

# Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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## Ecosystems of Support for Traditional Aged Students



*College Promise and Educational Testing Service (ETS) partnered to lead five design teams - Promise experts from the research, practitioner, and finance communities - to coauthor reports under the theme, "Ecosystems of Support for Five College Promise Populations." Mary Rauner of WestEd and Sara Lundquist of the Lumina Foundation co-chaired the Traditional-Aged Student team, whose report has been excerpted for this brief.*

College students today - even those in the traditional-age group of 18 to 24 years old - are notably different from students of the past. Previously, students enrolled in college the fall after high school graduation, attended a 4-year institution, took a full load of classes, lived on campus, and completed a baccalaureate degree in 4 years [1]. While the overall number of traditional-aged college students has

increased from 5.9 million students in 1970 to 11.6 million in 2015 [2], their share of total college enrollees has declined over the same period (from 69% in 1970 to 58% in 2016). Today, nearly 75% of college students embody at least one of seven characteristics that were once considered nontraditional: being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being an unmarried caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment after high school graduation, attending school part-time, and/or being employed full-time [3].

While many traditional-aged college students attend college directly after high school, others' paths to college are not direct, placing them in the upper end of the 18 to 24 year age range. In 2017, 1.9 million (67%) of high school graduates enrolled in college by the following October [4]. For the third of students who did not immediately enroll, these delays are often due to financial, family, and/or health issues. While in college, traditional-aged students also confront a variety of issues: mental health challenges, housing and food insecurity, homelessness, insufficient financial support, and inadequate academic preparation prior to attending college. Such obstacles can result in students dropping out and, thus, not reaping the benefits of their education.

One proposed solution is a College Promise framework that spans early childhood

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## DATA PROFILE FOR TRADITIONAL-AGED STUDENTS (18-24)

**Enrollment:** Only 67% of the roughly 3 million high school graduates each year are entering 2- or 4-year colleges within a year of graduating from high school. This varies by race, with African American and Hispanic student populations having below average representation. In 2017, almost one fourth (23%) of students ages 18–24 attended a 2-year higher education institution.

**Part-Time Enrollment:** In 2014, 38% of all 2- and 4-year college students enrolled on a part-time basis.

**Employment:** A significant percentage of students between the ages of 19 and 23 years were employed while taking courses in 2011 - 16% reported working full-time and 45.1% reported working part-time.

**Demographics:** This generation of traditional-aged college students is more racially and ethnically diverse. In 1976, only 16% of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions were people of color. By 2015, the percentage of students of color increased by more than 25 points to 42% and is expected to make up the majority of college students by 2023.

**Basic Needs:** For all students, the cost of room and board is outpacing inflation, further contributing to the increasing cost of a college education. 38% of traditional-aged college students at 2-year institutions and 34% at 4-year institutions experience housing insecurity. 13% of traditional-aged college students at 2-year institutions and 9% at 4-year institutions report being homeless. 39% of traditional-aged college students at 2-year institutions and 33% at 4-year institutions experience food insecurity.

**Socio-Economic Status:** The percentage of students in low-income situations enrolling in college immediately after high school has declined, dropping from 56% to 46% between 2008 and 2013.

**First-Generation:** In 2011, over a quarter (27%) of students at 2- and 4-year institutions between 19 and 23 years old were the first in their families to attend college. The percentage of first-generation students was much lower (18%) among first-time, full-time freshmen at 4-year colleges and universities in 2017.

**Mental Health:** 26% of students reported that anxiety affected their individual academic performance, and 17% reported that depression had an adverse impact on their ability to succeed in college. One in four freshmen at 4-year colleges or universities used student psychological services in 2018.

through college and career(s) and includes financial assistance, behavioral incentives, messaging, and communication to guide and support students and families, academic and student services interventions, and public-private partnerships that aid in increasing program success and enhancing decision-making. This brief provides a profile of traditional-aged students and an overview of the College Promise framework of support.

### College Promise Framework for Supporting Traditional-Aged College Students

College Promise programs seek to provide students with the support they need to access and complete their postsecondary education and prepare for the demands of

**Student Insight: Klayre Guzman**

Thanks to support from her parents, Klayre Guzman found San Jose City College and its Promise program, which provided guidance and motivation.

When Guzman learned she had to take remedial courses, she was shocked and devastated to learn that she was below college readiness level in math and English. However, thanks to peer mentoring and extra time spent with teachers, she passed.

Klayre also had difficulty obtaining financial aid due to her family's immigration status and had to work to compensate for the lack of financial support and, in particular, to cover the high cost of textbooks and other supplies. Guzman later transferred to UC Davis, where she received full financial aid.

She has since graduated and is now a graduate student earning her master's degree from San Jose State University, with the goal of becoming a college counselor for freshmen to help others achieve and succeed in their undergraduate programs of study as she has. Guzman stresses the importance of financial aid and mentoring as well as more supports for remedial courses and tutoring.

the changing workforce. Although there is no single definition of a College Promise, most scholars and practitioners agree that College Promise programs provide financial support to eligible students who live or attend school in a particular place [5;6]. Increasingly, Promise programs collaborate with partners from both within and beyond institutions of higher education to provide the academic support, student support, and basic services that students need to prepare for, gain access to, and successfully complete an education that prepares them for a living-wage career.



The College Promise framework for supporting traditional-aged college students includes three student support features (financial assistance, messaging and communication, and academic support and student services) and two program features (place-based eligibility requirements and cross-segment and cross-sector partnerships).

**Student Supports: Financial Assistance**

Financial support is a central feature of Promise programs, most often providing coverage for tuition (Perna & Leigh, 2018). However, the cost of tuition is a fraction of the total cost of attending college - only 20% for community college students, according to the Institute for College Access & Success. Other costs include: required student fees, housing, books and materials, transportation, and other living expenses. A 2016 study found that when students were provided with financial support beyond tuition and fees, they were more likely to enroll full-time and work fewer hours [7].

The level of financial support provided to students and the disbursement model adopted are key decisions for College Promise program designers. First-dollar programs, which provide a fixed amount of funding to students regardless of other financial aid awards they receive, are most beneficial to low-income students because they can use other financial aid to cover additional expenses that might otherwise be funded by increased work hours and/or expanding debt through loans. On the other hand, last-dollar Promise programs, which cover the remaining portion of tuition and fees after federal, state, and other aid is applied, are at risk of disproportionately benefiting students who have the least financial need.

Policy Recommendations for Promise Programs: Regardless of the disbursement model selected, there are strategies that allow programs to ensure equitable support.

- Provide a higher level of financial support to a smaller segment of students by limiting eligibility to, for example, first-generation students from low-income backgrounds.
- Provide different benefits for different students, such as tuition coverage for all students as well as book vouchers, transportation costs, and free childcare on campus to low-income students.

### *Student Supports: Messaging and Communications*

Research shows that the right messaging at the right time can influence students' decision-making related to college attendance. Pairing messaging about promised financial support with intensive outreach to local high school students has been found to help quadruple the number of graduates who matriculated into college in one low-income, urban community [8]. In the Kalamazoo Promise program, coordinated messaging from the community helped shape perceptions of the program, and recipients of the scholarship were found to have "significant extrinsic motivation" to excel academically [9].

Policy Recommendations for Promise Programs:

- Craft and broadcast a simple and understandable core message that describes a Promise program and can be personalized to different target audiences based on specific interests, concerns, and actions needed as a result of that message.
- Utilize a broad range of communication modalities, including: K-12 classroom presentations, commitment contracts, homepage web messages, school banners, back-to-school-night programs, education planning, campus visits, FAFSA and Dream Act completion workshops, email and social media campaigns, local newspapers, magazines, community newsletters and blogs, and existing community events.

### *Student Supports: Academic Support and Student Services*

Promise leaders cannot rely exclusively on financial assistance to ensure student access and success, particularly for students in low-income situations and students of color [10]. Students from low-income communities are less likely to have the information and support needed to gain access to college, to be prepared to navigate the complexities of college life, and to be prepared academically to succeed [11;12;13]. College Promise programs can provide the additional support needed through academic support and student services.

There is evidence that combining financial support with academic support and student services can increase college persistence and other student outcomes [14]. The Detroit Promise program provided incentivized coaching meetings to a sample

This policy brief is part of a five-part series by College Promise and ETS on "Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations."

Traditional-Age Student Design Team Leads

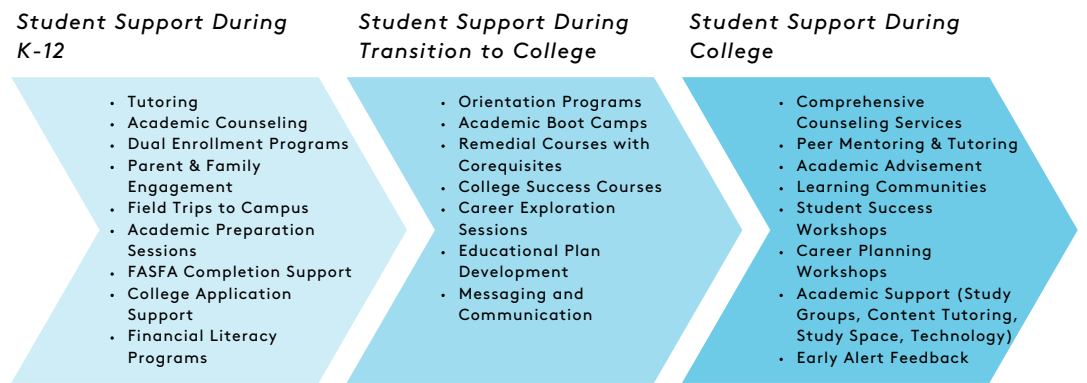
- Mary Rauner, WestEd
- Sara Lundquist, Lumina Foundation

Read the full report:  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ets2.12299>

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of their students and found a positive effect on persistence, full-time enrollment, and overall credit accumulation [15]. Positive effects were also found on measures of enrollment and retention in a randomized controlled trial of the Opening Doors program, which combined financial support with learning communities, counseling, and mentoring for community college students in low-income situations [16;17].

Policy Recommendations for Promise Programs: Support services encompass a wide range of programs and activities to help traditional-aged college students prepare for college, enroll in college, and persist to completion. These supports can be particularly valuable to students of color, students from low-income circumstances, and first-generation students.



**Conclusion**

The features of the College Promise Framework that are presented in this report can provide traditional-aged students with the support they need to prepare for, enroll in, and successfully complete their postsecondary education and career goals. Traditional-aged students who are underrepresented in higher education—including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students—are likely to have the greatest need and receive the greatest benefit from these support structures. The framework presented here may also be a useful starting point for designing the College Promise support systems for the other student populations described in the larger Promise Ecosystem: adult students, DREAMers, student veterans, and justice-impacted students.

In all cases, the support systems aligned with College Promise programs are strongest when key stakeholders collaborate to design a program that aligns with the articulated goals, partners exist across segments and sectors, systems are implemented with long-term sustainability in mind, and data are used to inform continuous program improvements.

**Special Thanks to our Sponsors**



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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