

1 What is the Free College Handbook?

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Are you a state legislator considering a free college program to meet your state's workforce needs? A civic leader exploring how to make your community more attractive? A community college administrator seeking to better serve your student body? A philanthropist looking for a high-impact, equity-oriented investment? An activist committed to the fight against generational poverty?

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.

We focus here 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 some kind of postsecondary training or apprenticeship, and that translate into better opportunities for individuals.

The handbook represents the collective effort of a dozen researchers and was funded by the Kresge Foundation through its CoPro 2.0 initiative. It is structured around 25 questions, with brief summaries of the answers appearing on each page.

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.¹ In the contemporary landscape of student financial aid, a commitment to award scholarships to all graduates of a given school district, to last in perpetuity, was something new. This place-based

¹ Stern, S. (2022), *Bernard Daly's Promise: The Enduring Legacy of a Place-based Scholarship*, Oregon State University Press.

model has since been replicated widely, spreading to more than 200 communities and community colleges, and in more than half the states..

This has been a grassroots movement across the United States, built from local assets in response to local needs, with some programs found in cities, others at the state level, and still others initiated by colleges themselves. Stakeholders 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 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 legislative initiatives.

The Promise model differs from traditional financial aid awarded based primarily on financial need (most notably through federal Pell grants) or academic merit (as in previous statewide scholarship programs like Georgia Hope, or much of the aid granted by colleges themselves). Instead, the key to unlocking a Promise scholarship is residing in a specified place, sometimes a city or school district, sometimes a state, sometimes a community college district. Because scholarships are granted at scale (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, systemwide effects. These 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. These programs may be diverse in their stakeholders and structure, but they share the basic idea of expanding postsecondary access at a large scale to simultaneously help individuals and transform places.

The handbook addresses three categories of programs: 1) community-based programs that emanate from a group of stakeholders in a given city or school district; 2) statewide programs that are enacted by state legislatures, often with leadership by a governor; and 3) institution-based programs created by community colleges.² The factors driving these diverse stakeholders 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 all these efforts, including 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 the 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 programs has intersected with a national dialogue around the cost of college and various free-college proposals from national leaders that, to date, have failed to progress. While attention to national policy has waxed and waned, innovation among states and communities around creating tuition-free college paths continues at a rapid pace.

² 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

Why are free college, or 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 high aid—means that students don't necessarily know what costs they will face until they actually enroll. This has helped drive the proliferation of free college programs that 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 costs of attendance.
- Program design is important, and simple eligibility criteria and clear messaging are more effective at reducing uncertainty than more complex programs.
- Stakeholders should avoid eligibility requirements that create barriers and 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 somewhat offset prices, the system is complex.¹ 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 very different out-of-pocket costs to attend the same institution. 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. 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.²

¹ Turner, S. (2018). [The evolution of the high tuition, high aid debate](#). *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 50(3-4), 142–148.

² 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 1991 to 2021, average list tuition and fees to attend a public, two-year institution rose from \$2,310 to \$3,800 (65%) in real terms. Costs for public, four-year institutions increased from \$4,160 to \$10,740 (158%) and in the private, four-year sector from \$19,360 to \$38,070 (97%). 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.³ Such trends have fueled the perception that the United States is facing a crisis of college affordability.⁴

Over the same period, 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 students face after financial aid is taken into account has increased at a slower rate than list prices and has been relatively stable in recent years.⁵ Of course, even stable net costs are no guarantee of affordability.

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 a financial aid package from that school, and if

required, verified elements of their financial aid applications with additional documentation. 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.⁶

Recommended Reading

Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2021). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2021*. 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.

Net Price Calculators

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 at a particular school. Users of these tools should know that Net Price Calculators provide “ballpark” estimates rather than exact figures.⁷

³ Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2021). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2021*. College Board.

⁴ Heinrich, M. (2017, November). *The college affordability crisis in America*. Report to the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee.

⁵ Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2021). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2021*. College Board.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Anthony, A. M., & Page, L. C. (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.

3

Why are free college, or 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. Of course, the returns to college vary across different types of institutions and majors, so it is important to make good choices in these areas using some of the tools in the Recommended Readings section below.

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.
- 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 help students identify the pathways that link educational programs to career aspirations.
- Regular communication between area employers and local colleges 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.¹ Further, the importance of a college education has grown over time, with the earnings gap for people with

¹National Center on Educational Statistics. (2021). [Annual earnings by educational attainment](#); Wolfe, B. L., & Haveman, R. H. (1998, 2002). [Social and nonmarket benefits from education in an advanced economy](#). (Conference Series) Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 47.

college degrees relative to those with high school diplomas roughly doubling over a 30-year period. The widening of this income difference is due both to a stagnation in real earnings for workers with at most a high school degree and substantial growth in real earnings for workers with a bachelor's degree or more.²

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.³ Higher education also has been linked to a host of positive nonmonetary outcomes, including civic engagement, family stability, health, and longevity.⁴ On average, returns are even positive (but smaller) for those who obtain some college-level schooling but do not earn a degree.⁵

Given the tremendous variety of institutions that comprise the U.S. system of higher education, it is no surprise that there is variation in the returns to attending different institutions. A recent set of 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 particular institutions in the United States. This work revealed that substantial economic mobility—defined as moving from the bottom 20% of household income to the top 20% 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% of earners.⁶

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.

For women, earnings are substantially increased by earning an associate degree in nursing, for example, whereas associate degrees in other fields, including 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.⁷

² Autor, D. H. (2014). *Skills, education, and the rise of earnings inequality among the "other 99 percent"*. *Science*, 344(6186), 843–851.

³ 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.

⁴ Haskins, R., Holzer, H. J., & Lerman, R. (2009). *Promoting economic mobility by increasing postsecondary education*. The 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. Ma, op. cit.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2017). *Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility* (Working paper No. w23618). *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*. (Working Paper No. w26748). *National Bureau of Economic Research*.

⁷ 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;

Liu, V. Y. T., Belfield, C. R., & Trimble, M. J. (2015). *The medium-term labor market returns to community college awards: Evidence from North Carolina*. *Economics of Education Review*, 44, 42–55.

“ From the beginning, free college in Tennessee was framed ... in terms of economic development. State leaders found that companies considering locating in Tennessee wanted a broad base of skilled workers more than just about any financial incentive they could offer.

Benjamin Wermund, [Politico](#)⁸

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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.

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 over 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., & Welch, M. (2019). [Education pays 2019: 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.

U.S. Department of Education. [The 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.

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 this investment might not pay off for everyone. School, major, and degree completion are important factors in the likely returns to enrolling in college.

⁸ Politico website: <https://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2019/01/16/tennessee-free-college-000867/>

4

Why are free college, or Promise, programs becoming more common? **Educated Workforce**

Lead author: Michelle Miller-Adams

States and communities benefit when they are home to educated 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. Areas with large concentrations of college-educated people are attractive to employers who want access to trained workers. These are some of the reasons states and communities have created Promise programs and why the business community has, in many places, been a key supporter.

Policy Considerations

- 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 the Promise effort, key economic actors, such as businesses and economic development organizations, were 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.¹

Higher education and skill levels are correlated with greater productivity, and greater productivity

¹ 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.

² Berger, N., & Fisher, P. (2013, August 22). *A well-educated workforce is key to state prosperity* (Report). Economic Policy Institute.

with faster rates of economic growth.² A state with more educated residents will have higher earnings, bringing in more tax revenue.³ Increased earnings also reduce poverty and save money on public services like Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Higher education levels can also reduce crime and the social costs of incarceration. These are among the reasons why 46 states have set attainment goals to increase their percentage of workers with postsecondary degrees or credentials.⁴

A greater share of educated workers can be 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.

Employers 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 Promise programs in places like Tennessee and Michigan.

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 at in-state institutions can stave off outmigration and help retain educated residents within states.

Recommended Reading

Berger, N., & Fisher, P. (2013, August). [*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.

Iriti, J., & Miller-Adams, M. (n.d). [*Promising 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 program stakeholders to track. Indicators span three spheres, including Community and Economic Development. A list of indicators can be downloaded here.

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

This website focuses on state efforts to increase post-high school educational attainment in line with a national attainment goal of 60 percent of adults with degrees or credentials. It also includes an interactive tool allowing users to explore the country's educational attainment challenge by state, race/ethnicity, and age group.

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.

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 shares the results of economic modeling to calculate the potential economic and fiscal returns of a statewide tuition-free college program. It shows that such programs yield net returns to states, but not right away. This research note links to a longer report on the model, as well as a cost estimate of a Promise program for the state of Illinois.

³ Carroll, S. J., & Erkut, E. (2009). [*How taxpayers benefit when students attain higher levels of education*](#) (Research brief). RAND Corporation.

⁴ Lumina Foundation. (n.d.). [*A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*](#).

“ 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

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 shows that the higher earnings generated by more students receiving degrees as a result of the Kalamazoo Promise generate returns on average of 11 percent, far in excess of the costs of providing the scholarship. Returns are high for both low-income and non-low-income groups, for non-whites, and for women.

Case Study: Michigan Reconnect—Business Support Made the Difference

In her first State of the State in 2019, Michigan’s newly elected Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer proposed a three-pronged investment in higher-education affordability, including tuition-free college for recent high school graduates and adults, and increased financial aid for all students attending the state’s four-year public universities.⁵ She ran headlong into opposition from a Republican-led legislature averse to raising new revenue and opposed to most of the Governor’s priorities. Eighteen months later, that same legislature funded Michigan Reconnect, a statewide Promise program that allows any Michigan resident over the age of 25 without a college degree to attend community college tuition free (residents

who live outside a community college district pay a small supplement).⁶ The program was funded again the following year and continues to enjoy bipartisan support.⁷

How did this happen? The key element in the enactment of Michigan Reconnect was coordinated support from multiple sectors, including the business community. The Michigan Chamber of Commerce and 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.⁸ They publicized their support, held legislative hearings, and—presumably—engaged in behind-the-scenes lobbying.⁹ They did this because they understand that Michigan’s economic future hinges on increasing its educational attainment and being able to provide the state’s employers (current and future) with an adequate supply of educated workers. The Michigan Reconnect program, which allows part-time attendance, also creates upskilling opportunities for people already in jobs.

Applicants for Michigan Reconnect come from every county in the state, further cementing political support and creating incentives for the program’s continuation.

⁵ Governor Gretchen Whitmer, [2019 State of the State](#) (press statement).

⁶ Michigan Reconnect website: <https://www.michigan.gov/reconnect>.

⁷ Michigan.gov, “[Governor Whitmer signs budget that puts Michiganders first, helps working families, and grows the economy](#),” September 29, 2021. Detroit Regional Chamber, “[Gov. Whitmer Launches Bipartisan \\$30 Million Michigan Reconnect Program](#),” Chamber Today, February 2.

⁸ Michigan House Fiscal Agency, [Michigan Reconnect Grant Act](#), March 12, 2020.

⁹ Detroit Regional Chamber, “[Michigan Reconnect letter to legislature](#),” August 20, 2019.

5

How do Promise programs benefit students? **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

- A messaging campaign that is clear and easy to understand by students, families, and school-based staff can help raise awareness and usage of a Promise scholarship.
- Students and families should be able to find answers to their program questions quickly and easily, whether through school staff, previous Promise recipients, or a well-designed website.
- Stakeholders 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.

What We Know

Paying for college may be the first substantial financial decision that a traditional-aged college student makes in their adult life. Research has consistently demonstrated that students and families confront a lack of clear information when it comes to paying for higher education. Students who are the first in their families to attend college often lack the cultural and social capital 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.

Promise programs are one solution to these barriers to college.

A recent 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

¹Odle, T. K. (2022). [The power of "free" college: Reducing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in college expectations](#) (EdWorking Paper No. 22–565). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

earn a college degree by 9–15 percentage points.¹ 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 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.² (Nonetheless, evidence shows that larger grant amounts lead to greater student impacts on persistence and completion outcomes.

While “free college” messaging is important, it is not enough on its own to increase enrollment, persistence, and eventual degree completion. Fewer administrative hurdles and less uncertainty in the aid process are also important. 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 was guaranteed free tuition for one year contingent on demonstrating financial need in a yearly application. The application rate among students guaranteed free tuition for four years was 63%, compared to 44% in the yearly application arm, and 35% in the control (or “business as usual”) group.³ 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. Any additional paperwork is another hurdle, especially for underrepresented college 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 burden (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 stakeholders to consider when designing Promise programs. If stakeholders 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 applying for aid and attending college.⁴ Simple applications and eligibility rules are 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

² 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.

³ 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](#) (No. w29864). National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁴ 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.

“Free college” messaging can be as important in inducing students to attend postsecondary institutions as the actual amount of the grant award.

hard to calculate can hinder the ease of messaging, as well as create an administrative burden for students and staff.

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. Stakeholders 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 pertinent information regarding the Promise program—such as eligibility criteria, application procedures, and dollars received—will be an important resource for providing information to students and families about college affordability.

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 to improve financial aid messaging.

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

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

Lowry, D. (2018). *[Nudging: Is a text messaging campaign right for your program?](#)* National College Attainment Network.

This brief article offers a sensible summary of text message “nudging” campaigns to improve student financial aid applications and college enrollment. These campaigns are most effective when students are aware of who/what is sending the texts.

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. Support can be delivered in various ways, but it generally will help students choose the best postsecondary program for their interests and abilities, complete the steps necessary to apply for college, access additional financial aid, avoid “summer melt,” (where students who intend to go to college fail to show up for classes in the fall), and facilitate transitions between college and 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 can help Promise programs avoid duplicating efforts.
- 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 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 consider enlisting more comprehensive student support services.

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.¹ 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.

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 and students who are transitory,² 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.³

Promise programs can play a role in partnering with educational and community institutions to instill robust FAFSA completion efforts community-

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.⁴

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% of students intending to enroll in the fall after high school graduation fail to show up on campus.⁵ These rates are even higher for low-income students, students from urban areas, and students intending to enroll in community college. A student with less college knowledge 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.⁶

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 Cases for examples.

¹ Chetty, R., et al. (2022). *Social capital I: Measurement and associations with economic mobility*. *Nature*, 608.

² Gagnon, D. J., & Mattingly, M. J. (2016). *Most US 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.

³ Kofoed, M. S. (2017). *To apply or not to apply: FAFSA completion and financial aid gaps*. *Higher Education*, 58(1).

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

Recommended Reading

Carruthers, C. K., Gurantz, O., & Page, L. (2022). [Helping students make informed choices about college \(Policy brief\)](#). 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.

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.

U.S. Department of Education. [The 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.

Case Study: 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 provide assistance 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, navigating financial aid, exploring both career and postsecondary options, and building 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. Promise coaches will help students discover those skills and explore pathways to careers they will enjoy and that will provide them with a living wage.

Some Promise programs, including the Denver Scholarship Foundation and 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, OH 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 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 partner four-year institutions. Program administrators developed the Detroit Promise Path for Detroit Promise recipients attending community colleges. Students meet with their coaches for the first time in the summer before beginning postsecondary education. 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 their relationship to the coaches.⁷

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. Research shows that the effectiveness of text messaging is more pronounced if the messages are coming from a known or trusted source to the student and messages are not being sent too frequently.⁸ 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.⁹

⁷ 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.

⁸ Bird, K. A., Castleman, B. L., Denning, J. T., Goodman, J., Lambertson, C., & Rosinger, K. O. (2021). [Nudging at scale: Experimental evidence from FAFSA completion campaigns](#). *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 183, 105–128.

⁹ Barr, A., & Castleman, B. (2021). [The bottom line on college advising: Large increases in degree attainment \(EdWorkingPaper No. 21\)](#). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

7

Why do Promise programs benefit students? **Enrollment and Completion**

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 that 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 college(s), 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 application procedures reach more students and more generous programs produce greater effects.

Research to date has focused on programs that include both two- and four-year postsecondary options and impacts on four-year outcomes tend to be larger.

In Table 1, 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.

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

Table 1. Effect of Promise Programs on Postsecondary Enrollment

| Location | Percentage point (pp) change in proportion of students who enroll in college after high school |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Knox Achieves ¹ | +3–5 pp at community colleges in TN |
| New Haven ² | +8–14 pp at public colleges in CT; +10–14 pp at public, four-year colleges in CT |
| El Dorado Promise ³ | +14 pp at any college nationally; largest increases among students of color and students with below-average high school GPAs |
| Pittsburgh Promise ⁴ | +5 pp at any accredited postsecondary institution in PA |
| Say Yes to Education ⁵ | +8 pp at any college in NY (attributed mostly to enrollment growth at four-year colleges) |
| Kalamazoo Promise ⁶ | +5–8 pp at any college in MI; +9 pp at four-year colleges in MI |
| Oregon Promise ⁷ | +4–5 pp at community colleges in OR |

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.

¹ 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.

² Daugherty, L., & Gonzalez, G. C. (2016). [The impact of the New Haven Promise program on college enrollment, choice, and persistence](#) (Working Paper No. 1146). RAND Corporation.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.56.1.0416-7824r4>

⁷ 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.

⁸ Li, A. Y., & Gándara, D. (2020). [The promise of “free” tuition and program design features: Impacts on first-time college enrollment](#). In L. W. Perna & E. J. Smith (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs* (pp. 219–239). American Educational Research Association.

to select from multiple colleges) found enrollment increases of 9%–22% at receiving institutions.⁸ Effect sizes varied depending on student race and gender; enrollment increased the most for Hispanic males and females (42% and 52%, respectively)⁹, and Black males and females (47% and 51%, respectively). While enrollment increased among white males and females, the enrollment of Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students did not change.

The Tennessee Promise produced a 40% increase in enrollment at community and technical colleges.¹⁰ The related Tennessee Reconnect for adult students (who did not enter college directly after high school) increased adult student enrollment by 19%–28%, with largest increases among part-time and male students.¹¹ In contrast to the previously mentioned studies, the New York Excelsior program produced no changes to college enrollment numbers,¹² which is attributed to its multiple requirements, lack of vigorous marketing, and other available aid programs in the state.

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

Statewide programs that focus only on 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.

Impacts on Postsecondary Persistence

Promise programs typically increase persistence in higher education,¹³ 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.¹⁴ The Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo and Syracuse increased first-to-second year persistence rates by 5.5 pp.¹⁵

Studies have also found positive impacts on credits earned. Knox Achieves students earned nearly 7 more credit hours during the first two years of college.¹⁶ Students on the Detroit Promise earned 17.1 credit hours versus 13.5 credit hours for nonparticipants during their first three years of college.¹⁷ Accelerated credit hour accumulation is associated with reduced stop-out rates and lower student debt. For the

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Nguyen, H. (2020). [Free college? Assessing enrollment responses to the Tennessee Promise program](#). *Labour Economics*, 66(July), 101882.

¹¹ 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*.

¹² Nguyen, H. (2019). [Free tuition and college enrollment: evidence from New York's Excelsior program](#). *Education Economics*, 27(6), 573–587.

¹³ Swanson, E., Watson, A., & Ritter, G. (2020). [Promises fulfilled? A systematic review of the impacts of Promise Programs](#). In L. W. Perna & E. J. Smith (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs* (pp. 33–68). American Educational Research Association.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Collier, D., & McMullen, I. (2021). [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*.

Kalamazoo Promise, giving students a greater share of Promise funding (from 65% to 100% of tuition) slightly reduced the likelihood of dropout between the first and second year.¹⁸

However, Tulsa Achieves had no impact on students' credits earned, retention rates, or credential completions, although it was unclear why.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the program did improve transfer rates from two- to four-year colleges by 13–14 pp., attributed to articulation agreements that Tulsa Community College formed with nearby four-year colleges, and 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 Case below for more details).²⁰ 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 two- to four-year college transfer by 13 pp. among Hispanic students. However, it did not affect degree completion or transfer rates for Black or Asian American students.²¹ The Kalamazoo Promise, an unusually generous program, produced a 10–12 pp. increase in any degree completion measured six years after high school graduation; much of this increase was in bachelor's degrees.²² Yet, the Detroit Promise Path did not result in any significant impact on credential completion.²³

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 report describes impacts of the first place-based scholarship program—the Kalamazoo Promise. The Kalamazoo Promise increased the likelihood of students enrolling in college after high school graduation by 14%, and increased the likelihood of four-year college enrollment by 34%. The program also increased the cumulative number of credit hours completed. Lastly, the program increased the percent of students earning any postsecondary credential by 12 percentage points.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

²³ 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.

Jaggars, S. S. (2020). [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). [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, Latinx, and white students. However, programs with an academic merit criteria, as well as those that allocated scholarships on a first-dollar basis, increased the enrollment of white students only.

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 at single community colleges. It emphasizes the large enrollment increases seen among Black and Latino students, and also 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.

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 only cover tuition, so for many students some level of borrowing will still be needed.

Policy Considerations

- Promise stakeholders should help ensure that students apply for any federal, state, or institutional aid for which they may be eligible beyond the Promise scholarship itself.
- 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.
- Promise program designers may want to actively monitor award displacement (for example, if a student's Promise award reduces their institutional aid award) and decide on a strategy 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, the net cost (out-of-pocket costs students pay after grants and scholarships have been deducted from the total price) has remained flat since 2015.¹ Nonetheless, 55% of public and nonprofit four-year graduates in the 2019–2020 school year held college loan debt. Additionally, around 20% of borrowers are in default, which has serious consequences for their financial well-being,² including their capacity to own a home.³ While recent efforts such as the Biden administration's student-loan forgiveness plan and borrowing caps have attempted to mitigate financial hardships for some students, they do little to address the underlying causes of high student loan debt.

¹ Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2021). *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2021*. College Board.

² The Pew Charitable Trusts (2020). *Student loan default has serious financial consequences: Department of Education and Congress can do more to help borrowers repay*. The Pew Charitable Trusts.

³ Mezza, A., Ringo, D., Sherlund, S., & Sommer, K. (2020). *Student loans and homeownership*. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 38(1), 215–260.

There is currently little research on the effects of Promise programs on student debt and later life outcomes. 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 reported that these positive effects are mainly due to a reduction in time-to-degree rather than a substantial reduction in debt upon graduation.⁴

However, other research on state merit aid programs found that these programs significantly reduce student loan debt.⁵ A study examining the effect of the Tennessee Promise on student loan-borrowing behaviors concluded that the Promise reduced the percent of students borrowing loans by 8–10 percentage points. Additionally, the Promise reduced the average loan amount by 32%.⁶

Although rigorous research on debt burdens of place-based Promise recipients do not yet exist, research from the Upjohn Institute found that 40% of Kalamazoo Promise recipients reported borrowing no money to attend college, compared to 28% of students nationwide.⁷

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, where 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 due to limited financial resources.

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 a partial or full amount of 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

⁴ 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.

⁵ Chakrabarti, R., Nober, W., & Van der Klaauw, W. (2020). [Do college tuition subsidies boost spending and reduce debt? Impacts by income and race](#) (No. 20200708d). Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Bolter, K., & McMullen, I. (2022). [The Kalamazoo Promise 'sweet 16,' summary study results: 16 key findings from 16 years studying The Kalamazoo Promise](#) (Report). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research).

Promise recipients are more likely to earn a graduate degree, own a home, and live in a higher-income neighborhood.

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. In fact, growing concerns over college affordability have, as of July 2022, led four states (Maryland, New Jersey, Washington, and Pennsylvania) to ban award displacement at public institutions. [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.

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 student loan debt, but they can create a base level of grant aid that reduces debt levels. They can also catalyze efforts among stakeholders to help students procure additional aid that will reduce loan debt further.

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 policy-makers 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, March). [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 Pittsburgh Promise after the amount of the award doubled in 2012. The study compares financial aid data from Pittsburgh Promise students to other students entering the same institutions the same year. It finds that receiving the Promise had no effect on the amount of aid received from other sources.

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; stakeholders should 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 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(s) 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 example, Columbus City Schools is one of the five entities that launched and operates 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 depends heavily on the degree of alignment between the school district and a local Promise program, regardless of formal structure.¹ 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.

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 given locale or 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

¹ 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.

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 increases² for the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) district following the implementation of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2006. 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.³ Between 2006 and 2019 (the last pre-pandemic year), KPS grew by almost 25 percent;⁴ 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 communities⁵ showed that public school enrollments increased in Promise communities relative to their surrounding areas following the announcement of Promise programs; however, program design variation raises challenges for drawing general conclusions from this research.

The bottom line is not to count on enrollment effects from your Promise program.

Behavior/achievement effects. This is an underresearched topic, although two studies of relatively generous Promise programs, those in Kalamazoo and El Dorado, 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.⁶ The El Dorado Promise was related to improvements in math scores⁷ 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 K-12 school district. By making a multiyear (sometimes open-ended) commitment to send successive classes of high school graduates to college at reduced cost, Promise programs can help K-12 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 Advanced Placement offerings; the creation of college readiness courses; 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,⁸ Pittsburgh,⁹ and Say Yess Buffalo,¹⁰ but they are present in most Promise communities.

²Bartik, T. J., Eberts, R., & Huang, W.-J. (2010). [The Kalamazoo Promise, and enrollment and achievement trends in Kalamazoo Public Schools](#). Presented at the PromiseNet 2010 Conference, June 16–18, Kalamazoo, MI.

³Hershbein, 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.

⁴Ibid.

⁵LeGower, 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.

⁶Bartik, T. J., & Lachowska, M. (2014). [The Kalamazoo Promise scholarship](#). *Education Next*, Spring.

⁷Ash, 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.

⁸Miron, G., Jones, J.N., & Kelaher-Young, A. J. (2011). [The Kalamazoo Promise and perceived changes in school climate](#). *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19(17).

Recommended Reading

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

This study examines the effects of the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise on student behavior and academic outcomes. The study found strong evidence that the Kalamazoo Promise decreased student behavioral issues among all groups. It also found that student academic performance measured in terms of GPA increased for all students in the years following the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, although the increase was not statistically significant. For African American Students however, the increase was statistically significant. All students saw a statistically significant increase in the chance of earning any credits in high school. On the whole, the study provides strong evidence that the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise had positive effects.

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 what has made it a success compared to initiatives led by outsiders to the school system that prescribe specific interventions. In contrast, the establishment of the Kalamazoo Promise gave stakeholders in the local school community incentive to work together and find ways for the district to ensure 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), as well as the evolution and effects of Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo, NY; Guilford County, NC; and Syracuse, NY.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Reeves, R., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). [*Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education*](#). Brookings Institution.

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 attract new families to move in, but 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.¹ Since then, over 200 local and community college-based programs have been created, some by philanthropists, others by public-private partnerships, and a few with public resources alone.² 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.

¹ Miller-Adams, M. (2009). [The power of a promise: Education and economic renewal in Kalamazoo](#). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

² Ibid.

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.³ Some of these benefits can occur nearly immediately while others take longer to be observed. All 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.

Migration. Because many Promise programs have residence-based eligibility, economic theory suggests that some people may be enticed to move

into an area (or 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 focused on 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.⁴ A second study, which looked at the nuances of where students were coming from, found that while approximately 60% of new students came from a neighboring district, one-quarter came from out of state; moreover, exit rates persistently fell by one-third.⁵ 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.⁶ 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,

³ Miller-Adams, M., & Smith, E. (2018). *Promise scholarship programs and local prosperity* (Policy Paper 2018-019). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Hershbein, B. J. (2013). *A second look at enrollment changes after the Kalamazoo Promise* (Working Paper No. 2013-200). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

⁶ Bartik, T. J., & Sothterland, 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.

“ 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. ”

Say Yes Buffalo

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% 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 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 local housing: a family that expects to save several tens of thousands of dollars in lower tuition for their children may decide, for example, 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 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.⁷ A separate, broader study of eight Promise programs—still disproportionately generous ones—found that, within three years of program announcement, housing prices rose 7%–12% in eligible areas relative to the immediately 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.⁸ 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 go to more expensive institutions.⁹ Still, since the value of the scholarship is more likely to capitalize into housing prices for these families, their net benefits are reduced more than for lower-income families, making the ultimate distribution of benefits

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Bailey, M. J., & Dynarski, S.M. (2011). *Inequality in postsecondary education*. In G.J. Duncan & R.J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances* (pp. 117–132). Russell Sage.

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 needed 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.¹⁰ A study on Knox Achieves found that the last-dollar program led to higher rates of associate's degree attainment starting 4 years after high school, but no changes in earnings as late as 9 years after high school.¹¹ This mixed body of early evidence underscores the need for more research on workforce returns to Promise programs, and in particular the role of program design and aid generosity.

Recommended Reading

Iriti, J., & Miller-Adams, M. (n.d). [*Promising 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 program stakeholders to track. Indicators span three spheres, including Community and Economic Development. A list of indicators can be downloaded [here](#).

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

This brief summarizes a study on how the Kalamazoo Promise affected the employment and earnings of graduates by the time they reached their mid-to-late 20s, as well as how close they remained to Kalamazoo.

Miller-Adams, M., Hershbein, B. J., Timmeney, B., & McMullen, I. (2017). [*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 over 200 as of 2022. 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). [*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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Carruthers, C. K., Fox, W. F., & Jepsen, C. (2022). [*What Knox achieved: Estimated effects of tuition-free community college on attainment and earnings*](#). (Working paper).

11

How do Promise programs benefit states?

Lead author: Gresham Collom

Statewide Promise programs are generally bipartisan efforts that may result in increased college enrollment and reduced 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. There is also some early evidence that they reduce student loan debt. Statewide Promise programs are found in both Democratic- and Republican-led states and generally enjoy high levels of bipartisan support.

Policy Considerations

- Meeting state workforce goals will be 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 when it comes to 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.¹ 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.

¹ Lumina Foundation. (n.d.) [A stronger nation report](#).

Currently, about half the states offer broadly inclusive Promise programs.²

These are distinct from a previous generation of statewide merit-based aid programs, some still in existence, that sought to keep talented high school students in state for college.³ While these earlier programs focused on high-achieving students, offering them a free ride to four-year public institutions, statewide Promise programs 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.⁴

Research on statewide Promise programs is limited; however, existing research points to several immediate benefits. Creating Promise programs has direct, positive effects on high school students, including increases in FAFSA completion rates.⁵ Access to a Promise program increases college-going intentions among high school students by an estimated 12.4%–21.8%, with even larger increases among low-income and minority students.⁶ Research also reveals increases in college enrollment and decreases in the overall costs of attending college; the Tennessee Promise and Oregon Promise led to a jump in postsecondary enrollment, particularly at public institutions⁷ and among Black/Hispanic students.⁸ Promise programs may also decrease students' reliance on loans. One study conducted in Tennessee revealed a decline in student loan debt in over 40% of first-time student loan borrowers.⁹

Because of the relative newness of these programs, the complexity of statewide economies, and data-related challenges, little is known about the longer-term effects of statewide Promise programs, especially their impact on earnings and employment. Modeling of a hypothetical statewide Promise program for Illinois shows high returns through both enhanced earnings and fiscal flows;

² Campaign for Free College Tuition. (2022). *Making public colleges tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders*. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

³ Sjoquist, D. L., & Winters, J. V. (2012). *State Merit-based Financial Aid Programs and College Attainment* [Discussion Paper No. 6801] IZA.

⁴ Oreopoulos, P., & Salvanes, K. G. (2011). *Priceless: The nonpecuniary benefits of schooling*. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 25(1), 159–184.

⁵ Urquhart, Molly Osborne. (2020). *Tennessee currently leads the nation in FAFSA completion. Here's how they did it*. EdNC.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Nguyen, H. (2020). *Free college? Assessing enrollment responses to the Tennessee Promise program*. *Labour Economics* 66. Advance online publication; 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.

⁹ Odle, T. K., Lee, J. C., & Gentile, S. P. (2021). *Do Promise programs reduce student loans? Evidence from Tennessee Promise*. *Journal of Higher Education*. Advance online publication.

“ 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](#)

however, these returns exceed program costs only over the medium-term.¹⁰ Research into the workforce impacts of a group of local Promise programs (the Kalamazoo Promise, Knox Achieves, and the Pittsburgh Promise) generated inconclusive results in terms of earnings.¹¹

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 independent, typically older, students. There are very few eligibility requirements, and usage of the scholarship has been high.¹² In contrast, New York’s Excelsior Scholarship has a number of requirements, including stay-in-state provisions and credit minimums, that have suppressed usage.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Its structure also means that most of the benefits flow to middle- rather than low-income students.¹⁵ The

Oregon Promise has changed its requirements along the way, injecting an element of uncertainty and increasing confusion around program benefits.

Several other design elements introduced in statewide Promise programs bear mention. Some Promise programs include field-of-study requirements for STEM 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, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

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

In general, having more eligibility requirements—whether high school GPA floors, credit minimums, stay-in-state rules, field-of-study limitations, mandatory mentoring, or community service requirements—will increase program complexity and

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Carruthers, C. K., Fox, W. F., & Jepsen, C. (2022). [What Knox achieved: Estimated effects of tuition-free community college on attainment and earnings](#). (Working paper); 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.

¹² 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*.

¹³ Quinlan, C. (2017, April 10). [There are a lot of strings attached to New York’s tuition-free plan](#). Think Progress.

¹⁴ Billings, M. (2018, September 18). [Understanding the design of college promise programs, and where to go from here](#). Brookings Institution.

¹⁵ 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). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

make it harder for students to access funding. They also increase the administrative burden on students and program administrators. Frequent changes in program rules, including student eligibility, benefit levels, or other requirements, will also make it more difficult for students to understand benefits and can undermine confidence in program terms.

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 changes to the nature of developmental (non-credit-bearing) coursework at community colleges. Further, states can expand on promise program policies to provide additional funding or support (such as completion grants and college coaching in Tennessee¹⁶) to students with increased financial need or hardship, or students otherwise considered at risk.

Recommended Reading

Iriti, J., & Miller-Adams, M. (n.d). [Promising 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 program stakeholders to track. Indicators span three spheres, including Community and Economic Development. A list of indicators can be downloaded [here](#).

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.

Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., and Jackson, V. (2018). [A promise worth keeping](#). The Education Trust.

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.

Quinton, Sophie. [‘Free college’ is increasingly popular—and complicated for states](#). The Pew Charitable Trusts.

This news article summarizes voices from lawmakers and researchers who advocate for and those who are skeptical of promise programs.

State-Specific Studies

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

This report is an accessible evaluation of the Oregon Promise. It contains key statistics, as well as discussion of the specifics of the program. It also contains discussion of the effects the program has had so far, and issues 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?](#) U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

See also the [infographic summary](#) based on the same report. This report discusses the research on the effects of the Oregon Promise during its first two years of implementation. It discusses 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.

¹⁶ [ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49 relative to completion grants for Tennessee Promise scholarship students, Senate Bill 0229](#) (n.d.).

“ Every Rhode Islander needs training or education to get a good job and deserves access to that education, regardless if they’re from a rich family or poor one. ”

Gov. Gina Raimondo - Rhode Island Promise

Institute of Education Sciences. (2021). [Oregon’s promise to cover the cost of community college tuition.](#) U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

This is a helpful infographic containing data on Oregon Promise student demographics, academic progress, and outcomes.

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

This report is an accessible evaluation of the Tennessee Promise. It contains key statistics, as well as discussion of the specifics of the program. It also contains evaluations based on feedback from students of specific aspects of the program.

Podesta, K., Spires, L., & Wilson, P. (2022). [Tennessee Promise evaluation.](#) Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury Office of Research and Education Accountability.

This report is an evaluation of the Tennessee Promise program by the Tennessee Comptroller of the treasury. It discusses the details of the program, the demographics of who applies, and which 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?](#) Urban Institute.

This report describes 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.](#) Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury Office of Research and Education Accountability.

This report is an evaluation of the Tennessee Reconnect grant by the Tennessee Comptroller of the treasury. It goes over the structure of the grant, the demographics of who applies, and the research on outcomes for students using the Tennessee Promise.

Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2021). [Tennessee Promise annual report.](#)

An in-depth yearly report on the Tennessee Promise by THEC containing detailed statistics, a description of the program, and discussions of the demographics of Promise students and their educational outcomes.

12

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 more often are supported through partnerships. Staffing and administrative costs, the cost of marketing/outreach, and evaluation resources to assess program impact are other important cost components.

Policy Considerations

- Stakeholders can use cost estimator calculators (see Recommended Reading) to estimate 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 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 the capacity to carry out evaluations or write grants to support them.

What We Know

Promise programs vary in the benefits that they offer students. Typically, Promise programs include scholarships that cover tuition or tuition plus 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 cost 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 (first-dollar, last-dollar, or middle-dollar).

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,¹ MDRC,² and WestEd³ have surveyed different 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 paid for either 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% of Promise programs offered some student support services and 25% reported that they contributed zero dollars to those services. For the 44 programs that provided information on the amount they spent on student support services, survey participants paid a median amount of \$150,000 and a mean amount of \$547,595. One program reported spending \$15 million.⁴

Cost-sharing agreements may allow for the Promise program to offer more services and resources to their students than the program may be able to afford on its own. If local college access programs

have overlapping missions, it may be 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.

Promise programs also need to consider the costs of overhead and program administration. 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 that applicants meet the requirements, admit students into the program, and plan and implement programming for the Promise recipients. 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% of Promise programs reported that they had more than one full-time staff member with larger Promise programs employing more staff members than smaller Promise programs. More than half of survey respondents (54%) paid for all or part of their administrative and operational expenses with a median amount of \$140,000 per program.⁵

¹ College Promise Campaign. (2020). *College promises to keep: A playbook for achieving college Promise financial sustainability*. College Promise Campaign.

² Willard, J., Vasquez, A., & Lepe, M. (2019). *Designing for success: The early implementation of college Promise programs*. MDRC College Promise Success Initiative.

³ Rauner, M., Perna, L. W., & Kanter, M. J. (2018). *California College Promise: Program characteristics and perceptions from the field*. WestEd.

⁴ College Promise Campaign. (2020). *College promises to keep: A playbook for achieving college promise financial sustainability*. College Promise Campaign.

⁵ 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.

Recommended Reading

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

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](#). MDRC.

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.

The W.E. Upjohn Institute has published several cost-estimate studies for specific Promise programs. These include local programs such as [Buchanan Promise](#) (Michigan), [Rockford Promise](#) (Illinois), and [Toledo Promise](#) (Ohio), as well as statewide programs such as the [Illinois Tuition-Free College Program](#) and [Oregon Promise](#).

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 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-based programs usually 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, stakeholders run the risk of breaking their promise to students and communities.

Policy Considerations

- From the start, Promise programs should identify financial sustainability as an essential goal.
- Aim to diversify funding sources by identifying potential resources within a state or community and cultivating relationships to help fund the Promise program.
- When exploring funding options, stable revenue sources, such as endowments, trusts, perpetual gifts, or tax-increment funding, will offer the most value.
- Promise programs will benefit from a long-term fundraising plan.

What We Know

When deciding how to fund the scholarship, student services, and administrative/overhead components of a Promise program, stakeholders 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. Promise programs have three main revenue sources: private funds, public funds, and a combination of the two.

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. Promise programs often 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 administrators more flexibility in their use of funding to meet the needs and goals of the program.

A majority of Promise programs leverage available state and federal financial aid, such as the Pell grant, to help fund the scholarship component of the program. Since 2020, some states have used federal pandemic relief funding through either the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund or Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund to create or expand eligibility.¹

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), 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% of Promise programs reported that they reduced the length of their award due to decreased funding during the COVID-19 pandemic.² 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.³

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 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 then either had to find funding to cover those services or reduce/eliminate the services if they could not afford to pay for them out of their budgets.⁴

Promise programs that lack a clear vision for ensuring 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.⁵ In a 2018 survey by the College Promise Campaign, about

¹ Billings, M. S., Li, A. Y., Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., Cervantes, D., & Turcios-Villalta, J. (n.d.). *Financing free college programs: Where the money comes from and where the money goes* (Working paper).

² College Promise Campaign. (2021). *Financial sustainability for college promise programs: Navigating through and beyond COVID-19*. College Promise Campaign.

³ St. Amour, M. (2020, October 8). *College promise programs wrestle with pandemic realities*. Inside Higher Ed.

⁴ Burkander, K., Kent, D. C., & Callahan, K. (2019). *The case of Oregon Promise: An early adopter focused on broadening access*. Research for Action

half of Promise programs reported that they had sustainability concerns.⁶ Their reasons included increasing demand for the program (51%), limited control over yearly budget allocation (37%), setting and meeting annual fundraising goals (36%), setting and meeting endowment goals to fully fund the Promise program (22%), and using endowment funds beyond the annual endowment interest rate (6%). 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 multiyear 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*](#). College Promise.

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*](#). 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.

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 think about financial sustainability practically in the context of their programs.

⁵ Millett, C. (Ed.). (2017). [*Designing sustainable funding for college promise initiatives*](#). Educational Testing Service.

⁶ MDRC and the College Promise Campaign. (2019). [*Promises to keep: Findings on college promise finance sustainability*](#) (Powerpoint slides). MDRC and the College Promise Campaign.

“ When you offer a program built on the notion of free tuition, what you’re really trying to do is build trust with students. If the program isn’t strong enough to survive economic shifts and market volatility, it won’t work. ”

Mike Krause, former executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, discussing the Tennessee Promise

Case Study: Michigan Promise Zones

In 2009, under Democratic Governor Jennifer M. Granholm, the State of Michigan adopted legislation allowing communities to establish Promise Zones in areas with above average poverty rates. Communities that were interested in the 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.⁷ Eight years later, Republican Governor Rick Snyder signed a bill that expanded the number of Promise Zones from 10 to 15.⁸ The list of the current Promise Zone communities are available here: <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 for the Baldwin Promise) or indexed to tuition and fees at the local community college (e.g., Oakland Community College for the Hazel Park Promise). Eligibility for the scholarship is 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 length of local school district enrollment, with considerable variation among the Promise Zones on the specific entry grade required to receive 100% of the scholarship.⁹

The Promise Zones are funded through a unique public-private partnership. In the first two years of operation, Promise Zones are funded by private sources, usually donations by local businesses and individuals. Beginning in the third year of operation, Promise Zones can receive funding through tax-increment financing or a “tax capture” mechanism that automatically awards half the growth in the state education tax (SET) within the zone to the Promise Zones to pay for the scholarships.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

⁷ 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.

⁸ Michigan Promise Zones Association. (n.d.). [History of Michigan Promise Zones](#).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Michigan Promise Zones Association. (n.d.). [How Promise Zones Work](#).

¹¹ 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.

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 stakeholders, 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 stakeholders are trying to address) is an essential first step.

Policy Considerations

- The group of stakeholders needed to sustain a program's operations over time may look different from the stakeholders 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 stakeholders 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 stakeholders are the main drivers of the Promise design.

Bringing the right stakeholders 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 stakeholder 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 stakeholders. Such programs will benefit if the broader community is engaged, but decision-making will be based at the institution itself. Key stakeholders 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 stakeholders to build and maintain a Promise. Those initiating a Promise program will benefit from being intentional about which stakeholders are at the table during the design phase. Public school districts are rarely the initiators of such efforts but are crucial partners. Promise programs need funding, so stakeholders must 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 stakeholders can flow.

Ideally, initial stakeholders 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 stakeholder groups, such as political organizations and labor unions, can also be crucial to advancing Promise models in some locales.

“ 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. ”

Say Yes Buffalo

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,¹ in which case the business community can speak to specific skills and fields that are lacking in the state workforce.

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 stakeholders.

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

A persistent challenge that improvement work faces 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 stakeholder group in relation to the intended beneficiaries.

¹ Lumina Foundation. (n.d). [*A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent*](#).

15

What steps are needed to launch a Promise program?

Lead authors: Jennifer Iriti and Celeste Carruthers

Although steps to establish a Promise program vary depending on who initiates it, the context, and the financial resources available, most programs are developed by following seven key steps.

Promise programs are built in a variety of ways depending on who initiates them, the local context, available fiscal resources, and the nature of the place where they are being created. Even so, there is a natural sequence of steps to building a Promise program, some of which are critical for its success. There are seven key steps: 1) form a design team, 2) build the foundation, 3) determine the program structures and requirements, 4) determine financial support and other supports, 5) develop a communication plan, 6) build a research and evaluation plan, and 7) implement the Promise.

Policy Considerations

- For institution-level programs, college leaders must convince their trustees of the Promise program 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 multisector 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, so it is key 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 such as 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 availability of fiscal resources, among many others. Despite this variation, there is a natural sequence of steps to building Promise programs, and some of these steps are particularly critical for success.¹

¹ College Promise Campaign (n.d.). *Playbook: How to build a Promise*. College Promise Campaign; Rauner, M., Lundquist, S., & Smith, A. (2019). *The college Promise guidebook for California and beyond*. WestED.

| Step | Description | Goal |
|------|--|--|
| 1 | Form a design team | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate the “why” question and answer for this institution, community, or state: What is the critical need stakeholders are trying to address and how can a Promise program help? • Identify needed partners/stakeholders for design phase; ensure equitable composition • Convene potential design team members and provide overview of development process • Formalize design team structure, roles, and responsibilities • Articulate partner roles and responsibilities |
| 2 | Build the foundation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a needs assessment and/or root cause analysis • Convene design team for critical need discussion • Establish shared need and goal(s) • Determine key stakeholders and partners needed to realize goal (including municipal, school district, higher education, funder/foundations, employers, community-based organizations, intended beneficiaries) • Determine organizational home and Promise leadership |
| 3 | Determine program structure and requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine eligibility and participation requirements • Establish appeals process • Determine distribution process • Identify needed partners |
| 4 | Determine financial support and other supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine financial support amount and structure • Use analytics to estimate program costs • Revise program structure, requirements, and financial support amounts based on analysis • Use root causes analysis and/or critical need results to plan for additional student supports • Build financial sustainability plan |
| 5 | Develop a communication plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop simple program message to partners/stakeholders, families, and students • Determine who needs to know what and when • Evaluate whether partners need additional training/support to implement |
| 6 | Build a research and evaluation plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify evaluation and research questions, including timeline and audiences for each • Establish measures and indicators • Establish targets with leadership team • Evaluation data availability across partners • Establish data-sharing agreements • Determine reporting cadence to stakeholder groups |
| 7 | Implement the Promise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor implementation quality • Implement communications plan • Implement financial sustainability plan • Implement evaluation and research plan • Modify program design and implementation based on emerging evidence |

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

Institution level

Compared to community and state-level Promise programs, institution-level programs initiated by community colleges tend to have fewer stakeholders and may have more readily visible needs (e.g., increase enrollment, improve completion rates). The support of college trustees and high-level institutional leaders is essential. Beyond that, institution-based Promise programs can benefit from engaging enrollment and fiscal analysts in the design phase to leverage all local, state, and federal financial resources and ensure that the Promise model yields an acceptable level of risk. It is also important to connect with key community partners, including local K-12 school districts and area employers. See Lake Michigan College Promise for an example.

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 a consensus on which ones to address in the Promise program. As a result, community-based Promise programs usually emerge from a multi-year, multi-sector development process. Consensus-building around the area's critical need and ongoing engagement of partners are essential elements in a program's success. See Say Yes Buffalo for an example.

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 upon the political machinery within the legislative process. In some places, models have advanced based on workforce development needs, while in others, Promise programs have advanced with 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. (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.

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.

Miller-Adams, M., & Timmeney, B. (2019, October 10). [*Program administration models*](#). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

This unpublished memo describes five different program administration models that reflect the variation across the set of Promise programs in existence up to 2019.

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.

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 over time, 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. Stakeholders should be sure not to over-promise 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 Promise program growth, day-to-day operations, and evolution.
- Several Promise programs have found enhanced stability by using detailed fiscal analysis and 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 in light of 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. Say Yes to Education deploys a careful cost and expenditure study at prospective host cities. Other programs and states contracted the services of the Upjohn Institute to prepare 10-year cost estimates to inform design 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.

Planning can also help to map out systems for operations and evaluation. Say Yes to Education builds student-level data systems to measure individual progress and connect students to wraparound services. This helps the program track community-wide measures of program success ranging from third grade reading proficiency to college completion. Tennessee issues an annual Tennessee Promise report itemizing program take-up, cost, and participating student outcomes.

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 for cuts if they rely on annual appropriations. Nevertheless, many Promise programs have expanded in various ways; these include implementing adaptations that cover more students; adding new eligible institutions; providing financial benefits beyond last-dollar aid; or trying to improve take-up rates, equitable access to higher education, college and community coordination, student support wraparound services, integrated continuous improvement, and/or evaluation. Below are a few examples of program contractions, expansions, and other evolutions.

- At the same time that Tennessee introduced the Tennessee Promise, a last-dollar program for new high school graduates, the state implemented Tennessee Reconnect for students 25 and older who were attending Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. Reconnect take-up was lower than expected, and Reconnect expenditures were under budget. In response, the state expanded Reconnect eligibility to include students ages 25 and up who attend a community college. Legislation in 2022 lowered the Reconnect age minimum to 23, thereby encompassing more students.
- In 2021, Lake Michigan College announced that all degree-seeking students could attend the college tuition-free for up to 30 credits during the 2021–22 academic year. This last-dollar promise was made possible through a combination of Michigan Reconnect, federal coronavirus emergency relief funds, and private donors. Enrollment was 13%–18% higher in 2021–22 than the year prior, bucking the nationwide trend of falling enrollment in two-year schools.¹ Based on the success of this pilot phase, the college announced the LMC Promise in February 2022. Eligibility for the [LMC Promise](#) was more limited than for the pilot, however, with the later program targeting students under age 25 without a college degree, and with family incomes under \$75,000. (Michigan Reconnect pays tuition for students without degrees who are over the age of 25.)
- The Oregon Promise launched with the graduating high school class of 2016. Initially a middle-dollar scholarship for new high school graduates attending community college, the program provided last-dollar aid or \$1,000 if a student's tuition was already covered. Funding for the Oregon Promise is subject to annual appropriations from the state legislature, and this has led to fluctuations in Promise eligibility over time. The program added an income cap for the 2017 entering class (a maximum expected family contribution [EFC] of \$20,000), removed the income limit for the 2018 class, and then imposed a \$22,000 maximum EFC for the 2020 class. The 2020 eligibility update came so late that about 1,000 Oregon Promise students had their awards revoked.² The income cap was raised to \$42,000 EFC in 2021, and removed altogether for 2022. The 2022 update also lowered the GPA eligibility requirement from 2.5 to 2.0, and eliminated student copayments.

¹ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2022). *Fall 2021 enrollment estimates*.

² St. Amour, M. (2020, October 8). *College Promise programs wrestle with pandemic realities*. Inside Higher Ed.

- Say Yes to Education was founded in 1987 by wealthy philanthropist George Weiss. Through Say Yes, Weiss and other donors promised college scholarships and provided additional support, such as legal aid and health care, to cohorts ranging from third to sixth grade in disadvantaged schools in four Northeastern cities. In the mid-2000s, Say Yes leaders broadened the organization’s strategy from supporting isolated cohorts at specific schools and “entered the business of improving entire school districts and communities.”³ There are now comprehensive Say Yes programs in Buffalo, Cleveland, Syracuse, and Guilford County (NC).
- The Pittsburgh Promise was established in 2008 as a last-dollar scholarship of up to \$5,000 per year that could be used at two-year, four-year, public, and private institutions in Pennsylvania. The maximum scholarship grew to \$10,000 in 2012 and shifted to a first-dollar structure, but contracted to \$7,500 per year in tuition-only support in 2015, when forecasted revenues fell short of expenses. Despite an uncertain financial future, the program sought to simplify eligibility criteria and reach more students. The maximum scholarship fell again to \$5,000 in 2018, but at the same time, the program loosened K-12 residency requirements and allowed students to apply Promise aid once again toward college expenses other than tuition. High school attendance and GPA criteria were suspended in 2021, in light of coronavirus disruptions. Pittsburgh Promise is not guaranteeing scholarships beyond the class of 2028 because funding is uncertain.
- Michigan Promise Zones are localities designated through state law as places where college scholarships are available to all students. They rely on a unique public-private partnership structure made up of local resources, Pell grants, and a tax capture from growth in state education 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 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, several Promise Zones have added four-year and even private options to their students’ postsecondary choices.

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.

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 and 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.

³ Reeves, R.V., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). [*Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education*](#). Brookings Institution.

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 sustainability.

Challenges during the design phase may include tensions around which stakeholders should be engaged and at what stage, and how to ensure 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, and/or how to measure program impact.

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, 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 stakeholders will face challenges along the way in designing, implementing, operating, and sustaining their programs. One framework for thinking about how to address such challenges is provided by the literature on collective impact,¹ a strategy for community alignment that helps stakeholders work together across diverse sectors in pursuit of a common goal.

Here we review the main categories of challenges Promise programs may face at various stages, as well as the essential elements of the collective impact approach.

¹ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36–41.

Design challenges that can derail a Promise before launch:

- Disagreement among stakeholders and decision-makers over the goals for tuition-free college, and disagreement over the forecasted effects of offering new or expanded financial aid. This can lead to difficult decisions in the design phase, where, for example, some favor simple and universal aid, while others want aid to be targeted to the neediest students or the most in-demand occupations.
- Not enough disagreement among stakeholders. Divergent and irreconcilable views can derail a nascent Promise program, but at the same time, an emphasis on consensus or a limited scope for productive debate among decision-makers can lead to a weaker or overly complicated program that fails to gather external support.
- The design process becoming public too soon. If a planning effort is shared widely early on, the stakeholder group may experience pressure from various entities (for example, school districts, private schools, colleges, or advocacy groups) to address their specific interests. This can create a situation in which consensus cannot be achieved and can create confusion among key stakeholder groups.
- Too many decision-makers at the table when designing a new Promise program. Some successful Promise programs have launched from a relatively small coalition of highly invested stakeholders: Privately funded Kalamazoo Promise, Knox Achieves, and Pittsburgh Promise are three examples. But having too few stakeholders at the beginning is risky as well, especially if funding is in question, and if the captains of a new Promise idea have a limited vision of the interdependent

problems and structures at play. Also, if particular interest groups are left out and perceive their own objectives to be at odds with a new Promise, they may successfully oppose its implementation.

Implementation and operation challenges that can curtail student and program success:

- Confusion around what is and is not “free” among the long list of college expenses. Such expenses may include tuition, mandatory fees, additional fees (for certain programs of study, late registration, housing, meals, and so forth), textbooks and supplies, and living expenses.
- Confusion around what is and is not “college.” If aid covers non-degree certificate programs or apprenticeships, for example, program messaging should promote these pathways alongside degree programs.
- Low take-up. This may be due to restrictions that limit the number of eligible students, such as requirements that create uncertainty about eligibility or benefits. Weak communications or insufficient outreach and navigation resources may also be responsible for low take-up.
- Inadequate systems connecting students with wraparound services. Students need to be connected with Promise program staff, advisers, college bursars, and other individuals (who should be) engaged in running the program, such as social service agencies for programs with wraparound supports, or high school faculty and staff for programs targeting new high school graduates. Inadequate support or inadequate systems for connecting students to the support can lead to mismanagement, erroneous bills, and red tape that students are left to resolve, as well as a dissolution of trust and shared goals.

Challenges in sustaining or growing new programs:

- Renewed funding. This is a challenge that many Promise programs face, whether they rely on private donors or public appropriations. Some can draw on endowed or earmarked resources, but even in those circumstances, shifting priorities may pull funds into other purposes.
- Turnover among the people who run or champion Promise programs. High turnover can erode institutional memory or reorder state, community, or college priorities, placing Promise programs below priorities for newly urgent problems. This challenge is to be expected for state governments and colleges, where churning staff and leadership priorities are the norm.
- Measuring and evaluating impact. This will be challenging for most Promise programs, since they are rarely structured as randomized, controlled trials with immediate outcomes of interest. Is a community-based Promise revitalizing an area as hoped? Is a state Promise growing the skilled workforce? Long-term, multisector questions such as these can be difficult to answer with short-term enrollment and attainment measures. Is an institutional Promise expanding access to the college in question? Perhaps so, in which case a broader college pipeline may result in cohorts that have lower GPAs, lower rates of year-to-year persistence, and lower completion rates. At every level, it can be difficult to measure program success against readily available measures of student success.

The collective-impact literature holds important lessons about how stakeholders from diverse sectors can align their efforts. Essential elements of the collective impact model include forging a common agenda, agreement about how to measure

progress, mutually reinforcing activities (that is, strategic coordination that plays to each participant's strengths), continuous communication, and backbone support staff. The model is adaptable to different contexts and offers one way to develop a vibrant Promise and translate it into a well-executed program. The model has recently been updated to emphasize equity concerns.² One specific strategy is to “move from working in communities to working *with* communities and supporting work *by* communities” (italics added).

Recommended Reading

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

This magazine 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?](#) Urban Institute.

This report describes low and uneven take-up of New York's Excelsior Scholarship among City University of New York students. Case Studies [adapted from Promise Nation, pp. 34–36]

² Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Juster, J. S. (2021). [Centering equity in collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 20(1), 38–45.

“ One specific strategy is to “move from working in communities to working with communities and supporting work by communities”.

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Case Studies

[adapted from *Promise Nation*, pp. 34–36]

Several communities began exploring their own college Promises shortly after the surprise announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2005. Flint, Michigan, was one such community, where education, foundation, and business leaders began meeting with the goal of establishing a Promise for Flint students. Despite years of effort, however, the coalition was not able to get buy-in from the city or overcome large financial hurdles. The outlook for Flint changed in 2009 when Michigan established Promise Zones in several distressed cities. Promise Zones are funded by a combination of private donations and tax increment financing, which relies on future growth in local property taxes collected within each Zone. Flint was not one of the state’s initial Promise Zones but was included in a 2018 expansion.

Akron, Ohio, is another community that explored its own Promise in the wake of Kalamazoo’s announcement. A ballot initiative attached Promise scholarship funding to another proposal

to privatize the city’s sewer system. This was one reason for opposition, along with a requirement that scholarship recipients pay city income tax for 30 years if they move away, as well as a general sentiment that the scholarship’s champions did not elicit enough public input. The vote failed, with 63% opposed.

In Davenport, Iowa, a task force of city, school, and community leaders led the push to provide scholarships through a reallocation of proceeds from the city’s \$0.01 local-option sales tax. Despite a deliberate convening process that included multiple public consultations, extensive media coverage, and the commissioning of an economic impact study, the program failed when it was put to a vote in a special election in March 2009. Proponents blamed the harsh economic climate, although an organized opposition that insisted such a program be privately funded was clearly a factor.

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, 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 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, complex requirements should be avoided.
- If the goal is to increase the supply of educated workers, include adults within eligibility requirements.
- Be aware that restrictions on scholarship usage 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 stakeholders 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.

Eligibility requirements should align with the program's purpose. For example, If the goal is to increase college-going, especially among disadvantaged students, complex requirements should be avoided. 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, include adults within eligibility requirements. Many adults, including those currently working, can benefit from the opportunity to retrain for a higher-paying job. For programs designed to reach adults, allowing part-time attendance and enlisting employers as partners are essential steps.

There also can be unintended consequences. 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.

Residency. The Promise programs covered in this handbook are 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. Community college-based programs, similarly, 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 almost always have multiyear residency or school district enrollment requirements (often 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 long-term attachment between families and 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.¹) Second, Promise programs can serve as catalysts for change in K-12 districts and communities (through, for example, enhanced tutoring or mentoring, or greater business engagement in internship or pathways programs), which may help engage all students and improve opportunity. Also, there is evidence that Promise programs can spark the creation of a college-going culture among high school students.² 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 impact of Promise programs. Low-income families may have higher mobility in and out of school districts, thereby reducing their children's benefits.³ This is one reason why some communities have opted for shorter residency requirements (the

¹ Bartik, T. J., & Sotheland, 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.

² 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); Winograd, M., & Miller, H. (2016, March 22). *Promise programs aren't just about the money*. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

³ Phinney, R. (2013). *Exploring residential mobility among low-income families*. *Social Service Review*, 87(4).

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. Some programs 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, 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. Such requirements also embody the idea that, with such an incentive on the table, students will work harder in high school.

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,⁴ so program stakeholders 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 pipeline to reach students not already on the postsecondary pathway, and high school GPA and attendance requirements can hinder this. A randomized trial of a Promise-like program in Milwaukee⁵ found that high school GPA requirements did not lead to higher grades in high school, and the main effect⁶ was to limit funds to only one in five students who were otherwise eligible. 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. Universal eligibility is more expensive, but also likely to do more to accomplish a variety of program goals.

Postsecondary performance requirements. Even after students meet the initial eligibility requirements, some programs have additional requirements

⁴ UChicagoNews. (n.d.). [Test scores don't stack up to GPAs in predicting college success.](#)

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

students must fulfill to maintain eligibility once they have entered college. The most common of these performance requirements 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.⁷ 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. Some Promise programs have embedded community service requirements into their eligibility criteria. These create an added administrative burden both for students who need to find qualifying community-service opportunities and program administrators who must track and enforce the rules, although community-service requirements can make a program more attractive to local stakeholders by requiring students to “give back” to their community. A few states, most notably New York, 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 (think of the difference in public attitudes toward Social Security and SNAP, or Medicare and Medicaid). In the Promise field, polling data suggests that adding GPA requirement increases public support⁸ while adding a financial need requirement reduces perceptions of fairness. Beyond perceptions, though, eligibility rules, along with other program criteria (see Questions 2 and 3), will profoundly affect who benefits from a Promise program.⁹ Eligibility requirements of all kinds also create administrative burdens¹⁰ that keep students from receiving funds even if they are eligible.

⁷ Scott-Clayton, J. (2009). [On money and motivation: A quasi-experimental analysis of financial incentives for college achievement](#). *Journal of Human Resources* 46; Carruthers, C., & Özek, U. (2013). [Losing HOPE: Financial aid and the line between college and work](#). (Working Paper No. 91). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research; 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.

⁸ Bell, E. (2020). [The politics of designing tuition-free college: How socially constructed target populations influence policy support](#). *Journal of Higher Education*, 91(6).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Gandara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022). [Reducing barriers to free college programs](#). (Policy brief). Scholars Strategy Network.

As with other social programs, simple rules around student eligibility¹¹ and low barriers to access¹² will maximize the reach of a Promise program, as research suggests.

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.

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.

Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022, April). [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.

Harris, D. N., et al. (2018). [The promise of free college \(and its potential pitfalls\)](#). Brookings Institution.

This report distills lessons for program design from the Degree Project, one of the first randomized control trials of a program similar to many free college and promise scholarship proposals.

Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., & Jackson, V. (2018). [A promise worth keeping](#). Education Trust.

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.

Miller-Adams, M. (2021). [The path to free college: In pursuit of access, equity, and prosperity](#). Harvard Education Press.

This book provides a high-level analysis of the free college movement and outlines how the design of free college programs should relate to programmatic goals, whether those are driven by expanding college access, improving equity in college-going and attainment, or promoting a better-educated workforce.

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.

Perna, L. W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. W. (2020). [Is a college promise program an effective use of resources? Understanding the implications of program design and resource investments for equity and efficiency](#). AERA Open, 6(4), 1–15.

This research article examines how program design and resource investments influence equity, efficiency, and outcomes for four last-dollar community college Promise programs.

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

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

¹¹ Burland, E., Dynarski, S., Micheltore, K., Owen, S., & Raghuraman, S. (2022). [The power of certainty: Experimental evidence on the effective design of free tuition programs](#). (Working Paper No. 29864). National Bureau of Economic Research.

¹² 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).

Case Studies

How student eligibility rules reflect stakeholder goals.

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.

Stakeholders 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 stakeholders 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.

Broadening eligibility beyond recent high school graduates.

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. In 2017, [Tennessee Reconnect](#) was launched, allowing any adult in the state without a degree to attend a community college or college of applied technology tuition free. [Michigan Reconnect](#), which serves adults, is modeled on Tennessee's program, while some other states have introduced tuition-free college programs with no age restrictions. California's community colleges also serve students of any age with tuition-free access. A few local programs do so as well.

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 is faulty. 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.

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 the range of covered institutions runs from a single local community college to any accredited higher-ed institution in the nation—although such programs typically include only local or in-state institutions. While most Promise programs focus on public colleges and universities, a few have special arrangements with private colleges.

Policy Considerations

- Promise programs should be designed to encourage students to attend the institution that offers the best academic match.
- Stakeholders should consider institutions' graduation rates and ability to support student success and completion when designating eligible postsecondary choices.
- Be clear about goals and devise rules regarding eligible institutions in line with these goals; decisions about including two-year v. four-year or local v. statewide institutions should be driven by student needs and program goals, not just by available resources.
- 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-year and four-year degrees, short-term credentials, and apprenticeships). But Promise stakeholders 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 stakeholder goals.

Most statewide Promise programs limit usage to the two-year public sector, often for cost reasons and because politically there are benefits to a relatively quick return on investment in the form of more educated workers. (There are a few exceptions, including New Mexico, New York, and Washington, which include four-year public options.) If focusing on this sector, 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 a two-year setting will transfer to a four-year institution.

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

Stakeholders designing community-based programs have more options. If generating degrees and credentials for local residents is the top priority, limiting usage to local institutions might make sense. If stakeholders 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 generous program that includes both two- and four-year options is a better design choice.

Limiting institutional choice can also have unintended consequences. The two-year public sector is considerably less expensive than the four-year sector (either public or private),¹ and most Promise

programs do not in fact include four-year options. However, programs focused solely on two-year institutions run the risk of inducing some students to switch from four-year to two-year institutions, 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.²) Limiting postsecondary options will reduce costs but make it likely that fewer students will participate. Field of study requirements (such as restricting scholarship use to certain majors) have the side effect of creating administrative complexity that can undermine program success. 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 stakeholders are trying to reach may not be aware of which specific programs qualify or may be confused about what happens if they switch majors later. 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 community colleges) can help build college awareness without overextending stakeholders’ financial 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 out of their own resources to support

¹ Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2021). *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2021*. New York: College Board.

² 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.

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.

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.

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.

Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., & Jackson, V. (2018). [*A promise worth keeping*](#). Education Trust.

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.

Miller-Adams, M. (2021). [*The path to free college: In pursuit of access, equity, and prosperity*](#). Harvard Education Press.

This book provides a high-level analysis of the free-college movement and outlines how the design of free-college programs should relate to programmatic goals, whether those are driven by expanding college access, improving equity in college-going and attainment, or promoting a better-educated workforce.

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.

Perna, L. W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. W. (2020). [*Is a college promise program an effective use of resources? Understanding the implications of program design and resource investments for equity and efficiency*](#). AERA Open, 6(4), 1–15.

This research article examines how program design and resource investments influence equity, efficiency, and outcomes for four last-dollar community college Promise programs.

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

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

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 that bring fewer or greater new resources to students.

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 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.
- Keeping the scholarship structure as simple as possible will reduce student uncertainty, make messaging easier, and promote usage.
- 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 support and strong messaging are in place around college-going requirements.
- Avoid making program commitments that cannot be sustained; it is better to start modestly and expand benefits than to provide generous benefits that at some point need to be reduced.

What We Know

A core element of a Promise program is the funding it provides for postsecondary education, especially important 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 may be. Others provide a flat grant to be used toward these costs. A few allocate additional resources to covering other costs such as housing, transportation, and books. Economists point out that the largest cost of college for most students is the loss of time they could have spent earning income (the “opportunity cost” of college). 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 apply the 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 is an expensive way to structure a Promise program and rare in the Promise universe, but it has important equity benefits, directing the largest amount of funding to those students most in need.¹ In a **last-dollar design**, which is dominant in the field, Promise scholarship dollars are applied after federal and sometimes state grant aid. This makes the program less expensive because some students

may not receive any Promise scholarship dollars if federal or state grant aid fully covers their tuition bill. **Middle-dollar designs** are becoming a more popular approach, 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 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 long and complex and has proven to be a barrier in college attendance.² One of the most important contributions of Promise programs is to provide an **early message about 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, stakeholders 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, stakeholders should consider providing supplemental grants to students who receive no funding through the Promise program (i.e., 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.

¹ 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.

² 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).

The spread of Promise programs has raised questions about **scholarship award displacement**—that is, whether the availability of a Promise scholarship leads institutions to “displace” or withdraw aid they have already awarded to students. Displacement is a widespread practice that is gaining greater scrutiny,³ and some states have enacted laws to make it illegal.⁴ 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.

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.

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.

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.

Hodara, M. (2017). [What does the research say about barriers to FAFSA completion and strategies to boost completion?](#) Education Northwest.

This article discusses the research on FAFSA completion. 2011/2012 data shows that about a third of students who did not submit a FAFSA would have been eligible for Pell Grants. The article lists some of the key barriers to FAFSA completion. Students and their families may believe they do not have financial need, they may not have adequate information about financial aid, they may be deterred by the cost of college,

and they may find the FAFSA completion process to be too complex. The article discusses strategies for overcoming these barriers to boost FAFSA completion, such as personally assisting students with completing the FAFSA and providing them with easy-to-understand information about the process.

Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., & Jackson, V. (2018). [A promise worth keeping](#). Education Trust.

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.

Miller-Adams, M. (2021). [The path to free college: In pursuit of access, equity, and prosperity](#). Harvard Education Press.

This book provides a high-level analysis of the free-college movement and outlines how the design of free-college programs should relate to programmatic goals, whether those are driven by expanding college access, improving equity in college-going and attainment, or promoting a better-educated workforce.

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

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Perna, L. W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. W. (2020). [Is a college promise program an effective use of resources? Understanding the implications of program design and resource investments for equity and efficiency](#). AERA Open, 6(4), 1–15.

This research article examines how program design and resource investments influence equity, efficiency, and outcomes for four last-dollar community college Promise programs.

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

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

³ Lewis, Z., & Green, B. (2022, April 25). [Scholarship award displacement: The hidden practice](#). Forbes.

⁴ Francisco, M. (2020, April 14). [Now you see it, now you don't: Scholarship displacement dilemma](#). New America.

21

Success factors: How does messaging affect program usage and impact?

Lead authors: Denisa Gándara and Bridget Timmeney¹

Clear and consistent messaging is an important component of a successful Promise program.

Without effective outreach around benefits and the steps needed to access them, a Promise program will fall short of its potential. The ability to deliver a simple, clear message is strengthened if program requirements are kept to a minimum and resources are provided for professional communications (including a high-quality website) and tailored outreach and engagement.

Policy Considerations

- Promise program designers should pay attention to how they communicate with stakeholders, especially students and families.
- Clear and consistent messaging is supported by program designs with minimal criteria, “automatic” eligibility determinations, and the use of plain language.
- Dedicated resources for professional communications capacity, including a high-quality website, should be included up front in Promise cost estimations.
- Tailored outreach to students can help ensure they clearly understand program rules and benefits.

What We Know

Research shows that when program-eligibility criteria are straightforward and minimal, more eligible people will participate. This makes intuitive sense: the fewer the requirements, the easier it is for individuals to determine whether they qualify.

Recent evidence suggests that eliminating students’ uncertainty about whether they qualify to participate in a Promise program is more effective than requiring them to submit proof of eligibility.² In a recent study, researchers mailed letters to two groups of prospective students offering tuition-free college, all of whom were eligible to attend the University of Michigan tuition free. The first group was told they automatically qualified, whereas the second group was told they would have to prove income eligibility. Students in the first group (with the guarantee) were more likely to apply to

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Rosa Acevedo (postdoctoral researcher) and Diana Cervantes (doctoral student) at the University of Texas at Austin.

² 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*. National Bureau of Economic Research. .

and enroll at the university than those in the second group.

Another recent study suggests that fewer eligibility criteria may lead to higher uptake of program benefits. Researchers examined 33 Promise programs at the community college level and found that programs without income criteria saw larger increases in community college enrollment than those with income criteria.³ In addition to adding a level of uncertainty, eligibility requirements, such as income criteria, usually impose compliance costs on students, requiring them to take an extra step (e.g., fill out paperwork) to demonstrate that they qualify.

While minimal eligibility requirements are desirable from a messaging standpoint, Promise program designers must determine eligibility criteria within the context of available resources. As a result, they may face a trade-off between the target level of benefits (e.g., funds flowing to students with the greatest need) and the complexity of eligibility criteria.

Research has shown that a universal message (e.g., “tuition-free college for all”) can go a long way in inducing prospective students to attend college. However, it is imperative that the message of “free college” not be misleading. New evidence on the Tennessee Promise illustrates 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.⁴

Promise program designers should consider two additional aspects related to messaging (beyond

eligibility criteria). First, outreach is a critical complement to messaging.⁵ Research on other types of programs showed that outreach to those who are eligible is important for increasing program participation. Relatedly, tailoring outreach to eligible individuals can be especially effective.⁶ Second, the accessibility of the written language used in messaging (e.g., avoiding jargon) can positively affect rates of program participation.⁷

Recommended Reading

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.

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 they have different responsibilities than other students. SHEEO encourages Programs to relay program information using clear and simple language.

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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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*, 01623737221090265.

⁵ Kim, D. H., & Rifelj, K. K. (2021). [*Packaging the Promise: Money, messaging, and misalignment*](#). *Teachers College Record*, 123(6), 1–38.

⁶ Hock, H., Jones, J. T., Levere, M., & Wittenburg, D. (2021). [*Using behavioral outreach to counteract administrative burden and encourage take-up of simplified disability payment rules*](#). *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 4(1).

⁷ Dorn, S. (2014). [*Public education, outreach and application assistance*](#). Urban Institute.

22

Success factors: What are the most effective approaches to student support?

Lead authors: Denisa Gándara and Bridget Timmeney¹

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. Stakeholders should consider including funding for student support in their Promise design and/or seek strong collaboration with their main receiving institutions around student support.

Policy Considerations

- Promise stakeholders 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 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.
- Data analytics can help colleges and their student support offices help detect when a student might need help.
- Administrative hurdles, such as application processes, that make it difficult for students to access benefits should be avoided.

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Rosa Acevedo (postdoctoral researcher) and Diana Cervantes (doctoral student) at the University of Texas at Austin.

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.² 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 access to improving completion, such support components are increasingly being incorporated.

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.³ The ASAP model has been replicated successfully (with modifications) in other locations,⁴ as well as with the Detroit Promise, where the replication generated mixed results.⁵

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 need “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.

As a final 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.⁶ 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. This design has been incorporated in such programs as the Kalamazoo Promise where a pathways coach is assigned to each high school and a handoff is made to a Promise coach

² 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.

³ 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, 253–297.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Ratledge, A., et. al. (2021). *Motor City momentum: Three years of the Detroit Promise Path for community college students*. MDRC.

⁶ 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.

located at the local community college and another at the local four-year institution. The intentional hand-off of students and consistent staff follow-up allows supportive transitions for students who are navigating on their own or with minimal support.

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.⁷

Recommended Reading

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

This case study highlights GSU's shift from a higher education system with significant disparities among its historically marginalized population to one that has closed its achievement gaps entirely, in part due to data-driven interventions.

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.

Hefling, Kimberly. (2019). [The 'moneyball' solution for higher education](#). Politico.

This article discusses how Georgia State uses student data with a predictive analytics system in order to identify which students might be at risk of dropping out. For example, the system uses students high school data in order to identify which incoming students are more likely to drop out before they even come to college, and these students are then invited to special college-prep events. It also monitors the data of current students, using over 800 academic risk factors, so that the college can intervene and provide students with resources before they drop out. The system can also be used by advisors to see which of their students need special attention. It goes on to discuss how a number of universities are adopting similar systems.

MDRC. (2021). [Detroit Promise Path](#). MDRC.

This webpage discusses the Detroit Promise Path, a program accompanying the Detroit Promise. Promise administrators during the early days of the program found that a large proportion of students who used the scholarship did not stay in college. The Detroit Promise Path was set up to provide students with support services, modeled on the highly regarded CUNY ASAP program, to make it easier to stay in school. This site links to a video about the support program, along with interim reports on its impact.

⁷ 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*. 01623737221090265. Dorn, S. (2014).

23

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

Lead authors: Bridget Timmeney and Denisa Gándara

Research and evaluation can help Promise stakeholders improve program implementation and find out if 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 stakeholders to make their program more effective. Research and evaluation can help stakeholders track progress toward goals, provide insights that lead to program improvements, and help build support for a program.

Policy Considerations

- Promise stakeholders 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 stakeholders 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.¹ The higher education commission also produces annual reports² 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,³ 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,⁴ while others may also create a formal evaluation plan, hire outside evaluators,⁵ or partner with academics,⁶ especially those at local universities, to do more formal evaluations.

Information generated through research and evaluation can inform an array of stakeholders, 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, to build support in the business sector for investing in sector pathways programs or hosting internships, and to 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).

¹ Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury. (2020-2022). *Tennessee Promise evaluation*.

² Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2021). *Tennessee Promise annual report*.

³ WestEd. (n.d.). *College Promise Project in California*.

⁴ Pittsburgh Promise. (n.d.). *The impact dashboard*.

⁵ MDRC. (n.d.). *Detroit Promise Path*.

⁶ 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.

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. Causal research designs can help explain cause and effect and thus predict outcomes. 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 stakeholders 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 stakeholders 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 application process.) While stakeholders 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 stakeholders understand the value and purpose of tracking data and examining processes 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 kind of interventions are likely to be successful in which contexts? 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, etc.) 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.

Recommended Reading

Iriti, J., & Miller-Adams, M. (n.d). [*Promising 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 program stakeholders 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.

Case Studies

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.

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 showed that some students were not completing bachelor's degrees within the program's 130-credit limit, and that these students were disproportionately African American. To strengthen the racial equity impact of the program, stakeholders 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.

The Detroit Promise contracted with a national evaluator, MDRC, to carry out a RCT of a program that provides coaching to Promise students at community colleges. Early positive results from the RCT led to the program's expansion to all Detroit Promise community college students. MDRC has continued to evaluate the impact of these coaching supports and other components of the Detroit Promise Path on retention, progression, and completion.

24

Success factors: How can stakeholders 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 stakeholders must attend to building avenues for ongoing alignment; collective impact strategies offer one potential model.
- Strong leadership teams who 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, 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 secondary to postsecondary education, from college and university, and 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 diverse stakeholders working across sectors buy into its goals and do their part to make it succeed. 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 enhanced workforce preparedness, 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.

Stakeholder alignment is intertwined with identification of a critical need. The alignment process begins during the early design and engagement process, and centers on the task of defining and reaching consensus around a critical need. Through this process, stakeholders 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.

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 framework¹ is a community alignment strategy that emerged around the same time as the Promise movement, modeled in part on the [Harlem Children's Zone](#).² In many Promise communities, stakeholders realized that fixing one point on the educational continuum, such as scholarship funding or high school college readiness training, 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.

¹ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(4), 36–41. This magazine article presents a model of successful cross-sector collaboration for social change.

² Harlem Children's Zone. (n.d.). [Our Approach](#).

“ 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 ”

Some Promise programs are embedded within formal collective impact strategies. Both the [Dallas County Promise](#),³ as administered by the [Commit Partnership](#),⁴ and the [Oakland Promise](#),⁵ as led by [Oakland Thrives](#),⁶ 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 stakeholder group 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, 9(4), 36–41.

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 and stakeholders 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.

Program-Specific Studies

Reeves, R. V., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018, June). [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.

³ Dallas County Promise. (n.d.). [Partners](#).

⁴ Commit Partnership. (n.d.). [We are the Commit Partnership](#).

⁵ Oakland Promise. (n.d.). [About Us](#).

⁶ Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority. (n.d.). [Oakland Thrives](#).

25

Who made this handbook?

This handbook is the product of close collaboration among a diverse group of researchers and support from the organizations and individuals listed below. The project is part of the Kresge Foundation's [CoPro 2.0 Initiative](#) dedicated to shaping equitable and sustainable College Promise programs.

Project Co-Directors



Michelle Miller-Adams is a senior researcher at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and a professor of political science at Grand Valley State University. Miller-Adams's research focuses on the local, state, and national movements toward tuition-free college. She 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 local and national media and advises state policymakers and community stakeholders on their tuition-free college initiatives. 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, research scientist and director of the [Evaluation for Learning Group](#) and co-director of the [Partners for Network Improvement](#) at the University of Pittsburgh, leads strategy, research, and evaluation initiatives for PK-20 education improvement efforts. Her team infuses field knowledge with practitioner expertise to support policymakers and practitioners in real-time decision making. Most recently, she has focused on programs that support broadening participation in postsecondary access and success, such as her work as external evaluator for the Pittsburgh Promise and as co-principal investigator for a \$10 million, five-year NSF INCLUDES Alliance grant in which she and her team are designing a networked improvement community of precollege STEM programs to increase STEM college access and success for Black and Brown students. She holds a doctoral degree in developmental and educational psychology and a certificate in interdisciplinary policy and evaluation from the University of Pittsburgh.

Contributing Researchers



Meredith S. Billings is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University. Her research agenda focuses on college affordability, higher education finance, and college access and success for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students. Currently, she is conducting research on the political dynamics of promise program designs and changes to institutional finances for community colleges with promise programs. Her dissertation examined the effect of promise programs on college access, persistence, and completion for nine promise programs in Michigan. She has published her promise program research in *Improving Research-Based Knowledge of Promise Programs and New Directions for Community Colleges* (American Educational

Research Association, 2020). She also wrote a piece on promise programs for Brookings Institution's Brown Center Chalkboard. She holds a BS in neuroscience from William and Mary, a master's degree in higher education from the University of Maryland, and a PhD in higher education from the University of Michigan.



Celeste K. Carruthers is an associate professor at the University of Tennessee, with a joint appointment in the Department of Economics and the Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research. Carruthers is also the editor-in-chief of *Economics of Education Review* and an advisory board member for the Career and Technical Education Research Network. 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. She has published in leading economics journals, including *Journal of Labor Economics*, *Journal of Human Resources*,

and *Journal of Public Economics*. 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.



Gresham D. Collom is a visiting researcher and adjunct faculty member with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. He deploys mixed methods to further the understanding of how policies are implemented, and how policy implementation influences student success in postsecondary education. While a doctoral student, Collom coordinated a state-supported longitudinal qualitative study on Tennessee Reconnect and adult student experiences as they returned to college. He has presented findings from this study nationally and recently published an article in *Community College Review*. Currently, Gresham is conducting several studies exploring promise programs. These projects are 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.



Denisa Gándara is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a 2021 recipient of the William T. Grant Scholars award, which funds a five-year study of racial equity in free-college program design. Her research agenda explores higher education policy formulation processes and impacts, especially on populations traditionally underserved in higher education. Her research has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Spencer Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the American Educational Research Association, among others. She serves as associate editor of the *Journal of Higher Education*. Gándara was recently selected by President Biden to serve on the National Board for Education Sciences. Gándara earned a BA from the University of Texas at Austin and a PhD from the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia.



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 both the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans and the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice. 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 White House, 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 assistant professor of higher education at Florida International University. Her research focuses on higher education finance and public policy, specifically performance funding, promise programs, student loan debt, state appropriations, and policy adoption. She studies the impact of local and state policies on college access and completion and is particularly interested in outcomes for historically underrepresented students. Li has written blog posts and reports covering her research on promise programs for the Conversation, the Campaign for Free College Tuition, and the Century Foundation. Her work has been funded by the American Educational Research Association, AccessLex and the Association for Institutional Research, and the Kresge Foundation. Li earned a PhD 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 postdoctoral researcher at the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center. She is a recent graduate in education administration and policy studies at the University of Pittsburgh. She previously worked for a nonprofit at Kent State University that assisted nontraditional students with FAFSA completion and college admissions. She attended Ohio State University and completed a master's degree in public administration while working for an organization that provided professional development opportunities to adult education instructors in Ohio. Her research focuses on financial aid policies and college access programs and their effect on college retention and completion.



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.

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