

Support Services that make Promise a Reality

Introduction

College Promise programs are designed to make college more affordable for students and meet the labor market's demand for a skilled workforce. By removing the barriers of tuition and fees and branding themselves as "free college," these programs inspire many families and students to pursue higher education who might have otherwise viewed it as out of reach. There are now over 300 College Promise programs in 44 states. The movement towards free community college continues to scale from innovations at the local level to statewide expansions; 24 states have implemented some form of statewide Promise.

To better understand the impact of College Promise, research organizations such as MDRC — a nonprofit, nonpartisan, education and social policy research organization — are conducting rigorous evaluations of some of these programs. MDRC's College Promise work began in 2016 with the [evaluation of the Detroit Promise Path](#) [1]. Findings from this study demonstrate that incorporating student support services into the scholarship has a positive impact on full-time enrollment and credit accumulation.

In 2018, MDRC expanded its work in the field by launching the College Promise Success Initiative (CPSI) with generous support from the Ascendium Education Group (formerly the Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates). Through [this initiative](#) [2], MDRC provides technical assistance to six College Promise programs committed to incorporating evidence-driven student support services. The technical assistance provided by MDRC complements initial work done by the College Promise Campaign, specifically the publications [Designing Sustainable Funding for College Promise Initiatives](#) [3], the [City and County Playbook – How to Build a Promise](#) [4], and [Promise with a Purpose](#) [5].

[1] Detroit Promise Path: Project Overview. (n.d.) MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/project/detroit-promise-path#overview

[2] College Promise Success Initiative. (2019, February 4). MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/project/college-promise-success-initiative#overview

[3] Design Sustainable Funding for College Promise. (2017, October 4). College Promise Campaign. Retrieved from www.collegepromise.org/cp-research/sustainable-funding/

[4] City and County Playbook – How to Build a Promise. (2018, May). College Promise Campaign. Retrieved from www.collegepromise.org/policy-tools/playbook/

[5] Promise with a Purpose: College Promise Programs "Built for Completion" - Complete College America. (2018, April 30). Complete College America. Retrieved from www.completecollege.org/promise/

MDRC also developed open-access tools to help programs [estimate the cost of their components](#) [6]; set program goals, or [benchmarks](#) [7], for various outcome measures; and create visual tools called [process maps](#) [8] that outline programs in their entirety and facilitate continuous improvement.

As the [Detroit Promise Path evaluation demonstrated](#) [9], a well-designed College Promise program can increase college enrollment — and potentially degree completion — by adding student support services to its scholarship. The work of MDRC informs College Promise research and policy development as well as conversations about program implementation and high-impact practices, both of which are central goals of the College Promise Campaign. This brief summarizes the lessons shared by MDRC in the recent policy brief [Designing for Success: The Early Implementation of College Promise Programs](#) [10], and serves to help other programs across the nation see how they too can best support their Promise students.

MDRC's College Promise Success Initiative

MDRC's initial work with College Promise and Detroit Promise Path has expanded to include five other College Promise Programs: Richmond Promise (Richmond, California), Oregon Promise at Portland Community College (Portland, Oregon), Flint Promise (Flint, Michigan), Los Angeles College Promise (Los Angeles, California), and Rhode Island Promise (statewide at the Community College of Rhode Island). As described in MDRC's brief, these programs are diverse in their geographic locations, sizes, and financing, but all share a strong commitment to incorporating evidence-driven practices, serving low-income students, maintaining financial sustainability, and demonstrating stakeholder support to improving student success. The amounts and structures of the Promise scholarships vary, as do the support services offered, although all include some type of coaching or advising, structured communications, and the use of data to inform service provision. Using MDRC's 15 years of evidence-based postsecondary research, CPSI aims to help all College Promise and free college programs not only provide access to college but also promote student success through college.

MDRC's technical assistance to each of the College Promise programs began by assessing each program's specific needs and barriers to student success.

[6] The College Promise Success Initiative Cost Calculator. (2018, August 6). MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/publication/college-promise-success-initiative-cost-calculator

[7] MDRC College Promise Success Initiative Benchmark Template. (2019, April 24). MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/publication/mdrc-college-promise-success-initiative-benchmark-template

[8] Creating a Process Map. (2019, April 24). MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/publication/creating-process-map

[9] Detroit Promise Path: Project Overview. (n.d.) MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/project/detroit-promise-path#overview

[10] Designing for Success: The Early Implementation of College Promise Program. (2019, April 24). MDRC. Retrieved from www.mdrc.org/publication/designing-success

Over the past year, MDRC has worked closely with programs to improve student success components through strategies such as using insights from behavioral science to change the content and frequency of targeted student communications, and integrating data management and reporting practices into existing program models. The technical assistance work with all five programs evolved throughout the year to fit the needs of each program and was guided by both qualitative data (for example, from student focus groups) and quantitative data (for example, from student surveys or tracked program outcome measures).

Supporting Promise Students

As the national resource of College Promise programs nationwide, the College Promise Campaign collects information on key features of College Promise programs through its online database and through periodic surveys. Nationwide, there are over 300 College Promise Programs, and the Campaign has found that academic and career counseling and mentoring are among the top support services offered to Promise students. Other surveys have shown similar results. WestEd's [California College Promise: Program Characteristics and Perceptions from the Field](#) [11] surveyed California Promise programs and found the most common support services were academic advising, career counseling, and summer orientation programs.

The Promise programs in MDRC's CPSI network vary, but a few common trends and strategies stand out among those they have used to incorporate student support components.

Success Coaching and Advising

Dedicated student success coaches work to ensure that students can easily navigate the college-going process and eventually earn their degrees and certificates. Success coaches differ from the colleges' advisers in that success coaches serve as "campus connectors," helping students resolve enrollment and financial aid issues, and helping them navigate personal challenges by directing them to the appropriate college resources. Success coaches also reach out to students, making contact by text, email, or phone. This communication typically starts during high school, when coaches aim to make sure that students are eligible for the Promise scholarship. It can continue throughout college, ensuring that students maintain their Program eligibility.

Student Communications

Student communications are an important aspect of College Promise programs. A targeted communication plan can increase student retention and persistence by ensuring that students stay abreast of important deadlines (for example, class registration, FAFSA completion, the add/drop period, etc.) and requirements related to both the College Promise scholarship

[11] Rauner, M. (2018, November). California College Promise: Program Characteristics and Perceptions from the Field. WestEd. Retrieved from www.wested.org/resources/california-college-promise-program-characteristics-and-perceptions/

and academic progress toward their degrees. Additionally, robust communications that use insights from behavioral science about student behavior can make it easier for success coaches and advisers to connect with students, provide encouragement and advice, help students during the semester, and point them to the necessary resources.

Data Management as a Student Success Tool

Programs can make great use of their existing data-tracking systems to monitor student progress and make program adjustments that will help more students succeed. For example, the Detroit Promise Path success coaches are responsible for tracking all student interactions (for example, coaching appointments, phone calls, texts, etc.), which helps the coaches manage relationships with students and better tailor communications to students' needs. MDRC also worked with other CPSI programs to create a reporting dashboard template that allows program staff members to carefully monitor students' participation and academic progress.

Lessons Learned

College Promise programs exist to reduce the cost of college and increase student access and success; the primary goal is to serve students. But within the context of supporting students, there are budget limitations. The College Promise Campaign's work on Financial Sustainability has shown that many programs across the nation assemble resources from multiple stakeholders, and often rely on in-kind contributions. The lessons learned from CPSI about communicating, about student advising, and about using data can allow College Promise programs to make more efficient use of the resources they have available.

The first year of a Promise program can be especially challenging. Programs usually have lean staffs and limited budgets when they launch. A lean team can produce an outsized impact, however, if it automates text messages and identifies non-Promise college faculty and staff members who are knowledgeable about Promise requirements and can help students. Implementing a pilot program can also be a good way to track and evaluate the Promise program on a small scale.

The Detroit Promise Path is a great example of a program that was first a pilot with added research components. That initial design eventually made it possible to expand the program regionally to all community colleges in Detroit.

While the College Promise movement is young, it has considerable momentum. Early results from local and statewide Promise programs and academic research have found that the message of "free college" brings students to college, many from diverse first-generation backgrounds. But Promise programs aren't just about access, they are also about the promise of earning a postsecondary credential and degree.

Students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds complete college at rates far below their wealthier peers. Often, these students do not have adults to help them navigate the complex college application, enrollment, and financial aid processes, which makes the student support services — student advising, coaching, and communication — offered by Promise programs essential to decreasing equity gaps in postsecondary attainment rates.

Conclusion

Embedding student support services in the early stages of a College Promise program is crucial to student success, and rigorous research has shown that these efforts are worthwhile. With the Detroit Promise Path, extra student services led to increases in full-time enrollment and credit accumulation. These results show how important it is for leaders to be thoughtful when designing and implementing a College Promise program, to maximize the program's impact on eligible students. Resources such as MDRC's brief and the College Promise Campaign's City and County Playbook are helping the field make headway on the national challenge to increase student success.

About the Authors



MDRC's College Promise Success Initiative provides technical assistance to College Promise and Free College programs interested in promoting success in college by implementing evidence-based student support practices. Through this initiative, MDRC is disseminating best practices and tools to the 300-plus College Promise and Free College programs that exist across the country. [Learn more here.](#)

The College Promise Campaign is a national, nonpartisan initiative to build broad public support for accessible, affordable, quality College Promise programs that enable hardworking students to complete a college degree or certificate, starting in America's community colleges.

The Campaign empowers community college and their education, business, government and philanthropic partners to enact solutions for students to graduate from college, advance in the workforce, further their education, and build rewarding lives in our nation's communities and states. [Learn more here.](#)