# The Free College Handbook

## A Practitioner's Guide to Promise Research

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Michelle Miller-Adams
W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, miller-adams@upjohn.org

Jennifer Iriti
University of Pittsburgh, iriti@pitt.edu

Meredith S. Billings
The University of Texas at Arlington

Kathleen Bolter
W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Celeste Carruthers
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Daniel Collier
University of Memphis

Gresham D. Collum
University of Minnesota

Denisa Gándara
The University of Texas at Austin

Douglas N. Harris
Tulane University

Brad J. Hershbein
W.E Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Amy Li
Florida International University

Danielle Lowry
University of Pittsburgh

Lindsay C. Page
Brown University

Bridget F. Timmeney
W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Handbook designed by Allison McKenna
*Website* designed and developed by Allison McKenna and Jeremy Conley

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CHAPTER 1

# What is the Free College Handbook?

**Michelle Miller-Adams and Jennifer Iriti, coeditors**

**Contributors:** Meredith S. Billings, Kathleen Bolter, Celeste Carruthers, Daniel Collier, Gresham D. Collum, Denisa Gándara, Douglas N. Harris, Brad Hershbein, Amy Li, Danielle Lowry, Lindsay C. Page, Bridget Timmeney

**Are you a state or local leader considering a tuition-free college program to meet your area's workforce needs? A civic leader exploring how to make your community more attractive? A college or university administrator seeking to better serve your student body? A philanthropist looking for a high-impact investment? An activist committed to building opportunities for upward mobility?**

Translating more than a decade of research into actionable strategies, the Free College Handbook is designed to help you understand how reducing college costs can simultaneously help students and the places they live. First published in 2022, this represents a second edition that has been revised and expanded.

The handbook focuses on place-based scholarships, using the terms "free college" or "Promise" to encompass a range of programs carried out by cities, states, and community colleges that broaden access to higher education and make it more affordable—in many cases, tuition free.

We define college broadly to include not just traditional academic degrees like bachelor's or associate degrees, but also short-term credentials and certifications that require postsecondary training or apprenticeships and that can translate to better opportunities for individuals.[1]

The handbook represents the collective effort of more than a dozen researchers and was funded through two grants from the Kresge Foundation. It is structured around 25 questions, with brief answers and additional resources for each.

The entire handbook can be downloaded ***here*** or browsed at this ***link***. Check out our "explainer" videos ***here***.

## Background

The modern free-college movement can trace its origins to the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2005, although at least one small-scale precursor has been identified.[2] In the contemporary landscape of student financial aid, a commitment to award scholarships to all graduates of a given school district, designed to last in perpetuity, was something new. This place-based model has since been replicated widely, spreading to almost 250 communities and community colleges and adopted in more than half the states.

The pursuit of tuition-free college has been a grassroots movement, built from local assets in response to local needs. Some programs originate with cities, others with states, and still others are initiated by colleges themselves. Promise architects have sought to use such programs to address shortages of skilled workers, expand access to higher education for groups historically excluded from it, and stem declining population and public-school enrollment trends.

The tuition-free college movement is large and diverse, and precise definitions are elusive. We focus on place-based initiatives that have a scholarship component and reach a high proportion of residents; these are often referred to as "Promise programs." Critical to our work is the notion of place—most of these programs are geographically bounded—and the provision of grant aid rather than loans. Such programs are part of a larger movement that includes other efforts to lower the cost of higher education, including national advocacy efforts and some legislative initiatives.

[1] Not addressed here are financial aid programs, such as Pell Grants or state-level merit scholarships, directed toward individual students who qualify for them based on either family financial need or academic achievement; colleges that are already tuition free; or initiatives undertaken by four-year public and private colleges and universities to support specific groups of students.

[2] Stern, S. (2022). Bernard Daly's promise: The enduring legacy of a place-based scholarship. Oregon State University Press.

The Promise model differs from traditional financial aid, which is awarded based primarily on financial need (most notably through federal Pell Grants) or academic merit (as in previous statewide scholarship programs like Georgia Hope). Instead, the key to unlocking a Promise scholarship is residing in a specified place, whether a city, school district, state, or community-college catchment area. Because scholarships are granted at scale (i.e., they are not restricted in number and do not involve a competitive application process), they hold the potential not just to send more students to college, but also to create larger, system-wide effects. These effects might include the development of school and community cultures that support postsecondary aspirations or conditions that make a place more attractive. In this sense, Promise programs hold both a "private" or individual value (by reducing the cost of higher education for students and families) and a "public" or collective value for the communities and states that create them. The individuals and groups involved in the Promise movement may be diverse, but they share the basic idea of creating opportunities for residents and transforming places by expanding postsecondary access at a large scale.

The handbook addresses three types of programs:

1. Community programs that emanate from a group of organizations or individuals within a city or school district
2. Statewide programs enacted by state legislatures, often with leadership from a governor
3. Institutionally based programs created by community colleges

The factors driving these partners to offer scholarships based on residency also vary, but they usually involve a combination of providing more opportunities for residents to benefit from earning degrees and credentials, reducing inequitable patterns of college access, and strengthening local economies and institutions. A strategy that seeks to accomplish these multiple goals is especially appealing for places facing economic challenges or distress.

For the place-based initiatives described here, it is important to note that the "free college" label is a misnomer. Such programs generally cover only the cost of tuition and fees, not associated costs of housing, food, books, transportation, or the "opportunity cost" of college attendance—income foregone through a reduction in working hours. Often the nontuition costs of attendance are higher than tuition and fees themselves.

The growth in local and state tuition-free college programs has intersected for most of the past two decades with a national dialogue around the cost of college and various free-college proposals from national leaders. These various proposals have, to date, failed to progress. But while attention to national policy has waxed and waned, innovation among states and communities around creating tuition-free college pathways continues at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER 2

# Why are Promise programs becoming more common? College prices

Lead author: Lindsay Page

**College has become more expensive.**

Free college programs have been spurred in part by rapidly rising college tuition. Tuition increases have outpaced inflation for the past three decades, although grant aid (the kind that does not need to be repaid) has also increased. Still, this complex situation—high prices and generous aid—means that students don't necessarily know what costs they will face until they enroll. This has helped drive the proliferation of free college programs, which simplify the system while offering new financial support.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise programs can improve college access by reducing uncertainty about the aid students will receive as well as the actual cost of attendance.
- Program design is important, and simple eligibility criteria and clear messaging are more effective at reducing uncertainty than more complex programs.
- Promise leaders should avoid eligibility requirements that create barriers and should decide how their funding will interact with other sources of financial aid.

## What We Know

Tuition prices have far outpaced inflation in recent decades, and, while financial aid is often available to offset prices, the system to acquire this aid is complex.[3] Higher-education costs vary according to students' and families' ability to pay, and, in many cases, students from low-income and those from high-income backgrounds will face a very different price tag to attend the same institution. Students must file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to access federal aid and—in some cases—state, local, and Promise aid. This process results in the calculation of a student's Student Aid Index (SAI), which uses the student's and his or her family's information (such as income, family size, and some assets) to determine how much the student can realistically contribute toward the cost of college. Institutions and the federal government use this index to determine how much financial aid a student ought to receive. Because of this, students with negative or low SAIs qualify for more financial aid (grants or scholarships) than students with higher SAIs. The idea behind this model is that students with fewer resources will pay less; however, the system this creates is not transparent. As a result, students considering a college education often lack a solid understanding of what their true out-of-pocket costs will be. This can lead students—particularly those who are the first in their families to attend college—to drastically overestimate the real cost of college and ultimately decide not to consider higher education as a postsecondary option.[4]

In addition, students and families may find it difficult to navigate the financial-aid application process, hindering their ability to access aid they are entitled to receive.[5] Low-income and first-generation college students may struggle the most with completing the FAFSA, as these students are more likely to attend lower-resourced schools where their access to a staff member (such as a school counselor) may be constrained by limited staff capacity. Despite efforts to simplify the FAFSA, students still struggle with the form's terminology, its length, and with gathering the necessary financial information from their parents.

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[3] Turner, S. (2018). *The evolution of the high tuition, high aid debate*. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning 50*(3-4), 142–148.

[4] Velez, E.D., & Horn, L. (2018). *What high schoolers and their parents know about public 4-year tuition and fees in their state*. (NCES 2019-404). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

5 Dynarski, S.M., & Scott-Clayton, J.E. (2006). *The cost of complexity in federal student aid: Lessons from optimal tax theory and behavioral economics*. National Tax Journal 59(2), 319–356.

Rapidly rising postsecondary tuition and fees—often referred to as "list" or "sticker" prices—are one piece of this cumbersome system. Over the past three decades, published list prices have increased faster than inflation in all sectors of higher education. Over the 30-year period from 1995 to 2025, average list tuition and fees to attend a public, two-year institution rose from $2,780 to $4,050 (46 percent) in real terms (or accounting for inflation). Costs for public, four-year institutions increased from $5,740 to $11,610 (102 percent), and in the private, four-year sector costs rose from $24,840 to $43,350 (75 percent). And, of course, the full cost of attendance goes beyond tuition and fees to include expenses like room and board, transportation, books, and other educational materials.[6] Such trends have fueled the perception that the United States is facing a crisis of college affordability.[7] In the past several years, a growing number of young people and their parents do not perceive college to be a valuable next step to finding a high-earning and sustainable job.[8]

Over the same 30-year period in which tuition and fees rapidly rose, the generosity of grant-based financial aid—aid that students do not have to repay—has also increased. This means that the out-of-pocket costs (or "net price") students face after financial aid is taken into account has increased at a slower rate than list prices and has been relatively stable or has even declined in recent years.[9] Of course, even stable net costs are no guarantee of long-term affordability. This is especially true given uncertainty in higher-education funding streams from state and federal governments to subsidize student costs.

In sum, financial aid has grown in importance over time in helping students meet the high sticker price of college. However, these patterns also point to the increasing challenge that students and families face in determining what costs they will confront individually. Under the current system, students do not know the exact amount they will have to pay to attend a particular school until they have applied for both admission and financial aid, received the offer of a financial aid package from that school, and, if required, verified elements of their financial aid applications with additional documentation. The latter issue more often places a burden on lower-income students.[10] In this context, it is no wonder that place-based financial aid programs that include the nomenclature of "free college" or a simple guarantee of financial aid have proliferated. Not only do many of these programs provide new financial support, but they also may help streamline the aid process and help alleviate the complexity of the system and the anxiety it can engender.[11]

## Recommended Reading

Ma, J., Pender, M., & Oster, M. (2024). ***Trends in college pricing 2024***. College Board.

*This report, updated and published annually by the College Board, presents a detailed overview of trends in college costs and financial aid. The report includes breakdowns by sector as well as by state to illustrate the tremendous variation that exists across contexts.*

Scott-Clayton, J. (2017). ***Undergraduate financial aid in the United States***. American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

*This report, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, includes a section on the design features of financial aid programs that is relevant for the (re)design of Promise programs.*

## Tools

All colleges and universities that are beneficiaries of federal financial aid are required to have "Net Price Calculators" on their websites. These web-based tools are intended to help students and families gain a more accurate estimate of the expected out-of-pocket costs (after grant aid) at a particular school. Users of these tools should know that Net Price Calculators provide "ballpark" estimates rather than exact figures.[12] These can be accessed either directly or through the U.S. Department of Education's ***Net Price Calculator Center***.

***NCAN FAFSA Tracker***.

*This interactive data display is maintained by the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) and regularly tracks FAFSA completion by state. Policymakers and practitioners can monitor their state's FAFSA completion rates and compare current rates to past years.*

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6 Ma, J., Pender, M., & Oster, M. (2024). *Trends in college pricing 2024*. College Board.

7 Heinrich, M. (2017). *The college affordability crisis in America*. Report to the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee.

8 Nguyen, S., Fishman, R., & Cheche, O. (2024). *Varying degrees 2024*. New America.

9 Ma et al. Op. cit.

10 Guzman-Alvarez, A., & Page, L.C. (2021). *Disproportionate burden: Estimating the cost of FAFSA verification for public colleges and universities*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 43*(3), 545–551.

11 Dynarski, S., Page, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2022). *College costs, financial aid, and student decisions* (NBER Working Paper No. 30275). National Bureau of Economic Research.

12 Anthony, A.M., & Page, L. (2021). *How big is the ballpark? Assessing variation in grant aid awards within net price calculator student profiles*. *Education Finance and Policy 16*(4), 716–726.

CHAPTER 3

# Why are Promise programs becoming more common? Value of degrees

Lead author: Lindsay Page

**College degrees and credentials increase earnings.**

Getting a college degree is one of the best steps a person can take toward upward mobility; even a single year of college can increase one's earnings, especially if it results in a credential that is valued by employers. People with college degrees are more likely to be employed, earn more money, enjoy better health, and live longer. To maximize the benefits of higher education, it's crucial to make informed choices about institutions and majors, utilizing the resources in the Recommended Readings section. These choices significantly impact the return on investment in a college education.

## Policy Considerations

- Because college is such a major investment, students need good information not just about costs, but also about the returns to attending different types of institutions and pursuing specific degrees or credentials. Promise programs can help provide this through supplemental programming to strengthen students' financial literacy skills and support in navigating the transition to college.
- To best serve their students, Promise programs should identify eligible institutions based on whether students at these places have strong graduation rates, good employment opportunities, and the ability to manage and repay any student loan debt they accrue.
- Promise programs can work with existing institutions, organizations, and high schools to build or support local or regional pathways that link educational programs to career aspirations.
- Regular communication among area employers, local colleges, and high schools can help ensure that educational programs prepare students with the skills needed to thrive in their workplaces.

## What We Know

Research shows that a college degree contributes to increased earnings and to social mobility.[13] Furthermore, the importance of a college education has grown over time, as the earnings gap for people with college degrees relative to those with only high school diplomas has roughly doubled over a 30-year period. Those with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn an average of $2.8 million over their lifetime compared to an average of $1.6 million in lifetime earnings for a high school graduate (75 percent more).[14] The widening of this income difference is due both to a stagnation in real earnings (i.e., adjusting for inflation) for workers with at most a high school degree, and substantial growth in real earnings for workers with a bachelor's degree or more.[15]

Individuals with a college degree have higher rates of employment, have higher earnings, and pay more in taxes compared to those with only a high school degree.[16] Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicate that the unemployment rate in 2024 for workers with a high school diploma was 4.2 percent, while the unemployment rate for those with a bachelor's degree

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[13] National Center on Educational Statistics. (2021). *Annual earnings by educational attainment*. U.S. Department of Education; Wolfe, B.L., & Haveman, R.H. (1998/2002). *Social and nonmarket benefits from education in an advanced economy*. *Conference Series, 47*. Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

[14] Cheah, B., Carnevale, A.P., & Wenzinger, E. (2021). *The college payoff: More education doesn't always mean more earnings*. Georgetown University Center on Education and Workforce.

[15] Autor, D.H. (2014). *Skills, education, and the rise of earnings inequality among the "other 99 percent*." *Science 344*(6186), 843–851.

[16] Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2019). *Education pays 2019: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. (Trends in Higher Education Series). College Board; Scott-Clayton, J., & Wen, Q. (2019). *Estimating returns to college attainment: Comparing survey and state administrative data-based estimates*. *Evaluation Review 43*(5), 266–306.

was 2.5 percent.[17] Additionally, at the onset of the COVID pandemic in April 2020, BLS reported that unemployment among high school graduates spiked to 17.7 percent—more than double the 8.4 percent unemployment rate for college graduates, providing evidence that earning a postsecondary degree can shield workers from unexpected shocks to the economy.[18] Higher education also has been linked to a host of positive nonmonetary outcomes, including civic engagement, family stability, health, and longevity.[19] In fact, a meta-analysis of years of education on adult mortality found an average reduction in mortality risk of 1.9 percent per additional year of schooling.[20] On average, returns are even positive (but smaller) for those who obtain some college-level schooling but do not earn a degree.[21]

Given the tremendous variety of institutions that make up the U.S. system of higher education, it is no surprise that there is variation in the returns to attending different institutions. A series of groundbreaking studies that used federal income tax records for over 30 million college students and their parents provided an unprecedented look into the returns to attending specific institutions in the United States. These studies revealed that substantial economic mobility— defined as moving from the bottom 20 percent of household income to the top 20 percent of household income—is generally most likely for low-income students who enroll in elite private and public flagship institutions. However, these institutions enroll a relatively small share of students from low-income backgrounds. In contrast, certain public, mid-tier institutions both enroll a large share of low-income students and provide educational experiences that propel many of these students into the top 20 percent of earners.[22] The gap in the wage premium between the lowest-income and highest-income students has grown since 1960. Much of this is due to lower-income students choosing to attend community colleges or for-profit schools, where the return on investment is often low, or attending public institutions where public investment has fallen.[23]

There is also variation in the degrees and credentials that students can earn. Considering two-year colleges, not all sub-baccalaureate degrees yield positive labor market returns. Research points to returns being particularly sizable for women but more modest for men. This likely relates to gender differences in chosen degree fields, as well as preferred labor market fields that individuals may pursue absent higher education. Additionally, while students from higher-income households are more likely to be guided to higher-earning fields such as computer science or economics/finance, students from lower-income households are more likely to pursue degrees in the humanities, which offer lower returns. All of this points to a need to pair Promise scholarships with intentional college and career planning.

For women, earnings are substantially increased by earning an associate degree in nursing, for example, whereas associate degrees in other fields, including the humanities, social or information sciences, or communication and design, yield much more modest returns. In general, where positive earnings effects are observed, they are driven by both an increased likelihood to be employed and increased wages for those who are employed.[24]

In sum, even one year of college can lead to increases in earnings. Moreover, a college degree, especially from a well-chosen institution and in a well-chosen program and major, will likely be well worth the investment of time and resources in the long run.

[17] Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025). Education pays. U.S. Department of Labor.

[18] Olian, J. (2025). Can young people afford to not go to college? *Time*, March 13.

[19] Haskins, R., Holzer, H.J., & Lerman, R. (2009). Promoting economic mobility by increasing postsecondary education. Pew Charitable Trusts; Hout, M. (2012). Social and economic returns to college education in the United States. *Annual Review of Sociology 38*(1), 379–400.

[20] IHME-CHAIN Collaborators. (2024). Effects of education on adult mortality: A global systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health 9*(3), e155–e165.

[21] Heckman, James J., Humphries, J.E., & Veramendi, G. (2018). Returns to education: The causal effects of education on earnings, health, and smoking. *Journal of Political Economy 126*(1), S197–S246; Carruthers, C.K., & Sanford, T. (2018). Way station or launching pad? Unpacking the returns to adult technical education. *Journal of Public Economics 165*, 146–159.

[22] Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2017). Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility (NBER Working Paper No. 23618). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Chetty, R., Friedman, J.N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2020). The determinants of income segregation and intergenerational mobility: Using test scores to measure undermatching (NBER Working Paper No. 26748). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[23] Bleemer, Z., & Quincy, S. (2025). Changes in the college mobility pipeline since 1900 (NBER Working Paper No. 33797). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[24] Dadgar, M., & Trimble, M.J. (2015). Labor market returns to sub-baccalaureate credentials: How much does a community college degree or certificate pay? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 37*(4), 399–418.

## Recommended Reading

Chetty, R., et al. (2017). ***Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility***. National Bureau of Economic Research.

*This research paper and accompanying interactive data tool analyzes intergenerational income mobility for each college in the United States based on data for more than 30 million college students. The data tool allows users to explore the household income of students who attend specific colleges as well as the economic returns associated with those specific colleges.*

Ma, J. & Pender M. (2023). ***Education pays 2023: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society***. Trends in Higher Education Series, College Board.

*This report, produced and updated regularly by the College Board, provides an overview of college-going in the United States and provides a general-audience summary of the research on individual and societal benefits to higher education.*

Matsudaira, J. (2021). ***The economic returns to postsecondary education: Public and private perspectives***. Postsecondary Value Commission.

*This paper, produced for the Postsecondary Value Commission, provides a nontechnical discussion of how economists assess the returns to higher education from both public and private perspectives.*

Webber, D. (2018). ***Is college worth it? Going beyond averages***. Third Way.

*This report shows how a college education pays off on average but points out that enrolling in college is an investment of time and money, and that this investment might not pay off for everyone. School, major, and degree completion are important factors in the likely returns to enrolling in college.*

## Tools

***Georgetown's College Payoff***

*This interactive tool allows the user to explore how lifetime earnings vary by education level, field of study, occupation, industry, gender, race and ethnicity, and location. This tool can be helpful in working with students in need of visual aids to convey the return on investment of a college degree.*

***College Scorecard***

*Maintained by the U.S. Department of Education, the College Scorecard allows prospective students to explore institutional outcomes and costs. Where data are available, the Scorecard also displays average annual costs of attending institutions, as well as median earnings of graduates.*

CHAPTER 4

# Why are Promise programs becoming more common? Educated workforce

Lead author: Michelle Miller-Adams

**States and communities benefit when they are home to educated workers.**

Economic factors are one reason states and communities have created Promise programs and why the business community has, in many places, been a key supporter. Areas with large concentrations of college-educated people are attractive to employers who want access to trained workers. Because residents with degrees or credentials earn more, they pay more in taxes and rely less on public assistance. Higher levels of education have also been shown to reduce crime and the cost of the criminal justice system. Concerns about tuition costs, debt, and the returns to a degree have generated mixed views of the value of college, especially for bachelor's degrees, but the push for more workforce-development programs suggests that postsecondary education is more essential than ever to a state's workforce needs.

## Policy Considerations

- Low-cost strategies to create a more educated workforce are increasingly important, and Promise programs are already part of this strategy in many communities.
- To have an impact on workforce development through greater college access, Promise programs must reach people who were not previously on the path to higher education. The programs that do this best are simple, inclusive, and flexible. (For example, they allow for part-time attendance and can be used to earn short-term credentials as well as college degrees.)
- In states and communities where workforce goals are driving Promise efforts, key economic actors, such as businesses and economic development organizations, have been at the planning table from the start.
- Businesses that are engaged in program design or fund development are more likely to encourage their workers to take advantage of Promise programs for upskilling and offer career pathways, including internships, to Promise recipients.

## What We Know

Numerous studies have shown the connection between the education levels of an area's population and its economic vitality. Both states and communities benefit when they have larger concentrations of educated or trained workers, and a local or statewide Promise program can help accomplish this goal.[25]

Higher education and skill levels are correlated with greater productivity, and greater productivity with faster rates of economic growth.[26] A state with more-educated residents will have higher earnings, bringing in more tax revenue.[27] And workers with degrees or credentials are less likely to become unemployed, stabilizing a local or state economy in a downturn.[28] Increased earnings also reduce poverty and save money on public services like Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).[29] Higher education levels can also reduce crime and the social costs

[25] Bartik, T.J., Miller-Adams, M., Pittelko, B., & Timmeney, B. (2021). *Returns from statewide tuition-free college: Modeling an Illinois Promise* (Upjohn Research Highlight). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[26] Berger, N., & Fisher, P. (2013). *A well-educated workforce is key to state prosperity* (Report). Economic Policy Institute.

[27] Carroll, S.J., & Erkut, E. (2009). *How taxpayers benefit when students attain higher levels of education* (Research brief). RAND Corporation.

[28] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Education pays, 2024*, U.S. Department of Labor.

[29] Nichols, A., Schmidt, L., & Sevak, P. (2017). *Economic conditions and supplemental security income application*. *Social Security Bulletin 77*(4).

of incarceration.[30] These fiscal benefits are among the reasons why 49 states have set attainment goals to increase their percentage of workers with postsecondary degrees or credentials.[31] Having a greater share of educated workers is of special value to places at risk of decline, because it helps localities adapt to economic shocks. Regions with skilled workforces experience higher rates of population and income growth than those without these assets.

Even so, there has been a recent decline in what heretofore was a near-universal belief in the value of a college education. Mixed views, especially on the merits of bachelor's degrees, have been driven by concerns around tuition costs, student loan debt, and economic returns—although bachelor's degrees still account for a large wage premium.[32] Some states, including California, have reduced the four-year-degree requirement for many state government jobs, with the goal of creating pathways to high-paying jobs for those with or without a bachelor's degree.[33]

Public opinion notwithstanding, employers continue to seek out communities that have a ready supply of educated workers, because this makes it easier for them to recruit employees and allows them to meet their staffing needs without major investments in job training. These are among the reasons why the business sector has been a key supporter of tuition-free college programs or new higher-education investments in places like Michigan, Tennessee, and Texas.

Human-capital investment strategies, of which Promise scholarship programs are one example, can help reverse population decline, including out-migration from urban centers, and can stabilize a school district's demographic makeup, reducing middle-class flight. Similarly, statewide Promise programs that focus attendance on in-state institutions can stave off outmigration and help retain educated residents within states. Investing in workforce training is of growing importance given current demographic, technological, and policy trends. The number of high-school graduates nationally is expected to peak in 2025 and decline thereafter;[34] over time, this will constrain the supply of new workers. The rapid growth in artificial intelligence is reshaping the job market in complex and not-yet-well-understood ways, replacing certain types of work while creating new employment opportunities.[35] As employers adapt, low-cost strategies for retraining workers will be essential. Finally, current federal changes in higher-education policy—from cuts in grant funding[36] to making colleges partly financially responsible[37] for student outcomes to the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education[38]—are increasing pressure on postsecondary institutions to ensure their viability. These developments are reinforcing the idea that a college education is not just valuable for its own sake but for its ability to help students get good jobs and help employers meet their workforce needs.

## Recommended Reading

Berger, N., & Fisher, P. (2013). ***A well-educated workforce is key to state prosperity***. *Economic Policy Institute*.

*This report from the Economic Policy Institute shows the connections between education levels and a state's economic performance. It also analyzes the value of state educational investments compared to other uses of state funding, such as economic development incentives or tax cuts.*

Carroll, S.J., & Erkut, E. (2009). ***How taxpayers benefit when students attain higher levels of education***. RAND Corporation.

*This RAND research brief summarizes the results of a study examining how students' education levels benefit taxpayers. It finds that highly educated people pay more in taxes, use fewer social services, and are less likely to be incarcerated. Investments in education yield net benefits to public-sector budgets.*

Donald, J., & Monk, D. (2023). ***An economic argument for affordable higher education: Closing the skills gap by expanding access***. Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

*This report, part of a series from the Texas Comptroller's office, explains the concept of the skills gap and examines Texas and national data on how postsecondary education can meet workforce needs.*

[30] Lochner, L., & Moretti, E. (2004). *The effect of education on crime: Evidence from prison inmates, arrests, and self-reports*. *American Economic Review 94*(1), 155–189.

[31] Lumina Foundation. (n.d.). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*.

[32] Fry, R., Braga, D., and Parker, K. (2024). *Is college worth it?* Pew Research Center.

[33] Spitalniak, L. (2024). *California nixes degree requirements for 30K state jobs*. *Higher Ed Dive*, Dec. 17.

[34] Unglesbee, B. (2025). *The coming decline in high school graduate counts, in 5 charts*. Higher Ed Dive, Jan. 27.

[35] Babina, T., & Fedyk, A. (2025). *The effects of AI on firms and workers*. Brookings Institution.

[36] Bedekovics, G., & Ragland, W. (2025). *Mapping federal funding cuts to U.S. colleges and universities*. Center for American Progress.

[37] Unglesbee, B. (2025). *Risk-sharing: A 'well-intentioned' disaster for colleges?* *Higher Ed Dive*, May 6.

[38] Knott, K. (2025). *Five ways the Education Department impacts higher ed* *Inside Higher Ed*., Feb. 7.

Lumina Foundation. (n.d.). ***Goal 2040: A stronger nation and a brighter future***.

*This website focuses on efforts to increase post–high school educational attainment toward a national goal of 75 percent of working-age adults with degrees or credentials by 2040. It also includes an interactive tool allowing users to explore the country's educational attainment progress by state, race/ethnicity, and age group.*

### Cost-Benefit Studies

Bartik, T.J., Miller-Adams, M., Pittelko, B., & Timmeney, B. (2021). ***Returns from statewide tuition-free college: Modeling an Illinois Promise***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This report describes an economic model used to calculate the potential economic and fiscal returns of a hypothetical statewide tuition-free college program for Illinois. The model shows that the program would yield an eventual net return, but not right away.*

Bartik, T.J., Hershbein B.J., & Lachowska, M. (2016). ***The merits of universal scholarships: Benefit-cost evidence from the Kalamazoo Promise***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This paper models benefits and actual costs from the Kalamazoo Promise to show that the program generates an estimated internal rate of return of 11 percent, or a benefit-to-cost ratio of approximately four-to-one, based just on predicted increased earnings from higher levels of educational attainment of Promise scholars. Returns are high for both low-income and non-low-income groups, for non-Whites, and for women.*

Xu, L., & Knight, D.S. (2025). ***Investing in college readiness: Societal benefits and costs of the El Dorado College Promise program***. (EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1161). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

*This paper examines the societal benefits and costs of a place-based scholarship program in rural Arkansas, the El Dorado Promise. Our cost framework treats tuition payments as a cash transfer that shifts the cost burden of higher education, rather than causing new societal costs. Findings show the program provides societal benefits equal to $4.60 for each dollar invested.*

> "All Michiganders deserve a pathway to a good-paying job, whether they choose to pursue a college degree, technical certificate, or an apprenticeship. Michigan Reconnect will connect thousands of Michiganders to good-paying jobs and connect businesses with the talent they need to thrive in their communities."
>
> —Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (2021)[39]

### Design Principles in Practice: State Tuition-Free College Programs for Adult Learners

A recent trend in the Promise movement is the creation of distinct adult-oriented pathways for state residents who lack a college degree. ***Tennessee Reconnect*** launched the first such program in 2018, and subsequent initiatives spread to three other states: ***Michigan Reconnect*** (2021), ***MassReconnect*** (2023) in Massachusetts, and ***SUNY Reconnect*** (2025) in New York. The efforts have originated with both parties: three state programs were created under single-party control (Republican in Tennessee and Democratic in Massachusetts and New York), and Michigan's was achieved with bipartisan cooperation across the executive and legislative branches. In addition to these four states, many others have sponsored tuition-free college initiatives without an upper age limit and thus also serve adults, although not through a dedicated program. Support from the business community is an important factor in the creation of adult-centric Promise programs, as the following cases show.

***Tennessee.*** ***Tennessee Reconnect*** emerged from Governor Bill Haslam's "Drive to 55" initiative (the goal being for 55 percent of Tennessee adults to have earned a degree or credential by 2025). Private-sector partners were a critical part of Drive to 55, which was announced in 2013 just as the Tennessee Promise was launching. The state chamber of commerce explicitly supported the Reconnect legislation when it was being considered in 2017–2018, and the Nashville Chamber of Commerce created a local version of the Reconnect program in 2018 centered on Nashville State Community College and the city's need for trained workers, especially for the

[39] State of Michigan, Office of the Governor. (2021). *Gov. Whitmer launches bipartisan $30 M Michigan Reconnect program* (Press release, Feb. 7).

information technology sector.[40] The local chamber continues to promote the program to businesses as a resource for encouraging the upskilling of existing workers and the training of new workers. One innovative component of the local program is the Nashville Chamber's training of "Reconnect Ambassadors" who help employers understand the value of Tennessee Reconnect for their own workforce.[41]

***Michigan.*** The value of tuition-free community college to the business community was also apparent in Michigan, where ***Michigan Reconnect***, one of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's proposed broad investments in higher education, was passed into law with bipartisan support. Like the Tennessee program, it provides a tuition-free pathway through community college for any resident over the age of 25 who lacks a college degree. (A broader Community College Guarantee for recent high school graduates was launched in 2024.) A key element in the enactment of Michigan Reconnect was coordinated support from the business community. The Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the Detroit Regional Chamber, the state's two leading business organizations, along with many other local and regional business organizations, campaigned on the program's behalf. They publicized their support, held legislative hearings, and—presumably—engaged in behind-the-scenes lobbying. They did this, presumably, because they understand that Michigan's economic future hinges on increasing its educational attainment to meet employers' need for educated workers. These combined outreach efforts have led to sizable student take-up of the program, despite many areas of Michigan not having a community college nearby.[42]

***Massachusetts.*** The state's path to tuition-free community college began with ***MassReconnect***, announced in 2023 and modeled on the two programs above. Throughout the debate over the legislation, Governor Maura T. Healey framed the program as a tool to close skill gaps and strengthen economic competitiveness.[43] Statewide business organizations such as the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and the Associated Industries of Massachusetts provided their support. A few months later, Massachusetts enacted tuition-free college for ***nursing students***, designed to meet the state's health-care worker shortage, and in 2024, tuition-free college was extended to all residents through ***MassEducate***.

***New York.*** The newest statewide entrant to the adult tuition-free college world is ***SUNY Reconnect***, funded by the state and offered to a similar population as the programs discussed above. (Confusingly, there is also ***CUNY Reconnect*** for New York City residents, funded by the city and begun in 2022, with slightly different eligibility requirements.) Governor Kathy Hochul announced SUNY Reconnect in her 2025 State of the State address; it was included in the state budget and will begin operations in the 2025–2026 academic year. Most of the language surrounding this program stresses the goal of making higher education more accessible and affordable rather than meeting workforce needs per se. However, the SUNY initiative, unlike the other programs discussed here, limits its funding to students pursuing credentials in high-demand fields, such as education, health care, cybersecurity, applied technologies, and human services.

As Promise programs serving adult learners have grown, they have had to adapt. For example, programs for adults generally allow part-time attendance, whereas many states' traditional tuition-free college programs require students to enroll full time. All the programs discussed here involve "reconnect navigators," a single-point-of-contact resource to help adult students understand the degree needed for their field of interest and where such a degree can be obtained. Navigators may also help adult students address other barriers that could impede degree completion: a January 2025 report from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission showed that Reconnectors who worked with a navigator stayed in school or completed a technical certificate or degree at higher rates (by 11 percentage points) than those who did not.[44] Colleges receiving adult students have also found that they may need to make adjustments to their course scheduling and delivery of student support services to better reach adult students.[45] These lessons—allowing part-time attendance, using navigators to help students, and adapting delivery of student support services—are relevant throughout the Promise movement and could help more students complete their programs and obtain quality jobs.

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[40] Pocai, J., Davis, L., & Ajinkya, J. (2020). *Innovative strategies to close postsecondary attainment gaps: Neighbors helping neighbors through Nashville's Reconnect Ambassador Program*. Institute for Higher Education Policy.

[41] Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce. (n.d.). *Nashville Reconnect for employers*.

[42] Huisman, K., & Bolter, K. (2023). *Unequal usage: Geographic disparities and the Michigan Reconnect program* (Report No. 291). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[43] Commonwealth of Massachusetts. (2025). *New data shows 40 percent increase in students attending community college through MassReconnect in second year* (Press release, Jul. 10). Executive Office of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

[44] Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2025). *Tennessee's Navigate Reconnect shows strong impact on non-traditional students, increasing college enrollment outcomes* (Press release, Jan. 10). Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

[45] Ward, L. (2020). *Two unique programs are helping Nashville adults go back to school*. Brookings Institution.

CHAPTER 5

# How do Promise programs benefit students? Early messaging

Lead authors: Danielle Lowry and Amy Li

**Promise programs deliver a message, early and often, that college tuition is affordable.**

Promise programs benefit students by making it easier to understand the application and financial aid process while adding a measure of certainty around cost. This is especially important for students who are the first in their families to go to college. Promise programs deliver a consistent message during a student's K–12 years that college tuition is affordable, and when it comes time to apply for college, they sometimes provide resources and support to make the process easier to understand and navigate.

## Policy Considerations

- Clear and consistent messaging is an essential component of a successful Promise program. Effective outreach around benefits and the steps needed to access them—delivered early and often to students, families, school personnel, and community-based organizations—can help raise awareness and usage of a Promise scholarship.
- Designers of Promise programs should consider regular and systematic messaging campaigns, supported by tailored outreach to students, to ensure that school staff and others have the capacity to assist students in following through on their postsecondary plans.
- Ease of messaging will be supported by streamlined program design that has simple eligibility criteria and application process. Promise partners should weigh the costs and benefits of targeting eligibility based on academic merit or financial need, as additional requirements complicate messaging and make it more difficult to reach students not already on a college-going path.
- Students and families should be able to find answers to their program questions quickly and easily—ideally through well-prepared school staff and a well-designed website.
- Resources for professional communications capacity, including a high-quality website, should be included up front in Promise cost estimations.

## What We Know

Paying for college may be the first substantial financial decision that a traditional-aged college student makes in his or her adult life. Research has consistently demonstrated that students and families confront a lack of clear information when it comes to paying for higher education.[46] Students who are the first in their families to attend college often lack the cultural and social capital (i.e., connections to information or networks of people who can provide support or knowledge) needed to navigate the financial aid process and other application hurdles. Some students choose not to apply for college for fear of taking on debt, especially in light of rising institutional sticker prices.[47]

Promise programs can be one solution to ameliorate these barriers to postsecondary access. Some researchers refer to Promise programs as "informational interventions." For example, a study using a large, nationally representative survey of high school students found that the introduction of a local Promise program increased the likelihood that students expected to earn a college

[46] Hershbein, B.J., & Hollenbeck, K. (2014). *College costs: Students can't afford not to know*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Report supported by Lumina Foundation.

[47] Goldrick-Rab, S., & Kelchen, R. (2015). *Making sense of loan aversion: evidence from Wisconsin*. In Hershbein, B., & Hollenbeck, K.M. (Eds.), *Student loans and the dynamics of debt*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

degree by 9–15 percentage points.[48] The introduction of Promise programs had a particularly strong impact for low-income and racially minoritized students.

Other researchers found that effects on actual college enrollment are similar whether Promise programs cover full or just partial tuition. They concluded that the "free college" messaging can be as important in inducing students to attend postsecondary institutions as the actual amount of the grant award.[49] A study of an anonymous Promise program in a Midwestern city found that it induced enrollment in community college, but not through price reductions. The "last-dollar" program ended up funding very few students, as most scholarship-eligible students were already covered by federal and state grants for low-income students. Students interviewed for the study said that before the scholarship, they did not know financial aid was available to them from government sources. The Promise scholarship prompted students to consider a postsecondary pathway and seek information about affordability. In such cases, the "free college" messaging may be enough to spur interest in postsecondary education.[50] Nonetheless, evidence shows that larger grant amounts lead to greater student impacts on persistence and completion outcomes.

"Tuition-free college" messaging is important, but it is not enough on its own to increase enrollment, persistence, and eventual degree completion. While a Promise program can be an informational intervention, if free college messaging is not coupled with supports, students may not be able to follow through on their postsecondary ambitions.[51] The Degree Project in Milwaukee was a randomized Promise program that launched a marketing campaign with personalized messaging to students, families, and school staff. Materials with college transition tips were available, but staff were stretched too thin to provide meaningful support that would help students act on their motivation to attend college. What was needed was an organized effort—not communications or strategies enacted at the individual level but broad structural supports. In the end, students who were offered Promise dollars were no more likely than those not offered the scholarship to have financial literacy skills or to navigate the financial aid process. Both groups indicated that college still seemed too expensive.[52] Tight, clear messaging coupled with individualized supports may be most needed in schools, districts, or regions where accessing supports, like postsecondary planning or advanced-level course taking, is unevenly distributed across and within schools.

Fewer administrative hurdles and less uncertainty in the aid process are also important factors when designing Promise scholarships. A University of Michigan study, for example, randomly selected low-income students in the state of Michigan to receive letters detailing a student's eligibility for free tuition at the university. One arm of the treatment guaranteed students would receive free tuition for four years, while another arm guaranteed them free tuition for one year, renewable, and contingent on demonstrating financial need in a yearly application. The application rate among students guaranteed free tuition for four years was 63 percent, compared to 44 percent in the yearly application arm and 35 percent in the control (or "business as usual") group.[53] Other studies have confirmed that scholarship or grant programs based on demonstrating financial need (like the Pell Grant) have smaller effects on enrollment than simpler financial aid programs.[54] Any additional paperwork is a hurdle, especially for underrepresented students.

Research on financial aid outreach and college applications has consistently shown the importance of clear and explicit messaging, as well as the reduction of administrative burdens (the added hassle of filing paperwork required of students to prove their income status) on college access. These lessons are critical for policymakers and other practitioners to consider when designing Promise programs. If program creators are intent on providing aid to students with financial need, great care must be taken in designing an application process that does not create an administrative burden for low-income students. The "cost of complexity" in financial aid applications may deter low-income and first-generation students from even

[48] Odle, T.K. (2022). *The power of "free" college: Reducing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in college expectations* (EdWorkingPaper No. 22-565). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

[49] Li, A.Y., & Gándara, D. (2020). *The promise of "free" tuition and program design features: Impacts on first-time college enrollment*. In Perna, L.W., & Smith, E.J. (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college Promise programs* (pp. 219–240). American Education Research Association.

[50] Monaghan, D.B. (2023). *How well do students understand "free community college"? Promise programs as informational interventions*. *AERA Open*, 9.

[51] Collier, D.A., & Parnther, C. (2018). *Conversing with Kalamazoo Promise scholars: An inquiry into the beliefs, motivations, and experiences of tuition-free college students*. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice 22*(4), 572–596.

[52] Kim, D.H., & Rifelj, K.K. (2021). *Packaging the promise: Money, messaging, and misalignment*. *Teachers College Record 123*(6), 1–38.

[53] Burland, E., Dynarski, S., Michelmore, K., Owen, S., & Raghuraman, S. (2022). *The power of certainty: Experimental evidence on the effective design of free tuition programs* (NBER Working Paper No. 29864). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[54] Gándara, D. & A. Li (2020). *Promise for whom? "Free-college" programs and enrollments by race and gender classifications at public, 2-year colleges*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 42*(4), 603–627.

applying for aid and attending college if not paired with careful and intentional supports.[55] Fashioning simple applications and eligibility rules is key in the design of new Promise programs.

When it comes to messaging, Promise programs will want to be explicit about the application process, the amount of money students will receive in scholarship dollars, and the institutions to which students can take those dollars. Eligibility criteria that are complex or hard to calculate can hinder the ease of messaging, as well as create an administrative burden for students and staff. Similarly, such programs will want to be clear about the meaning of "free" (no Promise programs cover the full cost of attendance, focusing on resources that go toward tuition and fees). Evidence from the Tennessee Promise illustrated that students' expectations for what the program will provide are often unmet, and those expectations are shaped by the "free college" language used to promote the program.[56]

Attention to how messages are shared is also important. Students often learn about Promise funding and eligibility criteria by word of mouth from trusted sources, such as friends or school-based staff, so staff members who work directly with students need to be knowledgeable about program details. Program designers might also consider an "ambassador" type program that enlists the help of Promise recipients in educating their near peers. A well-designed website with all of the pertinent information regarding the Promise program—such as eligibility criteria, application procedures, and dollars received—is an important resource for providing information to students and families about college affordability. Ensuring that the language used in messaging is plain and understandable (e.g., avoiding jargon) can also positively affect rates of program participation.[57]

## Recommended Reading

Burd, S., et al. (2018). ***Decoding the cost of college: The case for transparent financial aid award letters***. New America.

*This report details an analysis of over 11,000 financial aid award letters. The researchers found that award letters were overly complex and did not offer clear next steps to students. The authors provide recommendations on how to improve financial aid messaging.*

Carlson, A., & Laderman, S. (2018). ***The power of a promise: Implications and importance of adult Promise programs***. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO).

*Programs designed for adult students must consider the factors unique to this student population, considering that they have different responsibilities than other students. SHEEO encourages Programs to relay program information using clear and simple language.*

Conroy, E. (2022, April 4). ***Simplicity matters for free college***. Forbes.

*Clear and simple messaging for students regarding Promise programs is important for program effectiveness, as demonstrated by recent studies.*

Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022). ***Reducing barriers to free college programs***. Scholars Strategy Network.

*This brief highlights barriers in program design that could impact student access and persistence. Authors advance policy recommendations aimed at ameliorating the barriers that can limit the effectiveness of free college or Promise programs.*

Lieber, R. (2021). ***FAFSA's expected family contribution is going away. Good riddance***. New York Times, September 17.

*This article provides a breakdown of the complexity of the financial aid process and how it is overly burdensome on low-income families.*

## Tool

Castleman, B.L., Page, L.C., & Snowdon, A.L. (2013). ***SDP Summer Melt Handbook: A guide to investigating and responding to summer melt***. Strategic Data Project.

*The Strategic Data Project's Summer Melt Handbook provides guidance on text messaging campaigns, as well as other strategies to combat summer melt.*

55 Dynarski, S.M., & Scott-Clayton, J.E. (2006). *The cost of complexity in federal student aid: Lessons from optimal tax theory and behavioral economics*. *National Tax Journal 59*(2), 319–356.

56 Kramer, J.W. (2022). *Expectations of a promise: The psychological contracts between students, the state, and key actors in a tuition-free college environment*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 44*(4), 759–782.

57 Dorn, S. (2014). *Public education, outreach, and application assistance.* Urban Institute.

CHAPTER 6

# How do Promise programs benefit students? Student support

Lead authors: Danielle Lowry and Amy Li

**Promise programs can spark the creation of new forms of student support around college access, financial aid, and employment.**

Promise programs benefit students by providing them with college and career knowledge and support to navigate the high-school-to-college transition. This is especially important for first-generation college-goers, whose families and peers may not have firsthand experience to draw on. By offering tailored assistance, Promise programs empower students to choose the best postsecondary program for their interests and abilities, complete the college application process, access additional financial aid resources, avoid the pitfalls of "summer melt," and smoothly transition between college and future employment opportunities.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise programs can serve as catalysts for a robust FAFSA completion effort, in partnership with schools and the broader community.
- Collaboration with school-based staff is necessary for building a college-going culture and promoting Promise awareness and uptake.
- Strategic and intentional coordination with high school counselors and existing high-school-to-college support staff or local college access organizations can help Promise programs avoid duplicating effort.
- Resources to support students' nonfinancial needs can be deployed in various ways: college coaches or advisors can amplify high school–based resources, peer mentors can promote uptake, and text messaging campaigns can help students navigate their transition from high school to college.
- To prevent "summer melt" (planning for college but then not enrolling the next fall) and "academic undermatch" (enrolling at a less selective institution than one to which the student can gain admission), Promise programs may want to consider enlisting more comprehensive student support services.
- If implementing a case management approach, it is important to emphasize the importance of case management data systems that collect and securely store data on student interests and needs over time so that counselors or coaches are always aware of where a student is on the college and career pathway. This database can also support Promise program practitioners in making data-informed decisions.

## What We Know

Students with parents, family members, or friends who have attended college will have more access to college and career knowledge than students who are first-generation college-goers. The college application and financial aid process is an often-complex barrier for many first-generation students and those without such access to social capital (i.e., networks of knowledge).[58] Students who do not have advocates with college experience have a more difficult time navigating this process. Promise programs can help create new support structures to address these issues by motivating existing institutions to implement supports or by introducing resources to increase staff capacity in schools or communities.

[58] Chetty, R., et al. (2022). Social capital I: Measurement and associations with economic mobility. *Nature 608*, 108–271.

Traditionally, high school counselors are expected to provide support for the college application process; however, school counselors often do not have the capacity to assist all students in making the right choices and carrying out the necessary steps to access financial aid and submit college applications. Counselors in urban and low-income districts are often overburdened with large caseloads of students. Many of these students are transitory,[59] leading to further inequities in college and career knowledge and readiness.

For students and families who are not aware of scholarships and grants for which they are eligible, the sticker price of attending a higher-education institution can be shocking and off-putting. Additionally, the process of applying for financial aid is confusing for many families. This confusion has consequences: One study found that students who do not file the FAFSA forgo $10,000 a year, on average, in grants and loans. This amounts to $24 billion annually that eligible families miss out on because they do not complete the FAFSA.[60]

Promise programs can play a role in partnering with educational and community institutions to install robust FAFSA completion efforts community-wide or statewide. Assisting students in accessing financial aid can have big payoffs. For example, researchers partnered with H&R Block to offer families FAFSA completion assistance and to help families understand how much they would likely pay for tuition, given their financial circumstances. The support provided in the experiment led to significant increases in FAFSA completion, financial aid receipt, college attendance, and persistence.[61] A Century Foundation cross-state study found that five of the seven states that adopted mandatory FAFSA completion policies decreased gaps between low- and high-income districts. California and Illinois had some of the strongest increases in FAFSA completion even though neither state's legislation came with additional funds to support counselors or other school personnel in assisting students with this complicated form. Both states relied on support organizations to assist lower-income schools with this monumental task: California had a consortium of college-readiness organizations with trained professionals who guide students through FAFSA and postsecondary planning, and Illinois relied on a network of near-peer college undergraduates trained to provide postsecondary planning support and FAFSA assistance. The takeaway is that these support organizations can fill gaps in resource-constrained schools and districts, provide direct student and family support, capitalize on preexisting resources, and meet students and families where they are.[62]

There are also nonfinancial barriers to college entry that can hinder prospective college students. Lower-income and first-generation college students may struggle more than their peers to complete pre-college tasks, such as sending transcripts, paying a deposit, or navigating campus administration. There is also the problem of "summer melt": one study estimates that around 10–20 percent of students intending to enroll in the fall after high school graduation fail to show up on campus.[63] These rates are even higher for low-income students, students from urban areas, and students intending to enroll in community college. To combat summer melt and increase college persistence rates, a Promise program in Detroit created the Detroit Promise Path program, where coaches were embedded in the community college at which students could use their Promise scholarship. Although early results of the program were encouraging, at Year Three, coached students were no more likely to earn a degree than noncoached students. Students indicated that factors outside of college—mostly financial—often derailed them. Study authors argued that economically disadvantaged students from under-resourced school systems often need more intensive supports to get them through college.[64] This study also demonstrates the importance of targeted interventions at the right time. These more intensive supports offered by the Detroit Promise Path program became available students only after high school and might have had a greater impact had they been available during high school.

A student having less college knowledge available within their families and social sphere may also unintentionally undermatch—that is, attend an institution less academically rigorous than one they are qualified to attend. Research shows that academic undermatch leads some students to drop out of college.[65] A Canadian study found that, even when accounting for academic achievement, low-income students make suboptimal postsecondary choices because of information barriers.

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[59] Gagnon, D.J., & Mattingly, M.J. (2016). *Most U.S. school districts have low access to school counselors: Poor, diverse, and city school districts exhibit particularly high student-to-counselor ratios* (National Issue Brief No. 108). Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire.

[60] Kofoed, M.S. (2017). *To apply or not to apply: FAFSA completion and financial aid gaps*. *Higher Education 58*(1).

[61] Bettinger, E.P., Long, B.T., & Oreopoulos, P. (2013). *The FAFSA project: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment and next steps*. Harvard University.

[62] Granville, P., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., & Mikoulinskii, J. (2025). *Mandatory FAFSA policies have had immediate impact*. Century Foundation.

[63] Castleman, B.L., & Page, L.C. (2014). *A trickle or a torrent? Understanding the extent of summer "melt" among college-intending high school graduates*. *Social Science Quarterly 95*(1), 202–220.

[64] Brockman, S.L., Camo-Biogradlija, J., Ratledge, A., O'Donoghue, R., Baum, M.Y., & Jacob, B. (2024). *Forging a path to college persistence: An experimental evaluation of the Detroit Promise Path Program*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 47*(2), 549–576.

[65] Cohodes, S.R., & Goodman, J.S. (2014). *Merit aid, college quality, and college completion: Massachusetts' Adams Scholarship as an in-kind subsidy*. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 6*(4), 251–285.

This project tested four arms of an intervention: 1) career education, 2) a need-based grant, 3) a combined arm, and 4) a control group. In the career-education intervention, students attended multiple workshops in high school and developed postsecondary plans with adult guidance. Participants were 8 percentage points more likely to enroll in higher education, and their earnings were about 10 percent higher by their late twenties. The grant (intentionally simple to apply for and large enough to cover almost all of tuition for low-income students for two years) raised enrollment and community-college graduation rates but did not raise earnings. Overall, the authors of this study concluded that career education helped students identify the institutions that were both academic and social fits for them.[66]

While Promise programs do not offer an easy solution to the challenge of providing effective student support, their introduction often catalyzes new support efforts or better alignment of existing resources; see Design Principles in Practice (below) for examples.

## Recommended Reading

Carruthers, C.K., Gurantz, O., & Page, L. (2022). ***Helping students make informed choices about college***. EdResearch for Recovery.

*This policy brief contains evidence-based research on building a college-going culture within a school or district. It is written specifically for K–12 practitioners and provides sensible strategies to assist students in planning for college.*

Li, A.Y., Billings, M., & Gándara, D. (2025, August 11). ***Administrators push to improve free college access***. Brown Center Chalkboard, Brookings Institution.

*This blog post describes recommendations from college administrators who work with Promise students regarding the delivery of support services, students' needs, and recommendations for policy and practice. The blog is based on a study incorporating interviews of practitioners at seven community colleges that offer promise programs.*

Narehood, E. (2021). ***Lynchburg Beacon of Hope: Building a collaborative framework for student success***. College Promise.

*This policy brief explores how a Promise program in Central Virginia implemented future centers that serve as hubs for college and career readiness programming at both city high schools and the local community college, along with related programming, to ensure a seamless high-school-to-college transition.*

Page, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2015). ***Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses***. National Bureau of Economic Research.

*This paper provides a comprehensive review of the literature on experimental and quasi-experimental research that provides effective policies and strategies that programs can adopt to increase college access.*

## Tool

**U.S. Department of Education.** *College scorecard.*

*This website, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, provides a simple-to-use, Web-based tool to research colleges and universities in the United States. Students and families can learn about colleges' fields of study, their costs, admission rates, graduation rates, typical student-debt burdens, and the success with which their graduates are able to repay their student loans.*

## Design Principles in Practice: Approaches to Student Support

**High school coaching.** High school counselors and teachers who see students daily can be an important resource for Promise programs. Counselors already know the student population and can assist in the college search and application process. But many high school guidance counselors are stretched to capacity, and additional support can help.

After more than a decade of successfully funding Promise Scholars to and through college, the Pittsburgh Promise saw its rates of scholarship usage stagnate. In the spring of 2020, the Pittsburgh Promise received funding to implement a pilot coaching initiative in three Pittsburgh public high schools. The goals of the coaching program are to assist students in identifying their interests, navigate financial aid, explore both career and postsecondary options, and build soft skills. Past studies have demonstrated that high school students struggle to identify their own skills and interests and translate these into desired programs of study. Since its inception, the program has made progress in exposing students to a broader range of college and career opportunities, while connecting them with the resources to pursue their interests and goals. Coaches have served as trusted adults in their schools and have created opportunities for students to explore multiple postsecondary options. As a result, Promise scholarship usage and seamless enrollment rates have increased at the high schools where coaches are present.

[66] Renée, L. (2022). *The long-term effects of financial aid and career education: Evidence from a randomized experiment* (Working Paper Series No. 46). Canadian Labor Economics Forum.

Some Promise programs, including the Denver Scholarship Foundation and the Lynchburg Beacon of Hope, have created Future Centers—one-stop locales within high schools to help students access additional financial aid and complete college-access activities. Still others, including the Montgomery County, Ohio, Promise program or tnAchieves, rely on adult volunteer community mentors to help students navigate the high-school-to-college transition. There is also a role for peer mentorship; for example, the Pittsburgh Promise designates "Promise Ambassadors" at each high school in the district to encourage other students to apply for and use the Promise.

**College coaching.** Coaching can also reside at the postsecondary level. The Detroit Promise began in 2013 as a last-dollar scholarship for recent high school graduates to attend community college and their partner four-year institutions. Program administrators developed support services as part of the Detroit Promise Path for recipients attending community colleges. Students meet with their coaches for the first time in the summer before beginning college. They are encouraged to remain connected with their coach through a series of small financial incentives. Treated students were more likely to persist, remain full time in college, and accumulate more credits. Students reported overall positive experiences with the program, especially with their relationship to the coaches.[67] However, results at Year Three indicated no difference in degree-attainment rates between scholarship recipients and nonrecipients.

**Text-message campaigns.** Utilizing text messages to support students in their transition from high school to college has worked in many contexts to produce modest increases in college matriculation, although "nudges" delivered through texts have been difficult to scale (in part because students receive so many messages). Research shows that the effectiveness of text messaging is more pronounced if the messages are coming from a source known or trusted by the student and messages are not being sent too frequently.[68] Additionally, students are more likely to engage with text messaging campaigns if the messages provide specific information personalized to them (such as pre-college tasks required of them before enrolling in their specific college in the fall), rather than generic messages such as goal setting.

**Comprehensive student support services.** To prevent summer melt and academic undermatch, Promise programs may consider enlisting more comprehensive student support services. Programs such as College Possible and Bottom Line offer college search and application completion services to participating students. Evidence has shown that these college coaching programs have increased student enrollment, persistence, and eventual degree attainment at four-year institutions.[69]

[67] Ratledge, A., O'Donoghue, R., Cullinan, D., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2019). *A path from access to success: Interim findings from the Detroit Promise Path Evaluation*. MDRC.

[68] Bird, K.A., Castleman, B.L., Denning, J.T., Goodman, J., Lamberton, C., & Rosinger, K.O. (2021). *Nudging at scale: Experimental evidence from FAFSA completion campaigns*. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 183, 105–128.

[69] Barr, A., & Castleman, B. (2021). *The bottom line on college advising: Large increases in degree attainment (EdWorkingPaper No. 21-481)*. Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

CHAPTER 7

# How do Promise programs benefit students? Postsecondary attainment

Lead authors: Amy Li and Danielle Lowry

**Promise programs can lead more students to enroll in college and complete degrees or credentials.**

Promise programs benefit students by making it more likely they will enroll in college, remain enrolled, and complete degrees or credentials. The extent of these effects will depend on program design and implementation. The strongest effects will occur when Promise funding is generous and students can choose from a range of postsecondary options, and when navigation and support services are provided at critical transition points.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise programs that are financially generous and easy to access are likely to have the biggest impacts on postsecondary enrollment.
- Promise programs that offer a range of postsecondary options (by including credentials, two-year, and four-year degrees) allow students to find a better fit than those that are limited to two-year institutions.
- Statewide Promise programs restricted to the two-year sector will likely shift enrollment away from four-year colleges during the program's first few years, albeit modestly.
- Community college–initiated Promise programs will likely increase first-time enrollment at the Promise-eligible colleges, so administrators should assess the institution's capacity to serve these additional students.
- Some students who enter college in response to a Promise program may have lower levels of academic preparation than the current study body, so these entering students may need more support services to be successful.

## What We Know

### Impacts on Postsecondary Enrollment

Promise programs have significant positive impacts on college enrollment, as shown by numerous rigorous research studies. An investment in Promise programs can give students who otherwise might not do so the opportunity to attend college. Program design differences affect the magnitude of impacts: programs with easier and more transparent application procedures reach more students, and more financially generous programs produce greater effects. Research to date has focused on programs that include both two-year and four-year postsecondary options, and impacts on four-year outcomes tend to be larger. We suspect this is because two-year colleges often have lower sticker prices to begin with, whereas four-year institutions have higher sticker prices, making them seem financially out of reach for many lower- and middle-income students. The message of "free" or reduced-price four-year college may appear to be a more compelling opportunity to prospective Promise recipients, particularly for those who might not otherwise consider this more expensive option.

In the table below, we summarize the enrollment effects of programs, which indicate the percentage-point change in the proportion of high school graduates who enroll in college within 6–12 months of high school graduation.

**Effect of Promise Programs on Postsecondary Enrollment**

| Knox Achieves[70] | New Haven Promise[71] | El Dorado Promise[72] | Pittsburgh Promise[73] |
|---|---|---|---|
| +3–5 pp at community colleges in TN | +8–14 pp at public colleges in CT; +10–14 pp at public, four-year colleges in CT | +14 pp at any college nationally; largest increases among students of color and students with below-average high school GPAs | +5 pp at any accredited postsecondary institution in PA |

| Say Yes to Education[74] | Kalamazoo Promise[75] | Oregon Promise[76] | Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) Promise[77] |
|---|---|---|---|
| +8 pp at any college in NY (attributed mostly to enrollment growth at four-year colleges) | +5–8 pp at any college in MI; +9 pp at four-year colleges in MI | +4–5 pp at community colleges in OR | +4.9 pp at MATC; +2.3 pp at any college |

*Note: Program characteristics, data points, and methodology vary across studies. These estimates are not directly comparable, even if enrollment is measured in the same units.*

A study of the Kalamazoo Promise found that 90 percent of Black and Hispanic students who were eligible for the program enrolled in college immediately after high school, compared to 94 percent of White students (a statistically significant difference).[78] The authors suggest that White students benefited to a larger extent based on racial privileges and socioeconomic advantages.

Other studies have analyzed program effects on the *raw number* of students who enroll in college. A study of 30 local-level Promise programs that each covered a single community college (rather than allowing students to select from multiple colleges) found enrollment increases of 9–22 percent at receiving institutions.[79] Effect sizes varied depending on student race and gender; enrollment increased the most for Hispanic males and females (42 and 52 percent, respectively) and Black males and females (47 and 51 percent, respectively).[80] While enrollments increased among White males and females, the enrollment of Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students did not change. The American Dream Scholarship, which provides a last-dollar scholarship

[70] Carruthers, C.K., & Fox, W.F. (2016). *Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee*. *Economics of Education Review* 51, 97–112.

[71] Daugherty, L., & Gonzalez, G.C. (2016). *The impact of the New Haven Promise program on college enrollment, choice, and persistence* (No. 1146, April). RAND Corporation.

[72] Swanson, E., & Ritter, G. (2020). *Start to finish: Examining the impact of the El Dorado Promise on postsecondary outcomes*. *Journal of Student Financial Aid* 49(N3), 1–31.

[73] Page, L.C., Iriti, J., Lowry, D., & Anthony, A. (2019). *The promise of place-based investment in college access and success: Investigating the impact of the Pittsburgh Promise*. Education Finance and Policy 14(4), 572–600.

[74] Bifulco, R., Rubenstein, R., & Sohn, H. (2019). *Evaluating the effects of universal place-based scholarships on student outcomes: The Buffalo "Say Yes to Education" program*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38(4), 918–943.

[75] Bartik, T.J., Hershbein, B., & Lachowska, M. (2021). *The effects of the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship on college enrollment and completion*. *Journal of Human Resources* 56(1), 269–310.

[76] Gurantz, O. (2020). *What does free community college buy? Early impacts from the Oregon Promise*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39(1), 11–35.

[77] Anderson, D.M., Monaghan, D.B., & Richardson, J. (2024). *Can the promise of free education improve college attainment? Lessons from the Milwaukee Area Technical College Promise*. *Research in Higher Education* 65, 1747–1770.

[78] Martínez, D.G., Collier, D., Byrd, W.C., & McMullen, I. (2025). *A promise kept for whom? College access, success, and the limits of race-neutral tuition-free programs*. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 18(2), 174–187.

[79] Li, A.Y., & Gándara, D. (2020). *The promise of "free" tuition and program design features: Impacts on first-time college enrollment*. In Perna, L.W., & Smith, E.J., (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs* (pp. 219–239). American Educational Research Association.

[80] Gándara, D., & Li, A. (2020). *Promise for whom? "Free-college" programs and enrollments by race and gender classifications at public, 2-year colleges*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 42(4), 603–627.

for Miami–Dade County residents to attend any campus of Miami Dade College, increased the enrollment of first-time, full-time degree-seeking undergraduates by 18.5 to 32 percent.[81]

The Tennessee Promise provides last-dollar tuition coverage for Tennessee residents who attend a community college or college of applied technology. The program produced a 40 percent increase in enrollment at community and technical colleges.[82] The related Tennessee Reconnect for adult students (who did not enter college directly after high school) increased adult student enrollment by 19–28 percent, with the largest increases being among part-time and male students.[83] In contrast to the previously mentioned studies, the New York Excelsior program (a last-dollar program for residents attending a state-operated SUNY or CUNY campus) produced no changes to college enrollment numbers,[84] which is attributed to its multiple requirements, lack of vigorous marketing, and the fact that there exist other available aid programs in the state.

Some of these enrollment effects subsequently faded in response to pandemic-related disruptions and a strong labor market, which contributed to overall enrollment declines, most prominently at two-year colleges.

Statewide programs that focus on only the two-year sector can lead to short-term shifts from four-year to two-year institutions. The Oregon Promise and the Tennessee Promise both experienced these substitution effects, but they largely faded after the second year of program operations. The first-dollar Oklahoma Promise reduced the likelihood of academic undermatch (in which students attend colleges that are less selective than the ones they are qualified for based on academic credentials, as measured by ACT scores) among low-income Black, Hispanic, Native American, and White students.[85] The authors suspected that the Oklahoma Promise reached students at the margins of attending more selective institutions and helped students select into such institutions.

Another study examined whether the enrollment of low-income students specifically (Pell Grant recipients) at public, four-year colleges changed in response to a statewide program. The authors looked at three programs with need-based eligibility requirements (Washington's College Bound Scholarship, Louisiana's Go Grant, and New York's Excelsior Scholarship), but no changes to the number of low-income students were detected.[86]

### Impacts on Postsecondary Persistence

Promise programs typically increase persistence in higher education,[87] defined as the percentage of students who start college in a given academic year and return the following year. Recipients of the Pittsburgh Promise were 4–7 percentage points (pp) more likely to persist into their second year of college.[88] The "Say Yes to Education" programs in Buffalo and Syracuse, New York, increased first-to-second-year persistence rates by 5.5 pp.[89] Scholars in the Achieve Atlanta program who received the scholarship and participated in college advising and coaching were 14 percent more likely to persist into the second semester of college.[90] Kalamazoo Promise students have remained at higher rates than others at their respective institutions.[91]

Studies have also found positive impacts on credits earned. Knox Achieves students earned nearly seven more credit hours during the first two years of college.[92] Students on the Detroit Promise earned 17.1 credit hours versus 13.5 credit hours for nonparticipants during their first three years of

[81] Li, A.Y., & Katri, P. (2023). *Promise program effects at a large, urban institution: A study of Miami Dade College's American Dream Scholarship*. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success* 3(1), 60–79.

[82] Nguyen, H. (2020). *Free college? Assessing enrollment responses to the Tennessee Promise program*. *Labour Economics* 66(July), 101882.

[83] Collom, G.D. (2022). *A quasi-experimental investigation of adult student enrollment responses to the Tennessee Reconnect grant*. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 47(7), 478–493.

[84] Nguyen, H. (2019). *Free tuition and college enrollment: evidence from New York's Excelsior program*. *Education Economics* 27(6), 573–587.

[85] Bell, E., Skinner, B., Smith, K., & Morales, O. (2025). *Matching potential with promise: How Oklahoma's Promise shapes academic undermatch*. *Journal of Higher Education.*

[86] Li, A.Y., & Liu, Y. (2024). *Need-based Promise programs, performance funding bonuses, and the enrollment of low-income students*. *Educational Policy* 39(6), 1171–1208.

[87] Swanson, E., Watson, A., & Ritter, G. (2020). *Promises fulfilled? A systematic review of the impacts of Promise programs*. In Perna, L.W., & Smith, E.J. (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college Promise programs* (pp. 33–68). American Educational Research Association.

[88] Page, L.C., Iriti, J., Lowry, D., & Anthony, A. (2019). *The promise of place-based investment in college access and success: Investigating the impact of the Pittsburgh Promise*. *Education Finance and Policy* 14(4), 572–600.

[89] Bifulco, R., Rubenstein, R., & Sohn, H. (2019). *Evaluating the effects of universal place-based scholarships on student outcomes: The Buffalo "Say Yes to Education" program*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38(4), 918–943.

[90] Bueno, C., Page, L., & Smith, J. (2022). *Assessing Atlanta's place-based college scholarship* (EdWorkingPaper No. 22-670). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

[91] Collier, D.A., & McMullen, I. (2020). *Sometimes a long and winding road: An exploration of Kalamazoo Promise stop out and reenrollment*. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 24(4), 883–908.

[92] Carruthers, C.K., & Fox, W.F. (2016). *Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee*. *Economics of Education Review* 51, 97–112.

college.[93] Accelerated credit-hour accumulation is associated with reduced stop-out rates and lower student debt. For the Kalamazoo Promise, giving students a greater share of Promise funding (the amount of coverage for tuition and fees ranged from 65 to 100 percent) slightly reduced the likelihood of dropping out between the first and second year.[94] Scholars in the Achieve Atlanta program earned 0.75 more credit hours during their first semester compared to non-scholars.[95] Findings from focus groups and surveys suggest that lessening financial burdens allowed Achieve Atlanta scholars to focus more on academics.

However, Tulsa Achieves had no impact on students' credits earned, retention rates, or credential completions, and it was unclear why.[96] Nevertheless, the program did improve transfer rates from two- to four-year colleges by 13–14 pp, which is attributed to articulation agreements that Tulsa Community College formed with nearby four-year colleges, as well as financial incentives for participants to transfer.

### Impacts on Postsecondary Degree Completion

There is emerging evidence that Promise program recipients are more likely to complete associate and bachelor's degrees compared to their nonparticipating peers, although additional research is needed to confirm these findings across different types of programs. The El Dorado Promise produced no changes in associate degree completions but did increase bachelor's degree completions by almost 9 pp (see Design Principles in Practice, below, for more details).[97] Tulsa Achieves increased bachelor's-degree completion among Native American students by 9 pp and among Hispanic students by 4 pp. Among White students, the program increased the likelihood of associate degree completion within three years by 4 pp. Tulsa Achieves also increased the likelihood of transferring from a two- to a four-year college by 13 pp among Hispanic students. However, it did not affect degree completion or transfer rates for Black or Asian American students.[98] The Kalamazoo Promise, an unusually generous program, produced a 10–12 pp increase in any degree completion, measured six years after high school graduation, and much of this increase was in bachelor's degrees.[99] Recipients of the Achieve Atlanta scholarship who also participated in college advising and coaching support were 22 percent more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within four years than were similar nonrecipients.[100]

## Recommended Reading

Bartik, T.J., Hershbein, B.J., & Lachowska, M. (2015). ***The effects of the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship on college enrollment, persistence, and completion***. Brookings Institution.

*This brief discusses the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise, which increased the likelihood of students enrolling in college after high school graduation by 14 percent and increased the likelihood of four-year college enrollment by 34 percent. The program also increased the cumulative number of credit hours completed. Last, the program increased the percentage of students earning any postsecondary credential by 12 percentage points.*

Jaggars, S.S. (2020, April). A broken "Promise"? ***How college Promise programs can impact high-achieving, middle-income students.*** Third Way.

*This report considers the broader implications of Promise programs that increase enrollment in community colleges at the expense of four-year universities—specifically, that diverting students away from four-year colleges may dampen bachelor's degree completion.*

Li, A., & Gándara, D. (2021, February). ***These are the students free community college programs help the most***. The Conversation.

*This article summarizes findings of a study of 33 college Promise programs in 18 states that affect single community colleges. These programs increased the first-time, full-time college enrollment of Black, Latino, and White students. However, programs with academic merit criteria, as well as those that allocated scholarships on a first-dollar basis, increased the enrollment of White students only.*

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93 Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., Cullinan, D., O'Donoghue, R., Lepe, M., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2021). *Motor city momentum: Three years of the Detroit Promise Path program for community college students*. MDRC.

94 Collier, D., & McMullen, I. (2024). *Modeling first year stop out of Kalamazoo Promise scholars: Mapping influences of socioeconomic advantage and pre-college performance to college performance and persistence*. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice* 25(4), 846–870.

95 Bueno, C.M., Cash-Wiliams, M., Jarrell, D., Mawi, Z.E., Page, L.C., Smith, J., & Stich, A. (2024). *Achieve Atlanta's impact on college students: A mixed methods approach*. Georgia Policy Labs.

96 Bell, E. (2021). *Does free community college improve student outcomes? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 43(2), 329–350.

97 Swanson, E., & Ritter, G. (2020). *Start to finish: Examining the impact of the El Dorado Promise on postsecondary outcomes*. *Journal of Student Financial Aid* 49(N3), 1–31.

98 Bell, E., & Gándara, D. (2021). *Can free community college close racial disparities in postsecondary attainment? How Tulsa Achieves affects racially minoritized student outcomes*. *American Educational Research Journal* 58(6), 1142–1177.

99 Bartik, T.J., Hershbein, B., & Lachowska, M. (2021). *The effects of the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship on college enrollment and completion*. *Journal of Human Resources* 56(1), 269–310.

100 Bueno, C., Page, L., & Smith, J. (2022). *Assessing Atlanta's place-based college scholarship* (EdWorkingPaper No. 22-670). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

Li, A., & Mishory, J. (2018). ***Financing institutions in the free college debate***. The Century Foundation.

*This report provides a framework for state financing of free-college programs. It summarizes studies on how Promise programs affect demand and provides policy guidance on how to design and implement free-college programs that anticipate capacity challenges.*

Pals, T., & Wu, T. (2020, October). ***Study: Free-college programs have led to large enrollment increases at two-year institutions, especially among historically underserved students***. American Educational Research Association.

*This media release describes two studies conducted by Denisa Gándara and Amy Li on Promise programs, each at a single community college. It emphasizes the large enrollment increases seen among Black and Latino students and details differences in enrollment outcomes according to program design, including by first/last-dollar, income-eligibility criteria, full/partial tuition coverage, and with/without additional support services.*

## Design Principles in Practice: Increased Enrollment and Completion Rates in El Dorado, Arkansas

*The El Dorado Promise is more generous than the typical Promise program studied, and its effects on postsecondary outcomes are larger in magnitude than those of less generous programs. It is a first-dollar, universal eligibility program, and it covers tuition and fees up to the highest rate among Arkansas public universities.*

*The El Dorado Promise increased the likelihood of students entering any college within six months of high school graduation by 14 percentage points (pp).*[101] *This effect was 15 pp among students of color (Black; Hispanic; Asian, Native American, or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; multiracial), and 12.7 pp among White students. Students with above-average high school GPAs were 10.8 pp more likely to enter college, while students with below-average GPAs were 15.5 pp more likely. Thus, the program encouraged students of all levels of high school achievement to attend college.*

*The El Dorado Promise was associated with an 8.8 pp increase in completing a bachelor's degree within six years of high school graduation. Among students with above-average high school GPAs, the program increased degree completion by 11 pp, although no impacts were observed for students with below-average GPAs. In contrast, the program had no effect on associate-degree completions.*

[101] Swanson, E., & Ritter, G. (2020). *Start to finish: Examining the impact of the El Dorado Promise on postsecondary outcomes*. *Journal of Student Financial Aid* 49(N3), 1–31.

CHAPTER 8

# How do Promise programs benefit students? Borrowing

Lead authors: Danielle Lowry and Amy Li

**Promise programs may reduce the need for borrowing to cover college costs.**

Promise programs benefit students by providing a new source of funds to cover college tuition, making it less necessary to rely on loans. The research on this question is incomplete, but there is some evidence from both the state and local level that students making use of Promise programs borrow less on average than those who do not. Of course, there are many costs associated with college attendance beyond tuition (and most Promise programs cover only tuition), so, for many students, some level of borrowing will still be needed.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise policymakers and practitioners should help ensure that students apply for any federal, state, or institutional aid for which they might be eligible beyond the Promise scholarship itself. This may mean implementing proactive and hands-on support to assist students in applying for and securing financial aid.
- Financial literacy or college-access activities carried out in connection with Promise programs can help students understand the risks and rewards of borrowing for college costs and strengthen their longer-term financial literacy skills.
- Promise program designers may want to actively monitor award displacement (which happens, for example, if a student's Promise award reduces his or her institutional aid award) and decide on a strategy to recompense it should displacement occur.

## What We Know

Although the sticker price of college attendance has been rising faster than the rate of inflation over the past several decades, albeit with positive signs of slowing down in recent years, the net cost (out-of-pocket costs students pay after grants and scholarships have been deducted from the total price) has remained flat since 2015.[102]—and has even decreased in some years. Nonetheless, according to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, one in four adults under the age of 40 has student loan debt. In 2019, 28 percent of undergraduates took out federal loans—a 23 percent increase from two decades earlier.[103] Additionally, according to the Department of Education, as of April 2025, more than five million student-loan borrowers were in default, which has serious consequences for their financial well-being,[104] including their capacity to own a home.[105] While recent federal efforts have capped loan amounts to limit borrowing and defaults, these efforts do little to address the underlying causes of high student-loan debt.

Although research on Promise programs and their effects on later life outcomes is growing, there is currently little research on the effects of Promise programs on borrowing and student debt. One study of a statewide merit-based program, the West Virginia Promise Scholarship, found that Promise recipients are more likely to earn a graduate degree, own a home, and live in a higher-income neighborhood. The authors report that these positive effects are mainly due to a reduction in time-to-degree rather than a substantial reduction in debt upon graduation.[106]

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[102] Ma, J., Pender, M., & Oster, M. (2024). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2024*. College Board.

[103] Fry, R., & Cilluffo, A. (2024). *5 facts about student loans*. Pew Research Center.

[104] Pew Charitable Trusts (2020). *Student loan default has serious financial consequences: Department of Education and Congress can do more to help borrowers repay*. Pew Charitable Trusts.

[105] Mezza, A., Ringo, D., Sherlund, S., & Sommer, K. (2020). *Student loans and homeownership*. *Journal of Labor Economics* 38(1), 215–260.

[106] Scott-Clayton, J., & Zafar, B. (2019). *Financial aid, debt management, and socioeconomic outcomes: Post-college effects of merit-based aid*. *Journal of Public Economics* 170, 68–82.

However, other research on state merit aid programs found that these programs significantly reduce student loan debt.[107] A study examining the effect of the Tennessee Promise on student loan–borrowing behaviors concluded that the Promise reduced the percentage of students taking out loans by 8–10 percentage points. Additionally, the Promise reduced the average loan amount by 32 percent.[108]

Recent research on borrowing and debt burdens of place-based Promise recipients is growing. For example, research from the Upjohn Institute found that 40 percent of Kalamazoo Promise recipients reported borrowing no money to attend college, compared to 28 percent of students nationwide.[109] The Achieve Atlanta Scholarship (which pays up to $5,000 a year for a four-year institution) reduced loan borrowing among recipients by 11 percent. Scholarship recipients even reported lower levels of financial stress.[110] One study found that a $1,100 increase in grant aid reduces student labor by 1.5 to 2 hours a week and reduces loan borrowing by $300–$400.[111]

The level of debt held by Promise recipients may be affected by the program's design and the response of institutions accepting Promise students. For example, Kalamazoo is a first-dollar program, which means Promise funds are provided to students before any other financial aid the student receives. In contrast, the Pittsburgh Promise is a last-dollar award, in which a student first receives financial aid from other sources before receiving the Promise award. The benefits of the former model are that students retain use of their federal financial aid to help cover living expenses, and the guarantee of tuition is both generous and easy to explain. The latter model, however, is far more widespread because of the cost savings it provides.

Some institutions—especially private institutions— may practice an award displacement policy. "Award displacement" occurs when a student's financial aid award is displaced by another. For example, an institution may allow a student's Promise award to replace—either partially or by the full amount—an institutional grant the student would otherwise qualify to receive. If an institution displaces aid, a Promise student may not experience a meaningful reduction in debt, and a Promise program may inadvertently subsidize the institution rather than the student. The National Scholarship Providers Association (NSPA) recommends private scholarship providers reach out to financial aid offices to prevent this practice.

Statewide Promise programs—such as the Tennessee Promise and the Oregon Promise—may have led to a change in the financial aid landscape in those states: the average grant aid received increased after implementation; however, institutional aid amounts decreased. This contributes to apprehension about the financial stability of these programs.[112] Growing concerns over college affordability have, as of August 2025, led four states (Maryland, New Jersey, Washington, and Pennsylvania) to ban award displacement at public institutions. A fifth state, California, has banned this policy at both public and private institutions.

With few exceptions, Promise programs cover only tuition and fees, whereas the cost of attending college has many other components. Thus, Promise programs are not a panacea for eliminating student loan debt, but they can create a base level of grant aid that reduces debt levels. They can also catalyze efforts among policymakers and practitioners to help students procure additional aid that will further reduce loan debt.

## Recommended Reading

Hershbein, B.J., & Kevin M. Hollenbeck. (Eds). (2015). ***Student loans and the dynamics of debt***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This edited volume serves as a reference for researchers and policymakers seeking to understand how, why, and which students borrow for their postsecondary education; how this borrowing may affect later decisions; and what measures can help borrowers repay their loans successfully.*

Lowry, D., Page, L.C., & Iriti, J. (2022). ***Subtraction by addition: Do private scholarship awards lead to financial aid displacement?*** Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

*This paper explores whether the presence of financial aid programs can affect disbursements of other scholarships by examining the case of the Pittsburgh Promise after the amount of the award doubled in 2012. The study compares financial aid data from Pittsburgh Promise students to data for other students entering the same institutions in the same year. It finds that receiving the Promise had no effect on the amount of aid received from other sources.*

107 Chakrabarti, R., Nober, W., & Van der Klaauw, W. (2020). *Do college tuition subsidies boost spending and reduce debt? Impacts by income and race*. Liberty Street Economics. Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

108 Odle, T.K., Lee, J.C., & Gentile, S.P. (2021). *Do Promise programs reduce student loans? Evidence from Tennessee Promise*. *Journal of Higher Education* (92)6.

109 Bolter, K., & McMullen, I. (2022). *The Kalamazoo Promise "Sweet 16," summary study results: 16 key findings from 16 years studying the Kalamazoo Promise*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

110 Bueno, C.M., Cash-Wiliams, M., Jarrell, D., Mawi, Z.E., Page, L.C., Smith, J., & Stich, A. (2024). *Achieve Atlanta's impact on college students: A mixed methods approach*. Georgia Policy Labs.

111 Evans, B.J., & Nguyen, T.D. (2019). *Monetary substitution of loans, earnings, and need-based aid in postsecondary education: The impact of Pell Grant eligibility*. *Economics of Education Review* 70, 1–19.

112 Odle, T.K., Wright-Kim, J., & Castrejón, A. (2025). *Whose last dollar? Estimating the effects of Promise programs on financial aid awards*. *Journal of Higher Education*. Advance Online Publication.

### Tool

YesSheCanCampaign. (2024). ***DisScholared***

*DisScholared is an ed-tech platform that contains a database of individual institutions' award-displacement policies, as well as information on the status of award-displacement policies in the United States.*

CHAPTER 9

# How do Promise programs benefit K–12 schools?

Lead authors: Douglas Harris and Michelle Miller-Adams

**Promise programs can help bring about positive change in K–12 school districts, including a more robust culture around educational opportunities after high school.**

Promise programs allow school districts to deliver the message that college tuition is affordable and accessible early in a student's K–12 years, encouraging K–12 academic achievement and providing a platform for college-readiness activities at all grade levels. In a few cases, Promise programs have led to increases in K–12 enrollment mainly by attaching families more securely to their school districts, and there is some research showing they can generate improvements in academic achievement and student behavior. These effects are most likely to be seen in community-based Promise programs; statewide Promise programs or those initiated by community colleges are less focused on creating change in K–12 schools.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise programs can bring about positive change in K–12 settings, but this will not happen automatically; partners must work to align their efforts to promote a college-going culture and provide students with resources to make use of their Promise funding.
- School districts are well positioned to deliver key college-readiness services to students, especially during their high school years. The handoff from high school to college is a critically important moment.
- For Promise programs with secure, long-term funding, pushing college and career awareness into the earlier (middle- and elementary-school) years is a valuable strategy.
- The strongest effects of Promise programs on K–12 school districts will come from more inclusive programs—that is, those without GPA, attendance, or need requirements.

## What We Know

By awarding scholarships at scale and in a given place, Promise programs can have impacts beyond increased college-going. These include changes in the K–12 school district most affected by a Promise program, as well as the community and economic development outcomes discussed elsewhere in this handbook. The effects on school districts are most pronounced for community-based Promise programs that are aligned with local school-district boundaries.

Promise programs at the school-district level are common within the Promise movement and can be found in places like El Dorado, Arkansas; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; New Haven, Connecticut; Richmond, California; and the Say Yes communities of Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and Syracuse, New York. Such district-based programs continue to be developed; one of the most recent is in Columbus, Ohio. While these programs vary in their design details, they all make a commitment to providing college scholarships to graduates of specific school districts, often using sliding scales that reward long-term attendance. It is thus not surprising that these districts experience effects from the introduction and implementation of a Promise program, even when district-level interventions are not an explicit part of the Promise program.

The nature of the relationship between Promise programs and K–12 school districts varies across communities. Some Promise programs are tightly integrated into the school district; for example, the El Dorado Promise is operated by the El Dorado Educational Foundation, and its staff is housed at the district's high school. In other places, school districts are formal partners in Promise initiatives; for instance, Columbus City Schools is one of the four entities that launched and lead the Columbus Promise, and the Pittsburgh School District leadership sits on the Pittsburgh Promise board. In still other places, school districts are essential partners in free-standing Promise programs, but their role is not a formal one; examples of this kind of structure can be found in Kalamazoo and many other places.

The extent to which Promise programs affect K–12 districts will depend heavily on the degree of alignment between the school district and a local Promise program, regardless of formal structure.[113] Research has shown that Promise programs can serve as catalysts for change in several areas, including K–12 enrollment, student behavior and achievement, and college-going culture.

By delivering a message to the entire student body that postsecondary education or training is attainable, schools can amplify their college-readiness activities and help students plan for their postsecondary education early in the game. Promise eligibility requirements that screen out some portion of the student body will make these schoolwide cultural changes and service delivery more challenging.

For programs with secure, long-term funding (examples include the tax provisions of Michigan's Promise Zones, the Kalamazoo Promise's guarantee of perpetuity, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's generation-long commitment to the Bearcat Advantage, and the 20 years over which the Pittsburgh Promise will have operated), the tuition-free college message can be delivered early, and college and career readiness can be infused into activities throughout a student's K–12 years.

**Enrollment effects.** Some Promise programs include increases in a school district's enrollment among their goals, and it is easy to understand why. Many urban and rural school districts have experienced enrollment declines in recent decades that have hurt their funding and operations.

With the incentive of a scholarship for most or all graduates of a school district, parents may choose to move to or remain in a locale so as to be able to enroll their students in Promise-eligible K–12 schools so their children can benefit. One challenge is that for parents of young children, a scholarship benefit may be far down the road (and hence have a high discount rate), while other decisions, such as a job change, are more pressing. This high discount rate may help explain why the evidence is mixed about the K–12 enrollment impacts of Promise programs.

- Research has shown initial large enrollment increases for the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) District following the implementation of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2006.[114] Subsequent, more detailed analysis showed that growth in student enrollment came, first, from an initial influx of students, then a relative decline in exit rates.[115] Between 2006 and 2019 (the last pre-pandemic year), KPS grew by almost 25 percent;[116] however, the Kalamazoo Promise is one of the simplest and most generous Promise scholarship programs, so similar results have not been seen in other settings.
- A study of a diverse group of Promise communities showed that public school enrollments increased in Promise communities relative to their surrounding areas following the announcement of Promise programs;[117] however, program design variation raises challenges for drawing general conclusions from this research.

The bottom line is, don't count on enrollment effects from your Promise program.

**Behavior/achievement effects.** This is an under-researched topic, although two studies of relatively generous Promise programs, those in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and El Dorado, Arkansas, have shown positive effects on student behavior and achievement. The Kalamazoo Promise led to a reduction in suspensions and higher GPAs for African American students.[118] The El Dorado Promise was related to improvements in math scores[119] relative to a matched comparison group.

**School culture effects.** There is limited research but ample anecdotal evidence that community-based Promise programs can change the culture of a school district. By making a multi-year (sometimes open-ended) commitment to send successive classes of high school graduates to college at reduced cost, Promise programs can help school districts strengthen their college-going culture, change student and family expectations around the likelihood of college-going, and enlist community support for students' postsecondary pathways. Many of these changes show up in high school, where Promise programs have led to increased dual enrollment or Advanced Placement offerings; the addition of college readiness classes;

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[113] Iriti, J., Page, L.C., & Bickel, W.E. (2018). *Place-based scholarships: Catalysts for systems reform to improve postsecondary attainment*. *International Journal of Educational Development* (58), 137–148.

[114] Bartik, T.J., Eberts, R., & Huang, W.J. (2010). *The Kalamazoo Promise, and enrollment and achievement trends in Kalamazoo Public Schools*. PromiseNet 2010 Conference, June 16–18, Kalamazoo, MI.

[115] Hershbein, B.J. (2013). *A second look at enrollment changes after the Kalamazoo Promise*. (Upjohn Institute Working Paper No. 13-200). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[116] Ibid.

[117] LeGower, M., & Walsh, R. (2014). *Promise scholarship programs as place-making policy: Evidence from school enrollment and housing prices*. (NBER Working Paper No. 20056). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[118] Bartik, T.J., & Lachowska, M. (2014). *The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship*. *Education Next*, Spring.

[119] Ash, J., Swanson E., & Ritter G. (2021). *A promise kept? The impact of the El Dorado Promise scholarship on student achievement*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 43(1), 83–107.

SAT/ACT preparation and test-taking; greater support for FAFSA completion; and new college guidance, tutoring, and mentoring efforts. These changes have been documented in studies of Kalamazoo,[120] Pittsburgh,[121] and Say Yes Buffalo,[122] but they are present in most Promise communities.

## Recommended Reading

Bartik, T.J., & Lachowska, M. (2014, Spring). ***The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship***. Education Next.

*This is an accessible article about a scholarly study of the Kalamazoo Promise's impact on student behavior and academic outcomes. The study found strong evidence that the Kalamazoo Promise decreased student behavioral issues and increased the likelihood of earning high-school credits for all groups. It also found that student academic performance measured in terms of GPA rose for all students in the years following the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, although the increase was statistically significant only for African American students.*

Miron, G., Jones, J.N., & Kelaher-Young, A.J. (2010). ***Kalamazoo Promise: Can a universal college scholarship reform urban education?*** Phi Delta Kappan.

*This article discusses the history of the Kalamazoo Promise and how it differs from highly prescriptive school reform models that propose specific interventions to drive school improvement. In contrast, the Kalamazoo Promise brought about change by giving the local school district and community a strong incentive to work together to find ways to ensure that as many students as possible could use the scholarship program. The program has triggered increased parental and community involvement with the school system, improved the school system's internal culture, boosted students' academic performance and participation, and reversed the trend of declining enrollment the school system was experiencing prior to the creation of the Kalamazoo Promise.*

Reeves, R., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). ***Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education***. Brookings Institution.

*An in-depth report on the history and essential elements of the Say Yes to Education model of community-wide social change (including a college Promise, as well as other student and community supports), including the evolution and effects of Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo, NY; Guilford County, NC; and Syracuse, NY. (Note: the national Say Yes organization ceased operations in 2021, but these local programs continue.)*

[120] Miron, G., Jones, J.N., & Kelaher-Young, A.J. (2011). *The Kalamazoo Promise and perceived changes in school climate*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19(17).

[121] Gonzalez, G.C., Bozick, R., Tharp-Gilliam, S., & Phillips, A. (2011). *Fulfilling the Pittsburgh Promise®: Early progress of Pittsburgh's postsecondary scholarship program*. RAND Corporation.

[122] Reeves, R., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). *Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education*. Brookings Institution.

CHAPTER 10

# How do Promise programs benefit communities?

Lead author: Brad Hershbein

**Promise programs benefit communities by attaching residents more securely to them.**

The long-term availability of a scholarship opportunity, as well as any school-improvement effects that come with it, make communities more desirable places to live and increase the costs of moving away. There is some evidence that Promise programs have reduced out-migration, increased housing prices, and led scholarship recipients to remain in or return to the local area—all especially important dynamics for declining regions. But this evidence comes from a handful of studies of relatively generous Promise programs and may not be applicable to the Promise movement overall.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise programs are more likely to keep families from leaving a community than to attract new families to move in, but this is OK—retaining existing residents is vital to community development.
- Generous Promise programs can boost housing prices, new construction, or both, depending on zoning, but increases in property-tax revenues should be allocated with equity impacts in mind: investing resource gains back into schools can increase equity and inclusion, while strengthening a key community asset.
- Promise programs can retain graduates locally after college, but better local job opportunities make this more likely: working with local employers to ensure there are good jobs for students will improve community development.

## What We Know

The Promise movement has its roots in philanthropic efforts to provide scholarship resources to local students. The current phase of this effort began in 2005 with the Kalamazoo Promise.[123] Since then, more than 200 local and community college–based programs have been created, some by philanthropists and others through public-private partnerships.[124] What they have in common is a desire by community leaders to increase the educational attainment of residents while promoting the civic and economic development of their area.

There is considerable evidence for how financial and other support for postsecondary students benefits individuals, increasing not only their earnings but leading to a myriad of other positive outcomes, from better health to stronger civic participation. Understanding how Promise programs affect entire communities is more challenging because other factors, from general macroeconomic conditions to state and local policies, play an important role. Additionally, while Promise programs directly target students, they have indirect effects on everyone else in the broader community, adding complexity to any analysis of impact.

Nonetheless, researchers have thought carefully about a framework for examining how Promise programs can provide economic benefits to entire communities.[125] Some of these benefits (such as an increase in local school-district enrollment) can occur nearly immediately, while others take longer to be observed. All of these potential outcomes, however, depend on program characteristics: programs that cover a greater share of students (for example, by having fewer eligibility requirements) and those that provide more generous or flexible funding are likely to have greater community impact. This insight has influenced the relatively few studies to date that have examined the effect of Promise programs on migration, housing, and workforce development.

[123] Miller-Adams, M. (2009). *The power of a promise: Education and economic renewal in Kalamazoo*. W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[124] Miller-Adams, M., Hershbein, B.J., Huisman, K., Timmeney, B., & McMullen, I. (2025). *Promise Programs Database*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[125] Miller-Adams, M., & Smith, E. (2018). *Promise scholarship programs and local prosperity* (Policy Paper 2018-019). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

***Migration.*** Because many Promise programs have residence-based eligibility, economic theory suggests that some people may be enticed to move into an area (or may decide against leaving that area) to gain (or keep) access to the scholarship benefits. Unsurprisingly, these forces should be greater for families with school-age children. Two relatively early studies looked at the migration impacts of the Kalamazoo Promise. The first found that new student enrollment in the Kalamazoo Public Schools district surged in the year after the Kalamazoo Promise was announced but that gains in enrollment in subsequent years were increasingly driven by greater retention; that is, fewer students were leaving than before.[126] A second study looked at the nuances of where students were coming from. It found that while approximately 60 percent of new students came from a neighboring district, one-quarter came from out of state; moreover, exit rates persistently fell by one-third.[127] This implies that migration and housing were likely more affected than labor markets, as many families may have changed residential locations within the metro area without having to switch jobs.

A pair of subsequent studies expanded the scope of this research by examining the impacts on migration across multiple (relatively generous) Promise programs: one study focused on eight programs, while the second analyzed three.[128] Rather than looking only at migration among enrolled students, both these analyses focused on all residents of the broader community. For the first study, the findings indicated sharp reductions in outmigration over at least the three years after program announcement, although changes in in-migration were less conclusive. The declines in out-migration were larger for households with children, as expected, and concentrated around Promise-eligible zones. Quantitatively, these migration changes imply the metro area's population, three years after the program began, was 1.7 percent larger than it would have been without the program, predominantly because more families stayed. For an area of 100,000 people, this amounts to an additional 1,700 individuals, which is a sizable effect. The second study had roughly similar findings, although with the additional nuance that migration's impacts—especially retention—were more concentrated among higher-income residents.

***Housing.*** These migration impacts—which, again, are estimated from atypically generous programs and thus will not generalize to all Promise programs—suggest that housing markets could also be affected. Moreover, even families whose migration decisions are unaffected could still affect the local housing market: for example, a family that expects to save several tens of thousands of dollars in lower tuition for their children may decide to move to a bigger house or nicer neighborhood within the Promise-eligible zone. More generally, houses within the zone should become more valuable because they come with the scholarship amenity, and this could be reflected in existing home prices, in construction of new housing, or both. These channels would be expected to increase an area's property tax revenue, allowing for greater provision of public services (or tax cuts). However, greater price appreciation, rather than new construction, could also make housing less affordable for many families.

One study of the Say Yes to Education programs in both Syracuse and Buffalo found suggestive evidence that, after the program took effect, house prices in the Syracuse eligibility zone increased relative to those in neighborhoods just outside the zone. Buffalo, however, saw little relative price change, although changes in the quantity of housing weren't analyzed.[129] A recent analysis of the Kalamazoo Promise found that, after controlling for school quality and building restrictions, prices of single-family homes in the Kalamazoo eligibility area rose by 12–15 percent relative to comparable homes outside the eligibility areas in the two decades since the program began.[130] Another, broader study of eight Promise programs—still disproportionately generous ones—found that, within three years of program announcement, housing prices rose 7–12 percent in eligible areas relative to the immediate surrounding areas. These gains were concentrated in the top half of the housing price distribution and in neighborhoods that contained schools with higher standardized test scores.[131] This pattern suggests that higher-income families anticipate greater value from the Promise scholarship, perhaps because their children are more likely to both go to college and attend more expensive institutions.[132] Still, since the value of the scholarship is more likely to capitalize into housing prices for these families,

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[126] Bartik, T.J., Eberts, R.W., & Huang, W.J. (2010). *The Kalamazoo Promise, and enrollment and achievement trends in Kalamazoo Public Schools* (Conference papers, June 16). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[127] Hershbein, Brad J. (2013). *A second look at enrollment changes after the Kalamazoo Promise* (Working Paper No. 2013-200). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[128] Bartik, T.J., & Sotherland, N. (2015). *Migration and housing price effects of place-based college scholarships* (Working Paper No. 2015-235). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
Leigh, E.W., & González Canché, M.S. (2021). *The college promise in communities: Do place-based scholarships affect residential mobility patterns?* *Research in Higher Education* 62, 259–308.

[129] Sohn, H., Rubenstein, R., Murchie, J., & Bifulco, R. (2017). *Assessing the effects of place-based scholarships on urban revitalization: The case of Say Yes to Education*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 39(2), 198–222.

[130] Beasley, W.J., & Alam, J. (2025). *Place-based scholarships: An updated assessment of property value impacts from the Kalamazoo Promise*. *Applied Economics (forthcoming)*.

[131] LeGower, M., & Walsh, R. (2017). *Promise scholarship programs as place-making policy: Evidence from school enrollment and housing prices*. *Journal of Urban Economics* 101, 74–89.

[132] Bailey, M.J., & Dynarski, S.M. (2011). *Inequality in postsecondary education*. In Duncan, G.J., & Murnane, R.J. (Eds.), *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. Russell Sage.

their net benefits are reduced more than for lower-income families, making the ultimate distribution of benefits by socioeconomic status unclear. Much likely depends on peer effects—how student learning is affected by the presence of other students—as well as how communities choose to allocate the additional tax revenue: more services for lower-income students, general school funding increases, or lower tax rates.

***Workforce Development.*** As noted above, Promise programs can increase the educational attainment and career opportunities of students. Communities as a whole will benefit to the extent that these individuals either stay nearby or return to the local community after their education. This decision, in turn, is likely affected by the availability of local, high-quality job prospects.

Few studies have examined this potential effect, as the necessary data are hard to come by. One study focused on Kalamazoo found that graduates, by the time they reached their mid-to-late 20s, were 11 percentage points more likely to reside within 10 miles of downtown Kalamazoo. These individuals were also more likely to be earning above $35,000 annually than earlier cohorts at the same age.[133] A study on Knox Achieves, a Promise program for Knox County, Tennessee, found that the last-dollar program led to higher rates of associate degree attainment starting four years after high school, but no changes in earnings as late as nine years after high school; a follow-up study examining the rollout of Knox Achieves's successor, the Tennessee Promise, found similar gains in initial associate-degree attainment that tended to fade as individuals approached their mid-20s but more persistent earnings increases, especially outside of metro areas.[134] This mixed body of early evidence underscores the need for longer-term follow-up research on workforce returns to Promise programs, and in particular the role of program design and aid generosity.

## Recommended Reading

McMullen, I., & Hershbein, B.J. (2021, July). ***Beyond degrees: The Kalamazoo Promise and workforce outcomes***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This brief summarizes a longer study on the impact of the Kalamazoo Promise on individuals' early-career employment and earnings, with weak but suggestive evidence that earnings increase, and stronger evidence that Promise students are more likely to stay in Kalamazoo.*

Miller-Adams, M., Hershbein, B.J., Huisman, K., Timmeney, B., & McMullen, I. (2025). ***Promise Programs Database***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This annually updated Upjohn Institute database focuses on local—rather than statewide—Promise programs, including more than 200 as of 2025. Users can filter programs based on characteristics, compare programs, or request a spreadsheet file containing over 80 detailed characteristics for each program.*

Miller-Adams, M., & Smith, E. (2018, October). ***Promise scholarship programs and local prosperity*** (Policy Paper No. 2018-019). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*The authors lay out a framework and survey evidence for how well-designed Promise programs can affect community development and promote broad-based prosperity. This highlight links to both a full-length policy paper and a four-page brief.*

## Tool

Miller-Adams, M., Hershbein, B.J., Huisman, K., Timmeney, B., & McMullen, I. (2025). ***Promise Programs Database***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This annually updated Upjohn Institute database focuses on local—rather than statewide—Promise programs, including more than 200 as of 2025. Users can filter programs based on characteristics, compare programs, or request a spreadsheet file containing over 80 detailed characteristics for each program.*

[133] Hershbein, B.J., McMullen, I., Pittelko, B., & Timmeney, B.F. (2021). *Beyond degrees: Longer term outcomes of the Kalamazoo Promise* (Working Paper No. 21-350). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[134] Carruthers, C.K., Fox, W.F., & Jepsen, C. (2023). *What Knox achieved: Estimated effects of tuition-free community college on attainment and earnings*. *Journal of Human Resources (forthcoming)*; Attridge, J., Carruthers, C.K., & Welch, J.G. (2025). *Free community college and college completion: Evidence from Tennessee* (Working paper).

CHAPTER 11

# How do Promise programs benefit states?

Lead authors: Gresham Collom and Brad Hershbein

**Statewide Promise programs are often bipartisan efforts that may lead to increased college enrollment and less student loan debt.**

States enact Promise programs to create a better-educated workforce and make it easier for residents to obtain postsecondary degrees or credentials. Broadly accessible statewide Promise programs, whether for high school graduates or adults (or both), can increase college-going aspirations, raise FAFSA application rates, and lead to higher postsecondary enrollment. Emerging evidence suggests they may also reduce student loan debt. Statewide Promise programs exist in both Democratic- and Republican-led states and generally enjoy high levels of bipartisan support.

## Policy Considerations

- Meeting state workforce goals is easier if Promise programs are open to a broad segment of the population and program rules are simple and easy to understand.
- Changing program rules from year to year will complicate messaging and may reduce program usage.
- Including both two-year and four-year postsecondary options benefits both students and the state, as bachelor's degrees have high returns in earnings.
- Statewide Promise programs can serve as catalysts for improving state higher-education policy.

## What We Know

Policymakers have implemented Promise programs primarily to meet the growing need for college-educated individuals in the workforce, to further attract and keep employers, and to improve state economies.[135] Some also aim to address the rising price of college and make higher education more accessible to historically marginalized groups. Statewide Promise programs often garner bipartisan support, especially when they are framed as workforce investment policies that fit into larger statewide economic priorities, and in some places the business community has been instrumental in their enactment. Currently, nearly two-thirds of states offer broadly inclusive Promise programs, up from about half of states just a few years ago.[136]

Statewide tuition-free programs are distinct from a previous generation of merit-based aid scholarships, some still in existence, that sought to keep talented high school students within the state for college.[137] While these earlier programs focused on high-achieving students, offering them a tuition-free ride to four-year public institutions, the statewide Promise programs discussed here represent a broader human-capital investment strategy. Most do not have high school GPA requirements, and all but a few emphasize the community and technical college sectors.

Beyond workforce development, increased postsecondary education attainment serves state needs by:

- helping attract and retain state residents while strengthening educational opportunities for their children;
- supporting employers through formal partnerships that take the place of workplace training; and
- reducing expenditures on Medicaid, unemployment, and other safety-net programs.[138]

[135] Lumina Foundation. (n.d.) *A stronger nation*.

[136] Gilmore, C. (2025). *Which states offer tuition-free community college? Scholarship360*, April 17.

[137] Sjoquist, D.L., & Winters, J.V. (2015). *State merit-based financial aid programs and college attainment*. *Journal of Regional Science* 55(3), 364–390.

[138] Oreopoulos, P., & Salvanes, K.G. (2011). *Priceless: The nonpecuniary benefits of schooling*. *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* 25(1), 159–184.

Research on statewide Promise programs is limited; however, existing research points to several immediate benefits. Tennessee's Promise program had direct, positive effects on high school students, including increases in FAFSA completion rates.[139] Access to a Promise program increased college-going intentions among high school students by 12–22 percent, with even larger increases among low-income and minority students.[140] Research also reveals increases in college enrollment and decreases in the overall costs of attending college: the Tennessee and Oregon Promises, for example, led to a jump in postsecondary enrollment, particularly at public institutions,[141] and these programs, along with the North Carolina Promise, increased enrollment among Black and Hispanic students.[142] A recent study of the Tennessee Promise also found that it helped students earn their associate degree faster than they would have otherwise.[143] Promise programs may also decrease students' reliance on loans. One study conducted in Tennessee revealed a decline in student loan debt for over 40 percent of first-time student loan borrowers,[144] and another in New York found reduced borrowing for middle-income students and their parents.[145]

Because of the newness of these programs, the complexity of statewide economies, and data-related challenges, we still know relatively little about the longer-term effects of statewide Promise programs, especially their impact on earnings and employment. A recent study modeled a hypothetical statewide Promise program for Illinois and demonstrated high returns in terms of both individual earnings and fiscal revenue for the state; however, these returns took time to materialize and exceeded program costs only after several years.[146]

Perhaps for this reason, research into the workforce impacts of two local Promise programs (the Kalamazoo Promise and Knox Achieves, the forerunner of the Tennessee Promise), as well as a recent analysis of the Tennessee Promise itself, have found inconclusive results in terms of early-career earnings.[147]

> Every Rhode Islander needs training or education to get a good job and deserves access to that education, regardless [of] if they're from a rich family or poor one.
>
> Gov. ***Gina Raimondo***, March 2017

As with other categories of Promise programs, statewide Promise programs vary in terms of key design parameters, and these variations shape usage and impact. The Tennessee Promise, for example, is open to virtually all high school graduates, while a companion program, Tennessee Reconnect, is available to older students. There are very few eligibility requirements, and usage of the scholarship has been high.[148] Similarly, as of 2025, Michigan has separate community college programs for ***recent high school graduates***[149] and

[139] Urquhart, Molly Osborne. (2020). *Tennessee currently leads the nation in FAFSA completion. Here's how they did it*. EdNC.

[140] Odle, T.K. (2022). *The power of "free" college: Reducing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in college expectations* (EdWorkingPaper: 22-565). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

[141] Bell, E. (2021). Estimating the spillover effects of the Tennessee Promise: Exploring changes in tuition, fees, and enrollment. *Journal of Financial Aid* 50(1), Article 4; Gurantz, O. (2020). *What does free community college buy? Early impacts from the Oregon Promise*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 39*(1), 11–35; House, E., & Dell, M. (2020). Keeping the promise: Early outcomes of Tennessee's tuition-free college initiative. In Perna, L.W. and Smith, E.J. (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college Promise programs* (pp. 151–172). American Educational Research Association.

[142] Nguyen, H. (2020). Free college? Assessing enrollment responses to the Tennessee Promise program. *Labour Economics* 66(101882); Gurantz, O. (2020). *What does free community college buy? Early impacts from the Oregon Promise*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39(1), 11–35; Klasik, D., Zahran, W., Worsham, R., & Springer M.G. (2024). *Do students respond to sticker-price reductions? Evidence from the North Carolina Promise* (EdWorkingPaper 24-918). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

[143] Attridge, J., Carruthers, C.K., & Welch, J.G. (2025). *Free community college and college completion: Evidence from Tennessee* (Working paper).

[144] Odle, T.K., Lee, J.C., & Gentile, S.P. (2021). *Do Promise programs reduce student loans? Evidence from Tennessee Promise*. *Journal of Higher Education 92*(6): 847–876.

[145] Say, K. (2024). *Reducing student loan indebtedness: Examining the Excelsior Scholarship's role in loan borrowing among middle-income students*. (PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.)

[146] Bartik, T., Miller-Adams, M., Pittelko, B., & Timmeney, B. (2021). *Returns from statewide tuition-free college: Modeling an Illinois Promise*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[147] Carruthers, C.K., Fox, W.F., & Jepsen, C. (2023). *What Knox achieved: Estimated effects of tuition-free community college on attainment and earnings*. *Journal of Human Resources (forthcoming)*; Hershbein, B.J., McMullen, I., Pittelko, B., & Timmeney, B.F. (2021). *Beyond degrees: Longer term outcomes of the Kalamazoo Promise* (Upjohn Institute Working Paper No. 21- 350). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research; Attridge, J., Carruthers, C.K., & Welch, J.G. (2025). *Free community college and college completion: Evidence from Tennessee* (Working paper).

[148] Collom, G.D. (2022). *A quasi-experimental investigation of adult student enrollment responses to the Tennessee Reconnect Grant*. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 47(7), 478–493.

[149] Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential. (2025). *Community college guarantee*. Michigan.gov.

***adult learners***,[150] both with few eligibility requirements, and ***take-up***[151] for the latter has been especially robust. (See Chapter 4 for more on Reconnect programs.) In contrast, New York's Excelsior Scholarship has multiple requirements, including stay-in-state provisions and high minimum credit thresholds that have suppressed usage.[152] The program has been criticized for limiting career prospects of students in the military, students pursuing graduate or professional school, and those with better career prospects outside the state. Its structure, especially the full-time attendance requirement, also means that most of the benefits flow to middle- rather than low-income students.[153] The Oregon Promise, although also most beneficial for middle-income families,[154] has had capped funding, which has led to rationing of the program in recent years, injecting an element of uncertainty and increasing confusion around program benefits, although there have been proposals to expand funding and simplify eligibility.[155]

> As a direct result of our investment in tuition-free college and career training for New Mexicans, higher education enrollment is on the rise for the first time in over a decade.
>
> ***Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham***, October 2022

Several other design elements introduced in statewide Promise programs bear mention. Some Promise programs include field-of-study requirements for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields) or in-demand occupations. For example, the Arkansas Future Grant requires students to enroll in an approved STEM certificate or associate degree program. Similar requirements can be found in Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Another important design decision, as noted above, is eligibility based on age. Most states limit Promise eligibility to recent high school graduates. However, several states include older students either through a separate program targeted toward adults without degrees (e.g., Tennessee, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New York), or by having no age limitations for program eligibility (e.g., California, New Mexico, Washington).

In general, having more eligibility requirements—whether minimum high school GPA, enrollment intensity, stay-in-state rules, field-of-study limitations, mandatory mentoring, or community service requirements—increases program complexity and makes it harder for students to access funding. It also puts an added burden on program administrators who must monitor compliance. Frequent changes in program rules—such as eligibility, benefit levels, or adding requirements—can also add to the confusion, leading to mistrust in program rules and lower scholarship uptake.

The implementation of a statewide Promise program can serve as a platform for needed changes in higher-education policy at the state level. Such changes might include efforts to strengthen and clarify degree pathways and smooth transfer protocols across institutions, or reform the need for non-credit-bearing coursework at community colleges. Furthermore, states can expand on Promise programs by providing at-risk students with additional guidance and support (such as completion grants and college coaching in Tennessee,[156] navigators in Michigan[157] and Tennessee,[158] and clear career pathways built with employer input[159]). These interventions can bolster retention and degree/credential completion and increase the state's return on investment.

[150] Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential. (n.d.). *Michigan reconnect*. Michigan.gov.

[151] Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential. (n.d.). *Reconnect data dashboard*. Michigan.gov.

[152] Scott-Clayton, J., Libassi, C.J., & Sparks, D. (2022). *The fine print on free college: Who benefits from New York's Excelsior Scholarship?* Urban Institute.

[153] Billings, M. (2018). *Understanding the design of college Promise programs, and where to go from here*. Brookings Institution.

[154] Hodara, M., & Childress, L. (2021). *What were the reach and impact of the Oregon Promise financial aid program in its first two years?* (REL 2022–119). Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance; Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

[155] Edge, S. (2025). *Lawmakers float massive expansion of Oregon's tuition-free community college program*. *The Oregonian/OregonLive*.

[156] *An act to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, relative to completion grants for Tennessee Promise scholarship students*, S.B. 0229, 112th Gen. Assembly. (Tenn. 2025).

[157] Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential. (2025). *Meet the navigators*. Michigan.gov.

[158] Tennessee Reconnect. (n.d.). *Talk to a navigator*. TennesseeReconnect.

[159] National Governors Association. (n.d.) *10 transformational pathways for states*.

## Recommended Reading

Burkander, K., Kent, D., & Callahan, K. (2019). ***The case of Oregon Promise: An early adopter focused on broadening access***. Research for Action.

*This report provides an accessible evaluation of the Oregon Promise. It contains key statistics, as well as discussion of the specifics of the program. It also discusses the effects the program has had and challenges that have arisen.*

Hodara, M., & Childress, L. (2021). ***What were the reach and impact of the Oregon Promise financial aid program in its first two years?*** Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance; and Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

*This report discusses the research on the effects of the Oregon Promise during its first two years of implementation. It covers the demographics of students who attended, eligibility levels and requirements, and preliminary findings on college completion rates of students who started college during these first two years. It concludes with a section on the implication of these findings for policymakers.*

Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., and Jackson, V. (2020). ***A promise worth keeping: An updated equity-driven framework for free college programs.*** The Education Trust.

*This report reviews statewide Promise programs in terms of how equitable they are for student access, and it sets forth criteria that states should adopt for their Promise programs to reach students who struggle the most to pay for college.*

Meehan, K., Hagood, S., Callahan, K., & Kent, D. (2019). ***The case of Tennessee Promise: A uniquely comprehensive Promise program***. Research for Action.

*This report offers an accessible evaluation of the Tennessee Promise. It provides key statistics and discusses the program's operations. It also provides student feedback and evaluations of specific program aspects.*

Podesta, K., Spires, L., & Wilson, P. (2024). ***Tennessee Promise evaluation***. Nashville: Office of Research and Education Accountability, Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury.

*This report by the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury gives a high-level evaluation of the Tennessee Promise. It discusses the details of the program, the demographics of who applies, the colleges they attend, and student retention rates and credit accumulation.*

Scott-Clayton, J.E., Libassi, C.J., & Sparks, D.D. (2022). ***The fine print on free college: Who benefits from New York's Excelsior Scholarship?*** Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

*This report describes the low and uneven take-up of New York's Excelsior Scholarship among City University of New York students.*

Spires, L., Johnson, A., & Thibaul, J. (2022). ***Tennessee Reconnect grant evaluation***. Nashville: Office of Research and Education Accountability, Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury.

*This report by the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury summarizes the Tennessee Reconnect grant. It reviews the program structure, the demographics of applicants, and research to date on outcomes for students using Tennessee Reconnect.*

# What are the main cost components of a Promise program?

Lead author: Meredith Billings

**The cost of Promise programs is highly variable, depending mainly on program design.**

The cost of establishing and operating a Promise program will vary based on key design parameters, especially which institutions Promise recipients are permitted to attend and whether a scholarship is applied before or after other forms of grant aid. Most Promise program resources go toward scholarships; student support services are sometimes funded directly by the Promise program but are more often supported through partnerships. Staffing and administrative costs, the cost of messaging/outreach, and evaluation resources to assess program impact are other important cost components.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise collaborators can use cost-estimator calculators (see Recommended Reading) to judge the costs of different design choices, support services, and staffing levels for several years of the Promise program.
- Consider a pilot program in a program's initial years to ensure resources are sufficient to cover costs and meet demands for growth.
- Cost-sharing agreements or memoranda of understanding with postsecondary or other college access partners can help support student services, staffing, and administrative expenses.
- Evaluation costs can be reduced by partnering with interested faculty, graduate students, or nonprofit organizations that have capacity to carry out evaluations or write grants to support them.

## What We Know

Promise programs vary in the benefits they offer students. Typically, Promise programs include scholarships that cover tuition or tuition and mandatory fees, but in a few cases they also cover other expenses such as room and board or books. Program costs will depend on key design decisions; the most important of these from a budgetary standpoint are which institutions Promise students can attend (with the two-year sector being markedly less expensive than four-year institutions), and when scholarship dollars are applied relative to other forms of grant aid (the first-dollar v. last-dollar question).

In addition to scholarships, some Promise programs offer student support services. These may include student advising, academic coaching, career counseling, mentoring, community-building activities, summer orientation or bridge programs, tutoring or study skills support, and workshops on specific topics to help students transition to college. The College Promise Campaign,[160] MDRC,[161] and WestEd[162] have surveyed Promise programs and found that the typical support services offered include academic advising and coaching, career counseling, and summer orientation and bridge programs. These support services are either paid for by the program or through a combination of philanthropic and external partnerships. In a survey by the College Promise Campaign that included 134 local and state Promise program respondents, about 70 percent of Promise programs offered some student support services, and 25 percent reported that they contributed zero dollars to those services. For the 44 programs that provided information on the amount that they spent on student support services, survey participants paid a median amount of $150,000 and a mean amount of $547,595. There was one program that reported spending $15 million.[163]

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[160] College Promise Campaign. (2020). *College promises to keep: A playbook for achieving college Promise financial sustainability*.

[161] Willard, J., Vasquez, A., & Lepe, M. (2019). *Designing for success: The early implementation of college Promise programs*. MDRC College Promise Success Initiative.

[162] Rauner, M., Perna, L.W., & Kanter, M. J. (2018). *California College Promise: Program characteristics and perceptions from the field*. WestEd.

[163] College Promise Campaign. (2020). *College promises to keep: A playbook for achieving college promise financial sustainability*.

Cost-sharing agreements may allow for the Promise program to offer more services and resources to their students than the program can afford on its own. If there are local college access programs with overlapping missions, it is beneficial for Promise programs to combine forces for student services and other programming to reduce costs. Promise programs may also want to partner with postsecondary foundations that can help them fundraise for scholarships and support services for students. Agreements (whether memoranda of understanding or something less formal) between Promise programs and key receiving postsecondary institutions outlining their commitment to supporting Promise students can also be helpful; in some communities, Promise programs have helped fund college staff and supports.

Promise programs also need to consider the costs of program administration and overhead. They need staff to advertise the program, its requirements, and benefits to eligible students and their families. Once students apply, Promise program staff must process applications to ensure applicants meet the requirements, plan and implement programming for Promise recipients, and interface with colleges around scholarship administration. Promise programs may need to fundraise and solicit donations from the community to help fund the program. They may also need staff to collect data and analyze the program to provide evidence of its impact and to ensure that the program is meeting its goals. In the same survey by the College Promise Campaign, 70 percent of Promise programs reported they had more than one full-time staff member, with larger Promise programs employing more staff members than smaller programs. At some of the larger programs, especially those that incorporate student support personnel into their organization, staff size can be as large as 30 or more. More than half of survey respondents (54 percent) paid for all or part of their administrative and operational expenses; the median amount was $140,000 per program.[164]

WestEd examined the relationship between funding models and equity for Promise programs in California's community colleges.[165] WestEd found tradeoffs in the choices different Promise programs made based on funding sustainability, robustness of student supports, and program inclusiveness. The funding model that had the most robust financial support per student beyond tuition and fees and spent more per student on staff salaries was the least financially sustainable and served fewer low-income students than the other funding models. This study illustrates the difficult choices that Promise programs need to make when considering the affordability of robust student supports while balancing equity and financial sustainability.

## Recommended Reading

College Promise Campaign. (2020). ***College promises to keep: A playbook for achieving college Promise financial sustainability***.

*This Playbook includes sections on the costs associated with creating and administering a College Promise program. It also includes survey responses for 134 local and state Promise programs that were collected in 2018.*

MDRC. (2018). ***The college promise success initiative calculator***.

*This tool helps Promise program administrators cost out different Promise program designs including tuition, textbooks, student support services, administrative salaries, etc. It allows programs to select specific cost components, number of students served, program length, and estimated retention rates to calculate the total cost of the program per cohort or entering class.*

WestEd. (n.d.) ***College Promise cost estimator tool for California college promise programs***.

*Specifically designed for Promise programs in California, this tool allows Promise program administrators to input student, institutional, and summer/intersession costs to estimate the total cost of the program per cohort. It allows programs to make assumptions about the Promise program based on its design, size, and eligibility criteria to estimate these costs.*

## Cost Estimates

Miller-Adams, M., & K. Huisman. 2024. ***Tuition-free college options for Michigan***.

Miller-Adams, M., B. Pittelko, & B. Timmeney. 2020. ***Estimated cost of tuition-free college in Illinois***. Prepared for The Joyce Foundation and the Illinois Governor's Office.

The W.E. Upjohn Institute has also carried out cost estimates for approximately 50 communities. Examples are available on request.

[164] Only 70 Promise programs (or about half of the survey respondents) provided specific information on their administrative and operational expenses to calculate the median amount per program.

[165] Rauner, M., Mathias, J., & Lolashvili, G. (2024). *Sustainable, robust, and inclusive college promise programs in California's community colleges: Examining the relationship between funding models and equity*. WestEd.

CHAPTER 13

# What are the main funding sources for Promise programs?

Lead author: Meredith Billings

**Promise programs vary in whether they rely on private and/or public dollars, but they typically leverage existing sources of financial aid and seek sustainable funding that will ensure maximum confidence in the program.**

Funding sources for Promise programs include both public and private resources. Most Promise programs build on the federal and state need-based aid unlocked by the FAFSA, bringing less "new" money to students but providing a predictable funding stream. Most community-based Promise programs make use of private (often philanthropic) resources, statewide programs are generally funded with public money, and community college programs rely on the institutions' own financial resources. Financial sustainability should be a key goal of Promise programs at all stages of their development; in its absence, Promise architects run the risk of breaking their promise to students and communities.

## Policy Considerations

- Identify financial sustainability as an essential goal from the start.
- Consider obtaining a third-party cost estimate to forecast future financial needs.
- Diversify funding sources by identifying potential resources within a state or community and cultivating relationships to help fund the Promise program.
- Seek out and secure more stable revenue sources such as endowments, trusts, perpetual gifts, tax-increment funding, or a multi-year foundation commitment.
- Develop a long-term fundraising plan for the Promise program.

## What We Know

When deciding how to fund the scholarship, student services, and administrative/overhead components of a Promise program, collaborators must consider different factors such as existing revenue streams; their ability to mobilize their community, state, or institution to either raise or appropriate funds; and the amount of money needed for the students they are planning to serve. There are two main revenue sources for Promise programs: private funds and public funds, and the two can be combined.

**Private sources** include local, national, and postsecondary foundations; endowments; businesses/corporations; and individual donors. **Public sources** include local and state appropriations; lottery funds; tax credits; tax-increment financing; funding from school or community college districts, cities, or towns; and sales and property taxes. Often Promise programs use funding from both revenue categories through public-private partnerships. This allows the program to leverage the available resources in their community and/or state (especially when one source of funding is not enough) and to diversify their funding sources in case not all of them are available year-to-year. A combination of funding also allows Promise program administrators more flexibility in their use of funding to meet the needs and goals of the program.

Almost all Promise programs leverage available state and federal financial aid such as the Pell Grant to help fund the scholarship component of the program. In a landscape analysis of funding sources for statewide Promise programs,[166] 8 out of 33 programs (24 percent) were funded through a combination of sources with the majority using state sources (93 percent ) and 5 programs

[166] Billings, M.S., Li, A.Y., Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., Cervantes, D., & Turcios-Villalta, J. (2023). *Financing free college programs: Where the money comes from and where the money goes*. *New Directions for Community Colleges* 2023(203), 9–23.

(15 percent) using private sources. In the 2023 version of the Upjohn Institute Promise Programs Database, when excluding the large volume of California College Promise programs, 45 percent of Promise programs have mixed public and private funding, 38 percent are publicly funded, and 17 percent are privately funded.[167]

Typically, the design and implementation of the Promise program is shaped by the type, amount, and sustainability of available funding sources. Some local and statewide programs rely on nonrecurring funds, which means that when the funding expires (usually after a year based on annual budgeting processes), it requires state or local policymakers to get funding approval again. If they are not successful, Promise program administrators need to either find another funding source or reduce the benefits given to students. In a 2021 survey by the College Promise Campaign, 20 percent of Promise programs reported they reduced the length of their award due to decreased funding during the COVID-19 pandemic.[168] In addition, several states had to either revoke Promise scholarships or place Promise students on a waiting list because of reduced funding due to state budget cuts during early stages of the pandemic.[169]

Promise programs may also have trouble covering the amount needed to implement and administer their programs. In Oregon, the state legislature provided $1.66 million in funding to offer support services to recent high school graduates (including Oregon Promise recipients) who enrolled in community colleges. In the next legislative session, the funding was not renewed. Community colleges had to find funding to cover those services or reduce/eliminate them if they could not afford to pay for them out of their budgets.[170]

Promise programs that do not have a clear idea on how to ensure financial sustainability may run into problems in later years when initial funding is exhausted or budgetary funds are not renewed. Therefore, it is important to make financial sustainability throughout the life cycle of the Promise program a high priority by engaging in financial planning and implementing policies and strategies that align with this goal.[171] In a 2018 College Promise Campaign survey, about half of Promise programs reported that they had sustainability concerns.[172] Their reasons included increasing demand for the program (51 percent), limited control over yearly budget allocation (37 percent), setting and meeting annual fundraising goals (36 percent), setting and meeting endowment goals to fully fund the Promise program (22 percent), and using endowment funds beyond the annual endowment interest rate (6 percent). Statewide Promise programs were more likely to report concerns about their limited control over yearly budget allocations, while Promise programs that serve school districts and cities were more likely to report concerns with setting and meeting annual fundraising goals.

Some Promise programs have sought to ensure sustainability by creating endowments; however, building an endowment of sufficient size to generate the income needed to run a Promise program over the long term is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. It is also difficult to build an endowment while operating a Promise program, since some of the funds being raised end up being used for operations. There are alternatives to endowment funding—for example, the Kalamazoo Promise donors, who have not set up an endowment, have issued legal guarantees that their funding will continue in perpetuity; lottery proceeds are used to fund Tennessee Reconnect; and well-established foundations can issue a multi-year funding guarantee rather than supporting a program on an annual basis or tying up funds to create an endowment.

## Recommended Reading

College Promise Campaign. (2021). ***Financial sustainability for college Promise programs: Navigating through and beyond COVID-19.***

*This report describes the funding streams for Promise programs, reports challenges related to funding because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and offers recommendations to ensure the financial sustainability for programs.*

College Promise Campaign. (2018). ***Playbook: How to build a Promise.*** College Promise.

*A resource for city and county elected officials to build College Promise programs for their communities. It includes information on the steps needed to create a Promise program and provides planning documents from several existing Promise programs.*

Li, A., & Mishory, J. (2018, December). ***Financing institutions in the free college debate***. The Century Foundation.

*This report provides a framework for state financing of free-college programs. It summarizes studies on how Promise programs affect demand and provides policy guidance on how to design and implement free-college programs that anticipate capacity challenges.*

[167] Upjohn Institute. (2023). *Upjohn Institute Promise programs database*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

[168] College Promise Campaign. (2021). *Financial sustainability for college Promise programs: Navigating through and beyond COVID-19*.

[169] St. Amour, M. (2020, October 8). *College Promise programs wrestle with pandemic realities*. *Inside Higher Ed*.

[170] Burkander, K., Kent, D.C., & Callahan, K. (2019). *The case of Oregon Promise: An early adopter focused on broadening access*. Research for Action.

[171] Millett, C. (Ed.). (2017). *Designing sustainable funding for college Promise initiatives*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

[172] MDRC and the College Promise Campaign. (2019). *Promises to keep: Findings on college Promise finance sustainability* [Powerpoint slides].

Kanter, M., Meotti, M.P., DeAlejandro, K., Hiestand, R., & Weissman, E. (2019, July 31). ***Promises to keep: Findings on College promise financial sustainability***. MDRC and the College Promise Campaign.

*This webinar discusses a 2018 survey on the financial sustainability of College Promise programs conducted by the College Promise Campaign. It also includes panelists from tnAchieves and Washington's Husky Promise about how they practically think about financial sustainability in the context of their programs.*

## Design Principles in Practice: Michigan Promise Zones' Unique Funding Mechanism

In 2009, the state of Michigan adopted legislation that allowed communities to establish Promise Zones in areas with above average poverty rates. Communities that were interested in Promise Zone status had to apply to the state for recognition and the Department of the Treasury designated 10 communities out of 15 applicants as the Michigan Promise Zones.[173] Eight years later, Governor Snyder signed a bill that expanded the number of Promise Zones from 10 to 15.[174] Thirteen of these are currently operational. The list of the current Promise Zone communities are available on the following map: ***https://promisezonesmi.com/promise-zone-map/***

The Michigan Promise Zones offer eligible students last-dollar scholarships that cover tuition and fees for at least an associate degree. Depending on the Promise Zone, the scholarship is either a set amount (e.g., a maximum of $5,000 a year over four years for the Baldwin Promise) or indexed to tuition and fees at eligible institutions (e.g., Oakland Community College for the Hazel Park Promise). Eligibility criteria for the scholarship are based mainly on residency—students need to live and attend school within the boundaries of the Promise Zones. Most of the scholarships are prorated based on the number of grades completed, with considerable variation among the zones on the specific entry grade to receive 100 percent of the scholarship.[175]

The Promise Zones are funded through a unique public-private partnership. In the first two years of operation, funding must come from private sources—usually donations by local businesses and individuals. Starting in the third year of operation, the Promise Zones can receive funding through tax-increment financing or a "tax capture" mechanism that automatically awards half of the growth in the state education tax (SET) within the zone to the Promise Zones to pay for the scholarships.[176] The SET is indexed to a baseline year and the SET needs to exceed the baseline year for the Promise Zones to receive funding. Due to the Great Recession, the SET declined in most of the Promise Zones so many Promise Zones did not receive the tax-increment funding until years after their third year of operation, but state funds are now flowing to the Promise Zones, allowing some of them to expand the generosity of their scholarship or provide additional support services.[177]

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173 Billings, M.S. (2020). *The echo of a promise: The impact of state-designated Michigan Promise Zones*. In L. Perna & E. Smith (Eds.), *Improving Research-Based Knowledge of Promise Programs* (pp. 173–197). American Education Research Association.

174 *History of the Mi Promise Zones*. (n.d.).

175 Billings, M.S. (2020). *The echo of a promise: The impact of state-designated Michigan Promise Zones*. In L. Perna & E. Smith (Eds.), *Improving Research-Based Knowledge of Promise Programs* (pp. 173–197). American Education Research Association.

176 *How Promise zones work*. (n.d.).

177 Billings, M.S. (2020). *The echo of a promise: The impact of state-designated Michigan Promise Zones*. In L. Perna & E. Smith (Eds.), *Improving Research-Based Knowledge of Promise Programs* (pp. 173–197). American Education Research Association.

CHAPTER 14

# Who should sit at the planning table?

Lead authors: Jennifer Iriti and Celeste Carruthers

**The people who sit at the planning table will have an important impact on the design and operation of a Promise program.**

The people and organizations engaged in launching a Promise program will vary across different types of programs. Community college leadership is the key party involved in creating institution-based programs, while the leadership of high-level elected officials is essential for statewide initiatives. Community-based Promise programs involve a more complex set of partners, as they require collaboration across sectors. The makeup of the people invited to the planning table can have important implications for program design; strong agreement around the purpose of the program (the critical need partners are trying to address) is an essential first step.

## Policy Considerations

- The group of partners needed to sustain a program's operations over time may look different from that needed to launch a Promise program; in other words, it may make sense to think of the planning and governance function in two stages—launch and operations.
- Institution-level Promise programs benefit from including the college's leadership (president and trustees), representatives from various departments (including financial aid, institutional development, student support, enrollment analytics), K–12 district leaders, regional workforce development leaders, students who are intended to benefit, and local business community leaders.
- Community-level Promise programs benefit from including K–12 district leaders, representatives from higher education, municipal government leaders, regional business owners, workforce development entities, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and the students who are intended to benefit.
- Statewide Promise programs generally require buy-in and leadership from governors and other high-level elected officials. In most states, these programs will also require a bipartisan coalition of legislators, especially those on education and budget committees.

## What We Know

No two Promise programs are exactly alike. The variation comes from both contextual differences among the places and people they are intended to benefit and from the input of the initial parties who design the program.

For example, a Promise program is likely to end up with very different goals, policies, and funding structures if the business community is part of the initial design discussions than if it is not. Business leaders tend to inject linkages to workforce development that may be less prominent if K–12 schools and government entities are the main drivers of the Promise design.

Bringing the right partners to the table and keeping them there is critical to Promise success because most Promise programs require ongoing funding design adaptations based on what is learned from early implementation. Promise programs also benefit from ongoing broad-based commitment and enthusiasm. Who should be at the table is determined by the goals and approach of the proposed Promise, the structures of the local schools, and whether there are already cross-sector collaborative efforts in place.

Regardless of the type of Promise you intend to develop, key potential groups to consider include K–12 school district leaders, business and workforce development, higher education, local and state government (especially leaders representing the populations intended to benefit from the Promise), philanthropy, and community-based organizations such as those focused on student support, youth development, and workforce development.

### Institution level

Institution-based Promise programs are typically initiated and driven by a community college, which makes them quite different from community- or state-level programs in terms of who is involved in the planning process. Such programs will benefit if the broader community is engaged, but decision-making will be based at the institution itself. Key decision makers include senior community college leadership (often the president plays an important role), as well as representatives from departments of financial aid, institutional development, student support, and enrollment analytics; representatives of the institution's trustees (who may have control over funding) or endowment; K–12 district leaders from the "feeder" district(s); county- or regional-level workforce development leaders; representatives of the population intended to benefit; and potential business partners aware of skill demands and training needs of the region.

### Community level

Community-based programs require a broader set of partners to build and maintain a Promise program. Those initiating a Promise program will benefit from being intentional about who is at the table during the design phase. Public school districts are rarely the initiators of such efforts but are crucial participants. Promise programs need funding, so those involved in planning should include those with resources to invest (this can sometimes shift the goals and scope of Promise programs). An important initial step is to have agreement around the intended purpose of the program. From there, decisions about the design (such as who is eligible) and the necessary planning participants can flow.

Ideally, the initial planning table should include leadership and representatives from the school district, local higher education institutions, municipal government leaders, regional business owners, economic and workforce development entities, philanthropy, and community-based organizations that support young people. Other groups, such as political organizations and labor unions, can also be crucial to advancing Promise models in some locales.

### State level

Statewide Promise programs generally require buy-in and leadership from governors and other high-level elected officials. In most states, these programs will also require a bipartisan coalition of legislators, especially those on education and budget committees. State programs often involve higher education system leaders, business leaders, and key advocacy groups.

Some state Promise programs are components of broader postsecondary attainment goals,[178] in which case the business community can speak to specific skills and fields that are lacking in the state workforce.

> The breakthrough component of Say Yes Buffalo is the transparent, collaborative governance structure that guides all efforts and reports on progress to the public at large. This collaborative approach recognizes that Erie County, the city of Buffalo, and the Buffalo Public School District all hold pieces of the puzzle, that the solutions reside between and among these systems, and that improving academic outcomes for urban youth with scale demands a cross-sector, cross-government approach.
>
> Aspen Institute, ***Buffalo, New York: Building Off a Breakthrough***, 2016

[178] Lumina Foundation. (n.d). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*.

The following table represents suggested partner involvement by type of program.

| Partners | Institution-level Promise program | Community-level Promise program | State-level Promise program |
|---|---|---|---|
| Senior college leadership (single institution or cross-institution depending on model) | X | X | X |
| Institutional trustees | X | | |
| College financial aid leaders | X | | |
| College institutional development leaders | X | | |
| College student support leaders | X | | |
| College enrollment analytics | X | | |
| K–12 district leaders from "feeder" districts | X | X | X |
| Workforce development leaders | X | X | X |
| Representative intended student beneficiaries | X | X | X |
| Business or industry leaders | X | X | X |
| Municipal government leaders | | X | |
| Philanthropic partners | | X | |
| Community-based organizations with aligned missions | | X | |
| Labor unions (in local industries, in K–12, in higher ed) | | X | |
| State leadership from Governor's office | | | X |
| Bipartisan group of legislators | | | X |
| Education advocacy groups | | | X |
| State higher education system leader | | | X |

## Recommended Reading

Campaign for Free College Tuition. (2022, Revised). ***Making public colleges tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders***. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

*A compendium of existing statewide Promise programs and "how to" guide for state leaders covering best practices and steps needed to launch a statewide Promise program.*

College Promise Campaign. (2018). ***Playbook: How to build a Promise***. College Promise Campaign.

*A resource for city and county elected officials to build College Promise programs for their communities. It includes information on the steps needed to create a Promise program and provides planning documents from several existing Promise programs.*

Rauner, M., Lundquist, S., & Smith, A. (2019). ***The College Promise guidebook for California and beyond.*** WestED.

*This guidebook is geared toward institution-based Promise program development, with a specific focus on doing so within the California state policy context. The guidebook includes exercises and tools to support the execution of each of the steps and offers many examples from real programs. See, for example, Step 1 (pp. 7–19), which outlines forming a "Promise Team" and provides useful tips and exercises to ensure that you are identifying the right set of partners.*

National Implementation Research Network (n.d.). Stakeholder engagement guide. Adapted from the Community Engagement Toolkit developed by the Collective Impact Forum.

*A persistent challenge facing improvement work is ensuring equity in the design and implementation of the initiative. Promise programs are no different, especially because they often explicitly seek to improve conditions for students who are from low-income families, first-generation college-goers, and/or those who are from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. The stakeholder engagement guide, developed by KITAMBA on behalf of the National Implementation Research Network, is helpful in considering the composition of the planning group in relation to the intended beneficiaries.*

CHAPTER 15

# What steps are needed to launch a Promise program?

Lead authors: Jennifer Iriti and Celeste Carruthers

**Despite their variations, most programs are developed by following seven key steps, some of which are critical for its success.**

Promise programs are built in a variety of ways depending on who initiates them, available fiscal resources, and the nature of the place where they are being created. Even so, there is a natural sequence of steps to creating a Promise program, some of which are critical for its success. Here are seven key steps:

1. **Form a design team.**
2. **Build the foundation.**
3. **Determine program structure and requirements.**
4. **Determine financial support and other supports.**
5. **Develop a communication plan.**
6. **Build a research and evaluation plan.**
7. **Implement the Promise.**

## Policy Considerations

- For institution-level programs, college leaders must convince their trustees of the Promise program's value and engage key partners from the community, especially K–12 feeder districts and businesses with close ties to the education and training programs offered at the institution.
- Community-based Promise programs typically require a multi-sector development process that may unfold over a period of months or even years. Consensus-building around the area's critical need and ongoing engagement of partners are essential elements in a program's success.
- Statewide programs are dependent on the political machinery within the legislative process and often on gubernatorial leadership, so key steps are to build a coalition of legislators and elected officials who have the requisite authority.

## What We Know

Promise programs are built in a variety of ways depending on factors including the place's critical need; who initiates the discussion; whether the Promise is based at the institutional, community, or state level; the existing nature of cross-sector relationships in the place; and the availability of fiscal resources, among others. Despite this variation, there is a natural sequence of steps to building Promise programs, and some of these steps are particularly important for later success.[179, 180]

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[179] College Promise Campaign (n.d.). *Playbook: How to build a Promise*. College Promise Campaign

[180] Rauner, M., Lundquist, S., & Smith, A. (2019). *The College Promise guidebook for California and beyond*. WestED.

| Step | Description | Goals |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Form a design team | • Articulate the "why" question and answer for this institution, community, or state: What is the critical need planning partners are trying to address and how can a Promise program help?<br>• Identify needed partners for design phase; Ensure equitable composition<br>• Convene potential design team members and provide overview of development process<br>• Formalize design team structure, roles, and responsibilities<br>• Articulate partner roles and responsibilities |
| 2 | Build the foundation | • Conduct a needs assessment and/or root cause analysis<br>• Convene design team for critical need discussion<br>• Establish shared need and goal(s)<br>• Determine key partners needed to realize goal (including municipal, school district, higher education, funder/foundations, employers, community-based organizations, intended beneficiaries)<br>• Determine organizational home and Promise leadership |
| 3 | Determine program structure and requirements | • Determine eligibility and participation requirements<br>• Establish appeals process<br>• Determine distribution process<br>• Identify needed partners |
| 4 | Determine financial support and other supports | • Determine financial support amount and structure<br>• Use analytics to estimate program costs over a reasonable time frame, accounting for likely tuition changes, shifts in composition of students, and average aid levels. (Seek external help with a cost estimate if internal capacity does not exist.)<br>• Revise program structure, requirement, and financial support amounts based on analysis<br>• Use root causes analysis and/or critical need results to plan for additional student supports (intrusive supports and/or coaching)<br>• Build financial sustainability plan |
| 5 | Develop a communication plan | • Develop simple program message to partners, families, and students<br>• Determine who needs to know what and when<br>• Evaluate whether partners need additional training/support to implement<br>• Find additional resources to support robust public messaging |
| 6 | Build a research and evaluation plan | • Identify evaluation and research questions, including timeline and audiences for each<br>• Establish measures and indicators<br>• Establish targets with leadership team<br>• Ensure evaluation data availability across partners<br>• Establish data sharing agreements<br>• Determine reporting cadence to stakeholder groups<br>• Identify evaluation capacity (internal and/or external partner) |
| 7 | Implement the Promise | • Monitor program implementation quality<br>• Implement communications plan<br>• Implement financial sustainability plan<br>• Implement evaluation and research plan<br>• Modify program design and implementation based on emerging evidence and changes in the local, state and K–12 and federal higher education ecosystem |

Different types of Promise programs may have slightly different sequences, or specific steps may be more/less salient. In the following paragraphs, we highlight some of these nuances.

### Institution level

Compared to community and state-level Promise programs, the design process for institution-level programs initiated by community colleges will tend to have fewer participants and may have more readily visible goals (e.g., increase enrollment, improve completion rates). College leaders must convince their trustees of the Promise program's value and engage key partners from the community, especially K–12 feeder districts and businesses with close ties to the education and training programs offered at the institution. Leaders of institution-based Promise programs emphasize the importance of engaging enrollment and fiscal analysts in the design phase to build a model that leverages all local, state, and federal financial resources and can ensure that the Promise model yields an acceptable level of risk for trustees.

### Community level

Community-based programs can be quite complex—there are often many needs across constituencies, and thus it can be difficult to come to consensus on which ones to address in the Promise program. As a result, locally based Promise programs typically require a multi-sector development process that may unfold over a period of months or even years. Consensus-building around the area's critical need and ongoing engagement of partners are essential elements in a program's success.

### State level

Statewide programs can be difficult to establish because they require commitment from both legislators and a governor, as well as funding appropriated by state legislators. Thus, these programs are dependent on the political machinery within the legislative process and gubernatorial leadership. In some places, models have advanced based on workforce development needs, while in others Promise programs have set the goal of expanding access to higher education. See Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, and Michigan Reconnect as examples of the first approach, and New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship and California College Promise as examples of the latter.

## Recommended Reading

Campaign for Free College Tuition. (Revised 2022). ***Making public colleges tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders.*** Campaign for Free College Tuition.

*A compendium of existing statewide Promise programs and "how to" guide for state leaders covering best practices and steps needed to launch a statewide Promise program.*

College Promise Campaign. (2018). ***Playbook: How to build a Promise***. College Promise.

*A resource for city and county elected officials to build College Promise programs for their communities. It includes information on the steps needed to create a Promise program and provides planning documents from several existing Promise programs.*

Rauner, M., Lundquist, S., & Smith, A. (2019). ***The College Promise guidebook for California and beyond.*** WestED.

*This guidebook is geared toward institution-based Promise program development, with a specific focus on doing so within the California state policy context. The guidebook includes exercises and tools to support the execution of each of the steps and offers many examples from real programs.*

CHAPTER 16

# How do Promise programs evolve over time?

Lead authors: Celeste Carruthers and Jennifer Iriti

**On occasion, a Promise program may need to change its rules or benefits; such changes should be communicated clearly to avoid confusion on the part of the beneficiaries.**

Promise programs may evolve, whether due to changes in available funding or lessons learned through implementation. Sometimes these changes narrow or restrict program parameters, and sometimes they expand them. Frequent changes in program rules and procedures can be confusing to potential users, and a reduction in benefits can undermine confidence in a program's staying power. Leaders should be sure not to overpromise when launching their program and should take care to clearly communicate any program changes.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise programs may need to evolve in response to fluctuating funding levels, the need for improvement revealed by data and evaluation, and changes in political climate and leadership.
- Strategic use of data and short-term measures of student and program success have been important for improvements in day-to-day operations and the evolution of Promise programs.
- Several Promise programs have enhanced their stability by creating or commissioning cost estimates and testing the feasibility of program design prior to implementation.

## What We Know

Whether and how a Promise program evolves has largely been dictated by funding and in some cases by shifting program goals. Many programs have tightened benefits or eligibility over time due to insufficient funding or budget cuts, while a few have been able to make their terms more generous.

Careful planning before designing and implementing a Promise program can prevent the need for future cost-saving adjustments. Many local programs and some states have contracted with the Upjohn Institute to prepare 10-year cost estimates to inform design and fund development and monitor costs over time. In Tennessee, spending and take-up data from local nonprofit programs were used to project the cost of a statewide Promise. In Oregon and Pittsburgh, early Promise costs exceeded sustainable revenues, which led to tightened eligibility and benefits within a short time from program launch.

Prospective planning can also help map out systems for operations and evaluation. The Kalamazoo Promise built an interactive data tool that allows a robust review of critical indicators.[181] Tennessee issues an annual Tennessee Promise report itemizing program take-up, cost, and participating student outcomes.[182]

Even after following a rigorous plan, however, unforeseen circumstances can force programs to adapt. Philanthropically funded programs are vulnerable to shifting donor priorities or declining endowment earnings, and publicly funded programs are at risk of cuts if they rely on annual appropriations. Nevertheless, many Promise programs have expanded in various ways. Promise expansions have included adaptations that covered more students; added new eligible institutions; provided financial benefits beyond last-dollar aid; or tried to improve take-up rates, equitable access to higher education, college and community coordination, student support wrap-around services, integrated continuous improvement and/or evaluation.

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[181] W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. (2024). *Kalamazoo Promise interactive data tool*.

[182] See *https://comptroller.tn.gov/office-functions/research-and-education-accountability/other-collections/scholarships/tennessee-promise-evaluation.html* for full listing of available reports.

## Design Principles in Practice: Program Evolution Examples

The **Kalamazoo Promise** has undergone many changes, large and small, over the past two years. One of the most important changes has been a dramatic growth in staff size (from 1 to 30) as Kalamazoo Promise personnel have become involved in activities well beyond scholarship administration, such as coaching in the high schools, working to prevent stop-out in the community, and forging connections between Promise scholars and employers. Other structural changes include (early on) the ability to attend the local community college tuition free, the addition of a group of private colleges as eligible institutions, and a shift from a maximum of 130 credits of scholarship coverage to 145 to accommodate students who take longer to settle on a major or drop some courses.

In 2021, **Lake Michigan College** announced that all degree-seeking students could attend the college tuition-free during the next academic year. This last-dollar promise was funded through a combination of Michigan Reconnect, federal coronavirus emergency funds, and private donors. As a result, college enrollment grew by 13–18 percent, bucking nationwide trends of enrollment decline.[183] Based on the success of this pilot phase, the college announced the LMC Promise in 2022 covering students under the age of 25 without a college degree and with family incomes below $75,000.[184] In the fall of 2024, Michigan introduced the Community College Guarantee, a statewide universal access program. The LMC Promise evolved to become the LMC Guarantee, a last-dollar scholarship funded by the state rather than the college.[185]

**Michigan Promise Zones** are communities designated through state law as places where college scholarships are available to all students in a locality.[186] They rely on a unique public-private partnership structure made up of local resources, Pell grants, and a tax capture from growth in property tax revenue that flows back to communities. Fifteen Promise Zones have been authorized and 13 are granting scholarships. At a minimum, Michigan Promise Zones must provide a scholarship that gives students a tuition- and fee-free path to at least an associate degree at one Michigan institution, usually a local community college. But communities can elect to provide more options, up to and including a bachelor's degree. As additional funding has become available through the tax capture mechanism, and as new state financial aid programs have come online, several Promise Zones have added four-year options to their students' postsecondary choices and are exploring ways to use their resources to enhance student supports. The Michigan Promise Zone also provides transparency in outcomes through a public dashboard.[187]

**The Pittsburgh Promise**, established in 2008 as a last-dollar scholarship of up to $5,000 per year that could be used at any accredited Pennsylvania higher education institution, was available to all Pittsburgh Public School graduates who earned a 2.5 GPA and maintained a 90 percent attendance rate. Early on, leadership saw a need to support students who fell just under the GPA eligibility but who wanted to pursue postsecondary training (2.0–2.49 GPAs). Thus, a Promise "Extension" scholarship was added that allowed these students to attend the local community college for a year, and if an appropriate GPA was earned, students could then utilize the scholarship at any eligible institution in future years. Research data suggested that some of these Extension scholars might be better served by attending a four-year institution and so the Promise leadership changed their Extension policy to include four-year institutions who agreed to provide particular financial, academic, and social support. This change yielded positive impacts on enrollment and persistence for this student group.

As Tennessee was launching the **Tennessee Promise**, a last-dollar program for new high school graduates, the state was also implementing a different program for students 25 and older attending Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. Called Tennessee Reconnect, the program met with lower take-up rates than expected and expenditures were under budget. In response, the state expanded Reconnect eligibility to include students ages 25 and up who attend community colleges. Legislation in 2022 lowered the Reconnect age minimum to 23, thereby encompassing more students.

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[183] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2022). *Fall 2021 enrollment estimates*.

[184] Lake Michigan College. (2022, February 15). *LMC announces new free tuition program, LMC Promise* [News Release].

[185] Lake Michigan College. (2025). *LMC guarantee*.

[186] Michigan Promise Zones Association. (2025). *Michigan promise zones*.

[187] Michigan College Access Network (MCAN). (2025). *Find a promise zone*.

## Recommended Reading

Carruthers, C.K. (2019, May). *5 Things to Know about the Tennessee Promise*. Brookings Institution.

*This article describes the relationship between statewide, publicly funded Tennessee Promise and earlier nonprofit initiatives.*

Timmeney, B., & Hernandez, A. (2024). *The Evolution of Promise Scholarship Programs*.

In Bolter, K., Bartik, T., Hershbein, B., Miller-Adams, M., Adams, L., Asquith, B., Hernandez, A., Huisman, K., Lendel, I. V., Pepin, G., Timmeney, B., Truesdale, B., and Truskinovsky, Y. (2024). *Policies for Place: How to Make Sustainable Investments in Communities*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This chapter provides a high-level summary of the ways Promise scholarship programs may evolve.*

## Tool

Kalamazoo Promise Interactive Data tool (2025). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Access summary ***here*** and full interactive tool ***here***.

*This interactive and downloadable data set offers a dynamic way to explore measures of Kalamazoo Promise usage and student success. The new tool provides an in-depth look at enrollment trends, degree and certificate completion rates, and other critical statistics, broken down by race/ethnicity and gender.*

CHAPTER 17

# What are some common challenges Promise programs face?

Lead Authors: Celeste Carruthers and Jennifer Iriti

**While diverse in structure, Promise programs face common challenges related to design, operation, growth, and/or sustainability.**

Challenges during the design phase may include tensions around which partners should be engaged and at what stage, and how to ensure that design components are aligned with the program's goals. Challenges during the implementation phase may include ensuring that program rules support clear messaging and robust uptake, and that the right type and adequate amount of nonfinancial support is available. Once fully operational, programs may struggle with sustainable funding, leadership turnover, decisions about expansion, local/federal/state policy context changes, and/or how to measure program impact, and program redesign may be needed to respond to these new conditions.

## Policy Considerations

- Having a strong, representative stakeholder group is essential if Promise programs are to confront and resolve challenges that may arise during their lifespan.
- Partnering with existing college access programs, postsecondary institutions, and community workforce pathways organizations; listening to students and community members about their problems with college access and affordability; and developing a strong leadership team that represents the community may help build cross-sector support and provide valuable input for a new Promise program.
- The collective impact approach used in many communities can help guide the collaboration needed for community and statewide Promise programs that must draw support from multiple sectors**.**

## What We Know

Institution, community, and statewide Promise leaders will face challenges along the way in designing, implementing, operating, and sustaining their programs.

**Designing** a Promise program is inherently complex, often requiring leaders to navigate a landscape of competing visions, political sensitivities, and uncertain futures. Early-stage disagreements among partners —such as whether aid should be universal or targeted—can stall progress before a program ever launches. Yet, ironically, too little disagreement can be equally problematic: when program architects prioritize consensus over meaningful deliberation, the result may be a diluted or incoherent design that fails to inspire broader support. One illustrative challenge arises when the design process becomes public prematurely, prompting external scrutiny before internal alignment has been reached. This can splinter fragile coalitions, confuse key audiences, and generate mistrust. In some cases, having too many decision makers slows momentum, while too few may overlook critical perspectives or provoke opposition from excluded groups. For example, although the Kalamazoo Promise successfully launched with a small, focused coalition, replicating such a strategy without careful attention to inclusion and communication can backfire—particularly when funding mechanisms or community buy-in are uncertain. These tensions underscore the delicate balance required to design a Promise program that is both visionary and viable.

Even the most promising program designs can falter during **implementation** if critical operational details are unclear or poorly executed. A recurring challenge lies in the messaging around what is and isn't covered—students and families may hear the word "free" and reasonably assume all college-related costs are waived, only to encounter unexpected fees, textbook expenses, or living costs. Similarly, ambiguity about what qualifies as "college"—whether that includes nondegree credentials or apprenticeships—can undermine the legitimacy of alternative pathways and lead to missed opportunities for broader participation. One of the most consequential pitfalls is low program take-up, often driven by complex eligibility rules, inconsistent communication, or a lack of adequate guidance and support. For instance, when systems fail to connect students with financial aid staff, advisors, or external service providers, students may face bureaucratic hurdles alone—receiving incorrect bills, struggling to understand their responsibilities, or even losing benefits altogether. These operational breakdowns not only frustrate students but erode trust in the Promise itself, making it harder for programs to meet their equity goals or sustain momentum over time.

**Sustaining** a Promise program over time requires more than goodwill and early momentum—it demands stable funding, consistent leadership, and a capacity to demonstrate impact in complex and evolving contexts. Even well-established programs can face fiscal uncertainty as donor priorities shift or public budgets tighten, diverting earmarked resources to other urgent needs. Leadership turnover poses an equally persistent threat; as champions move on or new administrations reset agendas, programs may lose institutional memory, strategic direction, or political backing. Perhaps most elusive is the challenge of measuring success. Promise programs often aim to achieve long-term, multi-sector outcomes, such as regional economic revitalization or workforce development, that are difficult to capture with standard metrics like graduation rates or short-term enrollment spikes. For example, an institutional Promise may succeed in expanding access, yet attract students with more diverse academic backgrounds, resulting in lower average GPAs or persistence rates. Without a nuanced understanding of these trade-offs, programs risk being judged prematurely or inaccurately, undermining the very equity goals they were designed to advance.

The table below outlines major categories of challenges that may be faced by Promise programs, organized by program stage. Each stage presents unique tensions that, if not managed strategically, can hinder program success.

| Stage | Challenge | Risk |
|---|---|---|
| **Design** | Disagreement on aid goals (universal vs. targeted) | Risk of a fragmented or incoherent design |
| | Limited debate due to premature consensus | Leads to watered-down programs lacking external buy-in |
| | Premature publicity of draft designs | Makes stakeholder alignment harder |
| | Too many or too few decision makers | May result in exclusion or opposition by key groups |
| **Implementation** | Messaging confusion (e.g., what counts as "free" or "college") | Undermines student understanding and participation |
| | Low student take-up | Could stem from complex eligibility criteria or weak outreach |
| | Weak support service connections | Increases student frustration and decreases trust |
| **Sustainability** | Funding renewal difficulties | Shifting public/private priorities can destabilize operations |
| | Leadership turnover | Erodes institutional memory and advocacy capacity |
| | Difficulty measuring success | Long-term goals hard to capture with short-term data |

The **collective impact model** offers a powerful framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges Promise programs face. It supports alignment among diverse participants —including educators, funders, community members, and policy leaders—around shared goals and coordinated strategies (see Chapter 24 for more about Promise programs that were designed using a collective impact model).

The five pillars of the collective impact model include:

1) Common agenda: A unified vision and shared definition of success.

2) Shared measurement systems: Agreement on how progress is measured across partners.

3) Mutually reinforcing activities: Differentiated strategies aligned with stakeholder strengths.

4) Continuous communication: Ongoing dialogue to build trust and adaptability.

5) Backbone support: Dedicated staff who coordinate the collaborative process.

Recent updates to the model also emphasize equity, urging participants to move from working in communities to working with and for communities.[188]

## Recommended Reading

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). ***Collective impact***. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9(4), 36–41.

*This article presents a model of successful cross-sector collaboration for social change.*

Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Juster, J. S. (2022). ***Centering equity in collective impact***. *Stanford Social Innovation Review 20*(1), 38–45.

*This article updates the collective impact model to position equity as a prerequisite and describes five specific strategies for doing so.*

Miller-Adams, M. (2015). ***Promise nation: Transforming communities through place-based scholarships***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This free e-book provides a brief overview of the place-based scholarship movement, summarizing key design decisions, the diffusion of the Promise idea from Kalamazoo to other communities and states, and the challenges that stopped some Promise programs before they began.*

Scott-Clayton, J.E., Libassi, C.J., & Sparks, D.D. (2022). ***The Fine Print on Free College: Who Benefits From New York's Excelsior Scholarship?*** The Urban Institute.

*This report describes low and uneven take-up of New York's Excelsior Scholarship among City University of new York students.*

## Design Principles in Practice: Building Alignment in Columbus

The Columbus Promise offers a concrete example of how cross-sector partners can align their work in support of college access and success. The Columbus Promise was announced in November 2021 as a joint initiative of the City of Columbus, Columbus State Community College, I Know I Can (a local college-access nonprofit), and Columbus City Schools. Its chief goals were to increase college-going and student success for Columbus City Schools graduates and help meet the workforce needs of the local economy.[189] Initial funding provided for a three-year pilot program covering the high school classes of 2022, 2023, and 2024, and enabling them to attend the local community college tuition free (after other grant aid) and with a stipend.

It is easier to announce a collaborative effort than to actually implement and sustain one. To accomplish this, the Columbus Promise partners pursued all five pillars of the collective impact model—leaders from different organizations came together around a common vision and agenda; they committed to data sharing and rigorous, third-party evaluation that relied on data-sharing agreements among multiple organizations; they coordinated their work through a steering committee, executive committee, and student experience committee that met regularly throughout the program's first two years, sharing data and problem-solving to implement improvements; and over time they worked out a clear division of labor among the various partners and created strong interfaces and handoffs so roles were clear and mutually reinforcing.

This deep engagement in a multi-year process, before and after launch, of collaborative decision-making, with transparency around budgeting and serious attention to outcome measures, helped partners adapt their own work and strengthen the collective impact of the program.[190] The number of students using the Columbus Promise has risen steadily over the years, even facing headwinds from changes in higher education and the broader economy. Holistic support from the college has helped students match the success of (and sometimes outperform) pre-Promise cohorts; and the number of credentials and degrees generated through the program has outpaced initial expectations. Based on community enthusiasm around these results, the Columbus Promise has been extended for another three-year period while partners consider a range of options for expansion.[191]

[188] Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Juster, J. S. (2022). *Centering equity in collective impact.* *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 20(1), 38–45.

[189] Columbus State Community College. (2021, November 10). *Partners announce free community college for Columbus City Schools graduates*.

[190] Miller-Adams, M., Hollenbeck, K., Timmeney, B., and Huisman, K. 2024. *The Columbus Promise: Year one evaluation*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Report prepared for the city of Columbus; Miller-Adams, M., Hollenbeck, K., Timmeney, B., and Huisman, K. 2025. *The Columbus Promise: Year two evaluation report*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Report prepared for the city of Columbus; City of Columbus. (2024, June 13). *Columbus Promise leaders share ongoing successes of the pilot program, commit to program extension* [Press release].

[191] Hendrix, S. (2025, February 3). *City leaders launch fundraising campaign to extend Columbus Promise tuition-free college program*. *The Columbus Dispatch*.

CHAPTER 18

# Scholarship design: Who should be eligible?

Lead authors: Michelle Miller-Adams and Douglas Harris

**Which students should be eligible for funding depends on the goals of the Promise program and the community or population the program is designed to serve.**

Decisions around student eligibility will shape much of a Promise program's design, implementation, cost, and impact. Eligibility decisions typically take into consideration attributes such as residency, age of students, high school academic performance, postsecondary academic performance, financial need, and occasionally other components such as community service. The set of requirements can result in broad or narrow eligibility criteria and will influence the design of other Promise supports and the ease of messaging.

## Policy Considerations

- Be clear about program goals and make design decisions that advance them.
- If the goal is to increase college-going, especially among disadvantaged students, avoid complex requirements.
- If the goal is to increase the supply of educated workers, include adults within eligibility requirements.
- Be aware that restrictive eligibility rules can have unintended consequences.
- Simple eligibility rules and low barriers to access will maximize the reach of a Promise program.

## What We Know

The question of who is eligible for a Promise scholarship is one of the most critical decisions facing Promise architects at the design stage. Eligibility rules determine who benefits from such a program and affect a variety of other outcomes, such as potential changes in school culture or a state's overall educational attainment rates, as well as cost.

Eligibility requirements should align with the program's purpose. For example, if the goal is to increase college-going, especially among disadvantaged students, avoid complex requirements. Multiple requirements (such as high school GPA and attendance rates, community service, lengthy residency rules, and others) will reduce access; students can't benefit if they don't receive the funds, and this is especially true for the most disadvantaged. If the goal is to increase the supply of educated workers, adults should be included within eligibility requirements. Many adults, including those currently working, can benefit from the opportunity to upskill or retrain for a new job. For programs designed to reach adults, allowing part-time attendance and enlisting employers as partners are essential steps.

Eligibility decisions can create unintended consequences, and it's important for designers to think these through in advance. For example, academic requirements such as high school GPA or attendance rates can disproportionately screen out lower-income students who have had more limited access to academic support. Long residency and enrollment requirements are most likely to affect lower-income families who may need to move in or out of a school district because of housing insecurity or job changes. Community service requirements will create new administrative burdens (and costs) for both students and program administrators.

Eligibility decisions cover several attributes, as discussed below.

**Residency.** The Promise programs covered in this handbook are place-based policies designed to reach people who live in a particular geographic area, whether that is a state, a community, or a community college district. Thus, residency requirements are almost always a part of Promise programs. State-level Promise programs require beneficiaries to have attended high school or resided within the state, although residency length is generally short. Similarly, programs situated at community colleges usually require beneficiaries to reside within the relevant community college district. (California's community college programs are an exception, as most provide tuition-free attendance to state residents without regard to the specific community in which they reside.)

Local Promise programs often have multi-year residency or school district enrollment requirements (usually a minimum of two to four years). These programs may also have sliding scales that determine the level of benefits, with the greatest benefits going to those students with the longest tenure in the district. The rationale behind such rules is twofold.

First, local Promise programs are often conceived of as economic development strategies designed to create families' long-term attachment to a city or school district; residency or enrollment requirements seek to create incentives for this attachment. (Research is mixed on whether they in fact do so.[192])

Second, Promise programs are in many cases intended to serve as catalysts for change in K–12 districts and communities. This might include building a more robust career and college-readiness culture in the K–12 setting, generate new tutoring or mentoring resources in the broader community, and engage businesses in internship or pathways programs.[193] Students need to be attached to a school district or community to benefit from these changes.

There is a downside to lengthy residency or enrollment requirements when it comes to the equity orientation of Promise programs. Low-income families may have higher mobility in and out of school districts, thereby reducing their children's benefits.[194] This is one reason why some communities have opted for shorter residency requirements (the Detroit Promise, for example, requires two years of city residency), while others have abandoned the sliding scale idea and now provide the same level of scholarship to all eligible students. (For example, in 2018 the Pittsburgh Promise eliminated its sliding scale and established a four-year minimum residency prior to high school graduation.) Housing-insecure students may also move in and out of the district, thereby losing eligibility, although many programs with residency requirements include unhoused or housing-insecure students in their eligibility based on school-district attendance.

**Age of students.** The Promise movement began by serving recent high school graduates, with many programs requiring that students begin their postsecondary education immediately after graduation. But most college students are not, in fact, recent high school graduates,[195] and workforce-oriented Promise programs need to be able to reach adult workers. In recent years, the range of students reached by Promise programs has broadened, as some locales add companion programs to serve adults, and some states and community colleges launch Promise programs with no age restrictions.

**Academic eligibility requirements.** Some Promise programs include eligibility requirements that go beyond geographic location. The most typical among these are a minimum level of high school academic achievement (often a 2.0 or 2.5 GPA), high school attendance rates, or ACT/SAT scores. The rationale behind such requirements usually relates to the issue of college success—that is, students who fall below these academic benchmarks may struggle to succeed in a postsecondary setting. In addition, there are concerns that investing resources in sending students to college who have lower odds of persisting to a degree will reduce the return-on-investment of the Promise intervention.

The research is mixed on the effectiveness of program rules related to academic performance. Research suggests that high school GPAs are a reliable predictor of college success,[193] so program leaders may turn to them to increase the likelihood that program beneficiaries will complete credentials or degrees. However, most Promise programs seek to expand the college-going funnel to reach students not already on the postsecondary track, and high school GPA and attendance requirements can hinder this. A randomized trial of a Promise-like program in Milwaukee[196] found that high school GPA requirements did not lead to higher grades in high school, and

[192] Bartik, T.J., & Sotherland, N. (2015). *Migration and housing price effects of place-based college scholarships* (Upjohn Institute Working Paper No. 15-245). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research; Fitzpatrick, M. D. & Jones, D. (2013). *Higher education, merit-based scholarships and post-baccalaureate migration*. (NBER Working Paper No. 18530). National Bureau of Economic Research; Ordway, D.M. (2018, March 30). *Brain drain: Does tying college aid to residency keep graduates in state?* Journalist's Resource.

[193] Miron, G., Jones, J.N., & Kelaher-Young, A.J. (2011). *The Kalamazoo Promise and perceived changes in school climate*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 19(17); Ritter, G. & Ash, J. 2016. *The promise of a college scholarship transforms a district.* *Phi Delta Kappan* 97(5), 13–19; Winograd, M., & Miller, H. (2016, March 22). *Promise programs aren't just about the money*. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

[194] Phinney, R. (2013). *Exploring residential mobility among low-income families*. *Social Service Review* 87(4).

[195] Miron, G., Jones, J.N., & Kelaher-Young, A.J. (2011). The impact of the Kalamazoo Promise on school climate. Education Policy Analysis Archives 19(17); Ritter, G. & Ash, J. 2016. The promise of a college scholarship transforms a district. Phi Delta Kappan 97(5), 13–19; Winograd, M., & Miller, H. (2016, March 22). Promise programs aren't just about the money. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

[196] Harris, D.N., Farmer-Hinton, R., Kim, D., Diamond, J., Blakely Reavis, T., Krupa Rifelj, K., Lustick, H., & Carl, B. (2018). *The promise of free college (and its potential pitfalls)*. Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings.

the main effect was to limit funds to only one in five students who were otherwise eligible.[197] Since GPA is also correlated with race and income, such requirements can reduce program equity and effectiveness in increasing college-going. Moreover, such requirements are likely to limit the catalyzing effect on high schools' college-going culture, with resources targeted toward higher-achieving students.

An alternative approach to high school academic eligibility requirements is to "let the market decide," operating on the premise that if you can gain admission to a particular college or university based on your high school performance you can go there and receive Promise funding.

**Postsecondary performance requirements.** Even after students meet initial eligibility requirements, some programs have additional requirements students must fulfill to maintain eligibility once they have entered college. The most common of these are taking a minimum number of credit courses per semester and maintaining a minimum college GPA (this is often congruent with colleges' own requirements to remain in good academic standing). There is some research from other financial aid models that these types of incentives are more effective than high school–level merit requirements because they involve the possibility of taking away students' current funding.[198] In contrast, when academic merit requirements focus on high school, the receipt of college funding is often far in the future, limiting students' incentives to change their behavior.

**Financial need.** A minority of Promise programs restrict benefits to students with demonstrable financial need (as measured, for example, by Pell Grant eligibility), although many other programs target such students indirectly by focusing their resources on high-poverty school districts or limiting benefits to the two-year public college sector that disproportionately serves low-income students. Merit requirements have the opposite effect and tend to distribute funds to those with less financial need. Some programs combine academic and financial need requirements, while others have imposed income ceilings to ensure that benefits do not go to the wealthy.

**Other requirements.** A few Promise programs have embedded community service into their eligibility criteria. This creates an added administrative burden both for students who need to find qualifying volunteer opportunities and program administrators who must track and enforce the rules. On the other hand, such requirements can make a program more attractive to key constituencies or funders by requiring students to "give back" to their community. A few states, most notably New York with its Excelsior Scholarship, have adopted "stay or pay" rules that require students to remain in the state for a given number of years after degree completion—if the student leaves, their grant aid becomes a loan. These provisions, too, impose high levels of administrative burden and complicate the "free college" message.

The history of social welfare policy in the United States suggests that universal programs enjoy stronger political support and popularity than those targeted toward the poor. In the Promise field, polling data suggests that adding a GPA requirement increases public support, while adding a financial need requirement reduces perceptions of fairness.[199] Beyond perceptions, though, eligibility rules, along with other program criteria (see Questions 19 and 20), will profoundly affect who benefits from a Promise program.[200] Eligibility requirements of all kinds also create administrative burdens that keep students from receiving funds even if they are eligible.[201]

As with other social programs, simple rules around student eligibility[202] and low barriers to access[203] will maximize the reach of a Promise program, as research suggests.

Guidelines around student eligibility interact with the two other key design decisions—institutional choice and the form of the scholarship—to determine the nature of the incentive provided by a Promise program (see Chapters 19 and 20).

## Recommended Reading for Chapters 18, 19, and 20

Campaign for Free College Tuition. (2022, Revised). ***Making public colleges tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders***. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

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[197] Harris, D.N., & Mills, J. (2021). *Optimal college financial aid: Theory and evidence on free college, early commitment, and merit aid from an eight-year randomized trial* (EdWorkingPaper No. 21-393). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

[198] Scott-Clayton, J. (2011). *On money and motivation: A quasi-experimental analysis of financial incentives for college achievement*. *Journal of Human Resources* 46(3), 614–646; Carruthers, C., & Özek, U. (2016). *Losing HOPE: Financial aid and the line between college and work*. *Economics of Education Review*, Volume 53; Schudde, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). *Pell grants as performance-based scholarships? An examination of satisfactory academic progress requirements in the nation's largest need-based aid program*. *Research in Higher Education* 57(8), 943–967.

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[200] Judith Scott-Clayton, J., Libassi, C.J., & Sparks, D. (2022). *The fine print on free college: Who benefits from New York's Excelsior Scholarship?* (Brief). Urban Institute.

[201] Gandara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022). *Reducing barriers to free college programs*. (Policy brief). Scholars Strategy Network.

[202] Burland, E., Dynarski, S., Michelmore, K., Owen, S., & Raghuraman, S. (2022). *The power of certainty: Experimental evidence on the effective design of free tuition programs*. (NBER Working Paper No. 29864). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[203] Bettinger, E., Long, B.T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). *The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment*. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127(3).

*A compendium of existing statewide Promise programs and "how to" guide for state leaders covering best practices and steps needed to launch a statewide Promise program.*

College Promise Campaign. (2018). [***Playbook: How to build a Promise***]. College Promise.

*A resource for city and county elected officials to build College Promise programs for their communities. It includes information on the steps needed to create a Promise program and provides planning documents from several existing Promise programs.*

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*This infographic explores faulty public assumptions about the makeup of today's college students, touching on issues of age, economic background, and work.*

Miller-Adams, M. & B. Timmeney (2024). ***Six lessons for tuition-free college programs from the Columbus Promise***.

*This short article shows how a simple and relatively inexpensive Promise program limited to a single postsecondary institution can dramatically increase postsecondary attendance and provide a platform for new types of holistic student support and community alignment.*

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*This free e-book provides a brief overview of the place-based scholarship movement, summarizing key design decisions, the diffusion of the Promise idea from Kalamazoo to other communities and states, and the challenges that stopped some Promise programs before they began.*

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*This analysis of New York State's scholarship that allows students from families earning up to $125,000 to attend one of the state's public four-year institutions tuition free shows how the program's eligibility rules and application processes may impede access to benefits and direct most benefits toward middle- and upper-income students.*

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*Includes guidelines for Promise program design derived from technical assistance MDRC provided to several Promise programs in their early stages.*

## Design Principles in Practice: Letting Goals Drive Eligibility Rules

While it has always been difficult to know precisely what the ***Kalamazoo Promise*** donors had in mind due to their preference for anonymity, the design of the program, announced in 2005, provides plenty of hints. The Kalamazoo Promise restricts its benefits to graduates of the Kalamazoo Public Schools, the urban school district that serves most of the region's low-income and non-White students. It also pioneered the idea of a sliding scale for benefits, with a minimum residency and enrollment requirement of four years (beginning in ninth grade) and the largest scholarship going to students who are part of the district for 13 years. These program rules, as well as the outcomes of appeals over the years, suggest the donors' commitment to using the Kalamazoo Promise as a tool to attach students and families more securely to the urban core and revitalize the public school district that sits at the center of the region.

Leaders in Detroit took a different approach. The ***Detroit Promise*** is available to all high school graduates in the city of Detroit, provided their high school (whether public, private, charter, or parochial) is within city limits. For the larger of the Detroit Promise's two program tracks (that focused on community college attendance), the length of residency is also shorter (two years minimum), and there is no sliding scale promoting long-term attachment to the city or a given school. These program rules suggest that partners were motivated less by revitalizing the Detroit Public Schools (an urban district that has suffered declining enrollment and budgetary challenges for decades due in large part to policies promoting school choice and charter schools) and more by increasing college-going rates for youth across the city.

The Promise movement began by serving recent high school graduates. In places like Denver, El Dorado, New Haven, and Pittsburgh, students are required to begin college shortly after high school graduation and face relatively tight time limits for using scholarship funds. Statewide programs began the same way, with the Tennessee Promise, announced in 2014, designed to support students attending college the fall after they graduate from high school.

In some cases, the Promise movement, especially at the state level, has evolved to include adults; see Chapter 4 for discussion of adult focused "Reconnect" programs in Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Tennessee. California's community colleges also serve students of any age with tuition-free access as do some local programs. When the introduction of Promise programs is driven by the need to expand the workforce, the logic of restricting benefits to recent high school graduates falls short. There are workers all along the age continuum who can benefit from obtaining degrees or credentials and contribute to the quality of a state or local workforce. With enthusiastic support from employers seeking access to trained workers, even very conservative states have been able to launch Promise programs to meet emerging workforce needs.

CHAPTER 19

# Scholarship design: Which institutions should be included?

Lead authors: Michelle Miller-Adams and Douglas Harris

**Promise programs should designate eligible postsecondary institutions that offer good matches for different kinds of students and promote student success.**

Promise programs run the gamut in terms of the number and type of postsecondary institutions students can attend. Statewide Promise initiatives limit usage to in-state colleges and universities, often emphasizing the less-expensive two-year sector. Promise programs devised by community colleges limit attendance to their own institution. The greatest variation is found in community-based programs, where eligible institutions range from a single local community college to any accredited higher-ed institution in the nation. (If out-of-state attendance is allowed, tuition is usually capped at the highest in-state rate.) While most Promise programs focus on public colleges and universities, a few have special arrangements with private colleges. Promise programs have historically avoided for-profit colleges that lack regional accreditation; these institutions are considered exploitative based on their high costs, low completion rates, and poor workforce outcomes.[204]

## Policy Considerations

- Be clear about goals and devise rules regarding eligible institutions in line with these goals; decisions about two-year versus four-year institutions or local versus statewide institutions should be driven by student needs and program goals, not just by available resources.
- When designating eligible postsecondary choices, program designers should consider institutions' graduation rates and their ability to support student success.
- Promise programs should be designed to encourage students to attend the institution that offers the best academic match.
- It's best to start modestly and expand postsecondary choices, rather than the other way around.

## What We Know

In general, students will benefit from having a range of choices when it comes to types of institutions and covered programs (for example, two- and four-year degrees, short-term credentials, and apprenticeships). But Promise planners must also seek to direct students toward institutions and programs with strong records of student success and completion.

Cost considerations often drive the decision about which institutions should be included; a better approach is to connect this decision to the program's goals.

Most statewide Promise programs limit usage to the two-year public sector (although there are a few exceptions, including Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Washington, all of which include four-year options). In addition to keeping costs down, a focus on two-year institutions offers a quick return on investment in the form of more educated and credentialed workers that can strengthen political support for a program. If attendance is limited to two-year colleges, state policymakers and higher-ed leaders should ensure there are strong transfer pathways for students wanting to matriculate to a four-year institution and that credits earned in one setting can transfer to another.

Community colleges launching Promise programs with their own funds generally restrict usage to their own institutions. Here, an analysis of institutional capacity and local workforce needs can help planners focus on where additional resources may be needed and tighten the connection with the local economy.

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204 Cellini, S. (2025). *For-profit colleges*, in Douglas Harris (Eds.), *Live Handbook of Education Policy Research*. Association for Education Finance and Policy.

Partners designing community-based programs have more choices, and the community's critical need should guide them. If generating degrees and credentials for residents is the top priority, limiting usage to local institutions might make sense. If partners are hoping to use a Promise program to attract or retain residents (for example, to increase local public school district enrollment or attach residents to a community for the long term), a more generous program that offers stronger incentives by offering two- and four-year options is a better choice.

Decisions about eligible institutions can have unintended consequences. The two-year public sector is considerably less expensive than the four-year sector (either public or private),[205] but a program limited to these institutions runs the risk of inducing some students to switch from four-year to two-year colleges, where completion rates are lower. (College quality affects completion rates for equivalent students, thus "undermatching"—attending an institution that is less selective than the one to which you could gain admission—is best avoided.[206]) Field of study requirements (such as restricting scholarship use to certain majors) has the side effect of creating administrative complexity that can undermine program success. In short, the more "asterisks" that apply to rules about scholarship usage, the harder it is to send a clear message to prospective students. As a result, the students that Promise planners are trying to reach may not be aware of which specific programs are included or may be confused about what happens if they switch majors. Students are less likely to participate when this type of uncertainty prevails.

If resources are constrained, beginning with a more affordable Promise (such as one limited to a local community college) can help build college awareness without overextending funders' capacity. If a Promise program focuses exclusively on two-year institutions, ensuring robust FAFSA completion efforts and information availability around other scholarships can help students attend more selective institutions. (Some Promise programs, including the Detroit Promise, have negotiated directly with four-year institutions that offer scholarships from their own resources to support some students.) If additional resources become available, adding four-year institutions to the range of choices should be considered. Beginning with more expansive postsecondary choices that prove financially unsustainable and then narrowing options can erode confidence in a Promise program.

Guidelines around where students can use their scholarship interact with the two other key design decisions—student eligibility and the form of the scholarship—to determine the nature of the incentive provided by a Promise program (see Chapters 18 and 20).

## Recommended Reading for Chapters 18, 19, and 20

Campaign for Free College Tuition. (2022, Revised). ***Making public colleges tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders***. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

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*This report reviews statewide Promise programs through an equity lens and sets forth criteria states should adopt if they want their Promise programs to reach those students who struggle the most to pay for college.*

Lumina Foundation (n.d.), ***Today's students***.

*This infographic explores faulty public assumptions about the makeup of today's college students, touching on issues of age, economic background, and work.*

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206 Cohodes, S.R., & Goodman, J.S. (2014). *Merit aid, college quality, and college completion: Massachusetts' Adams Scholarship as an in-kind subsidy*. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 6(4), 251–285.

Miller-Adams, M. & B. Timmeney (2024). ***Six lessons for tuition-free college programs from the Columbus Promise***.

*This short article shows how a simple and relatively inexpensive Promise program limited to a single postsecondary institution can dramatically increase postsecondary attendance and provide a platform for new types of holistic student support and community alignment.*

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Includes guidelines for Promise program design derived from technical assistance MDRC provided to several Promise programs in their early stages.

CHAPTER 20

# Scholarship design: How should the scholarship be structured?

Lead authors: Douglas Harris and Michelle Miller-Adams

**Promise scholarships can be designed in various ways, some of which bring significant new resources to students and others that leverage existing resources in part through clear messaging around college affordability and access.**

There are several options for structuring Promise scholarships, and these have important implications for how much new funding is available to students. One distinction is whether the scholarship offers a guarantee of tuition coverage or whether it is set at a flat rate.

Another important issue is whether the scholarship is offered before or after other forms of grant aid; "first-dollar" scholarships are rare and expensive but bring more new resources to students. "Last-dollar" scholarships make use of existing forms of grant aid, especially Pell grants. They are more cost-effective but sometimes leave students without new resources. Some programs are pioneering new forms of "middle-dollar" scholarships to ensure that all students receive some new resources.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise leaders should seek to understand in advance how design decisions will affect cost to make sure their program is feasible and sustainable. Procuring an independent cost forecast will help with this process and increase certainty around program costs.
- Keeping the scholarship structure as simple as possible will reduce student uncertainty, make messaging easier, and promote usage. Even if there is more complex financing structure underpinning a program, it is essential to "keep the machinery under the hood" so students and families receive a clear message.
- It is important for Promise program leaders to have a plan and resources in place to communicate regularly with students and families about the details of the scholarship.
- First-dollar funding structures will better equip low-income students to manage the full costs of college; however, these are expensive and rare.
- Less generous, last- or middle-dollar programs can help increase college access provided effective navigation and student support resources, as well as strong messaging, are in place.
- Avoid making program commitments that cannot be sustained; it is better to start small and expand benefits than to offer a more generous Promise that at some point may need to be reduced.

## What We Know

A core element of a Promise program is the funding it provides for postsecondary education, which is especially valuable in an era where the price of college has been rising. The Promise model departs from the typical college scholarship in several ways: Promise scholarships are, for the most part, **based on residency and are need-blind,** whereas the largest source of student financial aid is need-based, awarded primarily through the federal Pell grant. Promise scholarships are generally **easy to access and are available to all students** who meet established criteria, whereas many other scholarships are limited in number and accessed through a competitive application process.

Most Promise programs address only the **direct costs of college—tuition and mandatory fees—**and not all cover these in their entirety. Some programs commit to covering tuition and fees at eligible institutions, whatever that cost may be. Others provide a flat grant to be used toward these costs. A few allocate additional resources to partially cover nontuition costs such as housing, transportation, and books. For many students, the largest cost of college is the time they could have spent on other activities, especially earning more income; economists call this an "opportunity cost." Promise programs help make college more attractive and feasible by providing resources to replace this lost income.

There are three main approaches for the timing of the application of scholarship funds to students' tuition bills. **First-dollar scholarships** are the most expensive because they calculate scholarship dollars before eligible federal and state grant aid are applied. This means that the Promise program is paying for tuition (and often mandatory fees) for each Promise program recipient. This structure is quite rare in the Promise universe because of its high cost, but it has important equity benefits, directing the largest amount of funding to those students most in need.[207] In a **last-dollar design,** which dominates in the field, Promise scholarship dollars are applied after federal and sometimes state grant aid. This makes the program less expensive; in fact, some students may not require any Promise scholarship dollars at all if federal or state grants fully cover their tuition bill. **Middle-dollar designs** are becoming more popular in part to ensure that low-income students receive new resources through a Promise scholarship. They guarantee funding for all students regardless of financial need by offering either a minimum scholarship amount or a stipend to cover books and other educational expenses.

Promise programs can help overcome two other problems with existing financial aid systems. Aid triggered by a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) filing comes very late in the process, since students do not file their FAFSA until they are high school seniors. The FAFSA form is also notoriously complex and has proven to be a barrier in college attendance.[208] One of the most important contributions of Promise programs is to provide an early guarantee of college affordability, conveying to eligible students that college is affordable. This makes FAFSA completion just one step along the path to college rather than a formidable barrier. If FAFSA completion is a requirement for receiving a Promise scholarship, program designers need to ensure that ample resources are in place to help students and families complete this task. Community partners and hands-on assistance—often working through high schools, which is where the students are—are critical elements of an effective FAFSA completion strategy.

For last-dollar programs that cover only the two-year sector, planners should consider providing supplemental grants to students who receive no funding through the Promise program (i.e., those whose Pell grants are covering their tuition). These can be used to help cover some costs of attendance (e.g., transportation, books). This model is sometimes called a "middle-dollar" scholarship.

The spread of Promise programs has raised questions about **scholarship award displacement—**that is, whether the availability of a Promise scholarship leads institutions to withdraw aid they have already awarded to students. Displacement is a widespread practice that is gaining greater scrutiny,[209] and some states have enacted laws to make it illegal.[210] Promise programs have found it helpful to negotiate directly with the financial aid offices of the colleges that receive their students to ensure agreement that a Promise scholarship will add to rather than replace existing aid. There is limited research on the topic, but at least one paper finds that the Pittsburgh Promise had not led to scholarship displacement.[211]

Guidelines around scholarship structure interact with the two other key design decisions—student eligibility and institutional choices—to determine the nature of the incentive provided by a Promise program (see Chapters 18 and 19).

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207 Miller-Adams, M., & McMullen, I. (2022). *Promise program design for equity outcomes: A landscape survey*. (Working Paper No. 22-366). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

208 Bettinger, E., Long, B.T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). *The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment*. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127(3); Selagea, M. (2025, January 24). *6 Main FAFSA Challenges – and How Educators Can Help Students Overcome Them.* OneGoal.

209 Lewis, Z., & Green, B. (2022, April 25). *Scholarship award displacement: The hidden practice*. Forbes.

210 Francisco, M. (2020, April 14). *Now you see it, now you don't: Scholarship displacement dilemma*. New America.

211 Lowry, D., L. Page, A. Nurshatayeva, & J. Iriti (2024). *Subtraction by addition: Do private scholarship awards lead to financial aid displacement?* *Economics of Education Review* 99(102517).

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CHAPTER 21

# Success factors: Implementing student support in high school and college

Lead authors: Bridget Timmeney and Denisa Gándara

**Promise programs will have the greatest impact if they combine new financial resources with proven forms of student support.**

Providing students with new financial resources is not always enough to change their postsecondary pathways. Students, especially first-generation or low-income college-goers, need support navigating both the academic and nonacademic challenges of college. Promise programs have drawn on evidence-based strategies for supporting students, such as coaching, case management, and the use of predictive analytics, to improve retention and completion. Promise leaders should consider including funding for student support in their Promise design and seek strong collaboration between their main sending (K–12 education) their receiving (higher ed) institutions around student support.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise leaders should integrate support services into their programs from the start and commit the resources needed to pay for them.
- Services may be delivered or paid for through the Promise program itself, through nonprofit college access organizations serving local school districts, or through the colleges recipients attend; if the latter, close alignment around goals is essential.
- Best practices include the provision of personalized support; creation of a sense of belonging through summer, cohort, and other types of programming, as well as culturally relevant service delivery; and proactive interventions, rather than those that wait for students to ask for help.
- Navigation support in high school can help students identify their career and college goals and ensure the "right fit" postsecondary institution. Creating a warm handoff from high school to college (trade school, two-year, or four-year) is especially important.
- Data analytics can help colleges and their student support offices help detect when a student might need help.
- Administrative hurdles, such as complex application or financial aid processes, should be avoided as they make it harder for students to access benefits.

## What We Know

Research is mixed about the effects of aid on college success. Some studies have suggested that reducing the price of college is insufficient to improve degree attainment rates and a greater per-dollar impact can be gained from increasing spending on students once in college.[212] Combining new financial resources with effective student support strategies offers the best path for Promise programs.

College persistence and completion can be supported by wraparound interventions for students, including personalized and high-touch support as well as programs that increase students' sense of belonging in their college or university. The most successful interventions also seek to reduce or eliminate hurdles students must overcome to access benefits. As Promise program designs evolve from increasing financial access to improving completion, such support components are increasingly being incorporated.

For Promise programs that support recent high school graduates, the first stages of support must occur in the K–12 years, whether through the local school district itself or through a community partner. I Know I Can (IKIC) serves this function for Columbus Promise students. The presence of IKIC advisors in the high schools and through the organization's ongoing coordination among

[212] Deming, David J., Walters, & Christopher R. (2017). *The impact of price caps and spending cuts on U.S. postsecondary attainment* (NBER Working Paper No. 23736). National Bureau of Economic Research.

the school district and Columbus State Community College are proving to be critical assets for students. The advisors are deeply embedded in the schools and are usually treated (by colleagues and students) as an integral part of the counseling or senior class support team. At the same time, they remain connected to IKIC and their fellow advisors, which facilitates information sharing, dissemination of best practices, and the resolution of problems. Above all, advisers have strong, trusting relationships with the students they serve. Senior English classes serve as important touchpoints for the advisors as a place where all seniors can be reached. IKIC also facilitates the "warm handoff" to college, assisting with FAFSA, applications, "right fit" decisions, financial aid communication, and attendance at the higher ed orientation to ensure that course registration is complete, books are secured, and a transportation plan is set.[213]

This approach has also been adopted by the Kalamazoo Promise, where a Pathways Coach is assigned to each high school, with a handoff to a Promise coach at the two largest receiving institutions—the local community college and a four-year university. The intentional support for students through the high-school-to-college transition along with consistent staff follow-up supports a successful transition for students who are navigating on their own or with minimal support.

The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) based at the City University of New York (CUNY) has served as a model for some Promise programs' support components. CUNY ASAP offers personalized academic and career advising, a summer institute, cohort-style courses with convenient scheduling, and financial support (e.g., tuition/fee waivers, textbook assistance, and transportation). The program has nearly doubled three-year associate degree completion rates.[214] The ASAP model has been replicated successfully (with modifications) in other locations,[215] as well as with the Detroit Promise, where the replication generated mixed results.[216] In places where the ASAP model was implemented as designed, however, it produced a small but statistically significant increase in college attainment.[217]

Similarly, Georgia State University's student-success initiatives, powered by predictive-analytics software, have had large, positive effects on student outcomes. These initiatives have been credited with eliminating racial/ethnic gaps in degree attainment. Georgia State's program uses information about students to predict when they would benefit from "intrusive" advising. The university also proactively provides emergency financial aid for students flagged by the system as in need of financial support. The university then automatically disburses the aid, addressing students' immediate needs and eliminating the bureaucratic and administrative barriers that often prevent students from accessing the help they need.[218]

The Nashville GRAD model was introduced at Nashville State Community College to offer dedicated success advisors, financial support for textbooks and transportation as well as academic, social, and emotional support to navigate higher education challenges. Results indicated that the GRAD program improved persistence rates, with GRAD students persisting at a rate that is approximately 11 points higher than that of comparison students.[219]

More recently, Research for Action (RFA) studied tnAchieves and the Tennessee Promise, as well as the Community College of Philadelphia's last-dollar scholarship programs that are building partnerships between postsecondary institutions and community organizations. In Tennessee, the COMPLETE coaching model offers structured advising—both proactive and reactive. RFA's randomized control trial shows limited evidence of differences in completion rates between students receiving proactive and reactive coaching, yet descriptive evidence indicates that students who were offered proactive coaching—*and subsequently engaged with their coach*—had higher rates of college completion compared to students who were offered reactive coaching. For holistic supports to be effective, the researchers found it's not enough to just offer resources and supports; well-designed programs successfully engage students in the supports available to them.

In the Philadelphia study, RFA's findings indicated that scholarship recipients credited their college success coach with their ability to persist in college because their coach helped them foster a sense of belonging to the college and the scholarship.[220]

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213 Miller-Adams, M., Hollenbeck, K., Timmeney, B., & Huisman, K. (2025). *The Columbus Promise: Year two evaluation report*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Report prepared for the City of Columbus.

214 Weiss, M.J., Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., & Gupta, H. (2019). *Supporting community college students from start to degree completion: Long-term evidence from a randomized trial of CUNY's ASAP*. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 11*(3), 253–297.

215 Miller, C., & Weiss, M.J. (2021). *Increasing community college graduation rates: A synthesis of findings on the ASAP model from six colleges across two states*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 44(2), 210–233.

216 Ratledge, A., et. al. (2021). *Motor City momentum: Three years of the Detroit Promise Path for community college students*. MDRC.

217 Ratledge, Alyssa and Stanley Dai. (2022). *The Detroit Promise path evaluation: Outcomes after four years*. MDRC.

218 Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2020). *Innovation in higher education case study: Georgia State University*.

219 Dickason, Christine & Heinrich, Carolyn & Smith, Mary. (2023). *Delivering on the Promise: the role of supplemental Promise programs in reducing barriers to college success*. *Journal of Higher Education* 95(1), 92–119.

220 Duffy, Mark. (2024). *For the good of the city: An early evaluation of the Catto Scholarship*. Research for Action.

As a final coaching and example, research on the Stay the Course intervention in Texas found that providing case-management support by a social worker substantially improves outcomes for low-income community college students, especially women.[221] A key finding showed that emergency financial aid alone was not enough to improve degree attainment rates.

College student success depends not only on what services and supports are delivered but also on how they are delivered. For instance, existing studies have highlighted the importance of building community in classrooms, having diverse faculty representation, validating students' backgrounds, fostering trusting relationships with staff and faculty, drawing on students' strengths, and using culturally relevant materials in classrooms.

Clear messaging around the availability of and nature of support is also crucial. Research suggests that misperceptions about the kind of support that will be forthcoming can hinder students' progress toward completion.[222]

## Recommended Reading

Li, A., M. Billings, & D. Gándara (2025). ***Administrators push to improve free college access***. Brookings Institution.

*The authors provide commentary on their qualitative study highlighting administrators' recommendations for program implementation including their suggestion for comprehensive advising.*

Bettinger, Eric, & Baker, Rachel. (2011). ***The Effects of student coaching in college: An evaluation of a randomized experiment in student mentoring.*** NBER.

*The researchers tested the theory that students often don't succeed in college because they lack key information about how to be successful or fail to act on information that they have. Students who were randomly assigned to coaching supports were more likely to persist and more likely to be attending classes one year after the coaching ended. Coaching also proved more cost effective toward retention and completion goals compared to previously studied interventions such as increased financial aid.*

Feygin, Amy, Miller, Trey, Bettinger, Eric, & Dell, Madison (2022). ***Advising for college success: A systemic review of the evidence***. Institute of Education Sciences and College Completion Network.

*The College Completion Network conducted a systematic review of the research on advising strategies that support college completion.*

Barret, B., & Lavinson, R. (2021). ***The 2021 Aspen prize for community college excellence***. The Aspen Institute.

*The Aspen Institute reports on data-informed strategies at community colleges across the nation to highlight successful practices that go beyond enrollment and graduation with a focus on advancing racial equity and closing racial educational gaps on college campuses.*

Culver, K.C., Rivera, G.J., Acuna, A.A., Cole, D., Hallett, R., Kitchen, J.A., Perez, R.J., & Swanson, E. (2021). ***Engaging at-Promise students for success through innovative practices: Proactive advising and shared academic courses***. Pullias Center for Higher Education.

*Developed for practitioners, leaders, and administrators in higher education, this brief provides evidence-based practices for supporting low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students participating in the Thomas Scholars Learning Community. Researchers found exemplary structures and practices that support students in validating and identity-conscious ways.*

Fox, M. (2022). ***iPad rentals, emergency funds and food pantries: What it takes to make "free college" work for all students***. Youth Today.

*Given the rise in student hardships amidst the pandemic, this article introduces the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship as a legislative initiative designed to alleviate student need. The article spotlights New Mexican support systems that serve students' nonacademic needs, such as food insecurity, technology, and transportation.*

Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022). ***Reducing barriers to free college programs***. Scholars Strategy Network.

*This brief highlights barriers in program design that could impact student access and persistence. Authors advance policy recommendations aimed at ameliorating the barriers that can limit the effectiveness of free college or Promise programs.*

[221] Evans, W.N., Kearney, M.S., Perry, B., & Sullivan, J.X. (2020). *Increasing community college completion rates among low-income students: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial evaluation of a case-management intervention*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39(4), 930–965.

[222] Kramer, J.W. (2022). *Expectations of a promise: The psychological contracts between students, the state, and key actors in a tuition-free college environment*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 44(4), 759–782.

Hefling, Kimberly. (2019). ***The 'Moneyball' solution for higher education***. Politico.

*This article discusses how Georgia State uses student data with a predictive analytics system to identify risks for students. For example, analysis of high school data helps predict which incoming students are most like to experience summer melt (not arriving at college when expected); these students are then invited to special college preparation events. The data of current students is also monitored, using over 800 academic risk factors, so the college can intervene and provide students with resources to reduce the risk of dropping out. The system can also be used by advisors to see which of their students need special attention. The article also discusses how other institutions are adopting similar systems.*

CHAPTER 22

# Success factors: What do Promise leaders need to know about basic needs and student success?

Lead authors: Kathleen Bolter, Daniel Collier, and Bridget Timmeney

**Basic needs insecurity—whether around food, housing, transportation, healthcare, childcare, or technology—affects many Promise students, yet most Promise programs have not yet developed systematic approaches to address these barriers to student success.**

Promise programs cannot achieve their transformative goals if students cannot meet their basic needs. When students struggle with hunger, housing instability, or lack of transportation, their ability to focus on coursework, participate in campus life, and persist toward graduation is compromised. Lack of access to reliable healthcare or childcare also poses severe barriers to academic progress. While Promise programs excel at removing tuition barriers and increasingly offer an array of student supports, the evidence shows that basic needs insecurity remains a significant obstacle to student success—one that requires targeted interventions informed by what we know works in similar contexts.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise program resources will ideally include sustainable funding and strong campus and community partnerships to ensure that students' basic needs are met.
- In devising basic needs strategies, Promise programs should begin with systematic assessment of their student populations through data collection and validated survey instruments.
- Food security interventions represent the most evidence-based starting point for Promise programs seeking to address basic needs, with proven models available for implementation.
- Interventions to meet housing and transportation needs are less well understood and will require careful adaptation and evaluation to assess their effectiveness in the Promise context.
- Mapping existing campus and community resources and developing cross-sector partnerships is essential for delivering comprehensive basic needs support beyond what Promise programs may provide directly.

## What We Know

Addressing the challenge of basic needs insecurity extends far beyond the traditional scope of scholarship programs. Recent national surveys reveal that many college students face food and housing insecurity, as well as inadequate transportation, healthcare, childcare, and technology resources. These barriers intersect and compound, creating complex challenges that hinder progression and completion, and that tuition support alone cannot meet.[223] For example, a food-insecure student might prioritize working more hours over attending class, and those who are couch-surfing may not have reliable transportation to and from campus. Even small changes of fortune can be debilitating, such as an unaffordable car repair or a stolen laptop that can hinder a student's ability to attend class or complete assignments.

There is ample evidence that the problem of basic needs insecurity is widespread. The Hope Center found that 41 percent of students surveyed in 2023–24 experienced food insecurity, with higher rates at two-year colleges (43 percent ) than four-year (3

[223] Collier, D.A., Fitzpatrick, D.A., Brehm, C., & Archer, E. (2021). Coming to college hungry: How food insecurity relates to amotivation, stress, engagement, and first-semester performance in a four-year university. *Journal of Postsecondary Success* 1(1); Collier, D.A., Parnther, C., Fitzpatrick, D., Brehm, C., & Beach, A. (2019). Helping students keep the promise: Exploring how Kalamazoo Promise scholars' basic needs, motivation, and engagement correlate to performance and persistence in a 4-year institution. *Innovative Higher Education* 44, 333–350.

percent ).[224] Almost half the respondents reported housing insecurity, 44 percent reported mental health challenges related to anxiety and depression, while 18 percent noted childcare challenges. Internet/technology and transportation each were noted by 12 percent of the students. In total, 73 percent of students reported at least one type of basic needs insecurity.[2]

Promise programs serve student populations that closely mirror those most affected by basic needs insecurity, but most Promise initiatives have not yet developed systematic approaches to addressing these challenges. Some programs—notably the Kalamazoo Promise and Achieve Atlanta—have begun collecting data and designing basic needs strategies; others—including the Pittsburgh Promise—seek to cover room and board as well as tuition and fees; still others—including the Columbus Promise—offer students free bus passes. But the Promise movement overall has not yet arrived at comprehensive strategies for supporting student basic needs.

This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Promise programs are uniquely positioned to address basic needs through their community partnerships, established relationships with the students served, focus on specific geographic regions, and commitment to holistic support of student success. The question is not whether Promise programs should address basic needs, but how they can do so most effectively given the current state of evidence and practice.

## Food insecurity

Food security represents the most mature area for Promise program intervention. The research base is substantial, measurement tools are validated, and successful interventions have been documented across multiple institutional contexts.[225] Focusing on this area of need can assist Promise programs in building on proven approaches while adapting them to their unique contexts.

The USDA 6-item food security scale[226] provides a standardized tool for assessing student needs, despite some limitations in capturing the full spectrum of food insecurity experiences.[227] This instrument allows Promise programs to establish baseline data, track changes over time, and compare their populations to national benchmarks. The Kalamazoo Promise and Achieve Atlanta have demonstrated the feasibility of incorporating such assessments into annual student surveys, creating valuable data for both program improvement and evaluation.

Effective food security interventions fall into several categories. Emergency food assistance through campus food pantries provides immediate relief but should not be viewed as a comprehensive solution. More beneficial are approaches that address underlying financial constraints: emergency aid disbursements, meal plan vouchers, and programs that facilitate student access to federal nutrition assistance like SNAP.[228]

The most successful interventions combine immediate assistance with longer-term support. Meal voucher programs, as studied in various institutional contexts,[229] not only address immediate hunger but also contribute to students' sense of belonging and connection to their institution. This dual impact—meeting basic needs while strengthening institutional attachment—suggests an avenue for place-based scholarship programs seeking to improve both persistence and completion rates.

## Housing and transportation needs

Housing insecurity is a factor that can undermine or derail student success. The housing challenge will look different for Promise programs in different areas – for example, students in urban areas may face issues of overcrowding or lack of affordability, while those in rural areas may struggle with housing availability and proximity to campus.

Emergency housing assistance represents one proven approach, with several higher ed institutions successfully implementing rapid response programs for students facing housing crises. These programs typically provide short-term financial assistance for rent, security deposits, or temporary housing while connecting students to longer-term solutions. The *Stay the Course* intervention in Texas demonstrated that

224 The Hope Center. (2025, February). *2023–2024 Student basic needs survey report web appendices*.

225 Nazmi, A., S. Martinez, A. Byrd, D. Robinson, S. Bianco, J. Maguire, R. Crutchfield, K. Condron & Ritchie, L. (2018). *A systematic review of food insecurity among US students in higher education*. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 14(5), 725–740.

226 USDA Economic Research Services. (2025). *Food Security in the U.S.–Survey Tools.*

227 Ellison, B., Nguyen, C.J., Rabbitt, M.P., French, B., & Bruening, M. (2024). *Adapting the USDA food security module for use with college students: Can we improve model fit?* *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 46(4), 1301–1318; Brescia, S.A., & Cute, C.L. (2022). *Underestimating college student food insecurity: Marginally food secure students may not be food secure*. *Nutrients 14*(15), 3143.

228 Freudenberg N., Goldrick-Rab S., & Poppendieck, J. (2019). *College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States*. *American Journal of Public Health*. December.

229 Broton, K.M., Mohebali, M., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2023). *Meal vouchers matter for academic attainment: A community college field experiment*. *Educational Researcher* 52(4), 231–241.

case management support, including housing assistance, significantly improved outcomes for low-income community college students.[230]

Transportation barriers are an issue for Promise programs in communities with limited or expensive public transit or those serving students commuting between rural areas and campuses. Successful interventions have included free bus pass programs, emergency transportation funds, and partnerships with rideshare services. However, these activities will require careful cost-benefit analysis and adaptation to local transportation ecosystems.

Housing and transportation challenges are not unique to Promise students and will vary depending on the community context. Partnership strategies are particularly important in these areas, as Promise programs cannot realistically become housing providers or transportation systems. They can, however, broker relationships with community organizations, social service agencies, and local government entities that provide these services.

## Other basic needs

Healthcare access, childcare availability, and technology equity are other essential ingredients for degree and credential completion. These needs particularly affect the adult learners, students who are parents, and rural students that many Promise programs serve.

Promise students often lack health insurance, face barriers accessing campus health services, or struggle with mental health challenges exacerbated by financial stress and academic pressure. While some institutions have experimented with enhanced counseling services, health insurance subsidies, or partnerships with community health centers, evidence on effectiveness remains limited.

Childcare is perhaps the most significant barrier for Promise students who are parents, a population that includes substantial numbers of adult learners in community college–focused programs. The lack of affordable, accessible childcare directly limits these students' ability to attend classes, study, and participate in campus activities. Some Promise communities—such as Hope Chicago, the Kalamazoo Promise, or Lee College in Texas—have explored partnerships with existing childcare providers or subsidies for childcare costs, but systematic evaluation of these approaches is lacking. Most recently, New Mexico, which is already home to the nation's most comprehensive tuition-free college program, has added a guarantee of universal, free childcare for all state residents.[231]

Technology access has evolved from a convenience to a necessity. The shift to remote learning precipitated by the pandemic prompted rapid responses—laptop lending programs, internet connectivity subsidies, tech support services—but the longer-term implications for Promise programs remain unclear. Rural Promise programs may face challenges in addressing technology gaps due to infrastructure limitations.

## Launching basic needs support

Whatever the area of need, similar steps can be followed by Promise partners to ensure that the problem is well understood, that new efforts build on existing resources, and that the impact of interventions is assessed. These questions represent a starting point for consideration of a basic needs strategy:

- What is the scope of the problem in the population we serve?
- Who is already doing work on this issue?
- What federal, state, and local policies or resources are already available?
- How can we meaningfully connect our Promise students to existing resources?
- What gaps remain after existing resources are utilized?
- How will we assess the impact of our efforts and adjust?

For Promise programs wanting to address basic needs, their approach should be systematic and include the following steps:

1. **Assessment** is the starting point. Promise programs should integrate basic needs assessment into their regular student data collection, using validated instruments like the USDA food security scale. Assessment should be ongoing rather than one-time, as student needs change throughout their postsecondary path.
2. **Implementation** should emphasize evidence-based strategies over comprehensiveness. Beginning with food security interventions would allow programs to build operational capacity while addressing a well-documented need. Success in tackling food security could create momentum for expanding to housing or transportation support, while building the evaluation tools necessary for innovation in other areas.
3. **Partnership development** should occur parallel to implementation. Basic needs support requires connections across multiple sectors—education, social services, healthcare, business, philanthropy, and government. Promise programs that are part of

[230] Evans, W.N., Kearney, M.S., Perry, B., & Sullivan, J.X. (2020). *Increasing community college completion rates among low-income students: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial evaluation of a case-management intervention*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39(4), 930–965.

[231] Lee, M. (2025, September 15). *New Mexico is first state to offer universal free child care*. AP News.

collective impact initiatives have an advantage in that they can build on existing relationships, but all programs can benefit from mapping their community resources and identifying potential collaboration opportunities.

4. **Sustainability planning** becomes crucial as programs expand their basic needs support. Unlike one-time tuition assistance, basic needs support requires ongoing operational funding and staff capacity. Promise programs must develop sustainable financing models, whether through diversified funding, fee-for-service arrangements with partner institutions, or integration with existing social service systems.

The Promise movement began by addressing financial and informational barriers to higher education but has evolved to tackle other barriers that impede students' successful progression through college and into the workforce. As Promise programs seek to reduce whatever barriers stand in the way of student success, basic needs insecurity increasingly requires attention. Promise partners are well-positioned to advocate for student needs, connect students to existing services, and leverage their community partnerships. In doing so, they may also serve as engines of innovation for broader strategies to meet the basic needs of today's college students.

## Recommended Reading

Collier, D.A., & Perez, B.E. (2023–2024). ***Food insecurity: A hidden barrier to higher education***. American Educator.

*This article provides an accessible introduction to research on food insecurity, how it affects student success, and promising approaches for addressing it.*

Goldrick-Rab, S. (n.d.). ***#RealCollege Resource Library***.

*This repository provides research studies, reports, and practical resources for addressing college student basic needs, offering evidence-based guidance for program development.*

Kramer, J.W., I. Simmons, A. Perez, & L. Daugherty (2025, June 2). ***Promising approaches to Student basic needs support: Evidence from leading colleges and the literature***. RAND.

*This report identifies six core features of effective basic needs support programs, providing guidance for Promise programs seeking to implement evidence-based approaches.*

McKibben, B., Wu, J., & Ableson, S. (2023, August 3). ***New federal data confirm that college students face significant—and unacceptable—basic needs insecurity***. The Hope Center at Temple University.

*This analysis of national data provides essential context for understanding the scope and demographics of basic needs insecurity among college students.*

CHAPTER 23

# Success factors: What is the role of research and evaluation?

Lead authors: Bridget Timmeney and Denisa Gándara

**Research and evaluation can help Promise partners improve program implementation and learn whether program goals are being met.**

Evaluation efforts need not be technical or expensive, and they can be carried out in a variety of ways, but their purpose is the same—to generate findings that can be used by Promise partners to make their program more effective. Research and evaluation can help these partners track progress toward goals, provide insights that lead to program improvements, and build support for a program.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise leadership should plan for evaluation during the program design phase, and evaluators, whether internal or external, should be engaged early on.
- Baseline data should be collected before a Promise program is announced to make it possible to compare pre- and post-outcomes.
- Consent forms for evaluation and research should be integrated into the program application process to facilitate data tracking without extra steps.
- A dissemination strategy for evaluation findings should be developed, with different mechanisms for internal and external audiences.

## What We Know

The Promise movement has given rise to a range of research and evaluation efforts that can help people understand whether programs are achieving their intended goals and build a base of knowledge about what works. Sometimes these efforts are carried out by external evaluators hired by Promise programs, sometimes they are carried out by Promise staff, and sometimes they are the products of independent researchers. Evaluation need not be costly and technical, or conducted by outside experts, but it should be an integral part of any Promise initiative from the beginning.

Research and evaluation resources can be found in multiple places: Statewide Promise programs created by legislatures generally require state agencies to track progress and usage of resources. In Tennessee, for example, the comptroller's office produces full evaluations every four years and annual updates.[232] The higher education commission also produces annual reports[233] that track enrollment and other statistics.

Community college–based programs usually rely on their own institutional research or enrollment management personnel to assess the impact of their tuition-free initiatives. Some cross-institutional efforts, such as this one in California,[234] also support the community college sector by tracking legislation and promoting best practices.

Community-based programs have the most diverse array of evaluation efforts. Most carry out their own data tracking and may post a data dashboard,[235] while others may also create a formal evaluation plan, hire outside evaluators,[236] or partner with

[232] Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury. (2020–2024). *Tennessee Promise evaluation*.

[233] Tennessee Higher Education Commission. 2017–2024). *Tennessee Promise annual reports*.

[234] WestEd. (n.d.). *College Promise project in California*.

[235] Pittsburgh Promise. (n.d.). *The impact dashboard*.

[236] MDRC. (n.d.). *Detroit Promise path*.

academics,[237] especially those at local universities, to do more formal evaluations.

Information generated through research and evaluation can inform an array of entities, including program administrators and staff, funders, policymakers, and community partners. Such information can reveal the impact a program is having on its target population and generate insights to help improve program delivery. It also can be used to identify effective, high-quality practices that should be scaled up or replicated.

Evaluations also produce data that can help build support for a program. In addition to providing feedback around implementation and program rules, Promise evaluation results have been used to demonstrate student impacts, such as institutional enrollment increases and stronger student and family engagement in higher education. These findings have been leveraged to solicit funding from donors, build support among business leaders for investing in sector pathways programs or hosting internships, and garner political support in the state context.

## Types of evaluations

Evaluations take different forms depending on their purpose. Some evaluation efforts provide feedback to program administrators, allowing them to improve programming or implementation efforts (these are sometimes known as process evaluations). Others assess the outcomes of a Promise program and may address issues such as who is being served, how students are progressing through higher education, and ultimately what impact the Promise program has on individuals and their communities (these are sometimes known as impact evaluations).

Not all evaluations shed light on the effects of a Promise program. To assess causal impact (whether the Promise program itself resulted in the changes observed), a comparison group or counterfactual is required to answer the question, "What would the situation be if this initiative had not occurred?" The gold standard in evaluation is a randomized control trial (RCT), where a statistically identical control group is monitored to assess the impact of a treatment. RCTs are difficult in the Promise arena where programs are designed to reach large cohorts of students; however, when resources are limited and Promise programs are being rolled out slowly (in a pilot phase or at a limited number of schools), randomization is a possibility. Evaluators have used quasi-experimental strategies to assess the causal impact of Promise programs. These strategies compare participants with a similar group that did not receive the program, using statistical techniques to mimic the conditions of an RCT as closely as possible.

Causal research designs can help determine whether an intervention produces an effect, along with its magnitude providing evidence that can be used to estimate the impact of a specific program. However, such rigorous approaches are not always needed to produce useful feedback and demonstrate effectiveness. Sometimes it makes sense to simply track changes in the number of students served or the number of services delivered. Other times, interviews and focus groups can be useful in understanding how implementation is proceeding and how it can be improved.

## Launching an evaluation

Evaluation is not something that should come late in the process as a "secret sauce" added at the end to reveal how an initiative has performed. Rather, evaluation is a tool through which Promise administrators can better understand their work and create, review, and modify interventions in real time to best meet program goals.

Ideally, planning for evaluation will begin during the design phase of a Promise program. Evaluators and researchers can assist administrators in identifying goals, metrics, and timelines, and establishing data collection procedures that are implemented from the start. (For example, due to federal privacy protections, students and families must consent to having their data used for evaluation purposes, and such consents are easiest to obtain if built into the Promise intake process.) While program designers may benefit from consulting or contracting with a third-party evaluator or researcher outside the Promise organization, evaluation efforts can be carried out by program staff members themselves. Any evaluation effort will be most successful if partners understand the value and purpose of tracking data and outcomes and buy into the evaluation process from the beginning.

Knowing your starting point is essential. Evaluation must reflect a shared understanding of program goals: What is the need the program is trying to meet, and how is the initiative expected to meet that need? Evaluators and program administrators must also understand the population they are serving: What kinds of interventions are likely to be successful in which contexts? What are the most successful strategies for securing input considering the population served? The broader ecosystem should also be part of formulating goals—a provider scan is useful so that services (e.g., success coaching, mentoring, pathway supports) are not duplicated. Establishing a system to collect baseline data is also helpful so that evaluators can establish a pre- and post-intervention analysis, if needed.

[237] Bell, E., & Gándara, D. (2021). *Can free community college close racial disparities in postsecondary attainment? How Tulsa Achieves affects racially minoritized student outcomes*. *American Educational Research Journal* 58(6), 1142–1177.

## Tool

Iriti, J., & Miller-Adams, M. (n.d). ***Promise monitoring and evaluation framework***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This tool, developed with support from Lumina Foundation, proposes a theory of change for how Promise programs change outcomes in a variety of areas and suggests potential indicators for interested parties to track. Indicators span three spheres, including community and economic development. A list of indicators can be downloaded **here**.*

*For examples of evaluation studies, see the Promise research bibliography compiled by the Upjohn Institute, and recent evaluations of the **Columbus Promise** and the **Bearcat Advantage**.*

## Design Principles in Practice: How are evaluations used?

### Evaluations can be used to scale pilot programs into larger initiatives.

Lake Michigan College launched its Promise program as a one-year pilot. The college then tracked data to discover the impact on enrollment, student financial aid, and the college's bottom line. These findings were used as the basis for building support for a longer-term program. The Columbus Promise, too, began as a three-year pilot; with positive results in hand, community partners opted to extend the program for an additional three years and are considering longer-term strategies.

### Evaluations can be used to generate programmatic changes.

In Pittsburgh, evaluators showed that the sliding scale rewarding long-term attachment to the school district disproportionately benefited middle-income students; low-income families with more frequent job and housing changes were losing out on the higher benefits related to long-term enrollment. As a result, the Pittsburgh Promise replaced its sliding scale with a four-year minimum (high school) enrollment requirement.

In Kalamazoo, data analysis revealed that some students were not completing bachelor's degrees within the program's 130-credit limit, and that these students were disproportionately African American males. To strengthen the equity impact of the program, decision-makers increased the maximum number of credits covered by the program from 130 to 145 (or a bachelor's degree), whichever comes first.

### Evaluations can be used to identify and catalyze system changes.

Early on, the Detroit Promise contracted with a national evaluator, MDRC, to carry out an RCT of a program that provides coaching to Promise students at community colleges. Although results were mixed when it came to degree or credential completion,[238] there was sufficient indication of the positive impact of coaching that the Detroit Promise Path interventions were extended to all community college students and have continued. Based on the heavily evaluated ASAP model, interventions include required monthly meetings with coaches, a monthly stipend for students who meet with coaches, summer engagement whether in classes or through paid work opportunities, and use of a management information system to track student usage of coaching resources.

[238] MDRC. (n.d.). *Detroit Promise path*.

CHAPTER 24

# Success factors: How can Promise partners build community alignment?

Lead authors: Bridget Timmeney and Denisa Gándara

**The success of Promise programs depends on multiple partners working together; collective impact strategies offer one model for building this kind of alignment.**

Promise programs' transformative goals cannot be achieved without the engagement of multiple partners with a shared vision. Cross-sector collective impact strategies, whether formal or informal, offer one avenue for building alignment. Partners should be engaged early in the design phase to reach consensus around the critical need the program is designed to address. Successful program implementation will require the ongoing engagement of key partners and accountability mechanisms to keep them connected and working in the same direction.

## Policy Considerations

- Promise partners must attend to building avenues for ongoing alignment; collective impact strategies offer one potential model.
- Strong leadership teams that can understand and speak to the needs of multiple sectors are an essential part of the alignment process.
- Key alignment partners may include K–12 and postsecondary education representatives, philanthropy, business, government, youth-serving nonprofits, researcher, and economic and workforce development entities.
- Successful navigation of key transition points—such as high school to college or college into the workforce—may require additional partners.
- Data tools and regular reporting of results can support monitoring and progress, build accountability, and help keep partners at the table.

## What We Know

Promise program funding alone does not transform communities or institutions. Clear and succinct messaging; wraparound student support at transition points from K–12 to postsecondary education and from postsecondary education into the workforce; and embedded evaluation are critical components. An additional Promise program success component is community alignment.

Whether a program resides at the community, institutional, or state level, alignment refers to the degree to which the different groups involved share its goals and work together to reach them. This element is essential if the transformative potential of Promise programs is to be achieved.

Transformative goals are an integral part of Promise models. These goals often have common themes related to enhancing workforce preparedness, contributing to economic development, increasing enrollment at the secondary or postsecondary level, increasing population or homeownership in a city or region, and/or creating greater equity in access to education.

Promise program transformation goals require a new way of thinking about scholarships—not as limited, competitive opportunities for a given number of qualified students, but as open-ended and inclusive opportunities for all students to increase their potential, and in turn, contribute to the economic health of their community.

Alignment among Promise partners is intertwined with identification of a critical need. The alignment process begins during the early design and engagement phase and centers on the task of defining and reaching consensus around a critical need. Through this process, participants see their concerns recognized, develop a common vision, and understand their role in reaching their shared goal. Designing a Promise program in the absence of clear consensus around critical needs can be problematic because a program's structural features must provide the incentives necessary to meet these needs. For example, the critical need in Kalamazoo was revitalization of the public school district serving the urban core, so usage of the Kalamazoo Promise is restricted to public school graduates. In Columbus, it was increasing the school district's low college-going rate, so a robust college-access organization already active in the schools was enlisted as a founding partner. In Tennessee and many other states, the goal is workforce development; thus, usage of Promise dollars is restricted to shorter-term credentials and two-year institutions.

> It takes more than parents and teachers to help our students. It takes entire school districts, colleges and universities, city and county government, businesses, and all community organizations getting involved, removing barriers, and making a difference in students' lives
>
> Joe May, Dallas County Community College District

Experience suggests that ongoing cross-sector alignment, whether ad hoc or organized formally through a collective impact strategy, is the critical element in whether Promise programs will ultimately achieve their goals, especially those related to transforming schools and communities. Effective alignment can also support fund development and sustainability of programs over the longer term. There are different ways to create alignment, including forming stakeholder groups, using data as a tool for accountability, and explicitly tightening transitions along the pipeline.

The collective impact framework[239] is a community alignment strategy that emerged around the same time as the Promise movement, modeled in part on the Harlem Children's Zone.[240] In many Promise communities, key partners realized that fixing one point on the educational continuum, such as scholarship funding or high school college readiness activities, wouldn't make much difference unless all parts of the continuum improved at the same time. No single organization, however innovative or powerful, could accomplish this alone. Instead, the ambitious mission became to coordinate improvements at every stage of a young person's life, from cradle to career.

Some Promise programs are embedded within formal collective impact strategies. Both the Dallas County Promise,[241] as administered by the Commit Partnership,[242] and the Oakland Promise,[243] as led by Oakland Thrives,[244] emerged using this strategy. The programs go beyond place-based scholarships supporting interventions along the life course from birth to career to achieve specified short- and long-term outcomes. The work is data driven and involves a diverse group of leaders mutually accountable to goals, jointly established and monitored over time. For instance, the collective supporting the Dallas County Promise comprises multiple school districts, Dallas College, the Dallas College Foundation, numerous neighboring colleges and universities, industry partners, and nonprofit organizations. In other communities, Promise programs have sparked cross-sector collaborations that resemble collective-impact strategies, even if not formally labeled as such.

Strong alignment of relevant partners is essential not just during the design of a Promise program but throughout its implementation.

## Recommended Reading

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). **[Collective impact](#)**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review.*

*This article presents a model of successful cross-sector collaboration for social change.*

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2013). ***Embracing emergence: How collective impact addresses complexity***. *Stanford Social Innovation Review.*

*This article describes how the collective impact approach to dealing with social problems can help organizations cooperate and adapt to the continually changing circumstances that surround these issues. The approach suggests that multiple organizations seeking to address the same issue adopt a shared framework for cooperation defined by the "five conditions of collective impact" that encourage participants to pool their resources and efforts in pursuing solutions to social issues.*

239 Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). *Collective impact*. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9(4), 36–41.

240 Harlem Children's Zone. (n.d.). *Our approach*.

241 Dallas County Promise. (n.d.). *Partners*.

242 Commit Partnership. (n.d.). *We are the commit partnership*.

243 Oakland Promise. (n.d.). *About us*.

244 Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority. (n.d.). *Oakland thrives*.

### Program-Specific Studies

Reeves, R. V., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). ***Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education***. Brookings Institution.

*An in-depth report on the history and essential elements of the Say Yes to Education model of community-wide social change (including a college Promise as well as other student and community supports), as well as the evolution and effects of Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo, NY, Guilford County, NC, and Syracuse, NY.*

Miller-Adams, M. (2009). ***The power of a promise: education and economic renewal in Kalamazoo***. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

*This book is the first comprehensive account of the Kalamazoo Promise. The author discusses the emergence of the place-based scholarship model and explains why this unprecedented experiment in education-based economic renewal is being emulated in communities around the nation. Chapter 4 addresses the challenge of community alignment in the early days of the Kalamazoo Promise.*

CHAPTER 25

# Who made this handbook?

## Project Co-Directors

*Michelle Miller-Adams* is a senior researcher at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and professor emeritus of political science at Grand Valley State University, where she taught for 18 years. Miller-Adams is the author of *The Path to Free College: In Pursuit of Access, Equity, and Prosperity* (Harvard Education Press, 2021), *Promise Nation: Transforming Communities through Place-Based Scholarships* (Upjohn Press, 2015), and *The Power of a Promise: Education and Economic Renewal in Kalamazoo* (Upjohn Press, 2009), along with two other books.

One of the nation's leading experts on the tuition-free college movement, she speaks with national media and advises state policymakers and community partners on their tuition-free college initiatives. Miller-Adams also co-directs the Upjohn Institute's ***Policies for Place*** Initiative that explores how communities can create good jobs for their residents. She holds a BA in history from the University of California Santa Barbara, a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, and a PhD in political science from Columbia University.

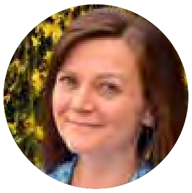
*Jennifer Iriti*, Assistant Vice Chancellor- Education & Strategy and a research scientist at the University of Pittsburgh, spearheads work at the intersections of evaluation, design thinking, equitable systems, and learning sciences. She heads two applied research teams that focus on PK-20 education and learning beyond the classroom. Her 25-year career has significantly impacted educational design and policy both locally and nationally, emphasizing decision-maker and user-centric evaluation designs and fostering partnerships that drive improvement.

Dr. Iriti studies and shapes the designs of equitable postsecondary opportunities, notably through projects such as the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship evaluation and its complementary coaching program. As Co-PI for a $10 million NSF INCLUDES Alliance, the STEM PUSH Network, she aims to democratize access to STEM education for underrepresented students by harnessing the collective power of 40 pre-college STEM programs nationwide. She holds a doctorate in Developmental and Educational Psychology and has served 12 years as an elected school board director in South Fayette Township School District.

## Contributing Editors

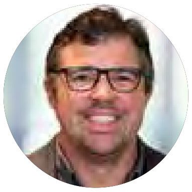
*Meredith S. Billings* is an assistant professor in the Department of Higher Education, Adult Learning, and Organizational Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research agenda focuses on the financial and information barriers to college for first generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students and how the relationship between the state government and public higher education shapes finance and governance outcomes. She is currently conducting or has conducted research projects on free college/Promise programs, guaranteed tuition/fixed tuition plans, college access programs, and financial aid advising in public high schools.  Dr. Billings is also interested in the decisions or justifications that state policymakers make when funding public higher education or adopting state financial aid programs. She has published her research in *Research in Higher Education*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Teachers College Record, Education Policy Analysis Archives*, and *Community College Review.* Her work has been supported by the Spencer Foundation and the Kresge Foundation. She holds a BS in neuroscience from William & Mary, a master's degree in higher education from the University of Maryland, and a PhD in higher education from the University of Michigan.

*Kathleen Bolter* is the program manager for *Policies for Place* at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Her work focuses on place-based policies that promote equitable economic development, with expertise in workforce development, postsecondary access, and regional labor market analysis. Bolter brings a multidisciplinary approach to applied research, combining quantitative and qualitative methods with a strong foundation in data visualization and policy communication. She has contributed to studies on the Kalamazoo Promise, housing instability and student success, and regional job growth. With expertise in data analysis, policy design, and research communication, she helps translate complex findings into actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers. Prior to joining the Institute, she worked in international education and workforce development. Bolter holds a PhD in Political Science, with subfields in comparative and American politics and a master's in international development administration.



*Celeste Carruthers* is the William F. Fox Distinguished Professor of Labor Economics in the Haslam College of Business at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, with a joint appointment in the Department of Economics and the Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research. Carruthers is also editor-in-chief of *Economics of Education Review* and a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research. Her research centers on education policy with crossovers into public economics, labor economics, and economic history. Recent and ongoing projects examine the effect of financial aid on college choices, career and technical education, and the consequences of segregated schools in the early 20th century United States. Her research on free community college was influential in the development of the Tennessee Promise, and she has written for the *New York Times* and the Brookings Institution on that topic.

*Daniel A. Collier* is an assistant professor of Higher and Adult Education at the University of Memphis and a research fellow at Davidson College's C2i and the University of California, Irvine Student Loan Law Initiative. Previously, he was a research associate at the W.E. Upjohn Institute, studying tuition-free policies, and director of research for "Success at WMU."  Daniel's research focuses on student loan debt and income-driven repayment, tuition-free policy, and student noncognitive attributes and basic needs. His work appears in journals such as *Research in Higher Education* and the *Journal of Student Financial Aid*. He is also a frequent media resource for outlets like Inside Higher Education, the Chronicle of Higher Education, Marketplace, Nerdwallet, and more. Daniel serves as the associate editor for the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* and is professionally affiliated with AEFP, ASHE, SREE, and more. Follow him on Bluesky under the profile name "Dcollier74."



*Gresham Collom* is an assistant professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota. His research interests include indigenous communities and tribal education policies, higher education finance, economics, and governance, and education policy analysis. Gresham has conducted several studies exploring Promise programs; these focused on the impact of mandatory mentoring in the Tennessee Promise, summer melt and early drop-out behaviors among Tennessee Promise students, and how public benefit programs impact adult college students' postsecondary outcomes. Gresham's scholarship is informed by his experiences as a first-descendent of Wisconsin's Stockbridge Munsee Mohican Tribe and a first-generation college student.

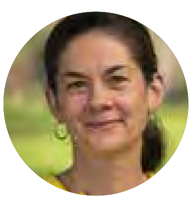
*Denisa Gándara* serves as an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research, primarily focusing on higher education finance, policy, and politics, is dedicated to advancing populations traditionally underserved in higher education. Gándara's work has garnered support from various governmental and private sources. She was appointed by former President Joe Biden to the National Board for Education Sciences and serves on the board of directors for the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Gándara is also an associate editor for *The Journal of Higher Education* and an editorial board member for the *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success* and *Higher Education Policy*.

*Douglas N. Harris* is a professor and chair of the Department of Economics and the Schlieder Foundation Chair in Public Education at Tulane University, as well as the founding director of the *Education Research Alliance for New Orleans*, the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (*REACH*), and the *State of the Nation Project*. Finally, he is the founding editor of the *Live Handbook of Education Policy Research*, a digital hub of timely, accessible, policy-relevant research on higher education, as well as early childhood and K–12. In addition to his three books and 100+ studies, Harris is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, which publishes his occasional blogs and reports, including The Promise of Free College (and Its Potential Pitfalls). He has advised governors in six states, testified in the U.S. Senate regarding college access, and advised the U.S. Department of Education, the Obama administration, and the Biden transition team on multiple education policies.

***Brad Hershbein*** is a senior economist and deputy director of research at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and a nonresident fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution. He has also served as the Institute's director of information and communications services. His fields of interest focus on labor economics, demography, and economics of education, and especially the intersection of the three. Hershbein has investigated how new high school graduates fare in the labor market during and after a recession, and how employers use the selectivity of school and GPA to infer the productivity of new college graduates. He has worked extensively on issues of higher education access and completion and subsequent labor market impacts, especially through evaluations of place-based college scholarships. His work has appeared in numerous academic journals and been covered in leading media outlets. He holds a PhD in economics from the University of Michigan.

**Amy Li** is an associate professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at Florida International University. Her research focuses on higher education finance and public policy, specifically Promise programs, performance-based funding policies, state funding for higher education, financial aid and student loan debt, and policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Li has written public-facing works on Promise programs for the Conversation, the Campaign for Free College Tuition, the Century Foundation, and the Brookings Institution's Brown Center Chalkboard. Her research has been funded by the American Educational Research Association, the AccessLex Institute and Association for Institutional Research, the Kresge Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, and the Strada Education Foundation. Li earned her Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy from the University of Washington. She holds a master's degree in higher education administration, and a bachelor's degree in economics and psychology, from the University of Utah.

**Danielle Lowry** is a research associate at the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh. As part of the Evaluation for Learning (EFL) group at the LRDC, she works with schools and education nonprofits to evaluate trends and impacts of education programs. Her work supports evidence-based decision-making among education leaders and practitioners using mixed methods approaches. Her research centers on building college and career pathways, with particular attention to higher education financial aid policies and college access and success programs that serve students from underserved backgrounds. Danielle earned her doctoral degree in education administration and policy studies from the University of Pittsburgh, where she specialized in education policy and causal inference methods. She also holds a master of public administration from Ohio State University.



**Lindsay C. Page** is the Annenberg Associate Professor of Education Policy at Brown University and is a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research. Her work focuses on quantitative methods and their application to questions regarding the effectiveness of educational policies and programs across the preschool to postsecondary spectrum. Much of her work has involved large-scale experimental or quasi-experimental studies to investigate the causal effects strategies for improving students' transition to and through college. She is particularly interested in policy efforts to improve college access and success for students who would be first in their family to reach postsecondary education. She holds a doctorate in quantitative policy analysis and master's degrees in statistics and in education policy from Harvard University. She earned a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College.

**Bridget Timmeney** is a consultant to the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and previously a long-term employee at the Institute in both the research and the employment management and services divisions. She assists with business and community alignment and strategic planning related to workforce development and the Kalamazoo Promise and works with other communities developing place-based scholarship programs. She has assisted in evaluations of state and local workplace literacy programs, developed community and regional benchmark indicators, was a key investigator on the Kansas City Scholars evaluation, and is part of the evaluation team for the Columbus Promise. She earned a master's degree in social work in policy, planning, and administration at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

# A Note from the Editors

***The Free College Handbook*** brings together wide-ranging expertise and the most current research to provide a coherent, practice-oriented guide to place-based scholarship programs. Our contributors sought to crystallize high-level findings and actionable implications from the growing body of evidence and accumulated experience across Promise initiatives. At the same time, we encourage readers to explore the recommended readings and authors' broader scholarship that provide greater nuance and more detail than could be fully captured here. Our goal has been to make this expanding field of research more accessible to those engaged in the challenging work of translating evidence into practice and policy.

Having reached the conclusion of the handbook, we hope you found the chapters both engaging and useful in shaping your thinking about your role in the ecosystem of place-based Promise programs. We encourage you to reflect on your own priorities and share relevant chapters (and the short videos) with colleagues, leadership teams, and partners. Building a common understanding of these insights across your organization increases the likelihood the principles outlined here will become guiding elements of your efforts.

This handbook is designed as a living resource. We will update it regularly to incorporate emerging research, developments within the Promise movement, and shifts in the policy and practice landscape that shape these initiatives. We invite you to check back to stay connected with the latest findings and insights.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to the talented and committed researchers who authored chapters and contributed to the 2025 updates. Their disciplinary diversity and methodological range reflect the richness of the field, and their collective work continues to advance the trajectory of Promise research and practice. We thank them not only for conducting rigorous scholarship but also for ensuring their work is accessible to policymakers and practitioners like you—those doing the daily work of bringing these programs to life and ensuring they realize their transformative goals.

Ultimately, the value of the handbook rests in how it informs your work in communities across the country. We look forward to seeing how you and your colleagues will activate these insights to advance the promise of place-based scholarships.

**Jennifer Iriti and Michelle Miller-Adams**