risk, alternative, and technical. We recruited counselors from these school categories proportionate to their share of senior class enrollment. Accordingly, we recruited six counselors from comprehensives, four from test-in schools, two from technical high schools, and one each from the remaining categories. We selected counselors at random within categories, and attempted to maximize the number of individual schools in our sample. The counselors we interviewed were employed at 13 separate schools that collectively enrolled over half of MPS seniors.

Counselors' participation was solicited by email. Interviews took place either on-site or at neutral locations, were all completed in April 2016, and were between 60 and 90 minutes in length. We queried counselors about how they initially became aware of the Promise and what they thought about it, how it impacted their work, how it fit together with helping students plan for the transition out of high school, what they did to get students to participate, students' and parents' reactions, and what they felt were remaining challenges. Counselors were compensated \$50 each for their participation.

We reviewed recorded interviews with regard to specific Promise-related topics, and identified a number of recurrent themes. Below we present a summary of findings based on this preliminary examination.

Counselors' Perceptions of the Promise

During the course of each interview, we asked counselors, "What was your initial reaction when you heard about the MATC Promise, and how have your feelings about it changed over the course of the year?" Most of the counselors we interviewed held positive views of the MATC Promise. Even prior to the program, they felt that MATC was a good option for many of their students because it is local, open-access, relatively inexpensive, and provides a bridge between high school and either a four-year college or a career. Indeed, most counselors we interviewed who worked at non-magnet high schools said that they saw MATC as the best among the few "realistic" options for many of their students – particularly those who had earned low grades in high school. In such schools, the majority of students' grades or test scores made acceptance unlikely at even moderately selective four-year colleges. Such students, if they continued their education at all, would attend MATC, other more distant two-year public colleges, or for-profit training schools. Counselors tended to prefer MATC for

8. Authors' calculations from data downloaded from WISEDash, <http://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash/download-files>.

such students because it is geographically accessible and low-cost.

Counselors all expressed the belief that students ought to continue their education after high school, though this didn't necessarily mean all students should aim for a four-year degree. As one put it, "Training is for everyone, but the traditional four-year college is not for every child." For them, obtaining marketable skills was essential for their students if they were to be able to compete for scarce jobs and thereby reach some measure of economic security. Most, however, also owned up to not having sufficient knowledge of the labor market or of job placements and apprenticeships to be able to advise students in this regard. Therefore, they tended to recommend MATC even to students who expressed no desire to go to college, framing it as a way to find a trade.

The Promise, counselors felt, had the potential to lead more students to consider postsecondary education immediately after high school. They identified three main mechanisms through which the Promise might have this effect: financial, informational, and social-psychological.

The Promise's marketing focused on offering "free tuition" and according to the counselors, this message about the low cost of college was easy for students to understand. One counselor said, "It seems like a no-brainer. Any kid with an EFC below 3000 dollars could benefit. With the way college tuition is skyrocketing probably the smartest thing to do is go to MATC for two years, get the general requirements and then transfer." Such financial incentives may make attending MATC seem more possible. Praise was also offered for the application fee waiver, which meant that there is "no downside" to applying, making it easier to convince students to apply.

By clearly listing its requirements, the Promise also made the process of getting to college more concrete. A counselor said that the Promise explained to students that "you do these four things and you get this money." Given these clear guidelines and incentives, some counselors believe that students may be more motivated to improve their attendance and grades, and even score higher on the ACT so they could meet the eligibility criteria (however, they noted that students took the ACT before the Promise was announced). As a result of the Promise, counselors suspected that more of their students completed the FAFSA than otherwise would have been the case.

Counselors also suggested that the Promise also appears to make MATC itself seem more welcoming. A counselor said that the Promise "made MATC seem a little less intimidating for them [students], like maybe they would have someone looking out for them there." Relatedly, the Promise could help students to feel that they deserved to go to college. Another counselor stated, many students "don't think they are scholarship material—so to feel like, oh, somebody wants to give them a scholarship—it makes them feel good."

But there were several concerns raised by the counselors, and these may shed light on potential unintended consequences and areas for improvement. The academic requirements for program eligibility received the greatest attention. Counselors tended to see the academic requirements for the Promise as either "right on" or as unrealistic. Those in the former group mostly worked at test-in schools with higher-performing students. The latter group believed that earning a 2.0 in one's senior year ought to be achievable by students, but recognized that the reality in their schools was that most students simply would not attain this. A number of counselors discussed how many students faced extremely daunting challenges on a day-to-day basis that made focusing on academics impossible. In the words of one,

“We have students who are parents. We have students who are consider homeless because they couch-surf or they live in homeless shelters. A lot of students work to support themselves, so coming to school full-time isn’t always an easy option for them.”

On the one hand, counselors appreciated that the Promise only took senior year performance and attendance into account. Said one counselor: “One thing I do like about the MATC Promise is that their grades freshman, sophomore and junior year didn’t count. Because for some of my kids, they really screwed up, and so that (the disregarding of prior years’ grades) was a motivator.” But at the same time, many counselors agreed with this one (from a high-poverty comprehensive high school) who felt that the criteria effectively excluded most of her students,

“In my opinion, what they have done is raised the bar... I’ve got kids who applied forthe Promise who haven’t taken the ACT, who aren’t getting a 2.0 their senior year... so what about them? Because those are the masses. Those are the majority of the kids. The kids haven’t changed. The game has changed.”

Some counselors forecast that students who applied for the Promise but ultimately do not meet the academic requirements will mistakenly think that they are unable to attend MATC. Others were unclear about whether undocumented students were eligible for the Promise, and felt that the uncertainty hurt those students. Only some of the counselors found out that undocumented students could be eligible for the Promise if they submitted a paper copy of the FAFSA. Those who did said they learned about this only a week or so before the March 15 deadline and had to “scramble” to meet the deadline.

Counselors also expressed some concern about the “free college” messaging for the Promise, as they perceived that college was already free for their \$0 EFC students. For a few, this translated into a view that the Promise was little more than “a good marketing scheme.” Relatedly, they were uncertain that sufficient support would be provided to the new students brought in via the Promise. They sought more specific details about plans for mentoring and related services, and worried that despite the Promise the student experience would be “business as usual.” Counselors are very aware that many of their students, including those who will attend MATC, have experienced substantial trauma and loss, both personally and as members of communities affected by poverty and violence. They discussed seeing students at funerals of young murder victims and the violent deaths of students attending their schools. They also discussed students who were victims of abuse, who were thrown out of their homes, whose parents were incarcerated, and who committed crimes and were incarcerated themselves. There was an awareness that many of their students simply could not take their physical safety or access to food and shelter for granted. As one counselor reported,

“I had a conversation with a student the other day about whether he wanted to be a statistic or go on and do something positive with his life. And he said, ‘I think I’m going to be a statistic. It’s just – it’s easier’...that’s just years and years and years of him being raised, and his dad being killed. That’s the life that he has and that he sees... that’s a really big challenge because our kids in general just don’t think long-term.”

For these reasons, the school counselors sought clear assurance that once “Promised,” their students who went on to MATC would be cared for. As one said,

“Our kids need a little bit more support. That’s our reality... They’re so used to having me here. Just knowing that I’m here is a calming thing for them, like if they need something they know they can come in. But in general I think our kids get lost in the shuffle (when they go to college).”

They talked about how sensitive some students were to negative experiences in bureaucratic offices – how rude treatment by a staff member could lead a student to avoid a service that they need in order to continue in college. They also mentioned the importance of building relationships with exemplary staff at various colleges who could serve as a reliable contact for the students in case of need.

Experiencing the Rollout

Counselors first became aware of the Promise at a counselor meeting in August 2015, before the school year began. Those who didn’t attend this meeting said that they found out about it relatively soon afterwards from other counselors or school officials. After that, the schools were “flooded” with information about the Promise by the District. Additionally, counselors mentioned seeing the program discussed in the local news and on billboards around the city, so they believed that the word was getting out. Most counselors felt that MATC did a good job of informing educators like themselves and the general public about the existence of the Promise, though its promotional material could at times be “vague and confusing.”

A number of counselors said that in the beginning, there was not much information about program details and so they relied on “MATC reps” (recruiters) as crucial conduits of information about the evolving program. These individuals were available to answer questions and to tell counselors when changes were made in the program. Counselors offered nearly uniformly positive assessments of these individuals, whom they appear to know well and trust.

In practical terms, counselors’ efforts were centered on the two main deadlines: the December 1 deadline for applying to MATC, and the March 15 deadline for completing the FAFSA. Counselors devoted substantial efforts to encouraging students to meet the requirements of both deadlines. Some felt that the program was implemented too quickly, and that this didn’t give them enough time to notify students properly. “It happened for us in September so we had to turn it around real quick”, one said. “Maybe if we had the junior year to work with them that would have helped.”

After finding out about the Promise and the application deadline, counselors’ first task was spreading the word to students and their parents. They did so in a variety of ways: flyers, emails, phone calls. In some cases they were assisted by their schools, which put up posters and banners about the Promise. At least one school had an automated phone call to all students and parents in several languages that described the Promise in general terms. Most counselors believe that this effort was successful, particularly for this year’s seniors. As one put it, “the seniors could spit out the requirements”.

Counselors then spent quite a bit of energy in the fall of 2015 getting their students to actually apply. As one counselor said, “I’ve exhausted myself.” Counselors described this process, semi-facetiously, as “forcing” their students to apply. One said, “For students that we thought should do it, I just called them into my office and made them apply.” A few counselors had their undocumented students apply even though it was unclear whether they were eligible for the Promise.

Discussing the Promise helped them to focus students' attention on post-high school planning. This energized them and their students, they reported. In addition, in order to accommodate the deadlines, counselors said that they refocused their work on "achievable" goals associated with the Promise. Overall, the Promise did not so much change what counselors did, but it did change when they did it. Specifically, they encouraged more students to apply to MATC, and did so in the fall rather than waiting until spring as in prior years. Some counselors said that as a result of the Promise, they de-prioritized discussing four-year colleges with many students. This change, they said, was a good one because these students were unlikely to be accepted at a four-year colleges anyway. As a counselor put it,

"We spent so much time in previous years having the kids fill out four-year college applications when they didn't have the skills or didn't have the grades... we were wasting all this time getting them to finish the college essay and fill in all this information when in reality MATC is a really good fit for them."

Meeting the Promise's mid-March FAFSA deadline was another challenge. A counselor said that in mid-February counselors were called to a meeting and "balled out" because FAFSA numbers were low. They said that they put a lot of effort into encouraging students to complete the FAFSA, and that as a result "more FAFSAs were done than ever before." One counselor said that the fact that there was a specific deadline for the FAFSA gave her a clearer focus for getting students to complete this than is usually the case. But counselors were nearly unanimous that getting students to turn in a completed FAFSA was "a ton of work" with ultimately uncertain results. Counselors described calling the same students into their office three or four times, sending them home repeatedly with paperwork, calling parents, meeting one-on-one with parents, all in an effort to get students and their families to complete the FAFSA. A number of counselors reported that a financial aid expert from Great Lakes also comes in a number of times a year to assist students, and described this as a great help.

Challenges to Scaling the Promise

Despite the strong push, counselors said that many students did not submit an application for the Promise. Some had strong academic records and planned to go someplace else. Others had family incomes that disqualify them for the Promise. But most of the students who didn't apply for the Promise seemingly could have benefitted from it. Why didn't they apply?

According to the counselors, some students may have intended to apply, but missed the December 1 deadline. One reason is that some counselors were unclear on the deadline (at least one thought it was November 1) but another issue was student responsiveness. As one counselor put it,

"One thing I have learned is, deadline don't mean anything. And in college, deadlines mean everything. So I have kids to who turn in things late, and they're shut out."

Counselors also discussed students who exhibited resistance to attending college at all. With such students their strategy was to encourage them to apply to MATC so as to "keep your options open." Counselors tended to think that students who did not respond to that encouragement were already working and were eager to be done with school and to earn more money by working full-time. Others were overwhelmed by life's demands. As one counselor put it, "As freshmen they're usually excited about (college). But by the time senior year comes, life happens for most of them. Even if I say you can do it, it really depends on the kid's motivation". Many students, they reported, are too busy trying to cope with day-to-day survival concerns to seriously consider what would happen after high school.

MATC received over 3,000 applications by the December 1 deadline for the Promise, but after the March 15 FAFSA deadline the number of eligible students dropped by more than half. What happened? Counselors like this one reported that they did not have the information they needed to effectively target students with outstanding paperwork,

“We have 204 kids who have submitted their FAFSA, but 182 that are listed as complete. So there’s 22 kids who they have to do something to make it complete. And we don’t know who those kids are. And there’s no list that will tell us... They give us our numbers but not who are the numbers are...Even the 204 who completed, we don’t know the 96 who haven’t done it. I mean, we kind of know because we kind of keep track, but if the next week you get 215 completed, you still don’t know because they don’t give you names.”

Counselors said that despite repeated badgering, many students simply wouldn’t complete the form. “The amount of time it took to chase those kids down to do their financial aid was just ridiculous. You know, talking to the same kids five, six times... So I don’t know what else you do to motivate them.”

Most counselors also indicted that a major problem was a lack of cooperation from parents. Parents were unfamiliar with requirements for filing the FAFSA, and so it falls to counselors and students themselves to complete the form. However, parents need to provide financial information and are often difficult to get in contact with – they work multiple jobs, have unstable housing, irregular access to email and a phone number that changes frequently or is out of service. And some were wary of providing information. According to a counselor,

“There’s so many parents who don’t want to share their information...It’s not a scam, and we’re not trying to take your money, but it’s a way to help your kid get into college and pay for it. A lot of parents don’t understand it.”

Counselors were nearly unanimous in doubting that their students could look to parents for substantial support when it came to preparing for college. The problem, for the most part, was believed to be at the level of capacity, not intention. Parents were believed to want the best for their kids, but to either not have the knowledge to help their children achieve it or to be mistaken as to how their children’s best interests could in fact be served. Most counselors reported limited contact with parents, and said that only through great efforts could marginal contact be established with even a small minority of parents. Counselors simply didn’t see parents as a resource that they could tap in their relationship with students: the student was seen as essentially on their own.

Looking into the Future

As a new and highly visible program, the MATC Promise is subject to considerable discussion. Our interviews revealed that these 15 school counselors were generally supportive of the Promise and acted energetically to promote it. They were considerably more cautious in their optimism regarding its eventual impacts, but this is perhaps a caution borne of experience from working in high-poverty schools. They had criticisms of the implementation of the program, but in general regarded difficulties as the unavoidable growing pains of a new program. They suspected that this would be the roughest year and that the Promise would operate more smoothly in the future. They had generally heard that it was going to be extended for another year and were already working to get the word out to the Class of 2017.

At the same time, the counselors' feedback makes it clear that the monetary benefit of the Promise, especially for EFC \$0 students, needs to be clarified. Eligibility criteria for undocumented students also merit clarification. It would also help to enumerate support services, particularly those geared to Promise students. Ongoing federal and state efforts to adjust the timeline for FAFSA completion (e.g., the latest prior-prior year changes) should help with those challenges and ought to be recognized in the setting of future deadlines.



The Wisconsin HOPE Lab was established in 2013 on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus to engage in translational research aimed at improving equitable outcomes in postsecondary education. The Lab's mission is to help policymakers and practitioners: (a) accurately state the costs of attending college; (b) ensure that families and students understand these costs; and, (c) find effective ways to cover these costs that enhance degree completion rates as well as the personal and societal benefits of postsecondary education. For more information see www.wihopelab.com.