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UChicago Inclusive Economy Lab Finds Community College Support Program Significantly Improves Degree Attainment

Latest results build on earlier evidence of increased program enrollment and persistence

CHICAGO, IL – NOVEMBER 1, 2021 – Providing comprehensive supports to community college students significantly increases their chances of obtaining an associate degree within three years, according to new results published today by the University of Chicago Inclusive Economy Lab (formerly known as the Poverty Lab).

Students who were offered the opportunity to participate in One Million Degrees (OMD), a Chicago-based organization providing wrap-around support to community college students from low-income backgrounds, were 9 percent more likely to earn an associate degree within three years. This effect was driven by students who enrolled in the program, who were 18 percent more likely to earn a degree within three years. The study, *Supporting Community College Student Success: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial*, can be found [here](#).

The study also revealed that students benefit most when offered OMD supports – from tutors and coaches to financial assistance and professional development – early in the college application and enrollment process. OMD participants who applied to the program during their senior year of high school were 73 percent more likely to graduate in three years, compared to similar students who applied to the program during their senior year of high school but were not randomly selected to receive an offer to participate.

These interim findings are part of an eight-year research partnership between the Inclusive Economy Lab and One Million Degrees. Two years ago, the Inclusive Economy Lab [reported](#) that community college students who were offered a spot in OMD were 13 percent more likely to enroll full time and 11 percent more likely to persist through their first year. Students who accepted the offer to participate in OMD were 35 percent more likely to enroll full-time and 47 percent more likely to persist full-time in their first year. Future phases of the study will examine the program's impact on students' employment and earnings.

An overwhelming majority of Chicago Public Schools high school students say they want to attend college. Meanwhile, researchers estimate that 65 percent of US jobs require postsecondary education, and free community college has been a major priority for President Biden. As open-access institutions, community colleges are a critical resource for students looking for a relatively less expensive and more flexible option to attain a degree on their terms. The American Association of Community Colleges [reports](#) that the median earnings of a full-time employee with an associate degree are over 40 percent higher than those of a high school graduate.

“Community colleges have the potential to be engines for social mobility in the United States, but discriminatory policy decisions, unmet financial need, family obligations, and other demands create barriers that disproportionately impact students from low-income backgrounds and students of color,” said Carmelo Barbaro, Executive Director of the Inclusive Economy Lab. “Today’s encouraging findings about One Million Degrees build on the positive results we shared two years ago and contribute to a growing, national body of evidence showing that community college students can thrive when properly supported.”

One Million Degrees operates in 10 Chicago-area colleges and is now expanding to Colorado. The OMD support model targets the academic, professional, personal, and financial needs of their scholars. Scholars are equipped with program coordinators, tutors, professional development coaches, and financial stipends to support their academic progress and to help them build their professional networks and prepare for an upwardly mobile career.

“These exciting results affirm what we’ve always believed: community college students, no matter the challenges they may face, are capable of extraordinary things when surrounded by supportive relationships,” said OMD CEO Aneesh Sohoni. “Students may be raising kids, caring for family members, and working multiple jobs. By bringing ‘community’ to community colleges, we are seeing the real impact on student success.”

“One Million Degrees is a great partner of City Colleges of Chicago. The support they provide our students is as vital as it is transformative,” said Juan Salgado, Chancellor of City Colleges of Chicago. “This research from the Inclusive Economy Lab shines a bright spotlight on how OMD is addressing inequities and helping our amazing students reach and exceed their academic goals.”

The researchers also examined whether OMD had an effect on four-year college enrollment and found that students who were offered a spot in the program enrolled in four-year colleges at rates that were similar to their control group peers. The same was true of students who accepted the offer to participate in OMD.

“For students at the end of their senior year of high school, our study demonstrates that participating in the OMD program dramatically increased the likelihood of enrolling in, persisting at, and graduating from a two-year degree college,” said Kelly Hallberg, the Inclusive Economy Lab’s Scientific Director and one of the study’s Principal Investigators. “This suggests

that students particularly benefit from the holistic supports OMD provides during the critical time at the end of high school when they are contemplating whether or not to attend college.”

“One Million Degrees supported me financially, emotionally, and mentally throughout my college journey. They helped me academically by making sure I had all the resources I needed,” said participant Monique L. Harvey. “I appreciate the continuity as they came with me as I moved from City Colleges to Columbia College to graduate.” Harvey earned her degree in 2021.

OMD regularly receives more applicants than available program spots. To determine the causal impact of the program, the Inclusive Economy Lab randomly selected eligible applicants to receive an offer to participate in the program. This approach enables outcomes to be attributed to the program rather than underlying differences between participants and non-participants. Three cohorts of students were randomized in Spring 2016, 2017, and 2018, totaling 4,897 unique applicants, 2,573 of whom were offered a spot. Among applicants offered a spot, 895 took up the offer to participate in the program (35 percent).

The UChicago Inclusive Economy Lab will release additional results once employment and earnings data become available. This research was made possible by generous support from Arnold Ventures, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) North America, the Spencer Foundation, and A Better Chicago.

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This report uses data that was provided by One Million Degrees and the National Student Clearinghouse. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of Harper College or City Colleges of Chicago.

About the UChicago Inclusive Economy Lab

Founded in 2015, [The UChicago Inclusive Economy Lab](#) (formerly the Poverty Lab) conducts rigorous studies that expand economic opportunity for communities that have been harmed by discrimination, disinvestment, and segregation. The lab partners with policymakers, community-based organizations, and others to identify their most urgent and pressing challenges, co-generate evidence about what works, and translate findings into policy changes that reduce urban poverty and improve people’s lives. One of five Urban Labs based at the [Harris School of Public Policy](#), the Inclusive Economy Lab is led by Pritzker Director [Marianne Bertrand](#), Chris P. Dialynas Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the Booth School of Business. <https://inclusiveeconomy.uchicago.edu>

About One Million Degrees

[One Million Degrees](#) accelerates community college students’ progress on career pathways to economic mobility by providing wrap-around supports to highly motivated community college students to help them succeed in school, in work, and in life. From tutors and coaches to financial assistance and professional development, OMD offers the support that empowers scholars to transform their lives and those around them for generations. OMD currently serves 871 community college scholars from under-resourced neighborhoods at 10 Chicago-area community colleges, including all seven City Colleges of Chicago. OMD partners with employers across industries to build on-ramps to in-demand jobs through new apprenticeship and credentialing programs.