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POLICY IN ACTION: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL STUDY OF THE OKLAHOMA'S PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a multidimensional examination of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship, an early commitment financial aid program aimed at improving college access for Oklahoma students. Oklahoma's Promise, which commits to covering the cost of tuition at in-state colleges and universities, requires students to sign up between the 8th and 10th grades, contingent upon meeting certain eligibility criteria. The dissertation is divided into two essays, each shedding light on critical aspects of program access and implementation. The first essay investigates factors influencing the timing of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise. Framed by Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, this analysis relies on a robust administrative dataset (n=46,824) and descriptive statistics to examine individual-, school- and district-level factors associated with timing of enrollment in the scholarship program. Findings indicate socioeconomic differences in timing of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise and reveal that individual and family variables may exert more profound influence on timing of enrollment than school-level or district-level characteristics. This essay contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between personal and institutional factors in shaping the development of college predisposition. The second essay investigates administrative burdens within the Oklahoma's Promise program. Framed by previous research on administrative burdens, street-level bureaucracy, and bureaucratic discretion, this section uses grounded theory methods to analyze open-ended survey responses (n=298) and semi-structured interviews (n=6). Key findings underscore that students must overcome multiple administrative burdens in the form of learning, psychological and compliance costs in their pursuit of the scholarship. Moreover, counselors and other school personnel assume diverse roles in program implementation, spanning information dissemination, compliance enforcement, and advocacy on behalf of students. Notably, findings also highlight the influential role of bureaucratic discretion wielded by counselors to either promote or inhibit access to the scholarship. Ultimately, findings hold significant implications for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders focused on enhancing educational access and equity.

Keywords: financial aid, administrative burden, early enrollment, college access

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Without question, the implementation of widespread financial aid programs has dramatically changed the landscape of higher education in the United States. Since the enactment of the G.I. Bill in 1944, the American higher education system has greatly expanded, with the college enrollment rates of high school graduates increasing from 45% to 69% and the number of colleges and universities doubling (Alon, 2009). Accompanying this expansion in enrollment and access to higher education is a significant increase in spending on financial aid at both the federal and state levels (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). The Higher Education Act of 1965 both broadened the federal government's role in the provision of financial aid and institutionalized a commitment to support college access for economically disadvantaged students (Kim, 2012). Since the adoption of the Higher Education Act, total federal spending on grant aid to students rose 322% from $9.0 billion in 1970-71 to $38.1 billion in 2020-21 (in 2020 dollars) (Ma & Pender, 2021). To complement federal financial aid spending, states awarded approximately $12.9 billion in student grant aid in 2020-21, a 19% increase over the last decade, while colleges and universities contributed another $71.1 billion in institutional grants, a 48% increase since 2011-12 (Ma & Pender, 2021).

Corresponding to the dramatic expansion in the American higher education system during the twentieth century, disparities in college access and attendance across demographic groups have become widely studied topics among higher education policymakers and administrators (Bergerson, 2009; Gándara & Li, 2020). Low-income students and students of color exhibit lower college enrollment rates compared to white students or those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Alon, 2009; Conner & Rabovsky, 2011; Rubin, 2011; Cahalan et al., 2021). Additionally, low-income students and students of color are disproportionately concentrated in open-access, less selective institutions, which may have negative consequences for overall educational aspirations and success as well as future occupational outcomes and earnings (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Black & Smith, 2006; Bowen et al., 2009; Howell & Pender, 2016; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Kim, 2004; Park & Pascarella, 2010; Smith et al., 2013).

Given that the intent of financial aid is to equalize access to educational opportunities for students regardless of financial ability, the design, provision, and implementation of financial aid programs play a key role in the ability of policymakers to close equity gaps in college choice and access. Low-income students and students of color are especially vulnerable to rising college costs, and state financial aid policies influence decisions these students make with regard to college preparation, attendance, and completion (Kim, 2004; Kim, 2012). It is important to note that not all financial aid programs are equally effective at moving the needle on college access and completion, and some may actually result in unintended consequences across demographic groups (Gándara & Li, 2020). In light of the fact that significant resources are dedicated each year at both the state and federal levels to fund financial aid programs, it is imperative for policymakers to determine the specific types of aid policies that are most effective in improving equitable postsecondary outcomes, such as college access and degree completion.

While the ability to pay for college is an important consideration, college choice decisions result from complex interactions among multiple economic, sociological, and cultural variables (Perna, 2006). Because of this complexity, research shows that the provision of financial aid, in and of itself, is not sufficient to significantly reduce disparities in college access and student success given that inadequate college preparation and low expectations for attendance also impede college enrollment (Blanco, 2005; Harnisch, 2009). To address the multiple barriers that negatively impact college access and choice, some states have implemented versions of early commitment financial aid or "promise" programs to increase college readiness, enhance awareness about the college application and enrollment processes, and expand access to financial aid (Harnisch, 2009; Kelchen, 2017; Perna & Leigh, 2018; Perna, Leigh & Carroll, 2017). These programs play a critical role in introducing and developing a college-going culture among underrepresented students who otherwise may not have the opportunity to gain access to information about college preparation, the enrollment process, and financial aid options.

The sections that follow provide background on the development and efficacy of early commitment financial aid programs, identifies the Oklahoma's Promise program as the topic of interest for this dissertation, and introduces two studies that provide a multidimensional analysis of this program.

Early Commitment Financial Aid

Historically, college access programs at the federal level have focused on removing economic barriers to postsecondary education through the provision of financial aid (Perna & Swail, 2001). However, financial constraints are not the only obstacle to degree attainment as lack of information, inadequate academic preparation, and low expectations also serve as significant challenges that students must overcome (Harnisch, 2009). Given that existing college choice literature suggests that college predisposition and planning begin as early as the 7th grade, if not earlier, some states have implemented versions of early commitment or promise programs as an early intervention to increase college readiness, enhance awareness about the college application and enrollment processes, and expand access to financial aid (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Harnisch, 2009; Kelchen, 2017; Somers et al., 2002). Because the enrollment and eligibility requirements of early commitment financial aid programs encourage students and their families to begin planning for college earlier in the educational pipeline, they play a critical role in introducing and developing a college-going culture among underrepresented students who otherwise may not have the opportunity to gain access to information on college enrollment and financial aid (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Early commitment financial aid programs positively impact college access and choice by influencing student decisions to prepare for college at an earlier point in their education regardless of financial circumstances (Blanco, 2005; Heller, 2006). In essence, early commitment programs create a contract between the state and middle school/early high school students that require students to complete a rigorous high school curriculum, earn good grades and avoid disciplinary misconduct in exchange for receiving guaranteed financial aid for college, although the award may not cover the entire cost of attendance

History of Early Commitment Financial Aid Programs

The concept of providing early notification of financial aid eligibility first originated in 1981 with the I Have a Dream program in New York City, in which philanthropist Eugene Lang committed to a group of sixth-grade students to pay for their college tuition if they graduated from high school and went on to attend college (Blanco, 2005; Heller, 2006). Following similar private philanthropic pledges to provide financial support for college attendance, state-funded efforts were established in the early 1990s to develop early commitment financial aid programs, including Indiana's Twenty-First Century Scholars program and the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, now known as Oklahoma's Promise. Initially, state policies related to the provision of early commitment financial aid included a need-based requirement, with Twenty First Century Scholars requiring students to qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program and Oklahoma's Promise limiting family income to a set amount established by the legislature (Heller, 2006). Mirroring the shifting trend from need-based to merit-based aid, subsequent early commitment financial aid programs, such as the Georgia HOPE program established in 1993, have eliminated income requirements (Kim, 2012). The implementation of early commitment financial aid has become an increasingly popular state financial aid strategy in recent years, with almost 200 active local and state college promise programs across 41 states (Kelchen, 2017). Since 2014 alone, seven states have implemented tuition-free college programs for some or all, including the Tennessee Promise program, which covers tuition at public community colleges, and New York's Excelsior Scholarship, which covers tuition for students meeting eligibility criteria at public two-year and four-year institutions (Kelchen, 2017).

Impact of Early Commitment Financial Aid on College Choice

Early commitment programs in states like Indiana, Oklahoma, and Washington have shown some promise in improving college access. For example, since implementation of the Twenty First Century Scholars program, Indiana has moved from 40th in the nation for students enrolling in college directly from high school to ninth (Harnisch, 2009). Twenty-First Century Scholars are 50 percent more likely to be enrolled in college within four years after ninth grade than non-Scholars (Harnisch, 2009). St. John et al. (2004) report that the Twenty-First Century Scholars program has helped to equalize opportunity for low-income students with regard to college access through increased aspirations to attain a four-year degree, likelihood to apply for financial aid, and enroll in college. The Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, also known as Oklahoma's Promise, also demonstrated gains in college enrollment and persistence for program participants when compared to the all Oklahoma students (Blanco, 2005; Mendoza & Mendez, 2012). The Washington State Achievers Program (WSA), established in 2001 to provide early commitment aid, college awareness, and mentorship opportunities for students attending one of 16 designated low-to-moderate income schools in Washington, increased the number of students participating in college preparatory behavior, such as taking the ACT or SAT, as well as the likelihood of college enrollment (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012).

It is important to note that while early commitment programs generally have the goal of increasing college access for students from traditionally underrepresented populations by changing expectations and the perceived accessibility of higher education for low-income students, students who should theoretically benefit most from these programs often still face systematic barriers. For example, in their study of the Wisconsin Covenant, Birkeland and Arney (2010) find that students in more racially diverse public schools as well as schools with higher percentages of students qualifying for free and/or reduced lunches are less likely to participate in the program. Birkeland and Arney (2010) attribute this finding to several factors. First, there may be differences in the dissemination of information about the Wisconsin Covenant program to students, which comes primarily from high school guidance counselors rather than a centralized, statewide campaign. Next, the high GPA requirement, as demonstrated in previous research, has been found to widen the minority gap in college attendance. Finally, the early registration requirement may unintentionally exclude students from families without a strong college-going background or those that do not traditionally value higher education. These conclusions demonstrate that policymakers must take care in designing and implementing early commitment financial aid programs to not systematically exclude the most vulnerable students from participation.

Oklahoma's Promise

This dissertation provides a multidimensional analysis of one early commitment financial aid program – Oklahoma's Promise. The Oklahoma's Promise scholarship which was enacted by the Oklahoma Legislature in 1992 as the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program.

Oklahoma's Promise is an early commitment financial aid program designed to assist Oklahoma families in sending their children to college. Under Oklahoma's Promise, the state of Oklahoma covers the cost of tuition for students to attend a public or private, non-profit Oklahoma college or university or to participate in certain CareerTech programs.

Eligibility Requirements

As an early commitment program, students must enroll in Oklahoma's Promise in the eighth, ninth or tenth grade and agree to maintain a minimum high school grade point average, take college preparatory courses, and avoid involvement in disciplinary issues. In addition to these merit-based eligibility requirements, Oklahoma's Promise participants must not exceed a family income limit at the time of enrollment in the program, an amount which has gradually been increased by the Oklahoma Legislature over time. A second income check was also created by the Legislature in 2007 to eliminate eligibility for students whose annual family income increased following initial program enrollment in the eighth, ninth or tenth grade to exceed $100,000 at the time they enter college. Recent legislative changes now require this income check to be conducted each year the scholarship recipient is enrolled in college. While in college, students must also meet certain academic requirements and avoid misconduct in order to renew the scholarship each year, and they have a maximum of five years from the time they enter college to receive the scholarship. Table 1.1 presents a timeline of legislative changes to the Oklahoma's Promise program and Table 1.2 summarizes current eligibility requirements to receive the scholarship at the time of data collection for this study.

Table 1.1.
History of Legislative Changes to Oklahoma's Promise (as of Data Collection)

Year	**Legislative Changes**
1992 (Original Legislation)	• Income Requirements: $25,000 family income limit at time of application; income defined as total "taxable and nontaxable" income.

	• Academic Requirements in High School: 15-unit core curriculum; 2.5 overall GPA; 2.5 GPA in the core curriculum • Conduct Requirements in High School: Must attend school regularly and do homework regularly; refrain from substance abuse; refrain from criminal or delinquent acts. • Award equals public college tuition, equivalent amount at private colleges; can only be used at career tech centers for courses that qualify for college credit. • College Level Requirements: Must start college within 3 years of high school graduation; May not receive the award for more than five years (consecutive) or the completion of a baccalaureate degree; Must maintain standard academic eligibility in college.
1994	• Academic Requirements in High School: Increased the 15-unit core curriculum to 17 units for students in the 9th grade in 1994-95 and thereafter
1996	• Documentation Requirements: Required students to provide their SSN or local school ID number.
1999	• Income Requirements: Increased the family income limit at the time of application from $25,000 to $32,000.
2000	• Income Requirements: The income limit at the time of application was increased from $32,000 to $50,000. • Academic Requirements in High School: Specified content of the core curriculum
2007	• Income Requirements: Created a second income check at $100,000 (defined as "taxable and nontaxable" income) to be applied at the time the student begins college. • College Level Requirements: Created a statutory college GPA requirement requiring a 2.0 for courses taken during the sophomore year and a 2.5 for courses taken during junior year and thereafter (to apply to 2009 college freshmen). • Documentation & Citizenship Requirements: Required scholarship recipients to be a U.S. citizen or lawfully present in the U.S. • Conduct Requirements: Created a college conduct requirement – students expelled for more than one semester for conduct reasons will permanently lose eligibility.
2011	• College Level Requirements: Added requirement that students meet federal satisfactory academic progress (SAP) standards
2017	• Income Requirements: The family income limit at the time of application in the 8th-10th grade is increased to $55,000 AGI in 2017-18 and later to $60,000 beginning in 2021-22. • Income Requirements: The second income limit at $100,000 will be checked each year in college beginning in 2018-19. Under the new change, for any year the student's family income is above $100,000, the student will not be eligible for the award that year.

	• <u>College Level Requirements</u>: Elimination of payment for noncredit remedial courses in college beginning in 2018-19. • <u>College Level Requirements</u>: Cap on the number of credit hours paid in college • <u>College Level Requirements</u>: Scholarship academic retention requirements: The specific statutory college GPA requirements are repealed; the scholarship retention/GPA requirements are now aligned with college academic retention and degree-completion standards.

Table 1.2.
Current Oklahoma's Promise Eligibility Requirements (as of Data Collection)

Stage in Process	Eligibility Requirements
Middle/High School	1. Must submit the five-page Oklahoma's Promise application form by the deadline in the 8th, 9th, 10th grade. 2. Must submit income documentation (tax returns) by specified deadline proving that the family income is within eligibility limits at the time of application. 3. Must agree to complete the 17-unit core college preparatory curriculum. 4. Must make a 2.5 overall GPA. 5. Must make a 2.5 GPA in the core curriculum. 6. Must submit documentation proving U.S. citizenship or lawful presence in the U.S. 7. Must attend school regularly. 8. Must do homework regularly. 9. Must refrain from substance abuse. 10. Must refrain from delinquent acts. 11. Must be certified by high school counselor that student met all academic and conduct requirements upon high school graduation.
College	1. Must start college within 3 years of high school graduation. 2. May not receive the award for more than five years (consecutive) or the completion of a bachelor's degree. 3. Must maintain satisfactory academic progress in college. 4. Must submit income documentation at the time the student begins college to prove family income is below $100,000 per year.

Oklahoma's Promise Funding and Administration

Recognizing the importance of ensuring adequate funding for the scholarship program, in 2007, the Oklahoma Legislature passed Senate Bill 820, providing a dedicated funding source to ensure full and stable financial support for the program. The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher

Education (OSRHE), the constitutional coordinating board for Oklahoma's state system of higher education, serves as the administrator for Oklahoma's Promise and provides a funding estimate for the anticipated cost of the program to the State Board of Equalization annually. For fiscal year 2018, the OSRHE estimated the costs of the program to be approximately $72.8 million, a figure that has been rising each year due to the steady increase in program eligibility completion rates, the improved persistence of scholarship recipients, tuition increases, and implementation of flat-rate tuition programs at certain public universities in Oklahoma (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education [OSRHE], 2019).

Oklahoma's Promise Outcomes

The first Oklahoma's Promise scholarships were awarded to students graduating from high school in 1996, and since the program's inception, over 100,000 students have received the scholarship (Garrett, 2022). Based on year-end reports provided by the OSRHE, Oklahoma's Promise students demonstrate improved academic outcomes in both high school and college in comparison to their non-Oklahoma's Promise peers. Oklahoma's Promise enrollees consistently demonstrate higher high school GPAs and ACT scores and have college going rates that are approximately 30-40 percentage points higher than the non-Oklahoma's Promise student population (OSRHE, 2019). Once in college, Oklahoma's Promise students have higher GPAs and freshman to sophomore persistence rates and are more likely to be enrolled full-time. Additionally, students receiving the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship have degree completion rates approximately 10 percentage points higher than non-Oklahoma's Promise students (OSRHE, 2019).

In addition to raw data presented by the OSRHE, past scholarly research generally provides support for the impact of the scholarship on college enrollment, student persistence, and college degree attainment (Bucceri, 2013; Le, 2016; Marriott, 2016; Mendez et al., 2011; Mendoza & Mendez, 2012). More recently, however, research has raised concerns regarding equity in access to the scholarship as well as outcomes of participation. For example, Beam's (2022) analysis of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship finds that the program does not consistently provide equitable support to students based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and high school characteristics. Additionally, Bell and Smith (2022) identify administrative burdens as a potential challenge to student access in the Oklahoma's Promise program. Expanding upon this recent research in more depth could provide valuable insights for more effective policy implementation that will benefit greater numbers of students.

Purpose of the Dissertation

This dissertation expands upon the existing literature on early commitment financial aid programs by providing a comprehensive exploration of the Oklahoma's Promise program through distinct but interrelated studies, each bearing significant implications for educational policy and practice.

First, Chapter 2 examines student-level, school-level and district-level factors associated with timing of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise. Becoming college-ready is a cumulative process that takes time and begins well in advance of a student's senior year in high school. The design of early commitment financial aid programs rests on the assumption that early preparation, coupled with expectations of guaranteed financial aid, is critical to college enrollment and success, especially for traditionally marginalized student populations. To make informed decisions about the effectiveness of such programs, it is important for policymakers to better understand the role that timing of student commitment plays. While the existing literature on early commitment financial aid programs examines the effect of such programs on student outcomes, little research has been conducted on factors associated with when students will sign-up for these early commitment financial programs. Investigating the differences between early and late enrollers may assist policymakers in developing more effective and equitable administration of early commitment financial aid programs and in targeting limited financial and personnel resources more efficiently.

Second, Chapter 3 explores critical issues associated with student access to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program. Drawing from an extensive body of existing literature, this study builds upon the significant groundwork laid by previous research highlighting the negative effects of administrative burdens in restricting access to government services (Burden et al., 2012; Christensen et al., 2020; Heinrich, 2016; Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). These studies have demonstrated that the bureaucratic complexities and obstacles embedded within administrative processes can effectively deter individuals from fully accessing the benefits of such government programs, even when they meet the eligibility criteria. This dissertation contributes to that body of literature by examining the use of bureaucratic discretion by school counselors to mitigate or enforce administrative burdens related to enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise. In navigating the complex application process required by Oklahoma's Promise, students frequently rely on the support of counselors and other school personnel, who serve as intermediaries between policy mandates and practical, real-world implementation. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews (n=6) and open-ended survey responses (n=298) from high school counselors located across school districts in Oklahoma, this chapter sheds light not only on the barriers students confront but also on the potential solutions that lie within the purview of administrators and policymakers.

Table 1.2 summarizes key elements of the two essays comprising this dissertation, including title, research design, research questions, data collection and sample size, and methods of analysis.

Table 1.2.
Summary of Dissertation Structure

Element	**Essay 1**	**Essay 2**
Title	Understanding Early Enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise – An Investigation of Student-Level, School-Level and District-Level Determinants	Gatekeepers: Street-Level Bureaucrats and the Use of Discretion in Oklahoma's Promise
Research Design	Quantitative	Qualitative
Research Questions	Who enrolls "early" in an early commitment financial aid program – Oklahoma's Promise? • What are the key variables associated with early enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise? • How do these variables differ for students who enroll late?	How do street-level bureaucrats use bureaucratic discretion to promote or inhibit access to government services in the context of higher education? • What types of administrative burdens do students face in seeking access to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship? • How do counselors and other school personnel use bureaucratic discretion as they assist students in enrolling and completing requirements for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?
Data	Administrative data from three sources (n=46,824): • Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education • Oklahoma Office of Educational Quality and Accountability • NCES Common Core of Data	• Open-ended survey responses to select questions from a survey administered to school counselors and administrators (n=298) • In-depth, semi-structured interviews (n=6)
Method of Analysis	Descriptive statistics	Grounded theory

Conclusion

This introductory chapter lays the foundation for a multi-dimensional exploration of the administration and implementation of early commitment financial aid programs, with a specific focus on Oklahoma's Promise. While we have observed a remarkable expansion in college access and enrollment over the last several decades, disparities in college access persist, especially among low-income students and students of color. Early commitment financial aid programs have emerged as a promising strategy to address these challenges by fostering a college-going culture among underrepresented students, this influencing their readiness for postsecondary education. By conducting this multi-dimensional analysis of Oklahoma's Promise, I am to contribute valuable insights to the fields of education policy and practice, ultimately informing policymakers and administrators on how to design and implement more effective and equitable early commitment financial aid programs.

Chapter 2:

Understanding Early Enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise – An Investigation of Student-Level, School-Level and District-Level Determinants

Access to higher education is a key strategy in promoting social mobility and reducing educational inequities (Adair, 2001; Martin, 2012; Stevens, 2007). Adair (2001) notes that "the process of earning postsecondary undergraduate and graduate degrees can and does break otherwise inviolate cycles of intergenerational poverty" (p. 219). Lifetime earnings increase with each level of postsecondary educational attainment, and bachelor's degree holders earn on average approximately $1.2 million more during a lifetime than individuals with only a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2021). Despite the overwhelming evidence that degree attainment is linked to significant economic benefits, those students who would benefit most financially from postsecondary education remain the least likely to attend (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016).

Financial barriers are widely recognized as a significant obstacle for students aspiring to earn a college degree. Historically, college access programs at the federal level have focused on removing these economic barriers to postsecondary education through the provision of financial aid (Perna & Swail, 2001). While financial aid is an important component of college access, it assumes that economic variables are the primary drivers of college choice decisions. Many other factors affect the decision-making process to attend college, such as socioeconomic background, educational experiences, family support and expectations, peer and community influences, and access to information (Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005).

Early commitment financial aid programs have emerged as a potential solution to address these issues, aiming to alleviate financial constraints and foster college aspirations among students from underserved backgrounds. These programs provide promising students with early financial aid offers, giving them a clearer pathway to navigate the college application and decision-making process. In addition to guaranteed financial aid, early commitment programs seek to increase student access to social and cultural capital, thus influencing the development of college predisposition in students through targeted outreach and interactions earlier in a student's education.

While early commitment financial aid programs hold promise in expanding college access and promoting educational equity, we must examine the factors that influence the timing of program uptake among eligible students. After all, the underlying assumption of early commitment financial aid programs is that early preparation is key to student success, which is why students have a limited time frame in which to enroll in these programs. While a significant body of research exists examining the impact of early commitment financial aid programs on student outcomes (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012; Musoba, 2004; St. John et al., 2002; St. John et al., 2003; Toutkoushian et al., 2015) there is limited understanding of the factors influencing the timing of a student's decision to enroll in these programs, particularly within the context of a student's socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and school environment.

While "little is known about the temporal nature of student decision-making in terms of their pursuit of a college degree" (DesJardins et al., 2019, p. 265), past research has documented the impact of both student-level and school-level factors on the college choice process. These include demographic factors, such as parental educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as well as a school's resources. Identifying the determinants of early versus late enrollment could enhance our understanding of student behaviors and inform the refinement of early commitment financial aid policy and program implementation. Timing of enrollment is an important area to explore as it can be viewed as a proxy for the development of college predisposition, which is a key step in the college choice process. Early development of college predisposition is critical as it initiates the process of college planning and preparation at an earlier stage, providing students more time to accumulate the necessary academic and social skills needed for a successful transition into higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999).

This research study attempts to address this gap in the literature by identifying who enrolls "early" in an early commitment financial aid program – Oklahoma's Promise. In seeking to understand the determinants of early enrollment, this study poses the following questions: What are the key variables associated with early enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise? How do these variables differ for students who enroll late? Through a detailed analysis framed by Perna's (2006) four-layer conceptual model of college choice, I expect to discover a set of socioeconomic and organizational variables that correlate with the timing of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise. By exploring potential determinants of when students decide to become college-bound via their enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise, it is hoped that valuable insights will be gained regarding factors that influence the timing and development of college predisposition, thereby informing more effective college preparation and outreach strategies.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, I review the literature on the college choice process and specifically focus on factors related to the development of college predisposition and the role of timing in college choice decisions. Next, I present Perna's conceptual model as the theoretical framework in which this study is situated. I then describe the methodology used in this study, followed by the presentation of research findings. Finally, I interpret these results through discussion and provide recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

Literature Review – College Choice Process

This study draws heavily from the existing college choice literature. Broadly speaking, college choice refers to the decisions students make about college preparation, enrollment in postsecondary education, and the type of institution they choose to attend (e.g. community college, four-year institution, selective institutions, etc.). Despite overall increases in college attendance and attainment, attention to college choice remains an important issue for policymakers for several reasons. First, college attendance imposes certain costs on students, families, institutions, and governments, all of which make a significant financial investment in a student's education. Second, college attendance and degree attainment confer significant benefits to both individual students, in the form of greater lifetime earnings and lower unemployment rates, and the general public, in the form of increased economic productivity and informed civic engagement (Carnevale et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2016; Pasque, 2010; Perna, 2006). Finally, racial and economic disparities continue to persist with regard to college choice and attendance. Not only do low-income students and students of color still attend college at lower rates than white middle-and upper-class students but they are also more likely to be concentrated at open-access institutions, even in instances when their academic ability matches admissions criteria for more selective institutions (Bergerson, 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Smith et al., 2013).

Research on the college choice process has evolved from a focus on the individual variables and student characteristics rooted in economic and sociological theories that affect college choice to the development of integrated, multiphase, multilayer models (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; St. John et al., 2004; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). The following sections present the predominant models of college choice in the extant literature, identify factors related specifically to the development of college predisposition, and explain importance of timing in the college choice process.

Economic Models of College Choice

A number of studies have relied on economic models and rational choice frameworks to explain the decisions students make with regard to college attendance and choice (Dynarski, 2003; Heller, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman, 1987; Perna & Titus, 2004). These studies primarily hold that decisions to attend college and institutional choice result from a rational cost-benefit analysis conducted by students in which the benefits of attending a postsecondary institution outweigh non-college alternatives (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Economic models of college choice are rooted in Becker's (1962) theory of human capital investment, which concerns the decisions of individuals to engage in educational activities (e.g., on-the-job training or college) in order to influence real future earnings. Under Becker's theory, differences in income can be partly attributed to differences in investments individuals make with regard to the quantity and quality of their education. Becker's theory presumes that as an individual's educational attainment increases, so does overall income, even after adjusting for the direct and indirect costs of schooling.

Utilizing the human capital theory of investment, students are assumed to make rational college choice decisions by considering the real cost of attendance, availability of financial aid and resources, and potential foregone earnings resulting from delayed entry into the workforce (Bergerson, 2009). Studies demonstrating price sensitivity among students, including the relationship between increasing cost of attendance and decreasing likelihood of enrollment, provide support for economic components of the college choice process (Leslie & Brinkman, 1987; Dynarski, 2003; Heller, 1997). While economic models are useful in providing a way for researchers to conceptualize the cost-benefit analysis that students conduct during the decision-making process, several limitations exist within purely economic models of college choice. For example, economic explanations do not account for differences observed across family income and racial/ethnic groups (Perna, 2006). These models also assume that the decision-making process occurs in a sequential order and students make decisions based on the possession of perfect information (Perna, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Sociocultural Models of College Choice

Sociocultural models of college choice, on the other hand, focus on social, cultural, and contextual factors that shape college choice decisions rather than solely examining individual-level factors. Sociocultural models incorporate features of the status attainment, social capital, cultural capital, and social structure literatures.

Status Attainment

Sociological models of college choice evolved from status attainment research, focusing on factors related to the development of aspirations for college attendance (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Bergerson (2009) notes that sociological perspectives of college choice emphasize the relationships between educational attainment and social status. Status attainment research suggests that socioeconomic background characteristics impact college choice decisions. For instance, the socioeconomic status of a family, including parental education level, can set the tone for a student's expectations and aspirations towards higher education (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Perna, 2006). Status attainment theory, therefore, posits that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to aspire to, prepare for, and eventually attend college.

Cultural Capital

Current sociological perspectives of college choice draw heavily from Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital. This refers to cultural habits and dispositions that comprise a resource capable of generating benefits, are subject to monopolization by certain individuals or groups, and can be transmitted from one generation to the next (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Weininger & Lareau, 2007). Cultural capital includes educational resources at home, parental involvement in education, and access to enriching cultural experiences. Theories of cultural capital are useful for explaining differences observed across groups related to college choice. For example, families with high cultural capital might expose their children to a range of cultural experiences, academic opportunities, and intellectual discourses that might make them more comfortable with the idea of college, thereby influencing their college choice. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is unequally distributed in society, creating the potential for systematic advantages and disadvantages that serve to reproduce social inequities (Weininger & Lareau, 2007). This implies that students from families with more cultural capital, such as those who have parents with higher education degrees, are more likely to be familiar with the college application process, making them more likely to apply and attend.

Social Capital

Sociological perspectives incorporate social capital as a factor influencing student decisions related to college. Social capital refers to the ways in which social networks and connections are formed and maintained, with the primary goal of social capital being to grant access to other forms of resources and support through an individual's community and social ties

(Lin, 2001; Perna, 2006). Social capital includes the value derived from family, friends, teachers, counselors, and other sources of influence, whose advice and encouragement can shape a student's educational aspirations, choices, and outcomes. A key aspect of social capital is its role in granting access to various forms of other capital, such as human capital and cultural capital. For example, through their networks, students might gain exposure to valuable knowledge, resources, or experiences that could influence their perspective on higher education and their choices related to college. Parents' social capital can also provide students with an edge in the college choice process (Perna & Titus, 2005). For instance, parents with strong networks in academia or specific industries may provide unique insights, access to resources, or opportunities, such as internships or job shadows, that can influence their child's postsecondary education choices. Similarly, the knowledge and understanding gained through a parent's own educational experiences could also be beneficial in navigating the complexities of the college admissions process, ultimately shaping a student's preparation for, and decision to attend, college.

Social Structure

Bourdieu (1986) and Lin (2001) argue that individual actions, such as decisions to prepare for and enroll in college, cannot be fully understood without examining the surrounding structural context, which includes the societal, institutional and systemic factors that shape opportunities and choices related to higher education (Perna & Titus, 2005). For example, secondary structural limitations can serve to inhibit equal opportunity for college preparation. Venezia and Kirst (2005) posit that the current structure of the secondary school system in the U.S. sorts students into curricular tracks based on perceived ability, providing differential levels of college preparation to high school students. In addition to the secondary school system, broader social structures such as societal norms, policies, and social class stratification can influence decisions related to college choice. Anyon (1980) notes that different types of knowledge are made available to students based on social class. For example, students from higher social classes might have access to more resources and opportunities, such as advanced courses or well-funded extracurricular activities, compared to their lower social class counterparts. Further, social structures can create or perpetuate inequalities, leading to disparities in college choice and enrollment. Practices such as curricular tracking often correlate with inequities in terms of race and social class, which has significant implications for who chooses to attend college and the level of selectivity in the colleges that they choose to attend (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

Integrated Models of College Choice

More recently, researchers have attempted to explain college choice through integrated frameworks that incorporate economic and sociocultural explanations of student decision-making behavior (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; St. John et al., 2004; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). For example, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model identifies predisposition, search, and choice as stages in the college choice process, with each phase impacted by individual and organizational-level factors. Additionally, Paulsen and St. John (2002) present a student choice construct to guide research that examines the experiences of diverse groups of students. Within this framework, Paulsen and St. John (2002) acknowledge a sequence in educational choices, including formation of aspirations, decision to attend, college choice, and persistence, that are influenced by family background, educational experiences, and policy-related factors (e.g., access to information, student aid, and college costs). St. John et al.'s (2004) balanced access model considers academic-social factors (e.g. family income, student expectations, academic preparation) and financial factors (e.g. perceived unmet need and actual unmet need) on college choice and persistence decisions. Tierney and Venegas (2009) developed a cultural-ecological approach to explaining college choice. Under the cultural-ecological model, decisions related to college choice result from the interaction of the educational, familial, and social environments in which a student is situated (Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Development of College Predisposition

Numerous factors influence the development of college predisposition and subsequent enrollment and attendance decisions. These include family background and culture, secondary school context, and access to information about college (Perna & Swail, 2001; Somers et al., 2002; Tierney, 2002).

Research has consistently demonstrated the significant impact of family background on the development of college aspirations among students. Family background includes multiple elements, including parental educational attainment, parental support, and socioeconomic status (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bonous-Hammarth-Allen, 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Past research shows that students with college-educated parents are more likely to aspire to attend college themselves (Hillman et al, 2015). Bastedo and Jaquette (2011) assert that "affluent households with high levels of parental education have more human, social and cultural capital to devote to education from the earliest ages, which situates [students] favorably in the competition for places at selective colleges" (p. 319). Bonous-Hamarth & Allen (2005) argue that parental support plays a significant role in the development of college predisposition, noting that "students who, by design or circumstances, have effective support from parents – and for that matter siblings, teachers, and friends too – expedite their college preparation by strengthening their self-concepts and aspirations and by garnering tried and true strategies to facilitate college enrollment" (p. 160). For example, high school seniors with consistent parental support in grades 9 through 12 demonstrate higher likelihood of college enrollment than peers not receiving support (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Conklin & Dailey, 1981). Research also shows that parent-student communications about college increase the odds of students attending college (Perna & Titus, 2005; Myers & Myers, 2012). Furthermore, research supports the impact of family socioeconomic status on the development of college aspirations, as financial resources often determine whether students believe college is attainable goal.

McDonough (1997) notes that a student's decisions regarding college are determined not only by their individual characteristics, such as family background, but also by structural characteristics of the schools they attend. Stillisano et al. (2013) argue that a "school's culture is a strong determinant of a student's college and career ambitions, along with their ability to reach those goals" (p. 285). Past research demonstrates correlation between schools with a strong college-going culture and college enrollment, persistence and graduation, particularly for at-risk students (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; McDonough, 2004; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Stillisano et al., 013). The extant literature suggests that school characteristics are shaped by the social and economic makeup of the surrounding community and that "difference in the school environment can be attributed to the presence of more resources and more advantaged student populations" (Johnson, 2008, p. 779). School personnel, especially counselors, play a critical role in developing a school's college-going culture, however, the structure and delivery of guidance counseling, including resources available to counselors and the importance of college counseling, vary greatly among schools (McDonough, 1997). In schools with a strong college-going culture, counselors spend more time on the college preparation and begin these discussions with students early in the 9th or 10th grade (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). On the other hand, in schools with weak college-going culture, counselors give much less attention to the college process and devote more time and resources to dealing with mental health, disciplinary issues, grades, and career counseling (McDonough, 1997; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Furthermore, students attending high schools with less resources may not gain as much benefit from interacting with counselors who have bigger caseloads and a wider range of responsibilities (Corwin et al., 2004; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

Finally, research has demonstrated that access to college preparation information and resources is also a large determinant of college attendance (Bell et al., 2009; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Walpole, 2007). At the school level, counselors and teachers predominantly serve as sources of college information, yet, as previously mentioned, "the nature of this information and its effectiveness varies with the accessibility and orientation of college counseling" (Bell et al., 2009, p. 668) within the school. The high school to college transition is particularly difficult for students who have to rely almost exclusively on these in-school resources to gain knowledge about college preparation and attendance (Venezia & Kirst, 2005). While the reliance on test scores for admission to the most selective institutions has led to the creation of an industry focused on preparing students to improve test scores, these resources are primarily available to students from families with higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Liu, 2011). To illustrate, 70 percent of high school seniors from high socioeconomic status families use formal test preparation services compared to less than half of seniors from low socioeconomic status families (Alon, 2009). Additionally, privileged youth are more likely to attend private and college-preparatory high schools with college-oriented curricula, more qualified guidance counselors, and increased preparation for standardized college admissions tests (Alon, 2009; Venezia & Kirst, 2005; Walpole, 2007).

Existing literature also underscores the confluence of racial and economic disparities in the development of college predisposition and access to higher education (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). Terenzini et al. (2001) argue that by as early as the seventh grade, most students have developed occupational and educational expectations strongly related to socioeconomic status. Research also indicates that racial disparities exist in the development of college predisposition. Black and Latino students often face systemic obstacles that prevent the development of college disposition and acquisition of college knowlege, which range from limited access to advanced coursework or college counseling to fewer financial resources to pay for the cost of college attendance (Bell et al., 2004; Grodsky & Jones, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). These factors can predetermine educational trajectories far before high school graduation, effectively narrowing postsecondary options for these students (Terenzini et al., 2001). It is also important to note that differences in educational aspirations may also exist within subset of the same group. For example, with regard to low-income students, past research has identified differences in educational achievement between moderately and severely disadvantaged students (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Cheng & Peterson, 2021). Bailey & Dynarski (2011) identify stark differences in educational outcomes among the lowest two SES quartiles, finding that only 29 percent of high school students from the lowest quartile enrolled in college compared to 47 percent of those from families in the second-lowest quartile.

Role of Timing in the College Choice Process

Existing research on the college choice process is generally based on Hossler and Galagher's (1987) three stage model of predisposition, search and choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Somers et al., 2000). During the predisposition phase, students become interested in attending college as they develop educational and occupational aspirations.

In the search phase, students and parents seek out information about college. Finally, in the choice phase, students make decisions to enroll in a particular college or university. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) maintain that while each stage interacts with one another, each phase in the college choice process is associated with a specific age cohort, with predisposition generally occurring in grades 7-9, search in grades 10-12, and choice in grades 11-12. Interest in the acquisition of college knowledge, as well as the sources of this knowledge, typically changes during the course of high school, with younger students in 9th and 10th grade more likely to receive this information from internal sources, such as parents, siblings, cousins and peers, while older students in 11th and 12th grade have more access to an expanded information network that includes teachers and counselors (Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992).

Because "formal and informal timelines" guide when key decisions are made by students to prepare for college, apply to college and attend college, timing is an important factor in college preparation and outreach strategies (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005, p. 156). Given that the college choice process is complex, developing over a period of several years, attempts to influence student predisposition and aspirations to attend college must begin early and target parents as well as students, with programs concentrating on students from families without a college-going culture. Early college planning is critical for the acquisition of the social and cultural capital needed to navigate the college choice process and enables students to enroll in college preparatory courses in high school, participate in extracurricular activities that strengthen their applications, maintain good academic performance, and learn about sources of financial aid (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Harding et al., 2017). For example, providing college information to students earlier in their education may lead to a "snowballing of benefits" as the earlier a student begins to make decisions about college, the more time he or she has to prepare (Harding et al., 2017, p. 3). The role of timing in course-taking behavior is also especially important as college preparatory courses are often sequential, requiring students to begin this path sometimes as early as 7th or 8th grade (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Harding et al. 2017). Somers at al. (2002) found that students who took a foreign language course in 8th grade, which is typically required for college admissions, were almost nine percentage points more likely to enroll in college. Prior research also demonstrates that students who make plans by the 8th grade year to earn a college degree are in fact more likely to attend college following high school graduation (Somers et al., 2002). More recent research on the role of timing in the college choice process reveals that the predominant college choice model should be updated to acknowledge that the development of college predisposition may occur much earlier than previously thought. Harding et al. (2017) examine relationships between the timing of decisions related to college attendance and outcomes such as aspirations, course-taking patterns in high school, and eventual college application, finding that many students actually begin gathering information and making decisions about college as early as elementary school.

The complex nature of the college choice process necessitates that interventions aimed at fostering the development of student aspirations for higher education begin early and engage not only students but also their parents, particularly in families without a college-going culture. Early college planning is critical as it provides the much-needed social and cultural capital to effectively navigate the college choice process.

Theoretical Framework

While each college choice model has its strengths and limitations, this paper is guided by Perna's (2006) four-layer conceptual model for examining student college choice, which incorporates economic, sociological and psychological theories. At the foundation of Perna's (2006) conceptualization of the college choice process is the economic model of human capital investment, in which decisions related to college choice are determined by an individual's academic preparation and available resources in relation to the expected monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits of college attendance. To account for differences across students in the factors affecting college choice, Perna (2006) situates the human capital investment model within four contextual layers – the individual's habitus, the school and community context, the higher education context, and the social, economic and policy context. The habitus layer of Perna's model borrows from the work of Bourdieu (1977), recognizing the impact of differences in demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and social capital on college choice processes. Under the habitus layer, cultural capital encompasses cultural knowledge and the value of college attainment while social capital refers to access to information about college and assistance with college preparation and enrollment processes. The second layer, school and community context, incorporates factors that can be described as organizational habitus, including the availability and type of school resources as well as structural supports and barriers. In the third layer, higher education context, Perna (2006) identifies the roles of colleges and universities in influencing college choice through marketing and recruitment efforts, campus location, and institutional characteristics and offerings. Finally, the outermost layer of Perna's model, the social, economic and policy context, acknowledges the college choice is directly and indirectly influenced by broader changes in social demographics, economic climate, and public policies.

Methodology

Given the critical role of timing in the college choice process, the present study focuses on identifying differences among students who enroll in the Oklahoma's Promise in the 8th, 9th and 10th grades. Specifically, this research aims to identify any individual and school-level factors associated with the timing of student enrollment in the program. This study utilizes a quantitative research design and employs descriptive statistics as the primary analytical approach. By exploring the determinants and patterns of early enrollment, valuable insights can be gained into the factors that contribute to program participation. This information can guide policymakers and educational stakeholders in developing targeted strategies to enhance program accessibility, equity and effectiveness. The following sections provide an overview of the study's methodology, including research design, data collection, and statistical analysis techniques employed in this investigation.

Research Design

To answer my research questions, I employed an observational research design with descriptive methods of analysis. Descriptive methods allowed me to identify potential differences among students with regard to timing of program enrollment at both the student and school levels while correlational methods investigated whether any variables can be used to predict the timing of program uptake.

Data Collection

This research study relies on disaggregated administrative data provided by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE), the state agency charged with administration of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship, to identify student-level differences related to timing of program enrollment. Administrative data serves as a source of large and complex information that typically derives from the operation of administrative systems by public sector agencies for the purposes of registration, service delivery and record keeping (Connelly et al., 2016). Administrative data differs from traditional data collection in social science research in that this type of data is not initially collected for research purposes. Therefore, while administrative datasets serve as a source of large and complex information, this data is often messy and requires extensive data management to clean, merge, and organize the data in a usable format.

The unique administrative dataset used for this research study was created from three separate databases managed by the OSRHE – the Unitized Data System, which contains student-level records related to college enrollment; the Financial Aid Database, which contains student-level records related to types of financial aid received; and the Oklahoma's Promise Database, which contains student-level data related to Oklahoma's Promise enrollment, eligibility and disbursement. Protection of student identity was maintained through the omission of personally identifiable information, such as name, social security number and address. OSRHE staff assigned unique random ID numbers to each student, allowing data to be merged across the multiple datasets maintained by the OSRHE. The combined data was then merged with school-level data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data to match students with school- and community-level variables based on their site of enrollment.

The administrative dataset used for the quantitative analysis includes a total of 46,824 unique records for students who enrolled in the Oklahoma's Promise program between 2005 and 2015 and subsequently entered college between 2006 and 2017. Table 2.1 shows the various types of student, school and community variables of interest contained in this unique administrative dataset.

Table 2.1.
Student-Level and School-Level Variables

Variable Name	**Description**	**Type**
Gender	Student gender 1= male 2= female	Nominal
Race/Ethnicity	Student race/ethnicity 0= Unknown 1= American Indian/Alaska Native 2= Asian, Middle Far East 3= Black or African American 4= Hispanic or Latino 5= Multiple Races 6= Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 7= Non-resident Alien 8= White, Non-Hispanic	Categorical
Mother's Educational Attainment	Mother's highest level of educational attainment 0= middle school/junior high 1= high school 3= college or beyond	Ordinal
Father's Educational Attainment	Mother's highest level of educational attainment 0= middle school/junior high 1= high school 3= college or beyond	Ordinal
Income	Family income at time of program enrollment	Scale
Program Entry Date	Student's date of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise	Ordinal
Entry Grade	Student's grade level at time of program enrollment	Ordinal
School Percent Minority	Percent minority enrollment at school student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
Student-to-Teacher Ratio	Student-to-teacher ratio at school student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
Student-to-Counselor Ratio	Student-to-counselor ratio at school student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
Student-to-Admin Ratio	Student-to-administrative staff ratio at school student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
Student-to-Professional Staff Ratio	Student-to-professional staff ratio at school student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
Parent-Teacher Conferences	Percent of parents attending at least 1 parent-teacher conference annually at the school the student attend at the time of enrollment	Scale
Free and Reduced Lunch	Percent free and reduced lunch at school student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
College Going Rate	College going rate of district student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale

District Student-to-Counselor Ratio	Student-to-counselor ratio in the district the student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
District Parent-Teacher Conferences	Percent of parents attending at least 1 parent-teacher conference annually in the district the student attend at the time of enrollment	Scale
District Average Household Income	Average household income in the school district student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
District Percent Poverty	Percent of households living in poverty in the school district student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale
District Percent College Degree	Percent of adults with a college degree in school district student attended at time of program enrollment	Scale

The administrative dataset was uploaded to SPSS for merging, cleaning and analysis. Several cleaning techniques were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Initially, a thorough examination was taken to identify and address outliers that could potentially skew results. Specifically, cases that fell more than three standard deviations from the mean were regarded as outliers and were excluded from the analyses. Particular attention was also given to data that were clearly incorrect or inconsistent. For example, cases in which a value for a particular variable was outside allowable limits, such as more than 100% of students at a given school received free and reduced lunch, were excluded from analysis. These inaccuracies were likely caused by input errors.

Data Analysis Methods

I employ descriptive statistics in this study to examine the student-level and school-level characteristics of Oklahoma's Promise program participants and explore how these characteristics vary based on timing of program uptake (8th, 9th, or 10th grade). Descriptive statistics are an appropriate method of analysis for this investigation as they allow for the summarization and presentation of the key features of the data, including an overview of the distribution and central tendencies of variables. In this study, descriptive statistics will facilitate the identification of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of students, as well as provide insights into potential variations across different grades of enrollment. This analysis will allow me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the profile of Oklahoma's Promise participants and characteristics associated with early enrollment versus late enrollment.

Findings

Description of Oklahoma's Promise Participants

Before addressing the main research question related to timing of enrollment in the Oklahoma's Promise program, it was critical to gain a thorough understanding of student participants and their corresponding school environments. To accomplish this, I examined descriptive statistics for relevant student-level and school-level variables contained in the dataset, specifically looking at frequency distributions and measures of central tendency as appropriate.

Student-Level Variables

Gender. Of the 46,824 students contained in the dataset, gender data is available for 40,276 or 86%. Table 2.2 provides the frequency distribution of students by gender, showing that 39.1% are male and 60.9% are female. Compared to Oklahoma's general population, female students are overrepresented.

Table 2.2.
Gender of OK Promise Enrollees

Gender	N	%
Male	15762	.391
Female	24514	.609
Total	40276	1.000

Race. Race/ethnicity data is available for 38,949 students, representing 83.2% of the dataset. Table 2.3 displays the race/ethnicity distribution of students, showing that 12.4% are American Indian/Alaska Native, 3.4% are Asian, Middle Far East, 9.8% are Black/African

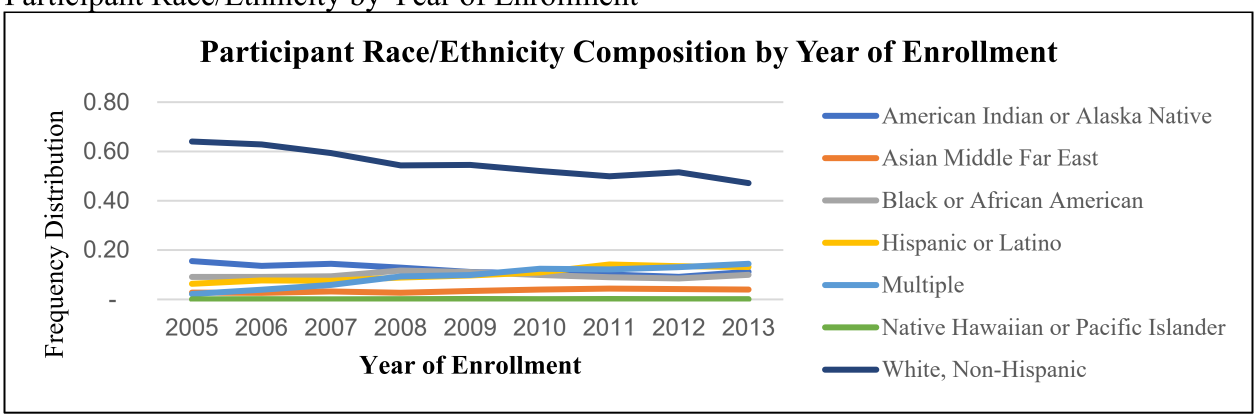
American, 9.6% are Hispanic/Latino, 8.4% are multiple races, 0.1% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 56.4% are White, Non-Hispanic.

Table 2.3.
Race/Ethnicity of OK Promise Enrollees

Race/Ethnicity	N	%
American Indian or Alaska Native	4838	.124
Asian, Middle Far East	1305	.034
Black or African American	3827	.098
Hispanic or Latino	3733	.096
Multiple	3254	.084
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	42	.001
White, Non-Hispanic	21950	.564
Total	38949	1.00

Interestingly, changes in student race/ethnicity were observed overtime and indicate increasing diversity of student enrollees in the Oklahoma's Promise program as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1.
Participant Race/Ethnicity by Year of Enrollment

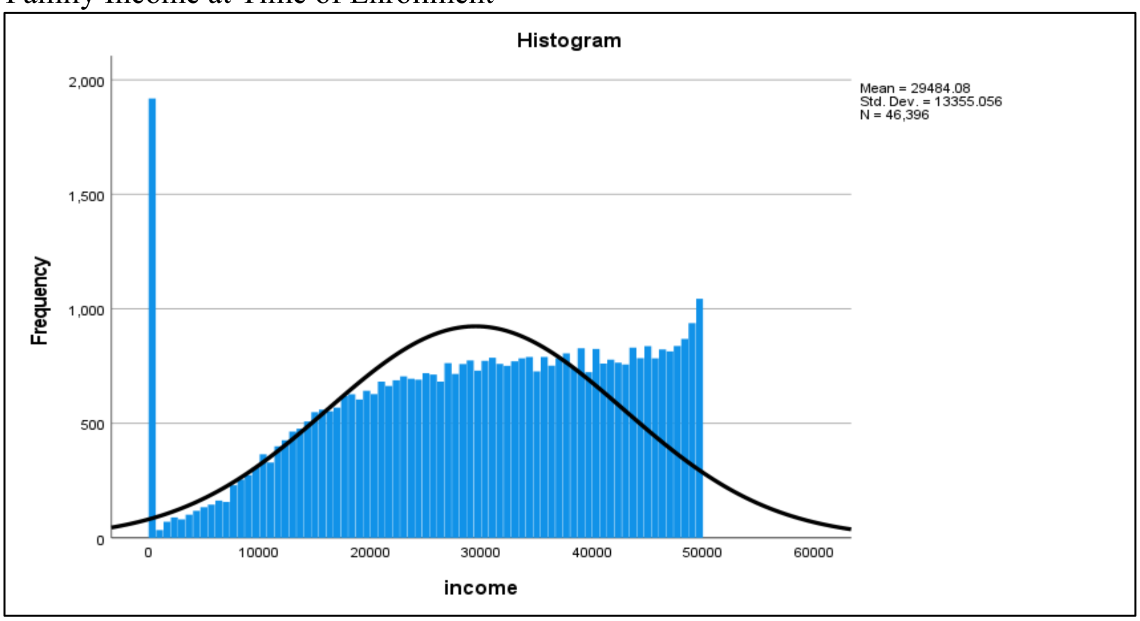


Family Income. To examine family income at the time of enrollment, I selected cases greater than or equal to $0 and less than or equal to $50,000. Cases outside these parameters are most likely input errors as family income cannot be less than $0 and enrollment eligibility criteria limited family income to $50,000 or less during the time period observed. Table 2.4 provides a summary of descriptive statistics for family income. Mean family income of students at the time of program enrollment is $29,484, with a standard deviation of $13,355.06. Half of students enrolled in the program come from families earning less than $30,714.50. A skewness of -0.401 is within the limits for a normal distribution of data, although a histogram plot (Figure 2.2) indicates the data is slightly left skewed.

Table 2.4.
Descriptive Statistics – Family Income at Time of Enrollment

Valid (N)	46396
Excluded (N)	428
Mean	29484.081
Std. Error of Mean	62.002
Median	30714.500
Std. Deviation	13355.056
Variance	178357521.069
Skewness	-.401
Std. Error of Skewness	.011
Kurtosis	-.696
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.023
Range	50000
Minimum	0
Maximum	50000
25th Percentile	19821.00
50th Percentile	30714.50
75th Percentile	40684.00

Figure 2.2.
Family Income at Time of Enrollment



Parental Educational Attainment. Parental educational attainment data is only available for years 2005 through 2011. Mother's educational attainment data is available for 5,040 students, representing 10.7% of the full dataset. Data concerning father's educational attainment is available for 4,735 students, representing 10.1% of the dataset. From the data in Table 2.5, 42% of mothers had earned a college degree compared to only 28.9% of fathers. Conversely, the percent of fathers whose highest level of education is only a high school diploma (60.8%) is 10.2 percentage points higher than that of mothers (50.6%).

Table 2.5.
Parental Educational Attainment of OK Promise Enrollees

Educational Attainment	Mother		Father	
	N	%	N	%
Middle School/Junior High	372	.074	486	.103
High School	2550	.507	2879	.608
College or Beyond	2118	.419	1370	.289
Total	5040	1.000	4735	1.000

School Characteristics

To better understand the school context in which Oklahoma's Promise students are situated, I examined the following school-level variables: school percent free-and-reduced lunch, school percent minority enrollment, student-to-teacher ratio, student-to-counselor ratio, student-to-administrator ratio, student-to-professional staff ratio (which includes positions such as library media specialist, speech-language pathologist, school psychologist, remedial specialist, and occupational therapist), and percent of parents attending parent/teacher conferences. These variables serve as indicators of the socioeconomic environment, available school resources, and parental involvement.

Table 2.6 provides descriptive statistics for the school-level variables of interest. On average, 52.7% of students received free-and-reduced lunch, school enrollment was 40.3%

minority, and parent participation in parent/teacher conferences was at 52.1%. Average student-to-teacher, student-to-counselor, student-to-administrator, and student-to-professional staff ratios were 16.7, 308.0, 232.3, and 409.8 respectively. The average district college-going rate was 50.0%, and the average ACT score was 20.28.

Table 2.6.
School Characteristics at the Time of Program Enrollment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
School Percent Free and Reduced Lunch	32850	0.000	1.000	0.527	0.195
School Percent Minority	32754	0.000	0.978	0.403	0.184
School Student-to-Teacher Ratio	32947	3.052	41.000	16.704	3.634
School Student-to-Counselor Ratio	29416	57.240	860.140	308.045	97.324
School Student-to-Admin Ratio	32165	18.000	1612.245	232.350	100.984
School Student-to-Professional Staff Ratio	29040	31.395	1543.000	409.818	241.148
School Percent Parent-Teacher Conference	31945	0.000	1.000	0.521	0.251

District Characteristics

To better understand the community context in which Oklahoma's Promise students are situated, I examined the following district-level variables: district student-to-counselor ratio, district percent of parents attending parent teacher conferences, district average household income, district percent poverty, district percent of residents with a college degree, district college-going rate, and district average ACT score. These variables serve as indicators of the socioeconomic environment, available resources, and parental involvement in the overall community.

Table 2.7 provides descriptive statistics for the school-level variables of interest. The average district-wide student-to-counselor ratio was 422.4, and the district average for participation in at least one parent-teach conference annually was 71.4%. District average household income ranged from $25,379.90 to $153,615.19, with an average of $47,938.37. District poverty rates averaged 15.8%. Across districts, an average of 21% of residents hold a college degree. College-going rates of high school seniors range from 22.8% to 76.4%, with an average of 50%. The average district ACT score was 20.3, with a range from 16.0 to 25.0. Descriptive statistics of district-level variables represent wide variation in the communities in which Oklahoma's Promise students live.

Table 2.7.
District Characteristics at the Time of Program Enrollment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
District Student-to-Counselor Ratio	32250	90.000	1332.170	422.400	136.590
District Percent Parent Teacher Conference	32586	.329	1.000	.714	.118
District Average Household Income	32548	25379.900	153615.197	47938.370	9223.370
District Percent Poverty	32887	.0172	.346	.158	.061
District Percent College Degree	32141	.001	.486	.210	.081
District College-Going Rate	32499	0.229	0.765	0.500	0.087
District Average ACT Score	32458	16.000	25.000	20.280	1.519

Grade of Enrollment

After reviewing student demographics and school characteristics, I ran descriptive statistics for grade of enrollment in the Oklahoma's Promise program. Data for grade of enrollment is available for 46,807 students, representing 99.96% of the dataset. Table 2.8 displays the grade of enrollment frequency distribution of students, showing that 29.3% enrolled in the 8th grade, 25.7% in the 9th grade and 45.1% in the 10th grade.

Table 2.8.
Grade of Enrollment in OK Promise

Grade	N	%
8th	13702	.293
9th	12017	.257
10th	21088	.451
Total	46807	1.000

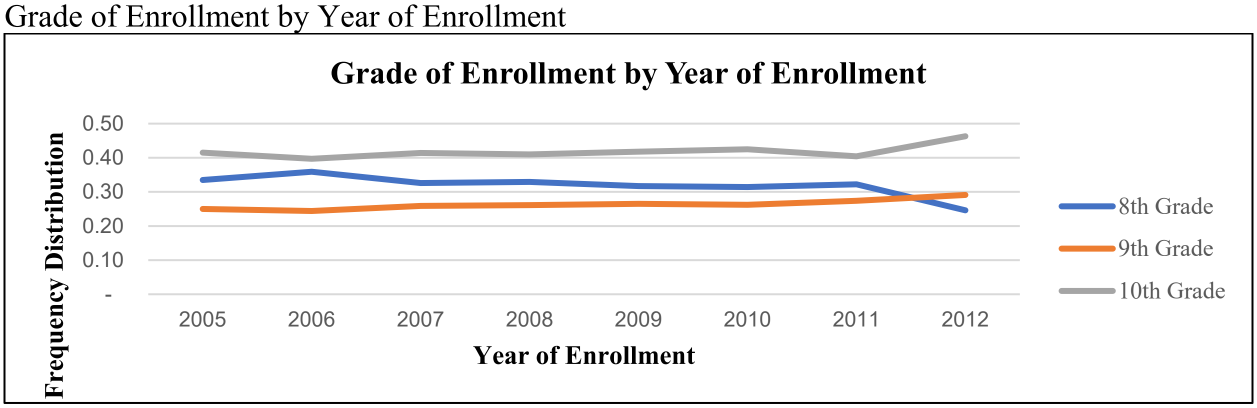
I also examined whether the percent distribution for grade of enrollment changed over time using the Crosstabs function in SPSS. This analysis revealed potential issues with data from years 2013-2016, as shown in Table 2.9. Specifically, there is a large decrease in the number of students marked as enrolling in the 8th grade in 2013 and a corresponding increase in the number of students enrolling in 10th grade. For 2014, almost all students are categorized as enrolling in the 10th grade. Furthermore, it appears that no students enrolled in the 8th or 9th grade in 2015 and no students enrolled in the 9th grade in 2016. The likely cause of these data issues stems from the way the data was pulled by the OSRHE as data was provided for Oklahoma's Promise students for which college-level data was available. Students enrolling in the 8th or 9th grades during these years had not graduated from high school and entered college at the time of data collection. For these reasons, years 2013-2016 are omitted from the change over time analysis for grade of enrollment.

Table 2.9.
Grade of Enrollment in OK Promise by Year

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
8th	0.335	0.359	0.326	0.329	0.317	0.314	0.322	0.246	0.006	0.001		0.500	0.293
9th	0.250	0.244	0.259	0.261	0.265	0.262	0.274	0.291	0.303	0.010			0.257
10th	0.415	0.397	0.414	0.410	0.418	0.425	0.404	0.463	0.690	0.989	1.000	0.500	0.451
Total	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

As shown in Figure 2.3, the frequency distribution of grade of enrollment in the Oklahoma's Promise program remained relatively stable from 2005 through 2011, with a slight increase in the percent of students enrolling in the 10th grade in 2012 and a corresponding decreasing in the percent of students enrolling in the 8th grade that same year. Without additional years of reliable data, it is uncertain whether the changes observed in 2012 are part of a trend or coincidental.

Figure 2.3.
Grade of Enrollment by Year of Enrollment



The next sections look at patterns in the student-level and school-level variables previously discussed across grade of enrollment. For these analyses, data has been restricted to years 2005 through 2012 given the data quality issues with years 2013-2016 that have been identified. This resulted in a revised overall dataset of 42,619 students.

Gender and Grade of Enrollment. Of the 42,619 students for whom grade of enrollment data is available, gender data is available for 38,961, representing a coverage of 91.4%. Table 2.10 shows the gender frequency distribution across grade of enrollment. Enrollment patterns for males and females are very similar, with 10th grade being the most common grade of enrollment for both at 43.0% and 44.2% respectively.

Table 2.10.
Gender Distribution by Grade of Enrollment

Gender	Grade of Enrollment			Total
	8	9	10	
Male	0.302	0.268	0.430	1.000
Female	0.294	0.263	0.442	1.000

Race/Ethnicity and Grade of Enrollment. Looking at the distribution of race/ethnicity across grade of enrollment, data is available for 37,668 out of 42,619 students, representing 88.4% of the dataset. Slight differences in enrollment patterns based on race/ethnicity are observed in Table 2.11. White, Non-Hispanic students and students identifying as multiple races have higher rates of enrollment in the 8th grade compared to other races, which have higher rates of enrollment in the 10th grade. Additionally, the percent of Black/African and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students enrolling early in the 8th grade is less than the overall percentage of students enrolling in that grade, while the percentage of these groups enrolling late in the 10th grade is higher than the overall average. Similarly, Asian and Hispanic/Latino students have lower enrollment in 8th grade compared to the overall average.

Table 2.11.
Race/Ethnicity Distribution by Grade of Enrollment

Race/Ethnicity	Grade of Enrollment			Total
	8	9	10	
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.293	0.261	0.446	1.000
Asian, Middle Far East	0.265	0.290	0.445	1.000
Black or African American	0.256	0.264	0.479	1.000
Hispanic or Latino	0.281	0.281	0.438	1.000
Multiple	0.352	0.271	0.377	1.000
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.244	0.220	0.537	1.000
White, Non-Hispanic	0.306	0.259	0.435	1.000

Family Income and Grade of Enrollment. Looking at the distribution of average family income across grade of enrollment in Table 2.12, students enrolling in Oklahoma's Promise in the 8^{th} grade have a higher average family income compared to those enrolling in 9^{th} and 10^{th} grades.

Table 2.12.
Average Family Income by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Average Family Income	N	Std. Deviation
8	29612.103	13683	22367.451
9	28499.628	11174	20501.716
10	27803.251	17762	20586.492
Total	28566.569	42619	21166.594

Parental Educational Attainment and Grade of Enrollment. With regard to the distribution of parental educational attainment across grade of enrollment, mother's educational attainment data is available for 5,038 (11.8%) of the 42,619 students in the restricted dataset. Data for father's educational attainment is available for 4,733 students (11.1%). For those students whose mothers have a college degree, 36.8% enroll in the 8^{th} grade, compared to 31.2% of those with a high school diploma and 20.2% of those with only a middle school education. (Table 2.13) Similar patterns exist for father's educational attainment at 35.6%, 32.8% and 27.8%, respectively (Table 2.14). With regard to "late" enrollers in the 10^{th} grade, an inverse relationship exists with students whose mothers have only a middle school education enrolling at higher rates in the 10th grade (50.5%) compared to those with a high school diploma (44.5%) or a college degree (37.9%). Again, there is a similar pattern for father's educational attainment at 45.3%, 42.5%, and 39.0%, respectively. The percent of students with the lowest maternal and paternal educational attainment levels (middle school/junior high) enrolling early in the 8th grade was much lower than overall averages for these groups – with differences of 12.6 and 5.3 percentage points, respectively. Students from families with the maternal and paternal educational attainment also enrolled in the 10th grade at higher percentages than the overall average – with differences of 8.3 and 3.6 percentage points, respectively. In both instances, maternal educational attainment appears to have a stronger relationship with grade of enrollment.

Table 2.13.
Mother's Educational Attainment by Grade of Enrollment

Educational Attainment	Grade of Enrollment 8	9	10	Total
Middle School/Junior High	0.202	0.293	0.505	1.000
High School	0.312	0.243	0.445	1.000
College or Beyond	0.368	0.253	0.379	1.000

Table 2.14.
Father's Educational Attainment by Grade of Enrollment

Educational Attainment	Grade of Enrollment 8	9	10	Total
Middle School/Junior High	0.278	0.270	0.453	1.000
High School	0.328	0.247	0.425	1.000
College or Beyond	0.356	0.254	0.390	1.000

School Characteristics and Grade of Enrollment. To examine relationships between school characteristics and grade of enrollment patterns among Oklahoma's Promise students, I compare means for the following variables based on grade of enrollment: school percent of students receiving free-and-reduced lunch (FRL), school percent minority enrollment, student-to-teacher ratio, student-to-counselor ratio, student-to-professional staff ratio, student-to-administrative staff ratio, school percent of parents attending at least one parent/teacher conference annually, district college going rate, and district average ACT score.

In comparing means across grade of enrollment, I found an inverse relationship between grade of enrollment and the school's percent FRL students and percent minority enrollment as shown in Tables 2.15 and 2.16, respectively. Students enrolling in the 8th grade come from schools with higher percent FRL students (57.7%) compared to those students enrolling in the 9th grade (51.9%) and 10th grade (50.2%). Additionally, students enrolling in the 8th grade come from schools with higher percent minority enrollment (41.5%) compared to those students enrolling in the 9th grade (40.3%) and 10th grade (39.7%).

Table 2.15.
Average Percent of Students Receiving Free-and-Reduced Lunch by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	.577	7188	.200
9	.519	8164	.193
10	.502	14173	.192
Total	.525	29525	.197

Table 2.16.
Average School Percent Minority Enrollment by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	.416	7155	.197
9	.403	8122	.183
10	.397	14108	.179
Total	.403	29385	.185

There does not appear to be a clear relationship between grade of enrollment and a school's student-to-teacher ratio or student-to-administrative staff ratio, as shown in Tables 2.17 and 2.18, respectively.

Table 2.17.
Average Student-to-Teacher Ratio by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	16.672	7221	3.771
9	16.468	8171	3.640
10	16.666	14189	3.548

Total	16.613	29581	3.630

Table 2.18.
Average Student-to-Administrative Staff Ratio by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	234.367	6944	108.309
9	229.208	7984	98.059
10	234.393	13882	97.224
Total	232.950	28810	100.257

With regard to student-to-counselor ratio (Table 2.19), students enrolling in 8th grade come from schools with a much larger average student-to-counselor ratio (329.1) compared to 9th grade (302.3) and 10th grade (300.6).

Table 2.19.
Average Student-to-Counselor Ratio by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	329.057	5872	116.490
9	302.264	7327	90.879
10	300.621	12878	89.127
Total	307.486	26077	97.130

In looking at the student-to-professional staff ratio (Table 2.20), as grade of enrollment increases, these variables increase in value. Students enrolling in the 8th grade come from schools with more professional staff per student.

Students enrolling in the 8th grade attend schools with higher participation in parent/teacher conferences (56.4%) compared to 9th grade (50.1%) and 10th grade (50.4%), as shown in Table 2.21.

Table 2.20.
Average Student-to-Professional Staff Ratio by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	350.349	5969	210.717
9	420.724	7154	243.958
10	435.868	12592	250.151
Total	411.804	25715	242.248

Table 2.21.
Average Parent/Teacher Conference Participation Rate by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	.564	6944	.244
9	.501	7929	.254
10	.504	13759	.250
Total	.518	28632	.251

District Characteristics and Grade of Enrollment. To examine relationships between district characteristics and grade of enrollment patterns among Oklahoma's Promise students, I compare means for the following variables based on grade of enrollment: district student-counselor ratio, district percent of parents attending at least one parent/teacher conference annually, district average household income, district percent poverty, district percent of residents holding a college degree, district college going rate, and district average ACT score.

With regard to student-to-counselor ratio (Table 2.22), students enrolling in 8^{th} grade come from districts with a much larger average student-to-counselor ratio (449.7) compared to 9^{th} grade (428.6) and 10^{th} grade (430.7).

Table 2.22.
District Student-to-Counselor Ratio by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	449.758	6785	296.037
9	428.569	7878	245.578
10	430.694	13743	300.929
Total	434.658	28406	285.549

Students enrolling in the 8^{th} grade attend districts with slightly higher participation of parents attending at least one parent-teacher conference annually (71.3%) compared to those enrolling in 9^{th} grade (70.4%) and 10th grade (70.5%), as shown in Table 2.23.

Table 2.23.
District Average Parent/Teacher Conference Participation Rate by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	.713	6932	.132
9	.705	7974	.126
10	.706	13870	.124
Total	.707	28776	.127

Looking at the distribution of district average household income across grade of enrollment in Table 2.24, students enrolling in Oklahoma's Promise in the 8th grade come from districts with lower average household income compared to those enrolling in 9th and 10th grades.

Table 2.24.
District Average Household Income by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	District Average Household Income	N	Std. Deviation
8	46515.924	6993	12378.833
9	46712.765	8083	12763.959
10	46794.952	14060	12091.480
Total	46705.181	29136	12350.323

With regard to district poverty rate, students enrolling in Oklahoma's Promise in 10th grade come from districts with very slightly lower poverty rates (15.4%) compared to those enrolling in 8th grade (16.0%) and 9th grade (15.9%).

Table 2.24.
District Poverty Rate by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	District Poverty Rate	N	Std. Deviation
8	.160	7222	.062
9	.159	8153	.060
10	.155	14166	.060
Total	.157	29541	.061

There does not appear to be a clear relationship between a district's percent of residents holding a college degree and grade of enrollment as shown in Table 2.25. Similarly, a clear relationship does not exist between average district college-going rate and grade of enrollment as shown in Table 2.26.

Table 2.25.
District Percent College Degree by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	.213	7069	.084
9	.209	7923	.080
10	.212	13862	.079
Total	.211	28854	.080

Table 2.26.
Average District College-Going Rate by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	.507	7028	.085
9	.502	8097	.088
10	.504	14053	.085
Total	.504	29178	.086

Finally, with regard to average district ACT scores (Table 2.27), students enrolling in the 8^{th} grade come from school districts with marginally lower composite ACT scores (20.18) compared to those enrolling in 9^{th} grade (20.24) and 10^{th} grade (20.3). It is important to note that these differences, while present, are of a small magnitude and may not necessarily indicate significant distinctions.

Table 2.27
Average District ACT Score by Grade of Enrollment

Grade of Enrollment	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8	20.177	6993	1.596
9	20.241	8083	1.534
10	20.298	14060	1.485
Total	20.253	29136	1.527

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting findings. First, in considering the analysis of school-level variables and grade of enrollment, it should be noted that systematic differences between middle and high school environments may limit our ability to draw accurate conclusions, especially as it relates to data on student-to-counselor ratios and parent/teacher conference participation. For example, data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that parent-teacher conference participation is generally lower among high school students at 54% compared to middle school students at 72% (Hansen et al., 2020). Furthermore, national data from the American School Counselor Association shows general discrepancies in student-to-counselor ratios by grade, with average ratios in K-8 settings ranging from 613 to 787 and those in high schools (grades 9-12) ranging from 205 to 243 (Prothero, 2023). For this reason, district-level data on these two variables were also included in the analyses.

Second, the generalizability of the results is limited due to the specific population and program under investigation. This study focused solely on students who successfully enrolled in the Oklahoma's Promise program in the 8th, 9th or 10th grades. It does not include students who qualify for the scholarship but failed to sign up or students who enrolled but did not complete scholarship requirements. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to other early commitment financial aid programs.

Third, it should be noted that data obtained from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education was found to often be messy or incomplete. Despite efforts to ensure data quality, the dataset contained missing values, which might have influenced the accuracy and reliability of results.

Finally, the existence of outliers in the dataset should be acknowledged. Outliers can substantially impact descriptive statistics, potentially distorting measures of central tendency and the relationships between variables. While attempts to limit the influence of outliers were made by excluding cases more than three standard deviations from the variable's mean, it is nevertheless important to recognize that such elimination could create bias in results if the outliers were not randomly distributed or represent genuine data points rather than input errors.

It is important to consider all of these constraints when interpreting findings and to recognized to need for further research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with early enrollment in the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the characteristics of students in the Oklahoma's Promise program and identify differences in these characteristics based on the timing of program enrollment (8^{th}, 9^{th}, or 10^{th} grade). The analysis of differences in student-level and school-level characteristics based on grade of enrollment in the Oklahoma's Promise program provides valuable insights. Situated within Perna's model of college choice, these characteristics can be viewed as proxies for social and cultural capital, representing the resources and advantages that individuals and schools possess in navigating the college choice process.

At the student level, the findings revealed interesting disparities in grade of enrollment based on demographic and socioeconomic factors. For example, students from higher family income backgrounds and those with parents holding college degrees were more likely to enroll early in the 8^{th} grade. These findings suggest that individuals with greater social and cultural capital, reflected in their family's financial resources and educational attainment, may develop college predisposition earlier, thus increasing the time they have to prepare for college and their chance of postsecondary success. This supports Cheng and Peterson's (2021) findings of differential impacts of educational interventions on moderately and severely disadvantaged students. Additionally, differences in grade of enrollment based on race/ethnicity were observed, with white students and those belonging to two or more races more likely to enroll early. This points to potential variations in social and cultural capital across different racial and ethnic groups, which can also influence the decision-making process regarding college enrollment.

At the school and district level, descriptive analyses shed light on the contextual factors that may serve as proxies for social and cultural capital. Consistent with previous literature, students attending schools or districts with higher percentages of parents attending parent/teacher conferences appear more likely to enroll early in the 8^{th} grade. These findings suggest that the level of parental involvement can serve as a potential indicator of social and cultural capital that influences the decision to enroll early in the Oklahoma's Promise program. Contrary to expectations, students enrolling in 8th grade were more likely to come from schools with higher percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL) and higher percentages of minority enrollment, which are factors that can be indicative of schools with greater socioeconomic disadvantage and racial diversity. Additionally, students enrolling in the 8th grade were found to come from schools and districts with higher student-to-counselor ratios. Finally, when comparing schools of only 9th and 10th grade enrollees, it appears that students enrolling earlier attend schools with more students per administrative staff (229.2) compared to those enrolling later (234.4), meaning those enrolling in 9th grade may attend schools with more resources per student than those enrolling in the 10th grade. However, this pattern does not hold true for students enrolling in 8th grade, which come from schools with an average administrative staff per student ratio of 234.4, virtually the same as those enrolling in 10th grade.

These unanticipated findings could be due to several factors. First, it is possible that less-resourced schools may participate in college access initiatives, such as GEAR UP or Upward Bound, that target low-income students. Participation in these programs provides additional grant-funded resources that could assist with outreach and enrollment assistance. Second, students from schools with a high percentage of students eligible for FRL may face greater financial barriers to higher education, making Oklahoma's Promise more applicable to the general student population. Third, administrators at less-resourced schools may prioritize Oklahoma's Promise as part of their mission to prepare college-ready students. For example, Santa Fe South High School, a charter school in Oklahoma City with over 98% minority enrollment and over 95% economically disadvantaged enrollment, has been named an

“Oklahoma’s Promise State Champion” by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education for 14 consecutive years, consistently producing the most high school graduates enrolled in and meeting Oklahoma’s Promise requirements in Class 5A.

Incorporating the concept of timing, this study finds that the timing of enrollment in the Oklahoma’s Promise program is associated with the social and cultural capital of students and the schools they attend. Early enrollees, namely those who sign up for the scholarship in 8^{th} grade, often come from backgrounds with higher levels of social and cultural capital, reflected in elements such as family income, parental educational attainment, or the level of parental involvement in their education. This aligns with existing research that highlights the influence of social and cultural capital in shaping educational outcomes and college access. This finding also implies that students with a stronger foundation of resources and support are more likely to develop an early predisposition towards college. They are more likely to enroll in the Oklahoma’s Promise program at the earliest opportunity, thereby solidifying their identity as college-bound and maximizing their preparation time for college.

Understanding the role of social and cultural capital in program participation and timing of enrollment can inform policymakers and educational stakeholders in developing targeted interventions to mitigate disparities improve program access. Efforts could be directed towards providing additional resources and support to students with limited social and cultural capital to promote greater equity in access to early commitment financial aid programs. Moreover, initiatives aimed at enhancing college readiness and fostering a college-going culture in schools with lower levels of social and cultural capital may help bridge the gap and improve opportunities for students.

It is also worth noting patterns of enrollment by grade were more clearly evident for family-level rather than school-level or district-level characteristics. This supports past research highlighting that while school resources can have appreciable effects on educational outcomes, they are typically smaller than effects of student and family resources (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). The current study reveals that timing of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise is more prominently associated with family-level attributes rather than school-level indicators. This distinction also provides significant insights for policymakers in designing early intervention programs. This differential impact underscores the importance of recognizing and targeting family-level dynamics as key drivers of college choice decisions. Policymakers and administrators aiming to enhance program participation and mitigate disparities could strategically allocate resources towards increasing family engagement and equipping parents and guardians with information and tools to foster a college-going culture. Although school-level initiatives remain necessary strategies, the central role of family-level factors warrants approaches that empower families with diverse backgrounds and resources to engage actively with early commitment financial aid programs. Emphasizing this distinction in policy discussions could lead to more effective interventions that address the heart of enrollment disparities, ensuring greater equity and access for all students.

While the current analysis provides valuable insights into the role of student and school level characteristics as proxies for social and cultural capital, future research should focus on developing a greater understanding the mechanisms through which social and capital influence program participation decisions. Advanced statistical techniques, such as regression analysis, could be employed to examine the direct and indirect effects of social and cultural capital factors on enrollment patterns, shedding further light on the dynamics of college choice and access within the context of early commitment financial aid programs like Oklahoma's Promise.

Chapter 3:

Gatekeepers: Street-Level Bureaucrats and the Use of Discretion in Oklahoma's Promise

Understanding the complex interactions between citizens and state actors is fundamental to the study of public administration. These client-state interactions are often shaped by "constraints placed on bureaucrats by policymakers and elected officials, which may undermine organizational effectiveness and limit fair and consistent client access to governmental programs," (Bell & Smith, 2022). Emerging public administration literature has focused on the role of administrative burdens in restraining access to government services, especially for disadvantaged clientele (Burden et al., 2012; Christensen et al., 2020; Heinrich, 2016; Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). This study contributes to the administrative burden literature by examining the role of bureaucratic discretion in promoting or inhibiting access to government services in the context of higher education. To do so, I examine the use of discretion by counselors and other school personnel as they assist students in enrolling in and completing the requirements for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program – a statewide means-tested financial aid program that requires students to overcome significant learning, psychological and compliance costs as they seek to access scholarship benefits. Findings from grounded theory analysis of open-ended survey responses and interviews with school personnel tasked with implementing the Oklahoma's Promise program reveal significant variation and discretion in the strategies used to assist students, which has implications for equity in accessing the scholarship.

In the following sections, I leverage the existing literature on administrative burden, street-level bureaucracy, and policy design of promise programs to provide a theoretical framework for my qualitative analysis. Next, I provide a detailed description of the administrative burden students encounter in accessing the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program. Then, I present my research design, data, and analysis. Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings for policymakers and future research.

Literature Review

Administrative Burden and Street-Level Bureaucracy

The concept of administrative burden is rooted in previous research on bureaucratic encounters or transactions and organizational "red tape" (Bozeman et al., 1992; Bozeman, 1993; Heinrich, 2016; Kahn et al., 1976). Kahn et al. (1976) define bureaucratic encounters as service-seeking transactions between citizens and the state and argue that reactions to those transactions are a joint product of client and agency characteristics. Bureaucratic encounters perceived as burdensome have been the subject of the organizational "red tape" literature, with the concept of red tape generally referring to constraints and barriers to organizational activities that result from both internal and external rules, regulations, and procedures (Baldwin, 1990; Heinrich, 2016). Moynihan et al. (2015) distinguish previous research on organizational "red tape" from administrative burden by exploring more intentionally the impact of these rules, or burdens, on extra-organizational interactions between bureaucrats and clients seeking access to public services. Similar to the red tape literature, research on administrative burden focuses on interactions and experiences that are viewed as onerous and restraining (Burden et al, 2012; Heinrich, 2016; Moynihan et al., 2015). Administrative burden is an important theoretical concept to our understanding of public policy, public administration, and citizen-state interactions as burdens affect whether citizens are successful in gaining access to public services, whether public policies are effective in reaching targeted beneficiaries, and public perceptions of government (Moynihan et al., 2015).

Defining Administrative Burden

Administrative burden can be conceptualized as a function of the learning, psychological, and compliance costs that citizens experience as they seek to access government services (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015).

Learning Costs. According to Herd and Moynihan (2018), learning costs “arise from engaging in search processes to collect information about public services” (p.15). Learning costs include time and resources spent by individuals to learn about a particular government program, including eligibility requirements, benefits, and how to access services (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). Determining the effects of learning costs on program access has been ascertained using multiple methods. One approach has been to document lack of knowledge about a program by its target population (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). For example, using surveys, Bhargava and Manoli (2012) found that 44% of those eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit were unaware of the program’s existence and that respondents significantly underestimated potential benefits. Additionally, surveys indicate that approximately half of individuals eligible to receive food stamp benefits incorrectly believed they were not eligible, with many of these respondents reporting they would have applied for benefits if they had known they were eligible (Bartlett et al., 2004; Moynihan et al., 2015). Learning costs also include other variables negatively impacting program take-up, such as distance from administrative centers, having lower educational attainment, or language barriers (Heckman & Smith, 2003; Moynihan et al., 2015). Moynihan et al. (2015) argue that the concept of learning costs also helps explain “why those already in one program become more likely to access other services because applying to one program can generate knowledge about others” (p. 48), citing research that demonstrates the direct provision of relevant information reduces learning costs and increases program take-up (Bhargava & Manoli, 2012; Budd & McCall, 1997; Kopczuk & Pop-Eleches, 2007).

Psychological Costs. Psychological costs refer to the stigma associated with participation in unpopular programs (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). Means-tested social safety net programs often generate a negative perception that recipients are undeserving, while universal programs, such as Social Security, do not carry the same negative connotation (Horan & Austin, 1974; Katz, 1986; Mettler, 2011; Moynihan et al., 2015; Piven & Cloward, 1993). Moynihan et al. (2015) argue that interactions with government that are experienced as "degrading, intrusive, and directive" (p. 49) erode an individual's basic need for autonomy. Citizens may choose not to participate in unpopular programs to avoid the negative stigma associated with such programs. For example, in a survey of individuals likely eligible but not receiving food stamp benefits, Bartlett et al. (2004) found that 27% of respondents would not apply because they did not want to be dependent on what is often viewed as "government handouts." Furthermore, qualitative research indicates that many welfare claimants find the application process itself to be disempowering, with the resulting lack of autonomy creating a sense of powerlessness and frustration (Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Moynihan et al., 2015; Soss, 1999). Moynihan et al. (2015) note that this "sense of subservience and loss of autonomy is furthered when claimants feel they must artificially alter their identity to be successful, contorting themselves into what they perceive as the caseworker's image of the appropriate client" (p. 49). Negative experiences associated with program access help explain why take-up rates among eligible beneficiaries of means-tested programs are much lower than the near 100% take-up for universal programs like Social Security and Medicare (Moynihan et al., 2015). For example, Sommers et al. (2012) estimate Medicaid program participation rates to be just 50-70% of eligible participants, and Kroft (2008) finds that only 30-60% of eligible claimants file for unemployment insurance benefits.

Compliance Costs. Moynihan et al. (2015) define compliance costs as "the burdens of following administrative rules and requirements" (p. 46). For individuals applying for government services, these include costs associated with program application, such as completing forms and providing required documentation, as well as costs associated with maintaining eligibility, such as meeting work search requirements under the TANF program or enrolling in a minimum number of credit hours to receive a scholarship. Overly burdensome compliance costs decrease program participation. For example, in their comprehensive study of SNAP, Bartlett et al. (2004) find that complexity of the application process significantly deterred participation in the food stamp program. Similarly, Brodkin and Majmundar (2010) examine procedural barriers in the TANF program, arguing that the complex and burdensome application process often makes it difficult for eligible families to access benefits. While increasing compliance costs reduces program take-up, research also demonstrates that reducing these costs is associated with increased program participation (Moynihan et al., 2015). For example, in her study of accessibility in the food stamp program, Hanratty (2006) identifies simplification of eligibility and application processes as a significant factor driving increased SNAP participation rates.

Street-Level Bureaucrats and Bureaucratic Discretion

While the study of administrative burden has significantly advanced our understanding of the impact of burdens on a variety of democratic outcomes, variation across local agencies in the implementation of burdens has largely been understudied, with some exceptions (see Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Soss et al., 2011; Heinrich, 2018). Bell and Smith (2022) argue that this is surprising given that manipulation of administrative burdens was initially captured by Lipsky (2010; 1984) in his seminal work on street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), who he defines as the front-line government workers that interact directly with citizen clients and play a critical role in policy implementation and service delivery.

As mediators of citizen access to government services, SLBs can be viewed as gatekeepers that make discretionary decisions according to their own specific value judgments while at the same time navigating and resolving complex and often conflicting demands from clients, supervisors and policymakers (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). SLBs wield significant discretionary authority to: 1) interpret policies and regulations, which are often ambiguous and rarely cover all conceivable situations; 2) prioritize workload and allocate resources, deciding which cases are most urgent and deserving of immediate attention and which can be addressed at a later time; and 3) interact with citizen clients, making decisions about proper methods of communication, how to handle confrontational situations, and responding to requests for information or assistance (Keiser, 1999; Kelly, 1994; Lipsky, 2010; Scott, 1997). Thus, these frontline workers can be thought of as informal policymakers whose discretionary decisions regarding “which rules, procedures and policies are acted on; who gets what services and who is hassled or arrested” significantly impact citizen experiences of government programs (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, p. 155).

The use of bureaucratic discretion has the potential to result in wide variation in administrative practices within the same program, leading to inconsistencies in service delivery and client access as well as raising ethical concerns about equity (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). May and Winter (2009) argue that use of discretion can be either positive or negative. On the one hand, SLBs can modify their services to fit the unique needs and circumstances of each individual client, ultimately leading to more effective service delivery. On the other hand, discretion opens the potential for bias, discrimination, and arbitrary decisions, especially when coupled with a lack of proper training and oversight (Riccucci, 2005).

Several factors impact SLBs use of discretion, including: a) role conflict and ambiguity; b) workload and time constraints; c) training and resource availability, including access to information, technology and other supports, and d) organizational culture and leadership (May and Winter, 2009). Additionally, Lipsky (2010) notes that SLBs are often subject to external constraints, including political pressures, bureaucratic rules and regulations, and public scrutiny, all of which limits their autonomy and use of discretion in decision-making. These external factors are, in turn, mediated by the individual values, knowledge, and beliefs of SLBs about the policy they implement and the clients they serve (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Sandfort, 2000; Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Soss et al., 2011). Previous research has found that despite attempts by policymakers and senior-level administrators to change service delivery priorities, SLBs' use of discretion is often still motivated by their individual values and beliefs (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Riccucci, 2005). For example, in the context of welfare reform, Watkins-Hayes (2009) observes that some SLBs take on a "social worker" role, providing supportive services, such as assistance with job searches, referrals, and counseling, to clients in addition to determining benefits eligibility because they view themselves as advocates for their clients. Alternatively, other SLBs serve as "efficiency engineers" who see themselves as responsible for implementing newly introduced bureaucratic practices designed to increase efficiency and reduce costs by getting clients off welfare and into the workplace and using eligibility requirements to regulate access to benefits. In both examples, self-perception plays an important role in shaping how SLBs approach their work, which can significantly impact how clients experience government.

Impact of Administrative Burden

Past research on administrative burden has emphasized the use of burden as a political tool in which policymakers can manipulate learning, psychological, and compliance costs to impede or support program access. Moynihan et al. (2015) describe administrative burden as a "venue of politics" in which the distribution of burdens is a "function of deliberate political choice rather than simply a product of historical accident or neglect" (p. 43). Accordingly, administrative burden can be viewed as a type of "policymaking by other means" in which policymakers use burdens as an alternative to overt political activity (Lineberry, 1977; Moynihan et al., 2015). The three components of administrative burden – learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs – function as strategic policy tools used by policymakers participating in "hidden politics" to enact significant policy changes without engaging in traditional democratic processes, such as debate and public transparency (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2016). Use of administrative burden and delegation of implementation down to frontline workers, therefore, allows elected officials to avoid controversial decisions that may hurt their re-election chances, such as funding cuts or program elimination, by serving to restrict access to programs not aligned with their political platform (Lipsky, 2010; Moynihan et al., 2015).

The implementation of administrative burden has been shown to impact a variety of democratic outcomes, including civic engagement and efficacy (Bruch et al., 2010; Soss, 1999), access to public programs and policy effectiveness (Heinrich & Brill, 2015; Herd et al., 2013), and social equity (Jilk et al., 2018; Nisar, 2017). Research also suggests that administrative burden negatively impacts both clients seeking access to government services and SLBs tasked with implementing policy and procedures. For clients, the negative impacts of administrative burden on citizen access to services is well-documented (Moynihan et al., 2015). Administrative burdens, such as complex application processes, lengthy wait times, and complicated eligibility requirements, can impede the ability to access needed services and benefits. These burdens, in turn, create additional psychological and financial stress for clients, especially those already experiencing economic insecurity and marginalization (Christensen et al., 2020; Hattke et al., 2020; Heinrich, 2016). For SLBs, administrative burden contributes to burnout and high turnover rates largely due to the fact that frontline workers often bear the brunt of bureaucratic practices designed to increase efficiency and reduce costs (Burden et al., 2012; Moynihan et al., 2015). Moreover, administrative burden has the potential to undermine relationships established between SLBs and their clients, especially when frontline staff are forced to prioritize bureaucratic requirements over quality service delivery to clients. This often results in a sense of distrust and frustration among clients, who may cite unfair treatment or inadequate support (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Lipsky, 2010; May & Winter, 2009; Riccucci, 2005).

Administrative Burdens in Promise Programs

Implementation of free college or promise programs across the United States has become an increasingly popular policy tool for expanding college access by reducing the cost of attendance (Mishory & Granville, 2019; Perna & Leigh, 2017; Rosinger et al., 2021). Approximately 20 states have adopted free college programs, the majority of which have been implemented since 2017 (Mishory & Granville, 2019; Rosinger et al., 2021). While all promise programs seek to increase access by reducing college costs for eligible students, their design and implementation varies significantly across programs, (Gándara & Li, 2020; Mishory & Granville, 2019; Rosinger et al., 2021). Previous research offers useful typologies in analyzing the design of promise programs, such as Miller-Adams' (2015) categorization of the expansive/restrictive and universal/limited nature of programs or Perna and Leigh's (2018) groupings based on eligibility criteria, award structure, and institutional restrictions. More recently, research has moved to understanding the effects of variation in program design on outcomes. For example, Gándara and Li (2020) find that programs without income eligibility requirements are associated with larger enrollment effects than those with restrictions and that programs with merit requirements and larger financial awards disproportionately benefit white students over those from marginalized groups.

Rosinger et al. (2021) provide a useful schema for analyzing administrative burden in the form of learning, compliance, and psychological costs in the context of promise programs, as shown in Table 3.1 (p. 4). Learning costs include the time and effort spent learning about the existence of the scholarship program and its financial benefits, as well as eligibility requirements and the application process. Significant compliance costs are also associated with accessing and maintaining scholarship funding under promise programs. These include signing and upholding agreements to meet specified benchmarks, aid application submission, and completion of annual eligibility checks (Rosinger et al., 2021). Finally, students seeking to access benefits under promise programs face psychological costs in multiple ways, including having to repeatedly identify oneself as low income on multiple forms, sharing sensitive personal information, pressure to meet high standards to earn and maintain eligibility, and negative stereotypes (Rosinger et al., 2021).

Table 3.1.
Administrative Burdens in Free College/Promise Programs

	Program Components Contributing to Administrative Burden
Learning Costs	Learning the program exists and financial benefits Determining individual eligibility Learning about the application process
Compliance Costs	Sign and uphold pledge to meet specified academic and other benchmarks

	Submit aid application(s) Complete annual eligibility checks to maintain award
Psychological Costs	Psychological strain from: • Stigma associated with requiring aid • Sharing personal information • High standards (GPA, volunteering) • Negative stereotypes (drug tests, criminal background checks)

Administrative Burdens in the Oklahoma's Promise Scholarship Program

The Oklahoma's Promise scholarship is a statewide means-tested financial aid program designed to increase college access by covering the full cost of tuition for low-income students planning to attend Oklahoma colleges or universities (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2017). Oklahoma's Promise is an ideal case for the study of administrative burdens in promise programs because 1) the social construction of students is similar to that of target populations in the administrative burden literature and 2) students must meet a stringent set of requirements in order to access and maintain scholarship funds, including recurring income checks and conduct requirements that are similar to other programs in the administrative burden literature. Like public narratives that frame welfare mothers, the unemployed, and uninsured in a negative light, some students are framed as more deserving of financial aid than others, which is particularly apparent when looking at public support for merit-based versus need-based financial aid (Ness, 2010). Despite its goal of reducing structural inequities in college access for low-income students, Oklahoma's Promise typifies the demeaning benefits described by Schneider and Ingram (2012) by imposing learning, compliance and psychological costs on its targeted beneficiaries. Similar to burdens faced by welfare recipients, students and parents applying for Oklahoma's Promise must 1) understand program requirements and estimate their eligibility for the scholarship, 2) complete complicated paperwork and procedural requirements, and 3) develop the psychological stamina to overcome stigma associated with recurring means-tests (Bell & Smith, 2022).

Rosinger et al. (2021) classify Oklahoma's Promise as a promise program with a high-level of administrative burden. Oklahoma's Promise provides a narrow enrollment time frame as an early commitment financial aid program (8^{th} -11^{th} grade) and compels students to meet a long list of requirements to confirm their eligibility. The initial application process in middle or high school requires students to complete and submit a five-page application form, provide income and proof of citizenship documentation, and sign an agreement stating they will complete homework, refrain from skipping school, refrain from abusing drugs or alcohol, and refrain from committing criminal or delinquent acts. In addition, once a student becomes a high school senior, he/she must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a notoriously complex process that consists of over 100 questions (Howell & Pender, 2016). Following high school graduation, a counselor must certify that the student completed the 17-unit core curriculum and earned at least a 2.5 cumulative GPA. Once in college, Oklahoma's Promise students must maintain eligibility by completing annual income checks and meeting academic and conduct requirements.

Oklahoma's Promise also serves as an excellent case study owing to implementation through the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE), a statewide coordinating board, and a decentralized network of SLBs that includes counselors, school administrators, and grant-funded staff for federal programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO. While OSRHE serves as the administrative organization for the program, much of the actual work involved in providing information to students and families and assisting with the application process occur on the frontlines in the K-12 setting. Thus, OSRHE delegates significant discretion to school personnel to interpret and apply state laws governing the scholarship, translate policy design into practice, perform student outreach, provide personalized support, and monitor student eligibility and compliance (Bell & Smith, 2022).

Research Design

This study uses a grounded theory approach to analyze the ways in which SLBs mediate access to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program through the use of discretion. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory seeks to discover or construct theory from data grounded in the views of participants rather than testing pre-existing theories or hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). Grounded theory research is an iterative process involving data collection, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. The overall aim of grounded theory is to develop a theory that is rooted in the data and relevant to the context in which the research is being conducted (Jones et al., 2014). Grounded theory is an appropriate design for this study because it enables the study of phenomena – the differential impact of counselor discretion on scholarship program uptake – on which very little empirical research has been conducted to date. In the sections that follow, I describe grounded theory methodology, the data collection process, the methods of analysis utilized, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and the limitations of this research study.

Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that focuses on building theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Bryant and Charmaz (2007) note that Glaser and Strauss developed the grounded theory approach in the 1960s as a response to "the hypothesis-driven deductive method that, as far as they were concerned, characterized the social and behavioral sciences at the time" (p. 46). In the development of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss sought to provide a systematic approach to qualitative research, which also answered criticisms regarding reliability and validity from positivist-oriented quantitative researchers by providing a solid method of data analysis and theory construction (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

In grounded theory, theory is developed through the interactive process of creating and refining "abstract conceptualizations of particular phenomenon" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 77). In 1990, Corbin and Strauss refined Glaser and Strauss's original conceptualization of grounded theory and outlined a specific set of technical procedures comprising the grounded theory process. These procedures and "canons" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6) include the following: interrelation between data collection and data analysis, concepts as the basic unit of analysis, grouping of categories from concepts, theoretical sampling, use of constant comparisons, accounting for patterns and variations, building process into the theory, writing theoretical memos, development and testing of hypothesized relationships among categories, analysis of broader structural conditions that affect the phenomenon of interest, and team-based research.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that every methodology is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and knowing and ontological assumptions about the nature of existence and reality. In order to appropriately employ congruent elements in the research design of this study, it is important to have a thorough understanding of the history of grounded theory as well as its epistemological and ontological underpinnings of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Jones et al., 2014).

Epistemological Foundation

Epistemologically, grounded theory is founded on the philosophies of Symbolic Interactionism and Pragmatism (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Symbolic Interactionism refers to the interaction that occurs through the interaction between individuals, asserting that each individual interprets or defines the other's actions instead of merely reacting to the other's actions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In other words, humans respond based upon their attribution of meaning to another individual's actions. Pragmatism contends that knowledge is created from a process involving the action and interaction of self-reflective beings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). With regard to the quest for an objective reality, the Pragmatists emphasized that "acts of knowing embody perspectives" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 4) and rejected the notion that what we discover about reality can be objectively separated from the researcher's past experiences and perspectives regarding the world. Corbin and Strauss (2008) caution that the acknowledgement of the role of researcher's perspective in the search for knowledge does not lead to the radical relativism associated with the postmodern epistemologies that maintain that absolute truth does not exist. In recognizing the role of the researcher, pragmatists make certain assumptions, including acceptance that the truth as we know it now may one day be overturned, the notion of cumulative knowledge, and the cyclical relationship of influence that exists between knowledge and practice (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Ontological Foundation

Grounded theory incorporates an ontological perspective that assumes "a world that is complex, often ambiguous, evincing change as well as periods of permanence; where action itself although routine today may be problematic tomorrow; where answers become questionable and questions ultimately produce theory" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6). This ontological position leads grounded theorists to be concerned with "the great varieties of human action, interaction, and emotional responses that people have to the events and problems they encounter" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6). Accompanying this perspective, Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory methodology notes the incorporation of several assumptions related to the nature of actions, interactions, and the intersection of actions. These assumptions reflect an understanding that the world is complex with multiple interacting factors. While researchers try to capture this complexity through the acknowledgment and inclusion of multiple perspectives, it is virtually impossible to depict the vast complexity of the world. Finally, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), our understanding of experiences and phenomenon cannot be divorced from the larger "social, political, cultural, racial, gender-related, informational, and technological" (p. 8) aspects of our lives.

Theoretical Perspective

In congruence with the epistemology and ontology framing Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory methodology, I have approached this research study with a postpositivist theoretical perspective, which challenges the traditional positivist assumptions of absolute truth and recognizes that we cannot be "positive" about our claims of knowledge in studying human behavior and action (Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, postpostivist approaches to research acknowledge the existence of multiple perspectives while still following systematically structured research processes (Creswell, 2014). Reflecting a postpositivist theoretical perspective, Corbin and Strauss (2008) observe that while there are numerous interpretations that can be composed from a given set of data, it is nevertheless a useful exercise for the researcher to generate concepts from a particular dataset. The practice of generating concepts increases our understanding of both people and phenomena as well as provides a "language that can be used for discussion and debate leading to the development of shared meanings and understandings" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. ix). Accordingly, Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory methodology reflects the postpositivist stance that knowledge is conjectural, with the goal of research being to develop theories through an iterative process of making claims and then refining or abandoning claims on the basis of evidence.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Qualitative research relies heavily upon the use of the researcher as an instrument for inquiry. Jones et al. (2014) describe positionality as "the relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic" (p. 26). Researcher positionality is influenced by research paradigm, theoretical perspective, and methodology (Jones et al., 2014). Relying on a postpositivist theoretical perspective, I have approached this research study following the systematic techniques prescribed by Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory methodology while acknowledging the influence of my personal and professional experiences. In an effort to fully disclose my potential biases, as a senior administrator for the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, I interact regularly with staff responsible for implementing the Oklahoma's Promise program. I have had opportunities to assist in problem-solving various issues related to the program and have a vested interest in the overall success of Oklahoma's Promise. At the same time, I have witnessed implementation challenges and communicated with individuals who were not able to access the program's benefits due to administrative barriers. Accordingly, this research study was designed and conducted with inherent assumptions regarding the efficacy of the program's current implementation approach.

Data Collection

To investigate how SLBs mediate administrative burden to impede or promote uptake in the Oklahoma's Promise program, I leverage two qualitative data sources. First, I utilize open-ended responses from a statewide survey of middle and high school counselors and administrators who play a key role in promoting student awareness of the program and assist students and families as they navigate the enrollment process (see Appendix A for survey instrument). Working with a research colleague, the survey instrument, which included both open and closed questions, was designed to capture beliefs about roles in encouraging students to apply for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship, perceived support from school officials in performing these responsibilities, and level of discretion in carrying out tasks. While findings from analysis of these survey responses have been previously published (Bell & Smith, 2022), this dissertation expands upon that research by providing a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the following open-ended survey questions:

- What is the most effective strategy that you have used to get information to students and families about the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship?
- How do you assist students in meeting the curricular, academic and disciplinary requirements to receive the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship upon graduation?
- How do you help students and parents overcome each of these barriers (learning, psychological, compliance)?
- Please describe your most common interactions with parents regarding the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship.
- Have there been particularly difficult cases where you had to help students that were struggling to provide all the documentation necessary to get Oklahoma's Promise? Please describe how you dealt with the situation.
- Are certain students more likely to come ask you for help with their application? What types of students need the most help in your experience?
- What recommendations do you have for improving this program?

We partnered with OSRHE, who distributed the survey recruitment e-mail to its listserv of counselors and administrators at schools across the state. OSRHE estimates that approximately 600 potential participants were notified of the survey opportunity. Completed responses were received from 298 individuals in May 2018, representing a 50-60% responses rate. Numerous factors may have impacted the response rate. First, the survey was distributed at the end of academic year, when many counselors and administrators most likely had higher than average workloads. Second, and most importantly, the survey was distributed during the middle of the teacher walkouts occurring in Oklahoma in April/May 2018, which led to uncertainty among school employees and unexpected closures of schools. Of the 298 completed surveys, 167 responses were received from school counselors and administrators while the remaining 131 represented employees from grant programs such as Upward Bound, higher education institutions, technology centers, tribal entities and nonprofit organizations. Furthermore, it should be noted that many of the K-12 counselors observed served multiple school sites, one result of the budget constraints within Oklahoma's common education system. The diverse nature of respondents also reflects the reality of the Oklahoma's Promise implementation process, which is highly decentralized and dependent upon numerous entities working together to impact program uptake.

The second source of qualitative data comes from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with survey respondents. Following survey closure, I reached out via e-mail to 38 respondents who indicated in their survey responses an interest in participating in a follow-up interview. A total of six respondents were actually willing to participate in an interview. These participants represented a variety of roles: four were high school counselors, one served as the assistant director of an Upward Bound program at a community college, and one served as an assistant superintendent. Interviewees also represented urban, suburban and rural school sites. The schools represented by interviewees varied in size, ranging from 161 students at Participant 6's school to 2,506 students at Participant 1's school; across socioeconomic lines, with as many as 91% of the students eligible for free and reduced lunch at Participant 2's school and only 37% at Participant 1's school; and in the percentage of potentially eligible students receiving the scholarship, with 17% of potentially eligible students receiving the scholarship at Participant 1's school and only 5% receiving it at Participant 2's school. Again, the extreme variation in interview participants corresponds to the decentralized system of program implementation associated with the Oklahoma's Promise program. Interviews were conducted via phone, audio-recorded, and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length. An interview protocol was utilized to guide the interview, but probing questions were also asked to elicit rich discussion on certain topics of interest that emerged (see Appendix B for interview protocol). From the interviews, 103 pages of denaturalized transcripts were produced, with grammar errors corrected and the idiosyncratic elements of speech, such as stutters or pauses, removed (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005).

Analysis

Following in the tradition of grounded theory methods, I employed several tools of analysis to explore the data that emerged from my open-ended survey responses and follow-up interviews, with the initial goal of developing a conceptual ordering that could assist in making sense of the "data by organizing them according to a classificatory scheme" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 19). These tools included researcher memos, open and axial coding, and constant comparative analysis.

Researcher Memos

As Corbin and Strauss (2008) note, the use of researcher memos serves as an important tool in the analytic process, providing the research with a method to keep track of the complex and cumulative thinking that occurs during the analytic process. Accordingly, researcher memos were generated during the research design portion of the study and continued throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Memos focused on the researcher's reasoning behind design choices and discussed possible themes that emerged during the analysis process.

Coding

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), coding refers to the process in which the researcher extracts concepts from raw data and examines them in terms of their raw properties and dimensions. To examine the concepts present in the transcripts from participant interviews and open-ended survey responses, I utilized Corbin and Strauss's (2008) open coding and axial coding methods. Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that open and axial coding often occur simultaneously, with the researcher breaking data apart to identify concepts through open coding and then reassembling the data through axial coding to relate the identified concepts. Following the open coding process, I broke the data from the interview transcripts down into manageable chunks and examined each chunk line-by-line in terms of the concepts present (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this process, I developed a list of initial codes and examined the characteristics, or properties, of each code and the range, or dimension, along which these characteristics varied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Concurrently, I used the axial coding process to reassemble the data chunks initially broken apart by the open coding process and to relate concepts "to form more precise and complete explanations" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124) about SLB use of discretion in implementing the Oklahoma's Promise program. Through axial coding, I reviewed the initial list of codes and collapsed related concepts to develop a more succinct list of themes.

Constant Comparative Analysis

Corbin and Strauss (2008) advocate the use of the constant comparison technique developed originally by Glaser and Strauss to compare incident with incident in the data. Constant comparisons enable the researcher to identify similarities and differences in the data. Using constant comparisons, I compared data from each participant. Incidents found to be conceptually similar were grouped together under a higher-level descriptive concept during the axial coding process. The use of constant comparisons allowed me to "differentiate one category/theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to that category/them" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73). The constant comparative process enables the researcher to identify similarities and differences within the data.

Trustworthiness

Jones et al. (2014) note that trustworthiness refers to the means by which readers can assure that the quality of a research study is high. Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this research study and findings. First, I have provided detailed descriptions regarding the selection of my study topic, the reasons behind the sample selection, and the approach to data collection. Second, prior to data collection, a research colleague, Elizabeth Bell, reviewed the research design, including the interview protocol and sample selection method. Comments from Dr. Bell were incorporated to strengthen the interview protocol and finalize sample selection. To remain cognizant of any potential biases, I also conducted a self-reflection prior to the study, as evidenced in the researcher positionality and reflexivity section of this paper. Finally, to strengthen the validity of findings, I conducted a search for discrepant evidence and negative cases throughout the analysis process to test rival or competing explanations as recommended by Yin (2016).

Limitations

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, although I employed theoretical sampling during the interview process, the sample of follow-up interviews actually conducted is relatively small. Second, while this study takes a post-positivist approach, it is nevertheless important to note the role of the researcher as a subjective observer. As a current staff member for the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, I am influenced by my professional experiences related to the Oklahoma's Promise program. While every effort was made to identify my potential biases and preconceived ideas regarding the subject of study, it is impossible to fully separate myself from the research design, data collection, and analysis phases of this study. Finally, the findings in this study are based on open-ended survey responses and interviews conducted with school personnel in Oklahoma and relate specifically to their experiences with implementation of the Oklahoma's Promise program. Findings may not translate well to other promise programs or in other administrative contexts.

Findings

Through grounded theory methods of analysis, findings indicate that 1) students face many administrative burdens in accessing the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship, 2) high school counselors and other front-line school personnel perceive their involvement with the Oklahoma's Promise as fulfilling certain roles and functions in the context of program implementation, 3) the self-identified role is largely a product of beliefs about who bears the primary responsibility for administrative burden, and 4) these role perceptions influence the ways in which counselors and other school personnel choose to exercise discretion as they help implement the scholarship program.

Administrative Burdens in the Oklahoma's Promise Program

Survey respondents identified all three major types of administrative burdens – learning, psychological, and compliance costs – as barriers to access in the Oklahoma's Promise program.

Learning Costs

Many school personnel described a general lack of public knowledge about Oklahoma's Promise as a significant barrier to program access that they work to overcome. In describing common interactions with parents, several respondents indicated that parents simply do not know the scholarship program exists. Others noted that they often spend time answering basic questions concerning program requirements and benefits. As one respondent explained, "my most common interactions [with parents] include helping them understand what OKPromise actually pays for and what actual documentation they need and actually guiding them while they fill it out." Another echoed this responsibility, commenting, "I have parents who tell me they didn't understand what the flyer is really about. Some parents are not confident in filling out the paperwork. I invited those parents to come to my office so I can walk them through applying for the scholarship." In these instances, school personnel serve to help parents interpret and navigate a complicated scholarship application process, even going so far as to provide one-on-one assistance. Language barriers further compound costs associated with learning about and understanding the Oklahoma's Promise application process. One counselor accurately encapsulated this when stating "ELL students usually need the most help filling out the application and understanding the requirements."

Another learning cost involves understanding the enrollment deadlines associated with Oklahoma's Promise as an early commitment financial aid program. One counselor remarked, "The enrollment is too early. Parents that have not gone to college simply do not understand this." Some parents only seem to grasp the importance of the program when their children are juniors or seniors, and by then, the enrollment deadline is passed. As counselor noted, "Many parents will still argue that they have never been told about the program. I feel like they don't really pay attention to the information until their children are juniors or seniors and by then it is too late. We start giving information in middle school and talk about OKPromise every chance we get with parents and students, I just don't feel like they understand the importance of the application and the deadlines."

Understanding program requirements for students to refrain from drug abuse and delinquent acts emerged as another challenging learning cost. Counselors noted that these requirements can be confusing for both students and parents, as evidenced by the following comment: "The delinquency procedures are not clear – parents and students do not understand the meaning of a delinquent act." It is important to note that while the Oklahoma's Promise program has since revised administrative rules to clarify that restrictions on delinquent acts and substance abuse refer to students not having been convicted in a court of law, such guidance was not in place at the time of data collection.

Beyond the application process itself, another learning cost identified by respondents was the absence of clear postsecondary educational pathways, particularly among students hailing from families without a robust college-going tradition. For example, one survey respondent noted that "the students that need the most help are the ones who have no clue what they are doing after high school. They have little to no support at home, and education is not important."

Similarly, another counselor indicated students from families with generational poverty "seem to need more help as their parents do not understand the process and quite frankly don't see the benefit in completing the paperwork." This lack of family guidance and support leads to notable learning costs. In addition to learning about Oklahoma's Process, these students must also overcome significant learning costs associated with identifying suitable educational institutions, understanding the college application process, navigating the complexities of financial aid, and ultimately enrolling in a college or university. As one respondent commented, "I think our students need all the help they can get and not all of them understand college, how to get there, or how they are going to pay for it."

Psychological Costs

Psychological costs associated with accessing the Oklahoma's Promise program primarily manifest as feelings of mistrust and fear of social stigma, which typically stem from concerns about providing sensitive personal information during the application process. Several respondents noted reluctance on the part of parents to provide tax information, which is required to confirm income eligibility for the scholarship. As one counselor observed, "usually the problem is with convincing parents that it is safe to enter their tax information with the system." Another noted that "many parents do not want others to know information about their income. The application asks for the student's social, address, phone numbers and emails. Some parents prefer not to disclose this type of information with someone they do not know." According to respondents, hesitancy to provide required documentation generally originates from shame associated with poverty, with one counselor commenting that "there is a certain stigma attached to the idea of 'income' based requirements."

In addition to concerns about sharing personal income information, school personnel also highlighted instances of perceived psychological costs associated with mistrust and fear related to immigration status and "citizenship issues." The fear of potential repercussions, as exposure of undocumented status or adverse legal consequences, can lead parents to avoid applying for program benefits, even if their children are legal U.S. citizens. For example, in describing her experiences with parents that refused to sign the Oklahoma's Promise application form, one counselor speculated that it was "because they are undocumented," and another observed that her school has "issues yearly with our students of Hispanic background." This fear-driven decision-making reflects a psychological cost, as parents must grapple with the emotional toll of keeping their immigration status hidden while also potentially sacrificing educational opportunities for their children.

To minimize the negative impacts of mistrust and social stigma on student access to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship, school personnel employed various strategies. First, counselors and administrators stressed the importance of assuring confidentiality in the application process. As one counselor noted, "parents are apprehensive about sharing their income information. I explain that they can do it all by themselves. No one at the school needs to see their information. If it is necessary for me to help them, I promise confidentiality in all personal matters." Similarly, another explained that she provides information about Oklahoma's Promise to all students who enroll in the 8th through 10th grades, which "makes the process less directed at the individual." The provision of one-on-one assistance in completing the application process is another strategy used by counselors. As one commented, "some of our students and parents will come to my office and we will apply together. That seems to erase the stigma of the program. I will actually have them bring their tax information with them and I will mail the application for them. The hard part is identifying those students that do have the language or learning barrier. Again, once you have identified those students by calling them int my office I can alleviate some of their fear, or stress." Finally, school personnel attempt to reframe Oklahoma's Promise as a traditional merit-based scholarship to eliminate stigma associated with a need-based scholarship. One counselor noted, "we try to promote this as a valid scholarship and not as an entitlement – income is just one small piece of the puzzle." Another respondent highlighted attempts to "normalize" the scholarship, explaining that she "always start[s] with, 'If you make $55,000 or less, which is a nice living in Oklahoma…' It seems to take any stigma out of the number and allows our parents and students to speak more freely about the program."

Compliance Costs

Compliance costs placed on students and families during the application process also serve as a barrier to program access. While students must meet and maintain numerous requirements in order to gain access to the scholarships, completing the application, meeting the enrollment deadline, providing documentation, and contesting administrative errors were the compliance costs most frequently cited by school personnel.

Completing the Application. Respondents reported the length of the application and completing the application process itself as barriers for students and parents in accessing the scholarship. One counselor observed, "some of the parents freak out about having to fill out the application and not know what to send in even though it says on the application. They still contact me about what do I need to send in – they are saying the application is incomplete. Many say they don't have the time to fill it out; even though it is a short application, they get overwhelmed." Finally, many counselors identified helping students and parents with incomplete applications is a significant area of focus. As one participant described, “incomplete students often need help determining what is needed to complete registration.”

Deadlines. To qualify for the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship, students must submit an initial application by June 30th of their tenth-grade year. As previously discussed, understanding Oklahoma’s Promise deadlines is a learning cost associated with program access but actually meeting those deadlines can also be viewed as a compliance cost. Survey respondents and interviewees repeatedly noted difficulties in meeting this deadline. As one counselor observed, some parents do not “realize the need until the deadline has passed.” Another noted that students and parents “seem excited when I first present [information about Oklahoma’s Promise]. They sometimes forget to apply until it is too late and then seem upset. I try to talk to them about other opportunities early if they miss the deadlines.” In explaining the inability to meet application deadlines, one respondent emphasized that “student apathy to the process is a problem…procrastinating and missing deadlines.” Another view held by some school personnel is that this challenge is linked to socioeconomic factors, with one counselor noting “students of poverty are often from families challenged by deadlines, keeping papers organized, etc.”

Documentation. Documentation often represents a significant compliance cost within the framework of administrative burden, necessitating extensive time and resources to maintain thorough records and meet regulatory requirements. Tax documentation to verify income eligibility was the most common form of documentation mentioned by participants. Students encounter difficulty when parents do not file taxes, do not know how to access past tax filings, or, as mentioned in the previous section, refuse to disclose taxes due to mistrust or fear of social stigma. Several respondents described frustration with documentation requirements, with one counselor offering the following example:

> I learned today of a student who lives with both parents but dad has not worked or filed tax returns in years. Mom stated she called OK Promise but they wanted documentation of dad's income and they could not provide it so the student lost out. She stated he has not worked in years and does not have an income; I could not provide the information of what I did not have available.

Another noted, "I worked tirelessly with a particular student that ran into many barriers with documents. If the parent cannot get the documentation, then my hands become tied, and [that] seems so frustrating."

In addition to tax information, survey respondents and interviewees noted that divorce decrees, birth certificates, and verification of social security benefits can also be difficult for some students and parents to produce. As one counselor observed, "some of the difficulties applying have to do with divorce situations and families having to produce divorce decrees. Or families having to produce child support papers or verification of social security benefits. People can get overwhelmed thinking they have to contact the court house for a divorce decree or the social security office for income documentation."

Administrative Errors. Survey respondents and interviewees noted that addressing administrative errors caused by either school personnel or OSRHE staff also serve as a compliance cost of scholarship access. For example, one counselor described a situation in which "a teacher required students to fill out paperwork in her classroom…Students thought she mailed the applications in so they did not do anything when we continued to encourage deadlines to be met the next two years. We realized as seniors that nothing was originally filed…WHAT A MESS." Another counselor echoed a similar error at her school, noting "I have several upperclassmen who are not signed up because they and/or their parents seemed to think that the school filled out and turned in the paperwork for Oklahoma's Promise." In addition to confusion surrounding responsibility for application submissions, other administrative errors occur related to curriculum requirements. As one counselor recounted:

> One of our students started to attend our alternative school. She almost lost her qualification status because the counselor had informed her she met all the academic requirements. Later, we found out a substation class did not qualify her for the scholarship. Fortunately, she was able to take the class needed her first year in college and receive her full funding.

Another interviewee revealed an error she helped resolve for the daughter of a personal friend who was told by her own high school counselor that she was ineligible to receive the scholarship because one of the history classes she took did not meet the social studies curriculum requirement under the program. After personally calling OSRHE staff on behalf of her friend, the interviewee was able to get confirmation that the class did actually meet the requirement. Recognizing the significant impact that these types of administrative errors have on student access, the interviewee commented, "I mean, this is your child going to college or not, I mean, you can't afford these mistakes. You know? So, I'm just thankful that like I had this information and knowledge to share with my friend so that her daughter was able to enroll in school."

In addition to school-level administrative errors, multiple respondents described cases in which the Oklahoma's Promise office denied receiving an application even though the parent maintained copies of submitted paperwork. For example, one counselor observed, "we had one case where the parent had submitted the necessary paperwork and Oklahoma's Promise stated they had never received it. The parent had kept copies of the paperwork as well as dates sent. She was able to resubmit the papers and have them accepted." In this instance, it is fortunate that this particular parent had the foresight to keep documentation of the submission to prove that an application had been sent in. However, given the many challenges cited by school personnel in gaining cooperation from parents during the application process, this example raises concerns about students being erroneously denied access to the program due to administrative errors.

Challenges in Overcoming Compliance Costs. Respondents and interviewees noted that most challenges faced by students in overcoming compliance costs of the Oklahoma's Promise program stem from family dysfunction. Family dysfunction can describe students experiencing homelessness, students with parents who are incarcerated or suffering from addiction, students from divorced households, students living with non-parental guardians, and, most importantly, students whose parents refuse to cooperate during the application process.

Homelessness. Multiple respondents noted challenges associated with homeless students. For example, one survey respondent described a situation "in which documentation could not be obtained due to the student being in a non-parent living situation. After speaking with the Regents, I was informed that the challenges of such for McKinney-Vento students had never been considered." By referencing the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the counselor recognizes that the unique circumstances surrounding students experiencing homelessness were not explicitly considered in the policy development of the Oklahoma's Promise program given that producing the type of documentation required to confirm scholarship eligibility is extremely difficult for this population subset.

Incarceration and drug addiction. School personnel also commented that students whose parents are incarcerated or are suffering from drug addiction face challenges in completing the scholarship application process. As one counselor described, "I once had a student whose parents were drug addicts and not really responsible with completing paperwork.

I was able to call the OK Promise office on the student's behalf and submitted a letter of my knowledge of the family and the student's eligibility, which they accepted in order for her to still receive OK Promise." Recognizing the family dysfunction that served as a barrier for this particular student, the counselor personally intervened on the student's behalf to find a workaround to confirm eligibility. Another counselor recounted a situation in which "the parents were lazy and strung out on meth. After several attempts I told the parent their child would lose $50,000 for college if they didn't come meet with me. I worked with her to apply, and find her tax documents to submit for the student." These two examples speak to the struggles many students face in applying for Oklahoma's Promise when drug addicted or incarcerated parents are involved. Although the outcomes were successful in these two examples, student access to the scholarship ultimately resulted from the use of discretion on the part of individual counselors to help students find a workaround to these barriers. More often than not, when a parent is "in jail or some other place and not accessible or willing to provide the needed information, the student gets marked incomplete and stops there and never pursues further."

Guardianship Issues. Survey respondents and interviewees noted multiple instances in which guardianships issues make accessing the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship difficulty. Multiple examples of these types of situations were provided, including students with deceased parents, students from divorced households, students living with relatives who are not legal guardians, students living with legal guardians who are not biological parents, and students who are emancipated minors. Family conflict stemming from divorce sometimes makes it difficult for parents to cooperate to provide the documentation needed for enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise. As one counselor confirmed, "yes, with divorced situations, it is difficult to get all the parties to work together. I usually have to talk to both parties separately to get the information."

Another observed, “I had a senior who did not submit all documents. The parent could not locate all necessary information due to a divorce between parents. I intervened by speaking with each parent; however an unfortunate situation, the student chose to not go to college.” In addition to divorce, absent parents provide another barrier to scholarship access. One counselor noted, “at our school, we have a lot of one-parent homes or kids living with grandparents. I struggle getting income for parents. Especially because one parent is usually missing out of the kids life. I usually contact OK Promise and explain the situation to see what we can do.” Relatedly, some students will “have no contact or very little with parent who claims on taxes,” and many respondents noted that producing documentation is difficult for students not living with biological parents. One counselor described an especially challenging situation:

> Student lived with grandmother from age 2. Grandmother had power of attorney for medical and educational purposes, which they believed should suffice for Oklahoma's Promise (educational). Student's father has been in and out of prison and the mother hasn't been in her life since age 2. It is assumed that the mother was still claiming her on her taxes. When we finally got into contact with the mother, she refused to provide any tax information, although she did admit to claiming her on her taxes. Mother then moved out of state. This child could not get qualified through grandmother’s income (or lack of), and this was her only support system.

Uncooperative Parents. School counselors and administrators described several situations in which parents refused to cooperate during the application process. Lack of parental cooperation prevents student access to the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship because “unfortunately, the application is dependent upon parents to initially get the process started.” In some cases, respondents attribute this to general laziness on the part of the parent. For example, one counselor observed, “there are students who can and will use the program and be successful…but the parents are not willing to spend the time filling out the application or provide the paperwork.” In other situations, parents have a complete disregard for the success of their child. One counselor noted cases in which she had to “write letters concerning student circumstances where the custodial parent wants nothing to do with their child and has no desire to help them sign up for scholarships, college, OK Promise or anything.” Another explained, “I think a lot of times this is because the parent has a low expectation for their child (basically the parent has an ignorant attitude).”

While some school personnel try to assist students in these situations by contacting OSRHE staff to discuss possible alternatives, others simply advised students that they may need to look for other resources that do not require parental consent and cooperation. As one counselor explained, “when a parent refuses to release financial information, I tell the student he/she must concentrate on applying for other scholarships that do not require the information. This has happened to me 4 times.” Counselors repeatedly commented that the strict application requirements become punitive to students with uncooperative parents. For example, one counselor described a situation in which a student had not “seen the parent who has custody because of running from the law, on drugs, just living with family but they don’t have custody. He did not get OHLAP or FAFSA and will not be going to college for something out of his control.” Another counselor explained, “yes, we have students who are basically homeless and have deadbeat parents that refuse to help them or ones that don't file income taxes. It's very frustrating seeing the students being penalized because of their parents’ mistakes.”

Role Perceptions: Information, Compliance, and Advocacy

Qualitative data from survey responses and follow-up interviews suggest that front-line school personnel perform various roles and responsibilities as they assist students in navigating administrative burdens associated with the Oklahoma's Promise application process to gain access to the scholarship. These responsibilities can be described as information dissemination, compliance, and advocacy.

Information Dissemination

To mitigate learning costs, counselors and school administrators function as disseminators of information about the Oklahoma's Promise program. In this capacity, counselors and other front-line school personnel communicate information about Oklahoma's Promise to students and their families, including how to apply for the scholarship and what costs are covered by Oklahoma's Promise, as well as correct misinformation about the program. To accomplish this, counselors engage in a variety of outreach strategies, which can generally be characterized as low-touch or high-touch communication based on the level of effort exerted by school personnel. Low-touch strategies included discussion about the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship in group settings, such as orientation and school events; mass communication through e-mail blasts, text messaging, letters, and flyers; and posting information to the school website or social media channels. Common responses that include low-touch strategies are listed below:

"Putting a notice in our PTA newsletter."

"Class meeting."

"Class presentations."

"Mass mailing."

"Mass e-mails to parents."

"Sending flyers home with students."

"Posting info on school website."

"Social media."

Because some low-touch strategies, such as e-mail, text messaging and social media, can reach large audiences with relatively little effort on the part of school personnel, some respondents emphasized repetition of these strategies, describing them as "constant e-mail communication" or "regular correspondence" with students and parents. Some respondents also noted that knowing the target audience is key to boosting efficacy of low-touch strategies. For example, one counselor indicated that mailing information at home is more effective than social media posts given that “some of my schools are very rural and families don't have computer access at home.” Another echoed the importance of continuing to provide access to traditional paper applications despite the availability of an online application:

> I give each 8th, 9th and 10th grade student a paper copy of the application and encourage them to fill out as much as they can, then take it home to their parents for completion. It makes it handy that the application has the envelope attached to it, so there's no question as to where it has to be sent. Many of our students do not have access to computers or good internet service, so the paper applications are the best resource I have to make sure I make contact with each student and parent.

On the other hand, some school personnel cited high-touch strategies as being the most effective in disseminating information about the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship and encouraging program enrollment. High-touch strategies are more time consuming and typically involve one-on-one, proactive engagement with students and/or parents. As one counselor (Interviewee 4) described, “And so, some of them I’ve just approached like individually and just say, you know, here's the paper, here's what I need you to do. And they'll do, some of them will do that… It's like a personal invitation basically to each individual one." In some cases, high-touch strategies are used to complement low-touch strategies. For example, one counselor noted, "we send applications home with students each year and send additional applications home with students who didn't sign up. If they still aren't signed up and we believe they qualify, we call parents." In this case, the counselor initially tried low-touch mass communication strategies to encourage Oklahoma's Promise enrollment. If it is believed a student would qualify for the scholarship but has not signed up, high-touch strategies were then employed to make one-on-one contact with the parent.

Some high-touch strategies could be considered as going above-and-beyond ordinary job duties, such as conducting home visits to assist with the application process and alert parents of incomplete enrollments. As one counselor, explained, "We send letters to our sophomores' families who have not completed the enrollment. We call and text parents. I have made home visits just for that purpose." Although such high-touch forms of outreach with students and families are more labor intensive on the part of front-line staff, these strategies are likely to be more effective in encouraging students with multiple college access barriers to enroll in the Oklahoma's Promise program.

Given resource constraints, school personnel exhibit varying degrees of discretion in determining which students to spend their time on when implementing high-touch strategies. This discretion typically centers on identifying students who they believe meet the family income limit for program participation. Some cited objective evidence by using free-and-reduced lunch status as a proxy for income eligibility while others relied on their personal connections with students and families. For example, one counselor commented, "since I'm in a small school and am familiar with families and their socioeconomic levels, I suggest Oklahoma's Promise to them. I will give the flyer and explain." Similarly, another explained, "we are a little bitty school (60 students in high school) so I have the advantage of knowing each of the students personally. I visit the classrooms and give them information and forms for OK Promise. If I think a student should apply but hasn't done so, I will speak with them one-on-one and sometimes will contact the parents as well." While the use of discretion can be well-intentioned, it is important for policymakers to recognize that subjective approaches to program implementation based on personal connections or familiarity with socioeconomic backgrounds might inadvertently perpetuate biases, lead to inconsistencies in the distribution of assistance, and inhibit equitable access to the scholarship.

Compliance

In taking on a compliance role, counselors concentrate on ensuring that students complete applications, submit documentation, and complete the required coursework in order to receive the scholarship. Compliance activities include reviewing lists of students with incomplete applications, conducting regular credit checks to ensure students are on track to complete curricular requirements, and verifying completion of course requirements and grade point average after graduation. These compliance roles often overlap with typical responsibilities held by counselors. For example, a primary function performed by counselors is reviewing course schedules and transcripts to ensure students are on track to meet high school graduation requirements. One survey respondent elaborated on her efforts in this area, remarking “every time I talk to the students about changes they or their parents want to make in their scheduled, I discuss the OK Promise requirements. We don’t make a schedule change if it will hurt their chances for OK Promise.” In reviewing her duties related to Oklahoma’s Promise, one interviewee who currently serves as an assistant superintendent (Interviewee 6) noted that her school counselor reviews course credits with Oklahoma's Promise students on a regular basis, saying, "Okay, these are the courses you have to have. This is what you've had so far. This is, you know, what you need to pre-enroll in." Another survey respondent further described her compliance role, explaining that:

> Every student in our high school has a binder with their transcripts, list of awards, community service, and test scores. At the front is a checklist for graduating high school and an OK Promise checklist. I check each binder at the end of every semester and keep the students aware of the progress they need to make to graduate and/or receive their Ok Promise scholarship.

The examples provided above are fairly standard duties performed by all counselors; however, executing compliance activities is especially important for Oklahoma's Promise students, whose ability to receive the scholarship hinges exclusively on the completion of very specific application, documentation, academic, and conduct requirements.

Advocacy

While most survey respondents and all interviewees performed information dissemination and compliance functions to some extent, a handful of participants appeared to take on an advocacy role to provide student support. In distinguishing advocacy roles from information and compliance roles, it is important to note that advocates generally view all students as capable of attending college and engaged in capacity building efforts with students. They typically go above-and-beyond what is expected of them and are persistent in their efforts to assist students in gaining access to Oklahoma's Promise. These counselors and school administrators persuade uncooperative parents, help students find alternative documentation to meet eligibility requirements, and intervene when necessary. For example, one counselor described her resolve in encouraging parents to submit completed applications, noting "I leave messages and do not stop trying to reach the parents until I have talked to every one of them. I only leave them alone when they tell me they are over income." Another counselor recalled, "I have had to call court houses, track down parents for students who would not give information, making repeated calls to remind parents to send information in."

Not only do advocates bend over backwards to assist students in applying for Oklahoma's Promise, they also ensure students build the skillsets needed to be successful in college. For example, one counselor employed through the TRIO Talent Search program at a regional university described the types of activities in which she engages with students.

> We work with students at Putnam City West, Putnam City Original, Capps Middle School, Cooper Middle School, and John-Marshall Mid-High. WE assist the students in our program by offering tutoring, college prep workshops, ACT/SAT prep, goal setting, time management, college tours, cultural activities, etc., that help them prepare for college and plan for their future.

An interviewee who primarily works with high school students through the Upward Bound program at a local community college (Interviewee 5) described a similar process that he frequently engaged in with potential Oklahoma's Promise students:

> I'll say okay grab your phone, call that number – I have it on my wall. Ask for Amanda Jones. Be ready… here's your social security number…I'll have their social security number handy because most high school students don't know it and that's okay… She's going to ask you for your social. Tell her your name, what grade you're in, what high school you're at and ask her about the status of your application.

These counselors encourage students to take ownership of their college education through preparation and self-advocacy, which is especially important for many of the students in the Oklahoma's Promise program who are first-generation college-bound and lack significant exposure to college knowledge.

Assigning Responsibility for Administrative Burdens

Survey respondents and interviewees indicated varying beliefs about the extent to which school personnel are responsible for facilitating student access to Oklahoma's Promise. School personnel who view themselves as having primary responsibility for information or compliance functions also appear to externalize responsibility for administrative burdens related to Oklahoma's Promise to students and parents, with some evening going so far as to deny the existence of any barriers to program access. As one survey respondent commented, "OKPromise provides a web site, they provide paper and pencil applications, online applications, and counselors across the state help them. Why do you feel that they have burdens?" These school personnel seem to attribute any difficulties with program access to a lack of personal responsibility on the part of students and parents.

The perceived absence of personal responsibility can be attributed to multiple factors. For example, one counselor (Interviewee 3) suggested that many students simply do not view college in their future:

> And then we also have a problem with the students themselves, some of them, many of them, are still in the mindset that they're not going to go to college. And so they change their mind, a lot of them, when they actually get close, but then it's too late. So, they just, they're real firm in their plans and they're not willing, I guess what you would say, have a plan B if plan A doesn't work out.

While this counselor assigned primary responsibility to students for decisions to prepare or not prepare for college, she also peripherally acknowledged the immaturity of adolescents, noting the tendency for these students to "change their mind" about college attendance as high graduation approaches. Additionally, even in instances when potentially eligible students wish to enroll in Oklahoma's Promise, many survey respondents and interview participants maintained that enrolling children in Oklahoma's Promise, submitting documentation, and ensuring that curriculum requirements are met is just not a "priority" for some parents. To illustrate, one counselor (Interviewee 4) observed, "Yeah, I mean there's been some where parents just are not quite with it enough to get stuff together. Yeah. And they just don't – the parents don't make it a priority." While one interviewee (Interviewee 6) described not taking advantage of Oklahoma's Promise as "crazy," another blamed an underlying attitude among parents that the student is just not college material. She (Interviewee 3) remarked, "I think sometimes they [parents] think their kid's not going to go to college. They're just going to go to work, and so they're not thinking that's really in the child's plan."

Perceptions regarding student and parent priorities as well as student status as college-bound, in turn, influence the degree to which counselors internalize their level of responsibility for helping students overcome administrative burdens and judge their own performance. For example, with regard to their role in information dissemination, two counselors (Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 3) maintained that information about Oklahoma's Promise is frequently distributed to students, but students often to do not relay this information to parents. As Interviewee 3 noted, one major barrier to access is "probably just the information actually getting to their parents. We get it to the kids pretty frequently, but then the kids don't get it to their parents." In passing responsibility to students for communicating information about Oklahoma's

Promise to their parents, SLBs generally demonstrate a passive, perfunctory role in the implementation of the program.

In contrast to beliefs about student and parental responsibility held by front-line school personnel focused on compliance and information roles, participants exhibiting an advocacy role seemed more likely to recognize the role systematic barriers play in preventing access to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship. For example, with regard to learning costs, some survey respondents hinted that a general lack of knowledge about Oklahoma's Promise is linked to access to social capital. Social capital, which encompasses the resources and benefits derived from social networks and relationships, can play a significant role in shaping individuals' opportunities and knowledge sharing. One counselor observed that the parents who are most "interested in getting their child enrolled in the OK Promise are usually the ones that do not qualify due to income limitations." This suggests that parents with greater financial resources may be more actively involved in facilitating their children's access to college-related resources. While this example might be influenced by factors beyond social capital, such as income disparity, it highlights a potential interplay between resource availability and awareness. Similarly, another counselor noted that resource constraints help explain why students and parents do not know about the scholarship program given that "many may just not have access to the Internet, as hard as hard as that is to believe in today's day and age." Although not exclusively a measure of social capital, this example underscores the potential role of unequal access to resources in shaping knowledge about the scholarship program. Finally, participants noted that many students have parents that never attended college and have no frame of reference to help navigate the college-going process. Elaborating on this, one interviewee who served as a counselor in large urban and suburban high schools commented that "just the general public, most parents, especially parents who didn't go to college themselves or are just not well-versed in this stuff, they, they don't have someone they can turn to who is just going to happen to have this information." In describing the need for more centralized and dedicated staff to assist students enroll in Oklahoma's Promise, one counselor (Interviewee 1) acknowledged poverty and low parental educational attainment as significant college access barriers for students:

> Because especially, like Oklahoma, our poverty rate is so high, but then we also have a high area of like rural areas where, you know, those, those families in the rural areas are less likely to have any kind of post-high school education. So they just don't know. They're just uninformed. You know, just a lack of information that gets to them.

In addition to poverty and a lack of college-going culture, many students also face psychological barriers to college access in the form of implicit biases, which refer to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence individual behavior and decisions. In the context of Oklahoma's Promise, these implicit biases appear as feelings of inadequacy about academic ability and low expectations for achievement. For example, one survey respondent noted that she has difficulty in promoting the program among "special needs students" or those who "are fearful of being able to meet the Algebra II requirement." Lack of confidence in the ability to succeed in college serves as a psychological deterrent for these students and their parents in applying for Oklahoma's Promise. Interviewee 5 maintained that low self-esteem prevented some students from enrolling in the program and preparing academically for college. He commented that students sometimes think, "I don't think I can do it. I really would like to go to OU, but I'm probably not going to get in." Similarly, other counselors explained some parents do not complete paperwork because "the parent has a low expectation for their child – basically the parent has an ignorant attitude" or "for the most part, education is just not important to them."

These psychological costs – lack of confidence and negative attitudes toward the value of education – pose significant challenges for students to overcome in accessing Oklahoma's Promise and deter potential participants from pursuing the benefits offered under the program.

In recognizing systematic barriers to college access, it's important to note that student advocates also seem to assume more personal responsibility for the role they play in helping students overcome these obstacles. To illustrate, in addressing the problem of parent-child communication, Interviewee 5 described taking a more proactive and assertive role in assisting students overcome administrative burdens:

> Another problem that I've picked up on is the parent-offspring communication or lack thereof. In other words, didn't you do it? No, I thought you did it. No, I thought you did it, no I thought you did it. Well somebody's got to do it, let's get it done right now. Let's not let another day go by, there's the computer, you and your mom go sit over there and do it.

One explanation for the contrasting views on who bears responsibility for administrative burdens is the role of personal experiences and self-identification with Oklahoma's Promise students. For example, Interviewee 1 described her experience growing up in poverty yet not being able to take advantage of Oklahoma's Promise because her mother refused to provide income documentation. She acknowledged that this experience has made her more committed to Oklahoma's Promise than other counselors:

> Like most counselors that I've worked with, even though they're good people, and, you know, they're good at what they do, they have not made it a priority the way I have made it because of their background. And because they didn't, you know, grow up in poverty, and they don't know what that looks like.

This section reveals the important role beliefs about responsibility plays in the use of discretion by school personnel, especially in a scholarship program with high administrative burden. The system of administrative burden in the Oklahoma's Promise program transfers down to the front-line, with students facing barriers to program access that school personnel can either alleviate or exacerbate. Depending on personal values, some school personnel may think that the parents or students bear primary responsibility for access, or they may blame an inherently inequitable system and exert additional effort to assist students in need of help. These choices and uneven uses of discretion on the part of school personnel may serve to help explain observed inequities in program access among students as shown in the quantitative analysis.

Use of Discretion: Routine Activities vs. Going the Extra Mile

In the context of Oklahoma's Promise, administrative burden is not self-implementing—it functions through a system of decentralized authority, in which local agencies delegate discretion to the front-lines of government, where the individual values, expertise, and moral judgments of school personnel come into play. Accordingly, high school counselors serve a key role in advertising the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship and assisting students enroll in and complete program requirements. Based on survey responses and follow-up interviews, the use of discretion primarily manifests itself in decisions to engage in routine activities or to "go the extra mile." Routine activities can be categorized as commonly cited outreach strategies, such as one-on-one meetings, group presentations, distribution of flyers, mass communication through text messages or e-mails, etc. Routine activities also include interaction with OSRHE staff to identify students who have outstanding enrollment documentation to submit, clarify courses that meet curriculum requirements, or verify that students have met program eligibility requirements to receive the scholarship upon high school graduation.

While virtually all study participants referenced these routine activities, those functioning as student advocates also discussed the extraordinary efforts they made to assist students. For example, Interviewee 5 described his efforts to assist a student obtain income documentation. While the student was a U.S. citizen, his father was an undocumented immigrant who refused to provide income documentation due to fear of deportation. Ultimately, Interviewee 5 assisted the student's mother in drafting a letter attesting that the father lives in Mexico but sends money to the family. In reflecting on the situation, Interviewee 5 noted "that was a little bit of a hurdle, but it wasn't that bad. We got it fixed and…it's not a complaint, it's just… it was just a situation where it wasn't as clear cut and there was no quick solution, it required more work."

In addition to providing problem-solving assistance, front-line school personnel can serve as a type of "personal concierge" to students and families during the application process. These activities include contacting employers to obtain copies of W-2s, starting and completing applications, scanning or copying documentation, and mailing in completed applications. For example, one counselor described the types of services she offers to students and parents:

> I make multiple phone calls to the parents and I help the students/parents call employers to get W2 information for income amounts that may have been lost in the chaos of the home. I offer "same day service" for copying financial information, in other words, for those students whose parents are leery of sending their tax records to school to fill out the OKP application, I make sure the student gets copies and then send the tax information back home the same day.

Similarly, another counselor explained,

> I had to call the parent telling him all the documentation that was needed to fill out the applications. He sent it to me and had me actually apply for his son's OK Promise. I

> actually have started the process of the OK Promise for 5 students and had to keep reminding parents that more documentation was needed to complete them. I followed through with them until the applications were completed.

In another example, Interviewee 1 recalled a situation in which she "had a little girl, her mom, she struggled with drugs really bad, she did have like the W2s, so I even helped her mom get on Turbo Tax and file her taxes so that she would complete that so that she could have the documentation to complete her application for Oklahoma's Promise." These instances of going above-and-beyond reflect the power of discretion as used by school personnel to meaningfully reduce onerous experiences of policy that come with systems of administrative burden.

Decisions to engage in routine activities or to make every effort possible to assist students access the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship highlight the potential of school personnel to serve as both policymakers and gatekeepers. For example, in helping the student and his family provide an acceptable source of income verification while at the same time protecting the father's undocumented status, Interviewee 5 worked to craft a solution to a vague policy. His intervention to provide a workaround for the student's complicate situation demonstrates the potential for discretion to serve as either a source of empowerment or disentitlement.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

This research study connects the administrative burden and street-level bureaucracy literature to explore the roles and responsibilities of SLBs, particularly counselors and other front-line school personnel, in implementing the Oklahoma's Promise program and their use bureaucratic discretion to either inhibit or promote access to scholarship benefits. Findings reveal three main roles of SLBs – information dissemination, compliance, and advocacy. Information dissemination involves school personnel communicating information about the scholarship to students and families through low-touch strategies such as emails, texts, and flyers, as well as high-touch strategies such as one-on-one meetings and home visits. Compliance focuses on ensuring that students complete applications, submit documentation, and complete coursework to receive the scholarship. Advocacy goes beyond compliance and information dissemination and involves school personnel providing additional support to students in navigating barriers to college access, such as persuading uncooperative parents, helping students find alternative documentation to meet eligibility requirements, and intervening when necessary. Advocates also engage in capacity-building efforts with students, providing them with tutoring, college prep workshops, and other activities to prepare them for college and encourage self-advocacy.

The use of discretion primarily manifests itself in decisions to engage in routine activities or to make extraordinary efforts to assist students overcome barriers to program access. As evidenced by the analysis of open-ended survey responses and follow-up interviews, routine activities involve information dissemination and compliance monitoring and typically take the form of one-on-one meetings, group presentations, or mass communication through mail, e-mail or text messaging. On the other hand, some SLBs make go “the extra mile” to assist students navigate complicated situations, such assisting a student obtain income documentation when the father is an undocumented immigrant or acting as a “personal concierge” to help complete all aspects of the application process. These decisions to engage in routine, low-touch activities or to go above-and-beyond the call of duty highlight the potential of counselors and other school personnel to serve as both policymakers and gatekeepers, where discretion can either empower or disentitle students.

Finally, findings highlight the intersection of role perceptions and bureaucratic discretion among SLBs as they facilitate student access to the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship program.

Counselors who viewed themselves as having primary responsibility for information or compliance functions tended to externalize responsibility for administrative burdens related to the program to students and parents. On the other hand, those who saw themselves as student advocates were more likely to recognize the role systematic barriers play in preventing access to the scholarship program. Additionally, SLB perceptions of student and parent priorities as well as student status as “college material” influenced the degree to which counselors and other school personnel internalized their level of responsibility for helping students overcome administrative burdens. Finally, personal experiences and self-identification with Oklahoma’s Promise students also played a role in shaping school personnel’s views on responsibility. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of roles perceptions in the use of discretion by school personnel and how it can either alleviate or exacerbate the barriers faced by students in accessing the program.

Implications for Practice

This study reveals several important insights that can be used to inform both theory and practice. First, overall findings indicate that students face significant administrative burden when attempting to access the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship program. Strict programmatic requirements present significant barriers to accessing financial aid, which is especially problematic for a program whose primary goal is to promote college access for under-resourced students. Second, although the intent of free college or promise programs is to improve college affordability for eligible students, their design and implementation matter significantly. As a result of program design variations, students are likely to encounter differing burdens as they seek to gain access to and maintain program benefits. As described by Rosinger et al. (2021), “students’ experiences of administrative burden, their behavioral responses to complex procedures, and behavioral supports aimed at helping students overcome complexity are shaped by program design" (p. 5). Oklahoma's Promise relies on a decentralized network of SLBs at various middle and high schools with differing resource capacities, responsibilities, and beliefs. Reliance on bureaucratic discretion raises concerns about equity in access as SLBs must triage their workload and make judgement calls about how best to spend their time, ultimately deciding which students are deserving of extra assistance in navigating the application process and which only merit bare minimum effort. Finally, to reduce the detrimental impacts of administrative burden and inequities in access, policymakers should look to streamline eligibility determination, standardize implementation practices, and implement appeals processes that provide workarounds for difficult cases, such as uncooperative parents. For example, rather than submission of tax documentation, could receipt of other means-tested government benefits act as a proxy for income eligibility? Could the state take more responsibility for direct communication with students and parents so that concerns about resources, workloads, and the difficulty counselors face in providing customized assistance to students would not serve as a barrier to access?

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The two essays presented in this dissertation expand the previous literature on early commitment financial aid programs, the college choice process, and administrative burdens. Chapter 2 examined student-level and school-level patterns in the timing of enrollment in the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship, which can be seen as a proxy for the development of college predisposition, while Chapter 3 explored administrative burdens faced by students seeking to gain access to the scholarship and the use of bureaucratic discretion by counselors to alleviate or enforce those burdens.

Chapter 2's investigation into the timing of enrollment in Oklahoma's Promise furthers our understanding of the influence of social and cultural capital in the college choice literature. Given that little scholarly attention has been devoted to timing in the college choice process, findings from Chapter 2 provide a foundation for future research to more closely examine this concept. At the student-level, Chapter 2's analysis reveals notable disparities in the timing of program uptake based on demographic and socioeconomic factors. Consistent with the previous literature on the role of social and cultural capital in college choice (Alon, 2009; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005), students from higher-income backgrounds and those with parents holding college degrees tend to enroll early in the 8^{th} grade, highlighting the role of family resources and capital in shaping college predisposition. Additionally, differences based on race/ethnicity suggest that variations in social and cultural capital exist across racial and ethnic groups, impacting college enrollment decisions. While all students enrolled in Oklahoma's Promise can be categorized as low-income by nature of the program's eligibility requirements, observed differences in timing of enrollment across race/ethnicity, parental educational attainment and family income underscore the heterogeneity of participants. This supports previous research documenting significant disparities in educational achievement between individuals who are moderately versus severely disadvantaged (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Cheng & Peterson, 2021). With regard to school-level characteristics, Chapter 2 uncovers unanticipated findings. Contrary to expectations, early enrollees, on average, come from schools with higher percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch and higher minority enrollment. This potentially suggests that schools facing greater socioeconomic disadvantage and diversity could be more active participants in college access initiatives like Oklahoma's Promise. Moreover, findings highlight that family-level attributes play a greater role in the development of college predisposition than school-level factors, consistent with previous literature (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). This insight underscores the importance of targeting family-level dynamics in policy discussions and interventions. The significance of these findings from Chapter 2 lies in their potential implications for policymakers and administrators tasked with implementing the Oklahoma’s Promise program. Recognizing the relationship between social and cultural capital and the timing of program enrollment informs targeted interventions designed to address disparities and enhance program access. Efforts should be aimed at providing students with limited social and cultural capitol additional support while also fostering a strong college-going culture in schools with fewer resources. Moving forward, future research should use more rigorous analytic techniques to identify factors related to timing of program uptake in early commitment financial aid programs. Employing advanced statistical techniques can help us better understand the direct and indirect effects of student-level and school-level factors on enrollment patterns and timing, providing a more comprehensive understanding of college choice and access within the context of programs like Oklahoma's Promise. Furthermore, future research should also amine whether early enrollment is actually associated with improved postsecondary outcomes, which is an underlying assumption in the design of early commitment financial aid programs.

Chapter 3's findings provide valuable insights into the roles and responsibilities of street-level bureaucrats (counselors) in implementing the Oklahoma's Promise program and their use of discretion to either facilitate or hinder student access to the scholarship. Chapter 3 highlights three main roles of counselors in program implementation: information dissemination, compliance, and advocacy. These roles encompass a wide range of activities, from basic communication to students and families about the scholarship to more involved efforts that help students navigate complex the complex eligibility requirements associated with the scholarship. The use of bureaucratic discretion by counselors is evident in their decisions to engage in routine activities or to "go the extra mile" to assist students overcome administrative burdens. These decisions underscore the potential of counselors to act as both policymakers and gatekeepers, with their discretion serving as either a force of empowerment or disentitlement. Additionally, findings reveal how counselor self-perceptions of their roles and responsibilities influence their use of discretion. Those who view themselves as information disseminators or compliance enforces may be more likely to externalize responsibility for overcoming administrative burdens onto students and parents whereas those identify as advocates for students may be more likely to recognize system barriers and take on a proactive role in helping students overcome them. The implications of these findings for administrators and policymakers are significant. First, Chapter 3 highlights several learning, psychological and compliance costs that must be overcome by students seeking to gain access to Oklahoma's Promise, emphasizing the need to streamline eligibility determination. Second, the decentralized nature of implementation in the Oklahoma's Promise program and the reliance on bureaucratic discretion among counselors raise concerns about equity in access and underscore the need to ensure fair and consistent support for all eligible students. Policymakers should explore strategies to reduce barriers, such as considering alternative means-tested criteria for determining income-eligibility, such as using free and reduced lunch status, or centralizing program administration, communication, and marketing efforts at the state-level to reduce reliance on already overburdened counselors. Additionally, future research should

When we combine the insights from both essays, we develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Oklahoma's Promise program. It is clear that the program's success is not solely attributable to individual student characteristics or the administrative efforts of counselors but is shaped a complex interaction of social and cultural capital, systematic barriers, and discretionary decision-making. This combined perspective offers several key takeaways for policymakers and administrators. It highlights the importance of social and cultural capital in program participation and underscores the need for targeted interventions to mitigate disparities in access. At the same time, it calls for efforts to streamline program implementation and reduce administrative burdens to ensure that eligible students can successfully navigate the enrollment process with greater ease.

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Appendix A – Survey Instrument

OK Promise Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Intro You are invited to participate in a research study conducted through the University of Oklahoma on the role of counselors & administrators in the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program. The first 300 participants will receive a **$5 Amazon Gift card**. Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be de-identified before they are shared for research purposes or published. If you agree to participate, you will complete this online survey. Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason. Your data may be used in future research studies, unless you contact me to withdraw your data. If you have questions about this research, please contact Kylie Smith or Elizabeth Bell at kylie.smith@ou.edu or Bell3922@ou.edu. You may also contact the Faculty Supervisor, Deven Carlson, at decarlson@ou.edu. You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher. *By answering the survey questions, I agree to participate in this research. Please print this page for your records.* **IRB Number**: ####**Approval date**: 5/11/2017

Page Break

filter Do you play a role in the administration of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Skip To: Q43 If Do you play a role in the administration of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? = No position In what position are you currently employed?

- Counselor (1)
- Principal (2)
- Assistant Principal (3)
- Superintendent (4)
- Other, please specify (5) ____

Skip To: Q43 If In what position are you currently employed? = Superintendent

school Which school do you work for?

Public or Private? (1)

School Name (2)

▼ Public (1) ... Private ~ WRIGHT CHRISTIAN ACADEMY (875)

tenure How long have you been working in your position?

- Less than 1 year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 4-10 years (3)
- More than 10 years (4)

resources When compared to other schools in your community, do you think the average income of families at your school is lower, higher, or about the same?

- Much higher (1)
- Somewhat higher (2)
- About the same (3)
- Somewhat lower (4)
- Much lower (5)

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students Approximately what percentage of your graduating seniors are you able to meet with for one-on-one conversations regarding college/post secondary plans. Just provide your best guess.

- Approximate percentage (1) ____

---

time_req Approximately what percentage of your time is spent on college preparation? Again, just provide your best guess.

- Approximate percentage (1) ____

Page Break

transition1 Now we are transitioning into the section of the survey on the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program.

---

familiar On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means ***not at all confident*** and 10 means ***very confident***, how confident are you in your knowledge of the eligibility requirements for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?

	Not at all confident									Very confident
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 (1)											

change_aware As you may know, the state legislature has made changes to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program in recent years. Were you made aware of potential changes before they were enacted?

- ◯ Yes (1)
- ◯ Somewhat (2)
- ◯ No (3)

change_support Changes made to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program over time are described below. Do you support or oppose these changes?

	Strongly Oppose (1)	Somewhat Oppose (2)	Neither Support nor Oppose (3)	Somewhat Support (4)	Strongly Support (5)
Eliminating award payments for remedial courses in college (2017) (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Eliminating eligibility for undocumented immigrant students (2007) (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Adding annual income checks while students are in college in addition to the income check in high school (2017) (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Adding a cap on the number of credit hours that will be covered for students in college (2017) (4)	○	○	○	○	○

Preventing students who do not maintain good standing and satisfactory academic progress in college from receiving the aid (2011) (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Increasing the income limit for program enrollment from $50,000 to $55,000 (2017) (6)	○	○	○	○	○

*

change_why Why do you support or oppose these changes to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Please be as specific as possible.

____

____

____

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____

change_learn How do you learn about changes and program requirements for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Select all that apply.

- ▢ The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education staff (1)
- ▢ Online resources (website, social media) (2)
- ▢ Local school district administrators (3)
- ▢ School level administration (4)
- ▢ GEAR UP personnel (5)
- ▢ Counselor conferences/meetings (6)
- ▢ Other, please specify (7) ____

Carry Forward Selected Choices from "How do you learn about changes and program requirements for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Select all that apply."

X→

info In the last year, approximately how often did you receive information from each of these sources about the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?

	Once (1)	Monthly (2)	Weekly (3)	Before deadlines (4)
The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education staff (x1)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online resources (website, social media) (x2)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local school district administrators (x3)	☐	☐	☐	☐
School level administration (x4)	☐	☐	☐	☐
GEAR UP personnel (x5)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counselor conferences/meetings (x6)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other, please specify (x7)	☐	☐	☐	☐

Page Break

transition2 This next set of questions will ask you about the roles you play in the administration of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program.

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role Which of the following best describes the role you identify with when dealing with students applying for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Please select all that apply.

- ▢ Compliance Officer: I am primarily concerned with making sure students meet program requirements and have the right documentation (1)
- ▢ Student Support Official: I am primarily concerned with helping all potentially eligible students navigate the process and ensure that as many eligible students as possible receive the Oklahoma Promise Scholarship (2)
- ▢ Information Liaison: I am primarily concerned with disseminating information about the scholarship requirements (3)
- ▢ Other, please specify (4) ____

Carry Forward Selected Choices from "Which of the following best describes the role you identify with when dealing with students applying for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Please select all that apply."

X→

discretion To what extent do you feel you have the authority and flexibility to strategize and make decisions in each of these roles?

	No discretion: I perform my role based solely on instructions received from upper administration (1)	Some discretion: I work in partnership with upper administration to determine how to best perform my role (2)	High discretion: I make almost all decisions with regard to how I perform my role (3)
Compliance Officer: I am primarily concerned with making sure students meet program requirements and have the right documentation (x1)	○	○	○
Student Support Official: I am primarily concerned with helping all potentially eligible students navigate the process and ensure that as many eligible students as possible receive the Oklahoma Promise Scholarship (x2)	○	○	○
Information Liaison: I am primarily concerned with disseminating information about the scholarship requirements (x3)	○	○	○
Other, please specify (x4)	○	○	○

tasks What tasks is your school responsible for in verifying that students meet eligibility requirements to receive the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship? Please select all that apply and specify any additional responsibilities not listed below.

- ▢ Submitting academic transcripts (1)
- ▢ Signing off on disciplinary record (2)
- ▢ Calculating & submitting core GPA (3)
- ▢ Ensuring students meet curriculum requirements (4)
- ▢ Holding informational events for students (5)
- ▢ Communicating with parents at events like parent night (6)
- ▢ Other, please specify (7) ____

advertise_strategy What strategies does your school use to communicate information about the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship program? Select all that apply.

- ▢ Flyers around the school (1)
- ▢ Emails to parents (2)
- ▢ One-on-one counseling sessions with students (3)
- ▢ Events with parents (4)
- ▢ School-wide events with students (5)
- ▢ School event for potential promise students (6)
- ▢ GEAR UP Events (7)
- ▢ Other, please specify (8) ____

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advertise_effect What is the most effective strategy that you have used to get information to students and families about the Oklahoma’s Promise scholarship program?

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student_help How do you assist students in meeting the curricular, academic, and disciplinary requirements to receive the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship upon graduation?

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Page Break

transition3 You are almost done with the survey! This last section on the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program will ask you about your interactions with students and parents.

burdens In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applying for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Please select all that apply.

▢ Learning Barriers- difficulty in the search process for information about the program (1)

▢ Psychological Barriers- stigma of applying to programs, loss of autonomy, or stress of administrative processes (2)

▢ Compliance Barriers- burdens of administrative rules and requirements such as paperwork (3)

▢ Other, please specify (4) ____

Display This Question:

If In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Learning Barriers- difficulty in the search process for information about the program

Or In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Psychological Barriers- stigma of applying to programs, loss of autonomy, or stress of administrative processes

Or In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Compliance Barriers- burdens of administrative rules and requirements such as paperwork

Or In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Other, please specify

Carry Forward Selected Choices from "In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applying for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? Please select all that apply."

X→

barrier_import How important do you believe these burdens to be in shaping whether a student is able to access the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship?

	Not at all important (1)	Slightly important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Very important (4)	Extremely important (5)
Learning Barriers- difficulty in the search process for information about the program (x1)	○	○	○	○	○
Psychological Barriers- stigma of applying to programs, loss of autonomy, or stress of administrative processes (x2)	○	○	○	○	○
Compliance Barriers- burdens of administrative rules and requirements such as paperwork (x3)	○	○	○	○	○
Other, please specify (x4)	○	○	○	○	○

Display This Question:

If In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Learning Barriers- difficulty in the search process for information about the program

Or In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Psychological Barriers- stigma of applying to programs, loss of autonomy, or stress of administrative processes

Or In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Compliance Barriers- burdens of administrative rules and requirements such as paperwork

Or In your experience, which of the following, if any, do students and parents experience in applyin... = Other, please specify

overcome How do you help students and parents overcome each of these barriers?

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barrier What are the biggest practical barriers that students and parents face in enrolling for the program and completing the requirements? Select all that apply.

- ▢ Lack of awareness (1)
- ▢ Difficulty obtaining & submitting required enrollment documents (2)
- ▢ Trouble meeting deadlines (3)
- ▢ Academic curriculum requirements (4)
- ▢ Disciplinary requirements (5)
- ▢ Income verification requirements (6)
- ▢ Submitting citizenship documentation (7)
- ▢ Misunderstanding core GPA (8)
- ▢ Other, please specify (9) ____

rank In your opinion, how much responsibility does each of the following actors have in the successful completion of an Oklahoma's Promise application?

	None (1)	Not much (2)	Some (3)	A lot (4)
Parents (1)	○	○	○	○
Students (2)	○	○	○	○
High School Counselors (3)	○	○	○	○
Oklahoma Promise Staff at the State Regents Office (4)	○	○	○	○
Teachers (5)	○	○	○	○
School administrators (6)	○	○	○	○
Other, please specify (7)	○	○	○	○

parents Do you meet with parents about Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Do you meet with parents about Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? = Yes parent_interact Please describe your most common interactions with parents regarding the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship.

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Display This Question:

If In what position are you currently employed? = Counselor

Or In what position are you currently employed? = Other, please specify

admin Is your school administration supportive of your efforts on behalf of students applying for the Oklahoma's Promise program?

- ◯ Very much so (1)
- ◯ Somewhat (2)
- ◯ Not really (3)
- ◯ Not at all (4)
- ◯ Not sure (5)

difficult_case Have there been particularly difficult cases where you had to help students that were struggling to provide all the documentation necessary to get the Oklahoma's Promise? Please describe how you dealt with this situation. *Please maintain student anonymity*

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student_type Are certain students more likely to come ask you for help with their application? What types of students need the most help in your experience?

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partner Does your school partner with any community organizations (such as churches or local non-profits) to help with college preparation?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Unsure (3)

Skip To: partnership If Does your school partner with any community organizations (such as churches or local non-profits)... = Yes

Skip To: rec If Does your school partner with any community organizations (such as churches or local non-profits)... = No

Skip To: rec If Does your school partner with any community organizations (such as churches or local non-profits)... = Unsure partnership Please describe any partnerships between the community organizations and your school. What do the community organizations provide for your school and for students?

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rec What recommendations do you have for improving this program?

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Page Break

Q35 This final section will ask you a bit more about yourself and then you will be asked to enter your email so that we can send you a $5 Amazon gift card!

gend Are you male or female?

- Female (1)
- Male (2)

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hisp Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish or to have Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

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race Which of the following best describes your race? You may select more than one option.

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic/Latino (3)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (4)
- Asian (5)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (6)
- Two or more races (7)
- Some other race (please specify) (8) ____

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inc Was the estimated annual income for your household in 2017:

- Less than $50,000 (1)
- At least $50,000 but less than $100,000 (2)
- At least $100,000 but less than $150,000 (3)
- $150,000 or more (4)

---

ed What is the highest level of education you have COMPLETED?

- Less than High School (1)
- High School / GED (2)
- Vocational or Technical Training (3)
- Some College — NO degree (4)
- 2-year College / Associate’s Degree (5)
- Bachelor’s Degree (6)
- Master’s degree (7)
- Doctorate/PhD/ JD(Law)/MD (8)

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ideol On a scale of political ideology, individuals can be arranged from strongly liberal to strongly conservative. Which of the following categories best describes your views?

- ○ Strongly Liberal (1)
- ○ Liberal (2)
- ○ Slightly liberal (3)
- ○ Middle of the road (4)
- ○ Slightly Conservative (5)
- ○ Conservative (6)
- ○ Strongly Conservative (7)

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party With which political party do you most identify?

- ○ Democratic party (1)
- ○ Republican party (or GOP) (2)
- ○ Independent (3)
- ○ Other, please specify (4) ____

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interview Would you be interested in doing a short follow-up phone interview to elaborate on the answers you provided?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Maybe (3)

Page Break

email Thank you so much for participating in this survey! Please provide your email address so that we can send you an Amazon gift card. Again, your information is will be kept strictly confidential and only approved researchers will have access to it. You should receive the gift card within 48 hours of completing the survey. If you have any questions or concerns please contact Bell3922@ou.edu.

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Display This Question:

If In what position are you currently employed? = Superintendent

Or Do you play a role in the administration of the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program? = No

Q43 You are being redirected out of the survey because you indicated that 1) you do not play a role in the administration of the Oklahoma's Promise program or 2) you are a superintendent. We appreciate your willingness to respond to this inquiry but are looking to hear from high school counselors and those employees that work directly with students regarding college preparation and the Oklahoma's scholarship program in particular.

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix B – Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Abstract
Emerging public administration scholarship has revealed the impact of administrative burden on citizen access to government programs (Heinrich, 2016; Heinrich & Brill, 2015; Herd, DeLeire, Harvey, & Moynihan, 2013; Moynihan & Herd, 2010; Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2015). However, scholars have yet to thoroughly develop an understanding of administrative burden from the public manager's perspective. This study investigates the impact of administrative burdens on the perception and management strategies of managerial level and street-level bureaucrats in the context of Oklahoma's Promise, a need-based, early commitment financial aid program. Specifically, we leverage interviews and a unique survey of public high school counselors to reveal the ways in which bureaucrats perceive and manage administrative burdens. Additionally, we investigate the consequences of delegating burden to street-level bureaucrats on citizen access to the Oklahoma's Promise. This project contributes to the growing literature on administrative burden by emphasizing the perceptions and management strategies of public managers.

Research Questions

1. What strategies do street-level bureaucrats use to help students overcome administrative burden in enrolling and completing the requirements for the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?

2. In what ways do street-level bureaucrats use discretion in helping students overcome the administrative burdens involved with the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program?

3. How does access to adequate resources impact street-level bureaucrats' ability to help students overcome administrative burdens?

4. What other factors come into play in determining whether a street-level bureaucrat is able to help students overcome administrative burden?

Interview Format

- Semi-structured
- Phone interview
- Audio recorded

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is Kylie Smith. I am a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma currently working with a team to conduct a research study related to the role of K-12 counselors/administrators in helping students access the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program. I want to thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to participate in this research study. [Read oral consent form].

1. Could you please describe your educational and professional background?

2. What is your current position at your school?

3. How long have you been with this particular school? Have you worked at other schools previously?

4. How would you describe your current roles and responsibilities?

5. How many students do you work with? What services do you provide these students?

6. What is your role in counseling/advising related to college preparation and financial aid opportunities?

7. What strategies does your school use to advertise the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program to 9^{th} and 10^{th} graders?

8. How supportive is school administration of the Oklahoma's Promise program?

9. Does your school partner with any community organizations (such as churches or local non-profits) to advertise the program? If so, please describe these partnerships.

10. In your opinion, do students understand the process involved with enrolling in Oklahoma's Promise and completing the requirements to receive the scholarship?

    a. What assistance is provided to help students enroll in the Oklahoma's Promise program?

    b. What strategies does your school use to assist students in meeting the curricular, academic, and disciplinary requirements to receive Oklahoma's Promise upon graduation?

11. What tasks is your school responsible for in verifying that students meet eligibility requirements to receive the scholarship? How much time is involved with this and who has this responsibility?

12. Describe the nature of your interaction with the Oklahoma's Promise staff at the Oklahoma State Regents for higher education.

13. How do you learn about changes made to the Oklahoma's Promise program? How do you communicate these changes to students?

14. In your opinion, what are the biggest barriers that students face in enrolling for the program and completing the requirements?

15. How do you respond to situations in which students have difficulty in enrolling for the program (for example, parents will not provide income documentation)?

16. What resources are needed to ensure that all students who would qualify for the scholarship are made aware of this opportunity?

17. What recommendations do you have for improving this program?

Conclusion

Thank you for your participation in this study. If clarification is needed regarding your comments during the analysis stage, may I contact you again? Also, would you like to receive an executive summary of the findings once the study is completed?