



CELEBRATING 5 YEARS

2020 Annual Report



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Introduction

It started with a dream: to make college as universal, free, and accessible as high school.

Five years ago, in front of a crowd of 1,000 at Michigan's Macomb Community College, President Barack Obama, accompanied by Dr. Jill Biden and Governor Jim Geringer, announced the launch of College Promise, a national, bipartisan campaign to recruit states and communities to build tuition-free college programs.

In the years since our launch, we've made great strides toward that dream by supporting the over sixfold growth of the Promise movement. Today, students in 360 programs - 330 located across 47 states and 30 statewide Promises - offer pathways to, through, and beyond college via tuition-free postsecondary education, often with wraparound services. College Promise supports coupling free tuition with institutional support to ensure that students can persevere and attain their degrees or certifications. Through leadership development, widespread, cross-sector engagement, and policy and research, our organization has spread the College Promise model across the country, identifying and promoting exemplar Promise programs for state and local leaders to adopt and expand in their own backyards.

Partners around the nation are investing in Promise programs because they understand that education beyond high school is a path to a happier, more prosperous future for individuals, families, local economies, states, and our nation. We have gathered a wide range of evidence that Promise programs are effectively working to increase college access, affordability, and completion.

But, despite all of our progress over the past five years, 2020 has brought heretofore unimaginable challenges. Students have changed their educational plans. Colleges have shifted to remote learning. Millions of Americans have lost their jobs or have been forced to shift careers. State and institutional budgets have been slashed across the nation.

College Promise quickly adapted to this shifting environment, and has focused on two key priorities in 2020: supporting students and ensuring financial sustainability. We believe that these programs have never been more necessary than at present. We have published COVID-19 resource guides, hosted workshops for students regarding mental health, academic, and wraparound supports, and conducted research on student support ecosystems. We also produced a playbook for program financial sustainability, policy recommendations for keeping the Promise in the age of COVID-19, and a national compilation of Promise program evidence.

Looking back on the past five years, we would like to honor the struggles and triumphs of Promise as it grew from a dream to a full-fledged movement. The vibrant community that has sprung up around Promise, in rural cities and urban centers, in schools with thousands of students as well as those with only dozens, and in neighborhoods across all socio-economic strata, has reinforced the empowering nature of the idea of free college for all. As we come together as a nation to recover from the tragedy and uncertainty brought about by COVID-19, there is no better time than now to reimagine how all levels of our education systems can be reshaped to better serve the futures of Americans and our nation, at large. For those of you who have been with us throughout this journey, we cannot thank you enough for your support. For those of you who are new to College Promise, we say 'welcome'! We are so glad to have you join our community. We can't wait for what the next five years hold for the College Promise movement.



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PADRÓN**

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**THE HONORABLE
JAMES GERINGER**

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KANTER**

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Director, Environmental Systems
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Founder & CEO, Avalos Foundation

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Robert (Bob) C. Ballard

President & CEO, Scholarship America

Joe May

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Community College District

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Martha Kanter

CEO, College Promise

Nancy Zimpher

Chancellor Emerita, State University
of New York

The Evolution of Promise



The Evolution of Promise

A century ago, our nation made high school free and accessible for all, with the understanding that a high school education provided students with the necessary skills to compete in the 20th-century economy. Today, a high school education is no longer enough for students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the highly competitive economy and society of the modern, interconnected world.

To address this gap, five years ago, President Barack Obama announced the formation of the College Promise National Advisory Board, led by Dr. Jill Biden and Governor Jim Geringer (R-WY) as honorary chair and vice chair, respectively. Supported by bipartisan leaders, Dr. Biden and Governor Geringer built the Promise movement to achieve a simple goal: to make the first two years of college as free and universal as high school.

Between 1989 and 2016, the cost for a college degree doubled, even accounting for inflation. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the cost of attending a university increased over the same period nearly eight times faster than wages. The skyrocketing costs of tuition have shouldered students with immense debt. Almost 70% of college graduates in 2018 graduated with debt, according to the Federal Reserve. Additionally, the College Board noted that the average cumulative student debt balance in 2019 was \$29,900 for graduates of public or non-profit four-year colleges and \$32,300 for graduates of private non-profit colleges. The high cost of post-secondary education disproportionately impacts low-income students and students of color. 80% of Black students take on federal loans, compared to approximately 60% of White students. Meanwhile, the skilled worker shortage continues to increase in the U.S.; about 600,000 highly-skilled jobs have gone unfilled in America while more than 21.2 million Americans are still receiving jobless benefits.

Program Spotlight: Birmingham Promise

Starting in the Fall of 2020, Birmingham Promise began offering graduating seniors from Birmingham high schools scholarships for the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at any public two-year or four-year college in Alabama. After consulting College Promise resources and other Promise community members, Birmingham Promise chose not to impose grade requirements. In conjunction with Alabama two-year colleges' open admission policies, the program structure ensured that grades would not be a barrier for students who sought to gain education and develop marketable skills.

The Birmingham Promise has worked extensively with stakeholders from the community, particularly the business sector, to ensure that the Birmingham Promise creates positive change throughout the city.

"Our organization and work grew out of Mayor Randall Woodfin's commitment to building a stronger, more prosperous, and more inclusive economy. He recognized, along with the many other business and civic leaders who make this work possible, that the cultivation of local talent is central to developing a thriving economy. We do our work because we want to support the trajectories of our young residents and because we understand that their trajectories will determine the future of our entire community. Our work then is not charity, but an investment in our future."

—Rachel Harmon, Executive Director, Birmingham Promise

Education forms the basis for not only economic stability, but also equity and active citizenship in our country. Recognizing this, College Promise proposed to dramatically increase access to postsecondary education, beginning in America's community colleges. College Promise has sought to address the mounting barriers to college retention and completion. Free college for all, as an economic policy solution, would address the knowledge and skills gaps and help fill vacancies for the growing number of high-skill jobs. As a social policy, free college would help eliminate disparities in educational attainment and create opportunities for upward mobility. As a financial policy, free college would help combat the student loan crisis, which keeps college out of reach for many students and mires others in years or decades of debt.

Under the leadership of Dr. Jill Biden, former Second Lady of the U.S., Jim Geringer, former Wyoming governor, and Dr. Martha Kanter, former U.S. Under Secretary of Education, the initiative to make the first two years of community college free has expanded to include tuition-free programs for four-year colleges, universities, and certificate programs. The initiative has worked to ensure that Americans are increasingly prepared to meet the knowledge and skill demands of the modern, global economy without shouldering burdensome decades of debt.



Our mission is to help all Americans, from birth through career, to benefit from education, training, and student supports and meet their full potentials. We believe that sufficient evidence from across the country shows that investing in the College Promise program model is the most effective way to achieve that goal. While the original, federal-level initiative did not find traction, the charge for Promise has been taken up by local-level initiatives that brought substantive benefits. The tenacity and spirit of innovation in these initiatives produced results that motivated others to bring Promise to their own communities. At the time of College Promise's launch in 2015, there were 53 Promise programs across the United States. Now, as part of our 5-year anniversary this Fall, we are proud to publish a catalog featuring all 360 Promise programs present throughout the country.

What Makes a Promise?

College Promise uses a series of guiding principles to determine if a program meets the criteria to be a Promise:

1. Covers, at a minimum, the full cost of tuition and fees needed to obtain a college degree or certificate
2. Does not require more than a 3.0 GPA or excessively burdensome eligibility requirements
3. Has a plan for longevity and financial sustainability

The initial definition of the Promise was a broad term covering the concept of "free college" programs. Over time, some dedicated Promise researchers narrowed the term to include "place-based scholarships providing free tuition." There is ongoing discussion about how to better define the College Promise, including what scholarships qualify as Promise, whether to make the definition of a Promise broader or narrower, and whether to establish a unique identity for Promise programs, enabling simpler comparisons and research across Promise programs.

Some questions remain to be fully answered regarding Promise programs. For instance, is a program considered a Promise program if it is highly exclusive, if it only serves a handful of students, or if it lasts only for a limited time?

Over the past five years, several core values and elements of a Promise have emerged: the removal of tuition and fees as a barrier to higher education, a cultivation of the mindset that college is for everyone that wants it, not just for the students that have traditionally succeeded, and a commitment to students that builds up a college-going culture within a community.

This year, College Promise published a catalog of 360 Promise Programs that satisfy the above criteria and are actively serving students across the United States. The Catalog of Local and State College Promise Programs - Fall 2020 provides useful information about each program, including eligibility requirements, the college(s) attached to the program, any support services provided, and whether a student must attend college full-time to receive the scholarship.

Local programs were not the only ones that have taken up the College Promise mantle. In recent years, we have seen dramatic growth in state adoptions of free college initiatives. As with local Promises, these state programs show incredible diversity, ranging from direct, 'first dollar' state financial aid programs, such as Louisiana TOPS, to state funding streams for community colleges that support and enable local Promises, such as the California Promise. These trends have translated into exponential growth in the number of students who qualify for Promise programs, and we expect the momentum to continue. Today, 30 statewide programs across the country have adopted their unique versions of the College Promise.

The development of state-level programs has drastically expanded the reach of Promise, but has also prompted a myriad of questions about how state and local efforts should interact, and what place community-based programs have within a state-based Promise framework. As an organization, College Promise has always believed that the diversity of community-level programs is a core strength of Promise, allowing free college initiatives to be tailored specifically to the needs of the local students being served. This belief ensures that students not only have access to higher education, but that they succeed in college as well. However, there are many Promise lessons learned that can be replicated or adapted in designing Promise eligibility, persistence, and completion goals, standards, and requirements into the future.

Financing Structures

Programs structure their scholarships into one of three forms:

- First dollar, in which programs cover the cost of tuition up front and allow other aid to be applied toward the full cost of attendance
- Last dollar, in which programs cover the remaining cost after other scholarships and forms of aid are applied
- Last dollar plus, in which programs cover tuition and fees on a last dollar basis, but offer additional funds or supports, such as book allowances or housing stipends to cover the full cost of attendance.

First dollar programs are the most equitable type as they allow economically disadvantaged students to put Pell and state aid money toward other college expenses. They are more expensive to operate as a result, and may therefore be offered to fewer students.

Last dollar programs are more economical to run than other programs, and are easier to expand to a greater number of students, but may have a lower impact on students with the most need. This is because other sources of aid reduce the value of a Promise scholarship. While the majority of Promise programs are last dollar, Promise is increasingly recognizing the importance of wraparound support services, leading to steady growth in the number of last dollar plus programs.

Looking to the future, we expect the trend of States taking up Promise programs to continue. It is crucial to note, however, that these state-wide programs do not remove the need for local programs. Local programs excel at customizing their supports and funding to best serve their specific students and community context. As states continue to devote Promise scholarship funding to expand access, attainment, and workforce goals, local programs should ideally design their resources to prioritize wraparound services benefitting college access and success.

Currently, the relationship between local and state programs is a work in progress, but California offers a promising model for a beneficial relationship. There, statewide funds are allocated to each individual community college to develop its own uniquely-tailored Promise program. This model preserves the best of both program types, providing near-universal access through state funding while allowing for local specialization. As statewide Promises grow, opportunities lay ahead for the federal government to enact federal-state partnerships. Evolution in the structures that tie local, state and federal Promise program goals and designs together may well become the newest frontier for advancing the College Promise movement.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark sleeveless top, stands behind a podium, gesturing with her hands as if presenting. In the foreground, the backs of several students' heads are visible, showing they are seated and facing the presenter. The background features a whiteboard with a bar chart. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent blue filter.

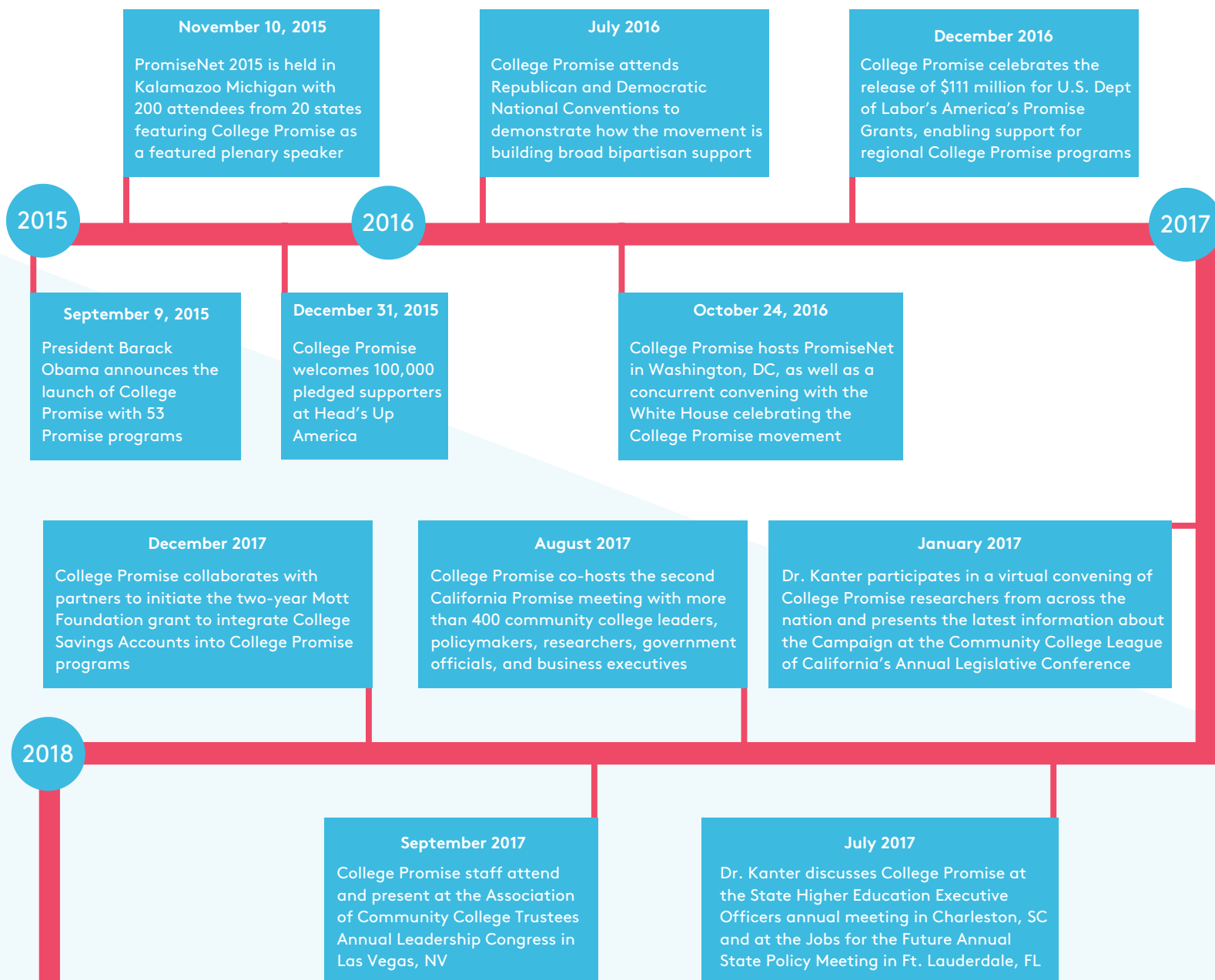
Expanding College Promise in Communities and States

Raising Public Awareness

When College Promise began, the concept of free college was considered idealistic, despite the existence of a handful of Promise programs in operation. One of the first tasks of College Promise was to change the conversation from “What is a Promise program?” and “Is a Promise possible?” to “How can I build and expand a Promise program?”

Our work required numerous cross-sector collaborations with K-12, postsecondary education, business, government, philanthropy, nonprofit, labor, and student stakeholders at the local, state, and national levels. Some of our strategies included speaking engagements, conferences with leaders, continual data tracking, and publication of high-impact Promise program results on social media. Now, five years later, the Promise movement has become a widely-accepted policy proposition, with 360 Promise programs established and underway. Promise boasts a diverse community of stakeholders, including educators, program administrators, researchers, policymakers, and leaders from public and private sector organizations.

Here are some key milestones we led to deepen and spread the College Promise conversations, growth, and movement:



February 2018

College Promise staff attends Achieving the Dream National Conference in Nashville, TN and identifies new Promise leaders from community college ATD campuses

June 9, 2018

College Promise hosts a reception in conjunction with the annual U.S. Conference of Mayors to celebrate the official launch of the City and County Playbook: How To Build A Promise

November 2018

College Promise launches a formal partnership with the National Governors Association to strengthen the growth and quality of statewide Promise programs

2019

May 2018

Dr. Jill Biden and College Promise celebrate the Dallas County Promise launch. The Promise serves students at one of the biggest metropolitan areas in the country

August 2018

More than 200 College Promise programs are underway in counties, cities and towns across 44 states. And statewide momentum is growing with programs in 23 states

November 2019

PromiseNet 2019 was successfully held in Berkeley, California and attended by over 300 Promise stakeholders from around the country

July 2019

College Promise co-hosted a webinar, "Promises to Keep: Preliminary Findings on College Promise Financial Sustainability," with MDRC. Over 100 participants joined the webinar representing diverse sectors and areas of expertise

February 2019

College Promise staff attended several Texas Regional Strategy meetings to support the development of the AlamoPROMISE

2020

October 2019

College Promise hosts a full day Financial Sustainability Symposium to discuss how to manage and maintain funding in order to build financially sustainable Promises.

September 2019

College Promise concluded its student video competition and selected four winners

June 4, 2019

College Promise co-hosts with ETS the "Depicting the Ecosystems for Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations" convening in Princeton, NJ

2021

February 2020

Columbia Teachers College Presentation

March 2020

Knight Foundation: HBS Building Outside the Box

NYU Panel: The Education Divide - Inequity in the Age of COVID-19

April 2020

American Council on Education (ACE) Podcast: College Promise Episode

July 2020

College Promise Financial Sustainability Webinar

August 2020

Virtual Event for International Young Presidents Organization

September 2020

College Promise Student Success Webinars

Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) Annual Conference Closing Plenary Discussion

COSUAA Virtual Conference

October 2020

College Promise moderates Arizona State University-Global Silicon Valley (ASU+GSV) Power of Women Panel

November 2020

College Promise Careers Institute

Digital Communications

Over the past year, College Promise has continued to grow its digital presence and communications strategy with stakeholders, including the launch of a monthly newsletter reaching 90,000 supporters and a weekly blog to serve as the primary source of information and engagement for all of College Promise's stakeholders. In response to the pandemic and the heightened uncertainty students face, College Promise has prioritized directly connecting with students and communicating Promise opportunities that can benefit students and their families. Throughout the summer and fall, the Promise team have hosted student webinars, partnering with student peer organizations such as Matriculate and other public and private sector partners. College Promise continues to communicate available supports to help students enroll, persist, and succeed in college despite the challenges currently facing the nation.

Building on positive reception to the webinar series, College Promise planned various other virtual events including virtual research briefing conferences, targeted Promise stakeholder webinars, and the College Promise Careers Institute, a 3-day virtual conference to illustrate high-impact systems, exemplars, and best practices that can serve to connect college and career pathways. Despite the lack of opportunities for in-person presentations and meetings, due to COVID-19, the reach and utility of these digital platforms has been instrumental in sustaining momentum for the movement. College Promise intends to carry these virtual means of connecting with Promise audiences through and beyond COVID-19.

"College Promise is the national voice and network for states and communities that offer financial aid to build a college going vision for young people who might not otherwise see their potential. College Promise helps all of us perform at a higher level of success."

**– Michael P. Meotti, Executive Director,
Washington Student Achievement Council**

2020 Virtual Events

You Belong In College: A Webinar for College Students

A panel discussion on why all students belong in college, even in a pandemic, and the services students can take advantage of to ensure they can thrive throughout the school year.

Choice Amidst COVID: A College Planning Virtual Workshop for College Students

A panel discussion that gave students an opportunity to hear practical information on choosing the next steps in their educational plan, including pitfalls to avoid and options they may not have considered before COVID-19.

Thriving in Adverse Climates: A Wellness and Mental Health Virtual Workshop for Students

A workshop that offered students actionable advice on maintaining both physical and mental health.

Managing Finances in an Economic Crisis: A Financial Literacy Workshop for College Students

A panel discussion on topics like managing debt and finances, estimating total costs of attending college, and general financial literacy skills for navigating life to, through, and beyond college.

College Promise Careers Institute

A 3-day summit that convened hundreds of our nation's trailblazers - educators, employers, government officials, thought leaders, and practitioners - to tackle the most complex challenges American workers face, from the role of artificial intelligence to the increasing importance of human skills. Featured 50 panelists and 24 sessions across the program.

Student Ecosystem Research Briefings

A series of five briefings to discuss major findings and recommendations from the College Promise student ecosystem reports. Each briefing focused on a different student population: traditional-aged, adult, justice-impacted, undocumented, and veteran.

Keeping the Promise: Financial Sustainability During COVID Virtual Event

A panel of experts from Promise Programs across the nation on financial sustainability in the time of COVID-19.

Near-Peer Student Advising Workshops

A series of virtual workshops for students on topics like transfers, transitions, and college plan disruptions.

A blue-tinted collage of diverse young people smiling. The image features several faces of different ethnicities and ages, all looking towards the camera with positive expressions. The text 'Student Supports' is overlaid in white, centered horizontally.

Student Supports

Promise Programs and Wrap Around Supports

The earliest conception of “Promise” focused almost exclusively on providing tuition and fees, branding itself as “free college”. It was quickly recognized, however, that even without the burden of tuition, college was far from free to students. Additional costs of college attendance kept college out of reach for many students, like housing, food, textbooks, childcare, and transportation, among others. Further, as the movement matured, supporters began asking if it was truly in the spirit of a Promise to only open the doors to higher education for underserved students without continuing to help them succeed once enrolled.

Since 2018, College Promise has emphasized the role of wraparound support services in creating and administering a successful Promise, and has engaged in various long-term projects to directly support or promote their inclusion in Promise programs.

Today, many innovative Promise programs are incorporating supports that help to mitigate the full costs of college and encourage student success, enabling more students to stay in college and earn their degrees and certificates. Some notable examples that we have drawn inspiration from over the years include:

- The Detroit Promise Path in Michigan is a program launched in 2016 to increase student success to and through college. Detroit Promise Path added monthly financial incentives for Detroit students, contingent on meeting with coaches and summer engagement. Detroit Promise Path utilized targeted messaging, informed by behavioral science, through a management information system created by MDRC, a national research organization. In July of 2017, MDRC published a report, “Enhancing Promise Programs to Improve College Access and Success,” that demonstrated the positive impact that the program had on students. The results highlighted the fact that more than 95% of students responded to coaches’ outreach. 96% of surveyed students, who had been in contact with a coach, said that the program was “valuable” to them. The program led to a significant positive impact on full-time enrollment in the first and second semesters of college, and on all enrollment in the second semester of college, showing positive changes in college persistence.
- Porterville College in California launched a food pantry to support students facing food insecurity. The college also maintains an online book system that can connect students with additional resources like daycare services, financial literacy workshops, and employment services.
- Launched in 2018, the Dallas County Promise offers food banks and transportation passes to its students. They have also dramatically leveraged technology to improve the transition to and through college for youth and adults, and have shared and extended these practices to other new and emerging Promise programs in the state. With an extensive list of business, philanthropic, government, and school district partners, the Promise has built and scaled a robust program to ensure increased student support.
- Since 2007, the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at City University of New York (CUNY) has provided services to help students complete a degree within three years. It provides a range of well-designed, integrated financial, academic, and personal supports including comprehensive and personalized advising, career counseling, tutoring, waivers for tuition and mandatory fees, MTA MetroCards, and additional financial assistance to cover textbook costs. Independent evaluations have shown that ASAP more than doubled CUNY’s average graduation rate (53% vs. 24%), was cost-effective, and returned significant positive benefits to taxpayers. The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences’ ‘What Works Clearinghouse’ designated ASAP as a high impact intervention of national importance.

Ecosystems of Support for Promise Populations

In 2018, through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion, College Promise began to explore how Promise programs could support specific student populations. College Promise extended its partnership with ETS in Princeton, NJ, and through the summer of 2018, held various roundtable discussions and town hall-style presentations with target student groups. College Promise sought to learn directly from their experiences, and to share their perspectives with students, scholars, practitioners, and leaders from education, business, government, and philanthropy sectors. Through 2019, five design teams were assembled to review literature and draft policy recommendations for five student populations.

In the Summer of 2020, College Promise and ETS publicly released their joint report "Depicting Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Populations" internationally through Wiley Online. This report gathered together the findings of five design teams to present equitable and achievable recommendations on how best to support diverse student populations in College Promise programs:

Program Spotlight: Tennessee Promise

A major strength of the Tennessee Promise lies in its universal eligibility and holistic approach to college success to reach the state's college attainment goal that the program has made central to its mission. This is evident in the many partnerships for wrap around services and the strong locally empowered systems that the Tennessee Promise has made use of to better serve every student across the state. For example, the Tennessee Promise provides a mentor for every Promise student.

"As a country, we must address the widespread economic disparities that challenge our communities. Providing all students with the opportunity to earn a college credential often levels the playing field and changes conversations around kitchen tables about the possibility of going to college. Promise programs, like the Tennessee Promise, are rooted in changing a culture of low expectations by clearly promoting the idea that college is for everyone. In turn, they bolster local and state economies by providing a more prepared workforce."

– The Honorable Bill Haslam, former Governor of Tennessee

"Promise programs are about student opportunity and economic viability. For our communities and states to thrive, every student regardless of income, zip code or background must have a clear, supported path to a college credential. Programs like Tennessee Promise and UT Promise open doors for students who possibly thought college was not an option. Championing promise programs, both large and small, create these opportunities and ultimately build a strong workforce ready to meet 21st Century demands."

– Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee

"Although statewide in scale, much of the TN Promise success lies in its community-based approach and student-centered philosophy. The founders of its precursor and now partnering organization, tnAchieves, understood the need for multiple, personalized layers of student supports to truly provide upward economic mobility for Tennessee students via a college degree. Rooting all conversations in student need is the magic of promise programs."

– Krissy DeAlejandro, Executive Director, tnAchieves

Traditional-Aged Students

- 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 for low-income students
- Craft and broadcast a simple and understandable core message that describes a Promise program and can be personalized to different target audiences
- Utilize a broad range of communication modalities
- Provide the additional support needed through academic support and student services

Student Veterans

- Build partnerships to streamline mental health and health care services on campus for Student Veterans
- Establish a Campus Veteran Resource Center
- Provide Peer Support Programs for Student Veterans
- Train Administrators and Staff to Mitigate Integration Gaps between Government Services for Student Veterans

Adult Students

- Eliminate trivial fees and financial holds
- Provide on-site food and child care
- Offer flexible hours for campus-based support services
- College Credit for Prior Learning & Experience

Undocumented Students

- Increase access to financial support (i.e., scholarships, stipends, and paid internships)

- Develop clear protocols and streamlined forms, specific to undocumented students
- Integrate relevant curricula that invites discussion regarding services and supports for undocumented students on- and off-campus
- Develop and implement regulations for responding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement requests

Justice-Impacted Students

- Supports with intentionality towards inclusion of justice-impacted students
- Personal supports like learning communities and comprehensive first-year experiences
- Academic supports, such as advising and tutoring
- Career supports, such as career counseling, mentoring, and work experience (Advising should also caution students against pursuing dead-end coursework, that would lead to an industry with occupational licensing restrictions against individuals with criminal records)

College Promise and ETS have now established the next phase of the Promise Ecosystems initiative, bringing together five new design teams to focus, research, and report on recommendations for five additional diverse student populations: parent students, first generation students, students in or aged out of foster care, students with disabilities, and students with developmental learning need. A national convening of students, experts, and other stakeholders focused on increasing education and workforce outcomes for these populations is planned for 2021-22 with associated research, policy recommendations, and a second international publication of the findings to offer more intentional and equitable pathways to, through, and beyond college for these student populations.

Integrating and Increasing College Promise Programs with Children's Savings Accounts

Program Spotlight: Neodesha Promise

The Neodesha Promise is a new Promise launched November 2019 in the rural community of Neodesha, Kansas. The plans for this Promise were originally inspired by learnings from PromiseNet convenings. The Promise covers, on a last dollar basis, cost of tuition and fees for 120 credit hours at Kansas State University, but the scholarship can be applied to any Pell-approved college or university in the US. The Neodesha Promise was designed over 18 months through intensive collaboration with not only community stakeholders, but national peers, Promise experts, and College Promise, as well. In 2020, the program served 33 recipients across 16 institutions of higher education and has seen 91% (30) of its scholarship recipients enroll in college for Fall of 2020.

"The Neodesha Promise got its inspiration from studying the impact promise programs have had on students, the school system, and the local community. Our role model was the El Dorado promise program. We are eternally grateful for the tremendous support we have received from promise administrators around the country in helping us design our program. We hope our program will lead to dramatically improved post-secondary success for our students, improved academic performance in our schools, and make Neodesha a more attractive community for families and businesses. We are a small community with big aspirations."

– Rebekah Peitz, Program Administrator, Neodesha Promise Scholarship Program

In 2017, with generous support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, College Promise partnered with several organizations to develop a College Promise-Children's Savings Account (CP-CSA) peer learning network focused on integration. This work built upon an extensive history demonstrating the significant potential of both Promise programs and CSAs to impact education outcomes and sought to help align these two policy designs and tools in order to maximize benefits to local communities and states. Partnering with the National League of Cities and Prosperity Now, College Promise continues to expand the CP-CSA Network to more communities, increase the number of CP-CSA integrated programs created, and significantly deepen the quality of the integration of CSAs with Promise programs.

As of Fall 2020, the CP-CSA partners have over 35 communities engaged in the CP-CSA Peer Learning Network, six of which are already fully integrated.

Compiling the Evidence Base



Compiling the Evidence Base

A major contribution to the College Promise mission is our charge to build the evidence base for Promise programs. Early on, the explosive growth of local, independent programs made it clear that the country was ready to invest in Promise programs, and the huge variety of models and design approaches showed incredible creativity and problem-solving. As some of the earliest programs began to mature and share findings, there was high demand for information about what practices and design elements worked well for these programs, as well as for lessons that they learned through their implementation. While this information began to circulate, we saw an opportunity to support new and existing programs by gathering and promoting these evidence-based practices in a structured way, giving our vast network of Promise stakeholders easy access to resources developed by diverse program leaders and scholars around the country. The two main vehicles for disseminating these resources are the College Promise Research Network (CPRN) and the regular development of research and policy briefs on Promise programs.

College Promise Research Network

Formally launched in 2019, the College Promise Research Network is comprised of research and policy scholars and other experts in economics, financial aid, social-emotional learning, and wraparound supports with experience in education and workforce analytics, assessment, design, and evaluation. This unique and diverse network supports the national College Promise movement by identifying, producing, sharing, and amplifying high-quality research and policy evidence in these areas:

- Describe the case for College Promise programs
- Identify research-based practices and program design features that promote access, persistence, and completion, especially for students from groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education
- Guide programs in evaluating program participation and outcomes
- Make research accessible and valuable to practitioners, policymakers, and other Promise stakeholders, including a wider network of emerging Promise leaders

Composed of both theory and application-focused researchers, the CPRN's steering committee oversees and distills findings from five working groups focused on various loci of Promise research: Program Design, Financial Sustainability, Workforce and Economic Development, Evaluation and Metrics, and Wraparound Support Services. Together, College Promise and the CPRN have compiled a 20-page bibliography of Promise-related research ("Evolution of Promise: The Evidence Behind the Movement") sorted and tagged by topic to help Promise stakeholders find data-driven guidance.

"As College Promise marks its 5th anniversary, one incredibly important contribution to celebrate is its encouragement of a multifaceted, multidisciplinary body of related research and development of a diverse community of college promise researchers."

I am deeply grateful to College Promise for their steadfast commitment to encouraging me and other scholars to conduct research that can inform the development, design, implementation, and sustainability of college promise programs. Having a strong research base is essential to advancing programs that create meaningful improvements in college-related outcomes for students from historically underserved groups."

- Laura Perna, PhD, Vice Provost for Faculty, Higher Education Division;
Centennial Presidential Professor of Education; Executive Director, Alliance for
Higher Education and Democracy, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Research and Policy Briefs

Over the years, College Promise has made concerted efforts to spotlight insights from Promise leaders across the country, believing that most learnings come from voices already inside the Promise community. Over the past few years, College Promise has published freely-available research and policy briefs that review programs, design features, student experiences, research, and strategies to address Promise specific challenges and criticisms. This research serves to offer Promise stakeholders meaningful evidence and policy recommendations. Published research and policy briefs, and their top-line recommendations from this past year, include:



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

- Monitor Equity Gaps and Plan to Differentiate Supports
- Allow for Flexibility in Program Policies
- Listen to Students Over “Best Practices,” and Don’t be Afraid to Adapt Policies and Program Requirements
- Have Direct Service Programming Inform Broader Policy



Ecosystems of Student Support

- Veteran Students
- Undocumented Students
- Traditional-Aged Students
- Adult Students
- Justice-Impacted Students



College Promise Predictor of Students' Completion Rates

- An exploratory study finding that College Promise programs contribute to 45% higher graduation and completion rates for students in American colleges and universities
- The default rates of College Promise students were shown to be 19% lower



Keeping the College Promise: Financial Sustainability in the Face of COVID-19 Pandemic

- Aim to diversify sources of funding and seek partnerships both within their community (public and private) and at the state level
- Invest in developing and continuously updating a long term strategic plan for financial sustainability with clear fund development goals. This includes investing in the administrative infrastructure and support needed to carry out such a plan
- Gradually scale Promise programs up to full target functionality over the course of multiple years to account for program costs and growth in demand, as well as to build “proof of concept” evidence to support their ultimate program goals sustainably



Magnifying the Impact of College Promise through Open Educational Resources

- Investigate OER policies in your state
- Curate and adapt OER materials for local needs to empower faculty, improving teaching and learning within institutions
- Identify or create grant programs and funding opportunities to support institutional and faculty pilots of OER materials
- Educate administration, faculty, students, and other stakeholders about OER and its benefits by holding workshops, presenting faculty awards, and inviting OER experts to present on campus
- Ensure that OER materials are accessible for students with disabilities

“College Promise is well known for promoting and supporting Promise programs across the nation, but they also facilitate essential connections between researchers and among the broader community of practice. Together, we are working to ensure that the research being conducted meets the needs of practitioners, and that practitioners can apply the lessons from research to improve their programs and – most importantly – improve the outcomes of the students they serve.”

- Evan Weissman, Senior Associate, MDRC

Earlier Policy Briefs

- How Harper College Established Its Promise
- What Can States Learn from Local College Promise Programs?
- Support Services that make Promise a Reality
- Growing College Enrollment and Persistence with the Pittsburgh Promise
- Promise Design Matters: A Review of The Degree Project (TDP)
- Spurring Innovation in New Jersey County Colleges through a Tuition-Free Pilot Program
- Leveraging Free College and Children’s Savings Accounts For a 21st Century Wealth Building Agenda
- The Promise of the College Promise

Financial Sustainability



Keeping the Promise

As College Promise affirmed in its program criteria, Promise programs must be long-term and reliable in order to successfully build a college-going culture. In other words, a Promise made must be a Promise kept. As such, supporting programs in their efforts to be financially sustainable is a key undertaking of College Promise. Since 2016, College Promise has partnered with ETS to research and provide recommendations on Promise financial sustainability, a joint effort that has resulted in multiple reports and convenings, regular data collection, and a financial sustainability playbook.

The very first effort in exploring financial sustainability consisted of the convening of five national design teams of distinguished scholars and Promise stakeholders to understand and describe the various approaches and models available for College Promise financing strategies. The compendium of this work, "Designing Sustainable Funding for College Promise Initiatives", was released in October 2017. The compendium specifically reviewed Children's Savings Account models, State-Funded models, Privately-Funded models, Federal Financial Aid Redesign models, and Outcomes-Based Financing models. Following the release of the compendium, College Promise and ETS determined that, while a range of local and state College Promise leaders had specific knowledge and expertise on specific College Promise financing strategies, information on the wider range of strategies being utilized was not collected nor aggregated comprehensively enough to help College Promise practitioners, policymakers, and interested stakeholders take action to sustain their initiatives.

As a result, in 2018, a national survey of local and state College Promise programs was conducted to learn about the financing strategies and administrative infrastructures Promises were employing. The survey gathered financial insights from 134 Promises about how programs were acquiring, maintaining, and utilizing funding. In June of 2019, College Promise publicly released the findings from the first-ever Promise Program Financial Sustainability Survey, including such key insights as:

- 50% of Promise programs reported having financial sustainability concerns and another 27% were unsure if financial sustainability would be an issue or not.
- 61% of programs indicating that they felt sufficient funding was potentially available within their community to achieve their Promise goals.

"Maximizing the potential of equity-centered College Promise programs calls for data-informed resources and best practices on the funding model of new and continuing College Promise programs.

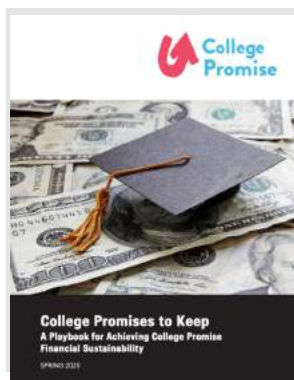
It is my sincere hope that tools like the College Promise Financial Sustainability Survey continue to move us forward in guaranteeing clear, affordable educational pathways for all.

This work and its results would not be possible without College Promise's key role in activating improvements and policy recommendations across the local, state and national level."

- Saúl Valdez, Program Officer, ECMC Foundation

- Only 34% of Promise programs reported making changes to be more financially sustainable, but half of those programs chose to restrict eligibility requirements to limit the number of students served and 30% chose to reduce the amount of the scholarship award offered.
- Although 80% of programs indicated taking steps toward financial sustainability, only about a third utilized long-term strategic plans or formal fundraising plans and only half had dedicated fundraising staff.

In November of 2019, College Promise released "College Promises to Keep: A Playbook for College Promise Financial Sustainability", condensing the analysis and findings from the Promise Program Financial Sustainability Survey into a meaningful resource to help guide other programs by explaining the various funding approaches utilized around the country. The Playbook elaborated on Promise financial sustainability in terms of:



- **Assessing cost**
 - Determining Service Area and Eligibility
 - Choosing Scholarship Method
 - Including Additional Supports
 - Administrative and Operational Costs
- **Evaluating sources of revenue**
 - Public Funding (Local, State, and Federal)
 - Private Funding (Private Donors, Fundraising, & Endowments)
 - Public-Private Partnerships (P3s, including Philanthropy)
 - In-kind Funding
- **Ensuring long-term sustainability**
 - Marketing and Branding
 - Data Collection and Outcomes Assessments
 - Development of Long-Term Fundraising Strategies
- **Reviewing case studies**
 - University of Washington Husky Promise- A state and local Promise partnership model
 - West Sacramento Promise- Local government funded model
 - Tennessee Promise- State government funded model with permanent endowment
 - El Dorado Promise- Full privately funded model

This past summer, following up on the successful release of the Playbook, College Promise launched the next phase of the Promise Program Financial Sustainability Survey. The goals of the new survey, which features updated questions in response to feedback from the first survey and report, are to capture up-to-date information from Promise programs, including how programs who responded previously have or have not changed over time. Additionally, survey questions were added to specifically address the impact of COVID-19. These questions seek to learn more about how Promises have adapted their financial sustainability strategies in response to the pandemic, as well as in light of new information about Children's Savings Accounts for college. Follow-up on the survey is actively underway, with a preliminary analysis of findings expected in 2021.

Program Spotlight: Dallas Promise

The Dallas County Promise utilized strong coalition building to design and fund its program, gathering support from higher education systems, the K-12 system, business leaders, and locally-elected officials. This allowed for a diverse mix of small dollar fundraising and large gift solicitations to support the Promise, which not only helps ensure the program can be reliably funded, but allows for greater flexibility should any individual funding stream be impacted, as well.

"Through the Dallas County Promise, we are ensuring that all students have access to a higher education, effectively placing them on a pathway filled with limitless opportunity. We have seen far too often how students are hindered by their inability to pay for college.

For countless students, the prospect of receiving a higher education is now a reality within reach. I am pleased with our College's involvement in eliminating such a barrier. The Dallas County Promise's success is hinged on a network of community engagement, business partnerships, and the Dallas College Foundation's support."

- Joe May, Chancellor, Dallas County Community College District

Toolkit for Success

The background of the entire page is a light blue color. On the left side, there is a close-up, slightly blurred image of a spiral-bound notebook. The spiral binding is a darker shade of blue and runs vertically. The pages of the notebook are visible, showing a fine, grid-like texture.

How to Build a Promise

As a national organization, College Promise benefits from taking a broad view of what is happening in Promise programs across the country. We are therefore able to identify national trends and best practices, and package those insights into technical assistance playbooks designed for new and existing Promise programs. The core of our toolkit for Promise success consists of our "How to Build a Promise Playbook".



One of the first goals of College Promise as an organization was the establishment of new Promise programs. We frequently encounter significant interest from communities and stakeholders, but a lack of understanding around where to begin such a monumental task as establishing a Promise. To this end, College Promise developed a playbook that, in addition to defining a Promise and discussing why it is an effective policy solution, addresses the following steps in creating a Promise:

1. Laying the foundation for a promise by assessing community needs, planning benchmarks to measure success, identifying a champion for the cause, building broad support across a diverse coalition, and establishing a leadership team
2. Developing the program design by considering program scope, scholarship distribution models, potential partnerships, and wraparound support services
3. Funding the Promise effectively making the case for Promise financial support, reviewing public and private sources of funding (as listed in the playbook), and utilizing fundraising best practices
4. Administering and sustaining the Promise by recruiting students, launching and implementing the Promise, maintaining a public presence, and tracking/evaluating outcomes

While the Playbook was built with an audience of locally-elected officials in mind, it serves as a great primer on Promise for any stakeholders and thoroughly reviews the basic elements for designing a local College Promise program.

Catalog of Local and State College Promise Programs - Fall 2020

The most common reaction to our map of Promise programs from people not familiar with the movement is surprise that Promise is so widespread. To help sift through the sheer breadth and diversity of existing Promise programs, College Promise created a comprehensive list of programs and their design features to inform

"As a philanthropist and researcher, I have a responsibility to analyze the policies and programs that affect my community and all who navigate education spaces. I would like to see College Promise programs reach their potential, and that won't happen without research and advocacy that unearths the best of what they can offer society."

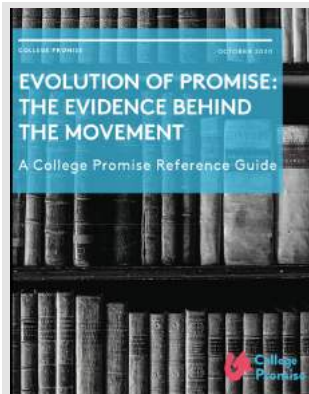
I am honored to support College Promise, whose varied programming and timely analyses help stakeholders uncover evidence on programs' effectiveness. I hope education leaders will use the campaign's work to make programs more equitable and sustainable, building an even stronger future for students, families, and communities."

- Edward Smith, PhD, Program Officer, The Kresge Foundation

students, program administrators, and researchers about the various Promise programs across the U.S. Updated in Fall of 2020, this catalog provides useful information about each of the Promise programs we track in our database, including the type of scholarship offered, the college(s) participating in the program, any support services provided, and student eligibility criteria. Not only does the catalog provide a wonderful snapshot of the spread of programs across the country, it allows students to easily identify and compare Promises that

they may be eligible for and helps policymakers learn about programs nearby or in communities similar to theirs.

Evolution of Promise: The Evidence Behind the Movement - A College Promise Reference Guide



The relative youth of the Promise movement and the great diversity among local program designs has created challenges in identifying and promoting best practices. As a result, Promise program leaders are continuously seeking outcome data and empirical evidence of the potential for various program designs to improve the impact of their Promises, and frequently document the outcomes of their own efforts. To help build and aggregate the full evidence base of data in support of both researchers and program practitioners, the College Promise Research Network collected an exhaustive list of scholarly works that addressed Promise or Promise adjacent research. Released in October 2020, the first-ever reference guide for Promise research compiles historical evidence on the Promise movement and provides a rich compendium of Promise studies for exploration into program designs and outcomes.

Playbook for Achieving College Promise Financial Sustainability

As College Promise programs continue to expand, ensuring long term financial sustainability becomes crucial in the face of increasing demand, tightening budgets, and varied - and often fluctuating - sources of funding. Our work on financial sustainability is designed to facilitate stakeholders' understanding of the current landscape, best practices, and tools for improvement. This playbook serves as a comprehensive resource of local and state strategies and considerations to help Promise programs ensure long-term financial viability and success.

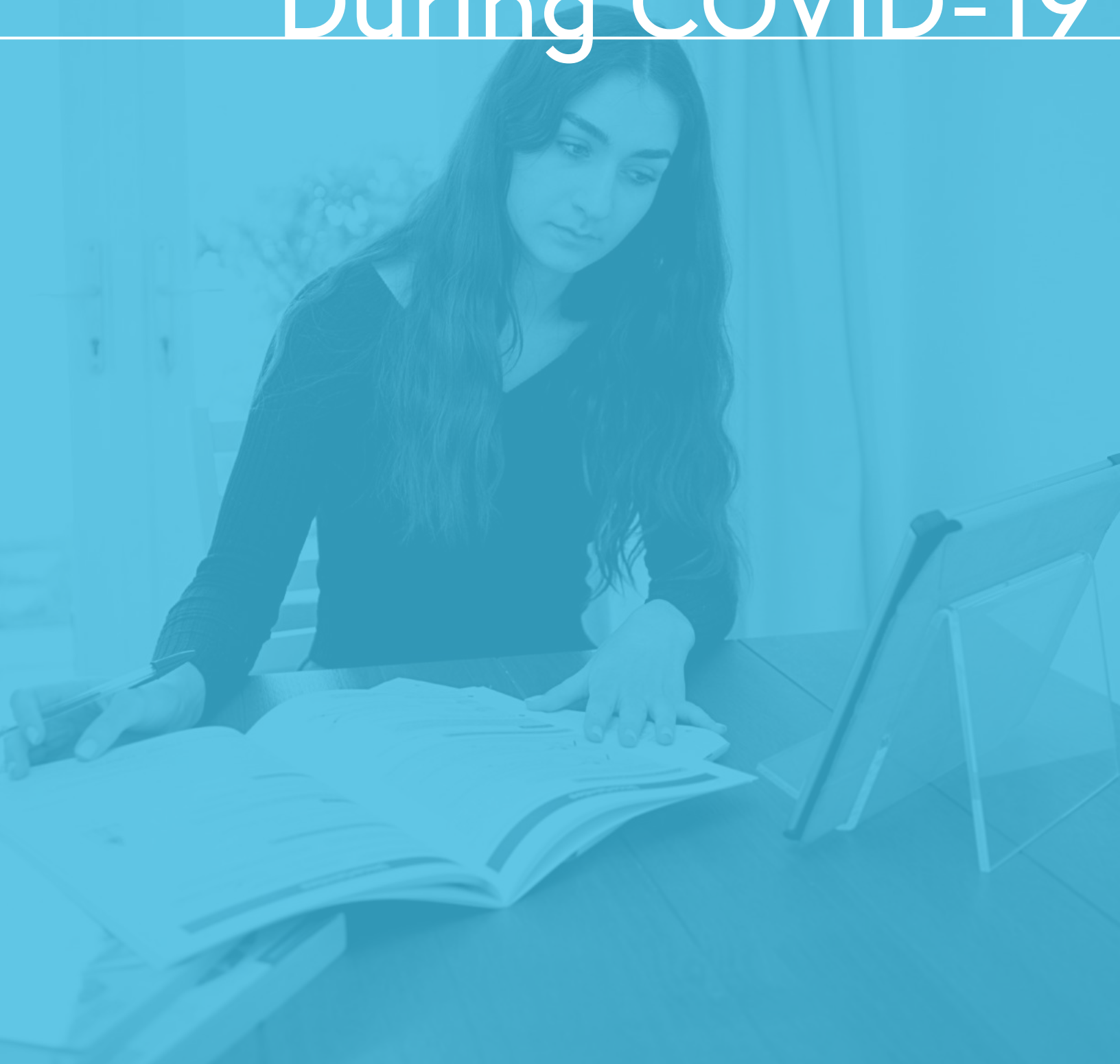
"Access to the middle class in the 21st century requires a postsecondary credential. The challenge has been: How can we get more Americans into and through college at an affordable price?"

By working with leaders and policymakers from both sides of the aisle, College Promise has helped hundreds of states, counties and cities offer two free years of college.

In just five years, hundreds of thousands of people have been given this opportunity to get out of poverty and secure their part of the American Dream for themselves and their families - and increase prosperity for all."

- Bill Moses, Managing Director,
The Kresge Foundation

Keeping the Promise During COVID-19



Adapting to the Pandemic

For the diverse range of nation's students, challenges already threatening college accessibility and affordability have heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unanticipated disruptions and cost pressures, from unmet basic needs for food, housing and transportation, to navigating remote classroom access, lack of broadband and technology tools, and the decline in full and part-time employment opportunities, have further strained students. These challenges signify the growing divide across the United States between the "haves" and "have nots," a gap exacerbated by the pandemic, social justice strife, and economic volatility.

COVID-19 doesn't change America's urgent need for a more educated workforce. If anything, the pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of education as many now face an even more competitive labor market. Not only have students' need for quality postsecondary credentials to secure good jobs and a middle-class future increased, but so has the economy's need for significantly more graduates to be relieved from exorbitant student debt as they search for jobs in this challenging environment. In short, COVID-19 has accentuated the risks posed by not providing an affordable path to college for our nation's students.

Over the course of the year, College Promise has worked to address pandemic-related risks to students and Promise programs. College Promise published COVID-19 Resources: Supporting Students, Educators, and Programs, with the following sections:



Finances



Health



Education



Utilities



Food



Population-Specific Needs



Careers

"The Seattle Promise is one of my proudest accomplishments as Mayor to date. Promise receive two years of free tuition to attend a Seattle College.

Last year, we had 399 students in the program and expanded eligibility to all graduates of Seattle Public Schools. This is a great example of what a strong partnership between community colleges, public schools, and government can do.

We can open doors for students furthest from educational justice. We can help our youth be successful in the new economy. I encourage municipalities across the country to do the same."

- Jenny A. Durkan, Mayor of Seattle

College Promise also published the policy brief "Keeping the College Promise: Financial Sustainability in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic", addressing the challenges COVID-19 has created in continued funding for Promise, and actions Promise programs could take to best continue serving students through and after the pandemic.

Another COVID-19 related brief, "Meeting the Moment and Raising the Bar: Applying Lessons Learned from the Fight to Curb Summer Melt through COVID-19 and Beyond", was produced in partnership with the Richmond Promise, covering policy recommendations learned from their personal experiences combating summer melt during the pandemic. Although they offer many recommendations that are applicable at any time, they also offer COVID-19 specific advice, such as "Learn to Serve a Digital Generation" and that, when it comes to student supports, "Virtual Does Not Replace the Personal".



The Future of Promise

The Next Phase of Promise

This Fall marked the 5th Anniversary of College Promise. What began as a dream for affordable access to education has transformed into a national, nonpartisan movement for equitable, affordable access to the American Dream. Recent studies quantify the significant impacts of College Promise programs across the country, from boosting student outcomes to increasing college access and affordability while yielding higher graduation rates. Gathering 360 Promise programs in just five years has been a substantial effort. Looking ahead, we are confident that the College Promise movement will grow broader and deeper to serve millions more Americans.

Now more than ever, education, government, business, philanthropy, and nonprofit leaders are calling for the expansion of Promise programs to spur the future prosperity and well-being of our nation and its students. The seeds planted at the local level have grown to bear fruit at the state level, and we are seeing an unprecedented flourishing in the number of students with access to a Promise.

Yet, the challenges ahead loom large. Understanding how best to integrate local- and state-level Promise programs is a work in progress. Maintaining financial sustainability as state and local budgets constrict due to the pandemic and economic impacts will require increased focus. Embracing Promise program designs that go above and beyond free tuition, incorporating robust student supports, will grow in priority to ensure students go through and beyond college into productive careers and community life. As more Americans embrace the open doors of America's community colleges aligning with their university, business, and nonprofit partners, the federal government could assume a larger role in the movement through a federal-state partnership to generate tremendous growth. There is also still much ground to cover to deepen the business sector and employer engagement in the Promise movement, ensuring that educational outcomes are aligned with the future of work, and to provide pathways to civic opportunity and community service that inspire and enable social inclusion and good quality of life.

The past 5 years have shown us that the Promise of college for all Americans is not only possible, it is within our reach. The success of the movement has outpaced the many expectations that were originally set for it, and while we humbly celebrate passing milestone after milestone, College Promise will continue to advance its agenda until the only barriers left to mitigate for any student are the desire to learn and the hard work and accomplishments enabled by one's potential.

"It has become abundantly clear that in the 21st century knowledge economy, a post-secondary credential is the crucial imperative to achieve the American Dream. In the last five years, the College Promise has done an exemplary job in making the Dream a real possibility for hundreds of thousands of students all over the nation.

This work must continue."

- Eduardo J. Padrón, President Emeritus, Miami Dade College; College Promise National Advisory Board Honorary Chair

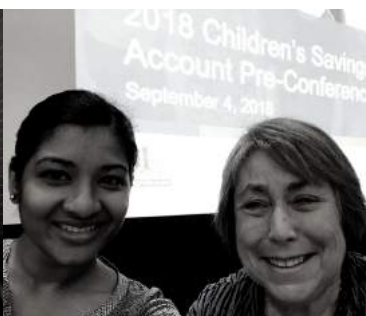
Promise Across America





"Nationally and here in Washington state, we know that every student should have the opportunity to get the higher education they need. College Promise means that a student's financial situation will not prohibit them from pursuing their dreams. I am proud that we've worked to help ensure that college and post-high school training is available to Washington state students and their families. Programs like College Promise help to prepare the next generation for career and life success."

– Jay Inslee, Governor of Washington



"Since 2008, The Pittsburgh Promise has worked to solidify the educational foundations of urban youth so that their prospects for economic mobility as well as family health and stability become more expansive and inclusive. The Pittsburgh Promise lives at the intersection of K-12 schools, post-secondary institutions, and employers. We are about to serve our 10,000th student and give our 150 millionth dollar in private college scholarships. We are glad to be related to the national College Promise campaign. On their 5th anniversary, we celebrate their accomplishments and cheer them on as they run the race before them with endurance and care."

– Saleem Ghubril, Executive Director, The Pittsburgh Promise



"The College Promise program is more than a "promise." It's an investment in the social and economic well-being of our communities. And the best part of an investment of this sort is that we know that 92 percent of community college graduates will remain to live and work in their communities. They get jobs, pay taxes and send their children to local schools. They join the PTA, shop at local supermarkets and serve on community boards. This is money and talent reinvested in local communities. Promise Programs enrich the lives of individuals and their families, but they also enrich our communities. That is the real "promise" in Promise programs."

– Sandra Kurtinitis, President, Community College of Baltimore County

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