



Evaluation of College Possible Milwaukee

June 2018

Prepared by Jed Richardson, Daniel Marlin, Jennifer Vadas,
Emily Colo, Sara Goldrick-Rab

Executive Summary

College Possible helps low-income students earn college degrees. They begin working with students their junior year of high school and stay with them all the way through college completion.

In the high school program, students meet with a near-peer coach for two hours, twice a week, to learn about the college search and application processes, financial aid, and ACT or SAT preparation. During their senior year, College Possible coaches help students complete applications for college, financial aid, and scholarships, and prepare for the transition to college. College Possible support with financial aid, developing study skills, and encouraging connections to local campus opportunities remains available to students throughout college. This evaluation examines the impact of College Possible for two cohorts of students attending Milwaukee Public Schools by comparing program participants to other students who have similar measurable characteristics.

College Possible aims to improve students' odds of enrolling in college and affect where they enroll, while also increasing year-to-year persistence in higher education. The program's impacts on those outcomes are examined in this report, along with additional information on students' college admissions activities and academic preparation in high school.

We estimate that students served by College Possible in Milwaukee were 18 percentage points more likely than their similar peers to enroll in college the year following high school graduation. They were also more likely to enroll in four-year and selective institutions. We find limited evidence that College Possible boosts the odds of persistence in college from the first to second year, although these estimates have wide confidence intervals because persistence outcomes currently exist for only one of the two sample cohorts.

Since students must go through an application process to join College Possible, it is possible that some of these effects are due to who participates in the program, rather than due to the program's activities. However, we find evidence that College Possible alters what students do in high school in ways that would seem to promote greater college attainment. For example, compared to their peers, College Possible students submitted more admissions and scholarship applications and had higher rates of FAFSA completion. The program also appears to have improved ACT Writing and English scores and increased enrollment in Science, Math, and AP or IB courses during twelfth grade. There is also limited evidence that the program increased the odds of high school graduation, though it did not appear to improve students' GPA, attendance, or behavior.

As expected, students who received more support from College Possible benefited more than students who received less. Students with high levels of program participation (i.e. who attended at least 50% of available program sessions) had higher rates of immediate college enrollment and enrollment in four-year colleges. They met program targets for numbers of college admissions applications and scholarship applications at much higher rates than those with lower levels of participation.

College Possible Milwaukee

College Possible aims to increase college access and success among low-income students by supporting students from low-income families in the “academic middle” as they apply to and prepare for college in their junior and senior years of high school. The program operates in six urban centers: Minneapolis/Saint Paul, MN; Milwaukee, WI; Chicago, IL; Portland, OR; Omaha, NE; and Philadelphia, PA. It also offers ongoing support to students as they pursue degrees at colleges and universities nationwide.

In Milwaukee, where the education landscape includes public, charter and voucher schools, College Possible serves low-income juniors and seniors in all three types. Rising juniors apply to the program and are admitted based on a combination of need and merit. Applicants must have family income at or below 200% of the federal poverty line or below Milwaukee county’s median salary and a GPA of 2.0 or higher. Applications are also judged based on the quality of essays, teacher recommendations, and in-person interviews.

Admitted students attend program sessions with a near-peer coach for two-hours, twice a week, for the duration of their junior and senior years of high school. These near-peer coaches are drawn from the ranks of the AmeriCorps program. During the junior year students are introduced to college search and application processes; coached in the basics of college financing and financial aid; and helped to prepare for the ACT or SAT College entrance exams. They are also coached in how to use the summer months and their senior year of high school to prepare well for college. During the senior year, students work with coaches to complete college admissions applications, including drafting quality college essays and preparing for interviews. Additionally, the senior year curriculum has a strong emphasis on financial literacy and planning. Coaches assist students in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and scholarship applications, as well as help students anticipate the transition to college and the potential cultural and relational challenges it might present. During the summer following graduation, College Possible supports students as they complete the final steps necessary to enroll in college. Finally, programming support, such as help with financial aid, study skills, and connections to local campus resources, is provided to students throughout college as they progress toward a postsecondary degree.

Since College Possible’s expansion to Milwaukee in 2008, the program has been extending its reach and increasing the number of students served in the area. In the 2016-17 school year College Possible Milwaukee served slightly fewer than 800 students in 14 partner high schools and over 1,200 college students.