

# Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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## Meeting the Moment and Raising the Bar: Applying Lessons Learned from the Fight to Curb Summer Melt through COVID-19 and Beyond

BY JESSIE STEWART, RICHMOND PROMISE



This spring and summer, the threat of summer melt was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has generated additional economic instability, heightened general uncertainty, and exacerbated existing inequities within higher education that we know far too many students face.[1] This brief discusses how the Richmond Promise coupled a foundation of near-peer support to mitigate summer melt to keep students on the college track with swift, rapid COVID-19 relief. Because of these interventions, as of September, the organization has seen an increase in cohort size and has kept enrollment numbers largely consistent despite the pandemic. It also highlights how the pandemic has pushed the Richmond Promise to reconsider and expand what is “Promised” to its Scholars to achieve long-term equitable supports. Finally, this brief outlines proven, scalable, and translatable programmatic innovations, lessons learned from this unprecedented summer of 2020, and how the Richmond

Promise is translating this short-term action and lessons learned into a plan to reach its longer-term equity and transformation goals with extended support for Scholars through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Up to one-third of high school seniors who intend to go to college the fall immediately after they graduate high school never make it to their first semester of college classes. Many of these students are low income and first in their family to go to college. Due to this phenomenon, known as “summer melt,” [2] summer is one of the most programmatically crucial times of the year for many Promise initiatives and college success programs across the country to provide a home-base of support for students to navigate through steps to successful college enrollment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has cultivated an unprecedented environment that is much

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Expand and Budget for What We Promise Beyond a Scholarship**
- **Make Use of Powerful and Reciprocally Impactful Near-peer Programming Support**
- **Monitor Equity Gaps and Plan to Differentiate Supports**
- **Use the Promise Scholarship as a Powerful Catalyst for Student Participation**
- **Allow for Flexibility in Program Policies**
- **Listen to Students Over “Best Practices,” and Don’t be Afraid to Adapt Policies and Program Requirements**
- **Learn to Serve a Digital Generation**
- **Recognize that Virtual Does Not Replace the Personal**
- **Have Direct Service Programming Inform Broader Policy**

bigger than any one program or organization. The continued struggles of students across the country has shed a spotlight on many challenges facing students around meeting basic needs: far too many students are one emergency away from having to stop out; many students begin college without a personal computer [3]; and a significant number of students are food and housing insecure. For program leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, the question is: how will we meet this moment? The COVID pandemic has generated "a call to action" upon which we must collectively act - at the local, state, and federal levels - to make higher education affordable and accessible to all, especially those who have been more impacted and marginalized.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also spotlighted something else: the ability and agility of local place-based organizations, like Promise initiatives, to effectively and quickly meet student and community needs during a time of crisis. The following policy brief provides a case study on how one such local Promise initiative, the Richmond Promise, is adapting its programs and policies to support students through and beyond the pandemic.

### Background on the Richmond Promise and the Impact of COVID-19 on Students

The Richmond Promise is a college scholarship and college success initiative launched in 2016 through an innovative public-private partnership between the City of Richmond, CA and the Chevron Richmond Refinery. Through a residency-based scholarship, near-peer led programming from middle school through college, and strategic college success partnerships, the mission of the Richmond Promise is to dramatically increase post-secondary attainment rates among Richmond residents and build a college-going and graduating culture through the City of Richmond. Of the Richmond Promise’s nearly 1,500 students in college, 71% are the first in their family to go to college and 72% are low-income. “Summer melt” inequitably affects low-income and first-generation students who often struggle to navigate the many next steps to fully enroll in college, such as working through financial aid verification or understanding how to pick the right classes. Over the past four years,



**Jessie Stewart**  
**Executive Director**  
**Richmond Promise**

Jessie brings over a decade of experience at the intersection of education and community development to the Richmond Promise. Prior to joining the Promise, Jessie served as National Director of UC Berkeley's Center for Cities + Schools Y-PLAN (Youth-Plan, Learn, Act Now) Educational Initiative. As Y-PLAN National Director, Jessie built cross-sector partnerships to engage schools and young people in a range of city and education policy issues across the nation. Jessie began her career in education as a founding high school history teacher at Golder College Prep in Chicago, IL where she had the privilege of handing out diplomas to the school's first graduating class. Jessie was also born and raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan, home of the groundbreaking Kalamazoo Promise, and a proud graduate of Kalamazoo Public Schools

the Richmond Promise has successfully decreased the summer melt rate amongst their students from 33% to an average of 10% [4] through a series of summer programming interventions and college partnership supports. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the decisions and steps needed to be taken over the summer for incoming college students. Students admitted to four-year universities are weighing if paying tuition for fully online classes seems worth the price. Others no longer have the ability to pay for college because one or several family members have lost their jobs. Some students have also been thrown into becoming the providers for their families as the economy transitions in unprecedented ways.

This spring, the Richmond Promise, like so many Promise programs and college success organizations across the country, laser focused on the triple-challenge of 1) meeting the immediate urgent basic needs of current and rising college students in light of COVID-19 to keep them enrolled on their college path; 2) innovating and adapting summer melt programming to a virtual environment to support rising college freshmen to successful enrollment; and 3) planning for long-term policy and program adaptation to support students' long-term success.

## Combating Summer Melt and COVID Melt

Currently, the Richmond Promise serves nearly 1,500 college students, with about a third attending community colleges and two-thirds attending four-year universities. During the summer, to combat summer melt, the Richmond Promise has developed intensive supports to maximize the number of rising college Richmond Scholars who start their first year of college the fall after their senior year. For a new Scholar, a typical summer at the Richmond Promise after senior year of high school includes:

- **College Success Workshops:** Scholars are required to attend a series of College Success Workshops that create community among Richmond Promise students and help them gain knowledge on critical topics for college success, including interpreting a financial aid award package, financial literacy, transferring from community college to a four-year university, and more.
- **Near-Peer Coaching:** All scholars attend a peer coaching appointment with current Richmond Promise college students -- hired as interns during the summer -- to ensure they meet with someone who has been in their shoes and can ensure they have everything on their "checklist" completed for successful fall enrollment. Richmond Promise community college students are also matched with a Beyond 12 near-peer college coach in late summer, who will stick with students and provide personalized virtual student coaching through their first two years of college.
- **Office Hours:** Office hours are offered throughout the summer, creating an additional opportunity for new Scholars to make appointments with Richmond Promise staff members.

## Richmond Promise Scholar Testimonial:

Jesse Hernandez Jr., a 2018 Richmond High School graduate who has served on the Richmond Promise Scholar Board, and twice as an Americorps Summer Associate for the Richmond Promise, was among the scholars who received COVID-19 Rapid Relief aid.

A junior at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, OR, Hernandez returned home to live with his grandmother in March 2020. He hopes to become a history teacher at his former high school.

Hernandez said he felt disoriented when he was forced to shift to distance learning. Going back home to San Pablo was hard. He watched on social media as his affluent college friends were hanging out on boats. College was the first time Hernandez had ever slept on a full-size bed; now, he was back to sleeping on a mattress in his grandmother's mobile home.

- College Partnerships: Connections to partners at the program's highest-attended colleges ensure students receive enrollment support and are able to meet with their college's counseling, financial aid, and student support program staff.

### COVID-19 Program Innovations & Adaptations

This summer due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Richmond Promise adapted this programming to be entirely virtual. They launched the Richmond Promise COVID-19 Rapid Relief Fund [5] and adapted all programming to be hosted on Zoom. Due to the newly-virtual nature of programming, Richmond Promise offered a much larger variety of workshops throughout the summer. Over 30 workshops were hosted on topics ranging from student wellness and mental health to credit management.

Additionally, Richmond Promise transitioned its near-peer coaching and office hours online. Near-peer coaches met with over 350 incoming students throughout the summer. As of early September, 88% of 567 incoming first-year students completed the necessary steps over the summer to start their first semester successfully. Richmond Promise hopes to reach a 90% completion rate to dramatically reduce its summer melt rate to 10% despite the challenges of the pandemic.

Richmond Promise listened to its students and community and recognized the need for short-term policy flexibility. With the goal of supporting its students to go to college this fall, and not 'gap,' in light of financial hardships and virtual learning, they adapted their scholarship policy to allow for students to enroll in less than 12 units if necessary this academic year.

Richmond Promise also launched a Rapid Relief Fund for incoming and current college students to provide immediate financial relief in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since it was launched in March 2020, Richmond Promise has filled over 450 requests totaling about \$80,000 to support students, mainly with groceries and access to a working laptop. Of students who applied, 91% indicated somebody in their family lost a job or was job insecure. In response to finding that nearly a third of these students are in college without a working laptop, Richmond Promise began to institutionalize a Laptop Fund as a key part of their programming -- ensuring every Richmond Promise student has a functional laptop while in college.

### Policy Recommendations

One of the primary lessons learned from the past few months is that the most pressing needs and inequities within higher education magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic are not unique to this moment. In the spirit of the Promise movement, the following recommendations are driven by local experience and learnings, offering actions for other Promise programs and local partner organizations as well as a suggested broader and collaborative path forward to impact policy and systems toward equity in higher education:



I think for a lot of Richmond Promise Scholars, their homes are not the most scholarly place to be.

After it's all said and done, with both a master's in education and a teaching credential under my belt, I hope to secure a teaching position at my former high school, Richmond High.

My long term goal is to contribute to the mission of the Richmond Promise, which is to establish a college culture in the city of Richmond. You'll see me around often, just doing what I do, helping people.



Jesse Hernandez, Jr.  
Richmond Promise Scholar  
Lewis & Clark College '21, History

- A Promise is More than a Scholarship; Expand (and Budget for) What We Promise - The Promise movement has always known that a Promise is more than a scholarship, but the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed Promise leaders to think critically about the digital divide communities face and the impact of emergency funding, so that students will continue to be supported. Programs should think about innovating and building in emergency relief and digital support into their package of student supports, with increased fundraising as an essential part of their student success strategies.
- Near-peer Programming Support is Powerful and Reciprocally Impactful - One of the most effective and unique elements of a Promise initiative is the place-based nature of the program and the powerful identity and belonging that comes from a shared community. Richmond Promise's network of college students helped them develop their near-peer strategy of programming, where they employ and train Richmond Promise Scholars as interns to deliver summer transition programming. This near-peer support provides younger students with relatable and relevant role models, enhancing the impact of the programming, while also employing current college students, giving them professional development and financial support.
- As Programs Scale, Monitor Equity Gaps and Plan to Differentiate Supports - Promise programs are unique in that they share a mission to reach and include all students, not just students who apply for competitive scholarships or opt-in to college access programming. This universality confers a responsibility to monitor equity gaps and think about strategies and differentiated supports that are relevant for a diverse student community. In response, the Richmond Promise monitors equity gaps and listens carefully to its students. Its peer-to-peer coaching system enables triage support for Scholars, and they have built a robust partnership with the nonprofit organization Beyond 12 to match near-peer college coaches with Richmond Promise community college students, who can benefit from enhanced individualized support. The Richmond Promise emergency fund also gives the program the capacity to identify and meet the needs of their most vulnerable students. Lastly, careful data analysis allows them to create initiatives to support students in areas of greatest needs.
- The Promise Scholarship as a Powerful Catalyst for Student Participation - Where there is evidence of programs working, incorporate and communicate the eligibility requirements as part of the scholarship. For example, attending a college success workshop and attending a one-on-one appointment with a near-peer coach is a requirement for the Richmond Promise, and has made a significant positive impact on reducing the summer melt rates and engagement among students, with nearly 90% of students attending the workshops and appointments.
- Allow for Flexibility in Program Policies - It is said that "complexity is the enemy of equity" - and so too is rigidity. Programs must be willing to be reflective and responsive in light of program learnings and changing conditions, and consider policy changes to keep students within the program and connected to critical

supports during extenuating times. For example, the Richmond Promise waived the full-time enrollment requirement for this academic year.

- Listen to Students Over “Best Practices,” and Don’t Be Afraid to Adapt Policies and Program Requirements - Identify formalized pathways for students to participate in the administration of Promise programs. The Richmond Promise supports a Scholar Board, an Alumni Association, and Near-Peer college interns who offer their experience, policy, and program recommendations to inform and guide the programming and strategy. This summer, these students were a critical voice on how the Richmond Promise structured their relief fund, innovated virtually, and set additional supports to meet the needs of its Scholars. It has always been clear that the Richmond Promise was, and needed to be, more than a scholarship program. COVID-19 has only underscored and validated the necessity of additional wraparound supports, and the need for programs to allow for flexibility and adaptation in policy order to effectively support Scholars amid extenuating circumstances. Sometimes this means pressing pause on “best practices” and listening to students.
- Learn to Serve a Digital Generation - Virtual programming, despite its challenges, provides an opportunity for creative engagement, flexibility, scale, and expanded participation. With knowledge that the digital divide creates a tremendous equity gap, participation in online programming has maintained levels of previous participation in the Richmond Promise. The additional capacity afforded through virtual meetings has allowed programs like Richmond's to offer a wider breadth of specific topics for students and a wider range of scheduling options. Using Zoom, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media platforms is key, and students, by and large, understand how to use these technologies.
- Virtual Does Not Replace the Personal - While going virtual, Richmond Promise doubled-down on its college partnerships, and ensured students were connected to a point-person on campus, a near-peer college student, and a Beyond-12 coach. Ensuring students receive a warm and personal hand-off to their support system during the summer is critical to ensuring a successful start to college.
- Direct Service Programming is Powerful, and Should Inform Broader Policy - Often marginalized as too ‘down stream,’ or ‘too late,’ now is a moment to recognize and uplift the importance of direct-service programming. While continuing to work for policy and systems change, we need to uplift learnings and best practices to simultaneously push for broader policy. The Promise movement has shown how local innovation can spark larger policy movements toward making higher education affordable and accessible for all. This continued work in light of COVID-19 is more important than ever, and looks like working together on a regional level to push for policy at the state level, like Richmond Promise does with Northern California College Promise Coalition and College Promise at the national level, daylighting program learnings and best practices to push for policy improvements at the state and federal level, such as emergency funding, expanding Pell Grant



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eligibility and increasing the Pell award amount, making the FAFSA financial aid application more easily accessible, and offering opportunities for local organizations to access government funds to support the basic needs and offer wraparound supports for their students.

## Conclusion

Every year, colleges lose thousands of prospective students to summer melt. COVID-19 has only exacerbated concerns that recent high school graduates with college aspirations may fall through the cracks due to the further complicated decisions and steps needed to start school during a pandemic.

The experience of the Richmond Promise broadly demonstrates the unique ability of local initiatives and community-based organizations to act with integrity and agility to meet students' needs even in the face of unprecedented challenges. Local organizations can intentionally and swiftly engage student voices, reflect, and implement necessary programmatic adaptations to mitigate the inequities of challenges like the pandemic. After meeting this moment head-on, local organizations are now invited to use the lessons learned to continue to strengthen their initiatives by redesigning programming to serve students more effectively, coupled with the ability to raise funds to ensure these new program designs and innovations are financially sustainable.

Furthermore, local organizations can use their lessons learned to inform larger policy proposals moving forward in their regions and states. Although not an exhaustive list, the issues of college affordability, access to basic needs, and the need for wraparound supports that support college opportunity, persistence, and success must be addressed at the local, state, and national levels.

## RESOURCES

Richmond Promise

<https://richmondpromise.org/>

Beyond 12

<https://beyond12.org/who-we-are/>

College Promise Covid-19 Resource Guide

<https://www.collegepromise.org/covid19/resources>

Northern California Promise Coalition

<https://www.norcalpromisecoalition.org/>

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: [collegepromise.org](https://collegepromise.org) or email [info@collegepromise.org](mailto:info@collegepromise.org)

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