## The University of Chicago Poverty Lab Finds Community College Program Significantly Improves Enrollment and Persistence

**CHICAGO, IL – MAY 2, 2019 –** Offering comprehensive supports to community college students can increase full-time enrollment in college by 13 percent and increase retention to the next term by 11 to 16 percent, according to new results from a study underway by the University of Chicago Poverty Lab. The benefits for participating students are even greater; program scholars are 35 percent more likely to enroll full-time and 47 percent more likely to persist to the next term in their first year in the program.

The preliminary findings reflect the second year of an eight-year large-scale randomized controlled trial of One Million Degrees (OMD), a Chicago nonprofit that provides wraparound support to low-income community college students in the Chicago area. Long-term, the three-cohort study will include almost 5,000 students and will evaluate whether this promising model also shows impacts on degree attainment, employment, and earnings. Randomized controlled trials are widely considered the gold standard for studying impact. These results add to a small but growing body of rigorous evidence on how to successfully support persistence and completion among community college students.

An associate degree has been shown to increase a family's income by 30 percent. As open-access institutions, community colleges have immense reach and potential: two-year institutions enroll 8.7 million students each year, nearly half of all students in postsecondary institutions in the U.S. These students are disproportionately low-income, first-generation college-goers, and/or students of color. Yet while successful in getting students in the door, community colleges struggle to keep students engaged and to get them to graduation. Despite the ever-increasing importance of postsecondary education in the labor market, in Chicago, less than one in four community college students graduates within three years.

"Community colleges hold promise for increasing social mobility and promoting racial equity," said Carmelo Barbaro, Executive Director of the Poverty Lab. "To deliver on this enormous potential, we need to generate evidence about the most effective ways to give community college students the support they need to persist and ultimately graduate. While initial results suggest the model works to keep students enrolled, we look forward to understanding long-term whether it will also help them graduate. Given the duration this type of research requires, the Poverty Lab is honored to partner with One Million Degrees on this important work."

Students face multiple barriers to success in community college, including a bewildering array of institutional processes, often with little guidance on how to select courses or connect with valuable supports. Without role models who have successfully navigated community college, students may begin to wonder if they belong in college at all or whether they will be able to turn a degree into a career in their chosen profession. On top of this, many community college students struggle to balance competing demands of work and school, citing financial insecurity as a primary reason for eventually dropping out.

One Million Degrees addresses these compounding obstacles by implementing a unique support model that 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 academic progress and to help scholars build professional networks and prepare for an upwardly mobile career. OMD currently serves nearly 750 students at schools across the Chicagoland area, including all seven City Colleges of

Chicago, Prairie State College, South Suburban College, and William Rainey Harper College. The students in the study attend all seven City Colleges of Chicago, as well as Harper College in Palatine, Illinois.

"Students who attend community colleges have so much talent and experience to bring to the table. OMD builds a web of support around them and engages a wide network of volunteers and supporters across Chicago to help accelerate these high potential students on their pathways to economic mobility," said Paige Ponder, Chief Executive Officer of One Million Degrees.

OMD participants consist of both recent high school graduates and continuing community college students. Initial results show the offer of a spot in the OMD program is equally impactful for both groups of students. However, participating in the program had a larger effect on students entering directly from high school. High school students who elect to participate in the program are twice as likely to persist to the next school term and 82 to 85 percent more likely to enroll full-time. OMD also substantially increases the likelihood that students enroll in college at all the fall after their senior year in high school, indicating great promise to move the needle among the approximately 20% of Chicago Public Schools graduates who do not immediately pursue postsecondary education.

These encouraging preliminary results stand against a backdrop of little previous evidence about how best to support community college persistence and graduation. A study of the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)—a wraparound program for community college students similar to One Million Degrees—found that ASAP doubled graduation rates. The first-year enrollment and persistence results of One Million Degrees are similar in magnitude to those from ASAP, revealing the promise of this program model to support low-income community colleges students across different cities and service providers.

"While the ultimate outcome of interest is whether the OMD program improves students' chances of receiving a degree or transferring to a four-year college," said Kelly Hallberg, the Poverty Lab's Scientific Director and one of the study's Principal Investigators, "these early enrollment and persistence findings provide some of the first suggestive evidence that comprehensive supports for community college students can be effective here in Chicago. We look forward to monitoring the program's progress to understand whether persistence will manifest into continued success for these students."

The University of Chicago Poverty Lab will release additional results once graduation 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.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

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 author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of Harper College or City Colleges of Chicago.

**About the University of Chicago Poverty Lab**
The Poverty Lab partners with civic and community leaders to identify, rigorously evaluate, and help scale programs and policies that reduce poverty and create paths to social mobility. This year, the Harris School of Public Policy became the new academic home of UChicago's five Urban Labs: Crime, Education, Health, Poverty, and Energy & Environment. The Poverty Lab specializes in evaluating programs with the potential to improve individuals' postsecondary success, housing security, workforce development, and household finances. Working in partnership with private, government, and nonprofit stakeholders, we bring to bear the power of data and evidence to address major social challenges. For more information, visit https://povertylab.uchicago.edu

**About One Million Degrees**
One Million Degrees accelerates community college students' progress on career pathways to economic mobility. OMD provides comprehensive supports to community college students, including tutoring, volunteer coaching, financial assistance and professional development. OMD currently partners with 10 Chicago-area community colleges, including the seven City Colleges of Chicago, Harper College, Prairie State College, and South Suburban College and leading Chicago area employers and other organizations to foster postsecondary and career success. For more information, visit: https://www.onemilliondegrees.org