



Have an Uplifting Holiday Season!

2018 has been an eventful year for us. Most notably, we changed our name! On November 15 we officially became Ascendium.

But while we have a new name and logo, our values and priorities have not changed. We remain as committed as ever to removing more and more barriers to postsecondary completion to help underserved students reach the education goals that matter most to them.

As this momentous year draws to a close, all of us at Ascendium would like to wish you a safe, happy and healthy holiday season! Please [click here](#) or on the image below to view a special holiday greeting, the first of the Ascendium era.



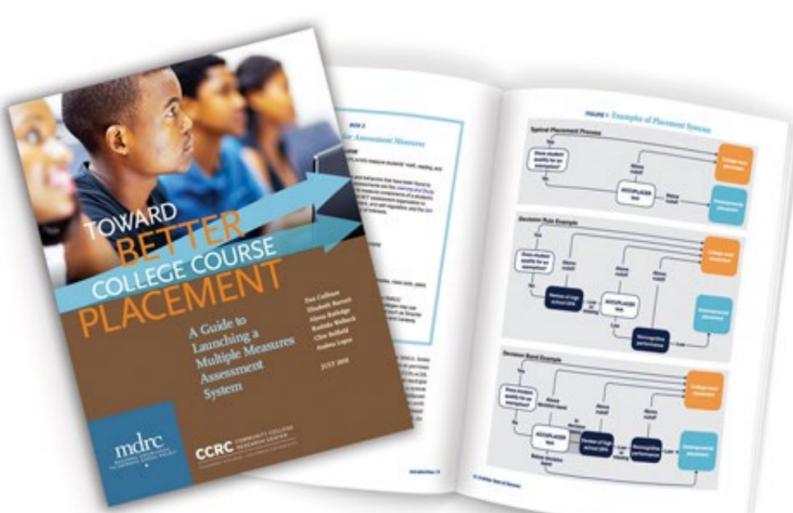
Are Promise Programs Robust Enough to Help Students Succeed?

When promise programs were just beginning to gain momentum around the country, we partnered with Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to learn whether the promise of a scholarship would help more high school students from low-income households get to and through college. In 2011 we launched **The Degree Project** to offer nearly 2,600 MPS freshmen the promise of a \$12,000 scholarship. To remain eligible, students had to graduate on time from an MPS high school with at least a 2.5 cumulative GPA and a 90 percent class attendance rate, and fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

The Degree Project is one of the first randomized control trials of a promise program, with an evaluation funded by the Institute for Education Sciences to compare the outcomes for participating students to a control group. Principal investigator Dr. Douglas Harris of Tulane University and his co-authors have shared preliminary results in a report, **The Promise of Free College (and Its Potential Pitfalls)**. Early findings suggest that the scholarships may not have significantly increased persistence and graduation.

These findings indicate the promise of a scholarship alone is not enough to move the needle. But as we learned through the **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)** program, when college students are offered a range of financial, academic and personalized supports, they stay enrolled and graduate in larger numbers and at a faster rate. An MDRC evaluation of the Detroit Promise Program showed early evidence that combining free tuition with wraparound support had a positive impact on enrollment in the first two semesters.

Based on those results, MDRC developed the **College Promise Success Initiative (CPSI)** to enable more colleges to supplement their College Promise programs with proven interventions. This year we funded CPSI to build on the lessons learned in the Detroit Promise program and we look forward to sharing MDRC's findings later in 2019. [Read more](#)



Step-by-step Guide Shows How to Launch New Placement Systems

Research suggests that many community college students are misplaced into remedial math and English courses due to inherent flaws in commonly used placement exams. This causes serious problems, since students placed into remedial classes are less likely to earn degrees than their peers who start in college-level courses—an issue that disproportionately affects underserved students. In response, many community colleges are interested in creating new placement strategies based on multiple measures of college readiness, rather than relying on standard placement testing. In 2015 we **made a grant to MDRC** to support their Multiple Measures Assessment Project, designed to study placement policies and develop a how-to guide.

MDRC recently published **Toward Better College Course Placement: A Guide to Launching a Multiple Measures Assessment System**, which provides a roadmap for college administrators who want to revamp their placement systems to make them more equitable. This comprehensive guide offers step-by-step recommendations for planning, implementing and managing multiple measures systems. We are optimistic that this work will help set more students up for success.



New Project to Analyze Effectiveness of State Financial Aid Systems

Ascendium has awarded a \$150,000 grant to RAND Corporation to study whether state financial aid grant programs can improve student outcomes by devising a more equitable way to allocate their funds, especially for those students who file for aid late or who just miss out on eligibility. Currently, leaders from the University of Wisconsin System, the Wisconsin Technical College System, the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and Wisconsin's tribal colleges meet to develop a formula for allocating Wisconsin Grant funds. RAND will examine academic and financial aid data to learn whether the current process is achieving the goals of the Wisconsin Grant program in terms of student success. This work has implications not just for Wisconsin, but for other state financial aid programs as well. A comprehensive report on findings and two accompanying issue briefs will be published in February of 2019. [Read more](#)

