

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Strengthening the Cornerstones of College Promise Programs for the Decade Ahead

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Introduction

As College Promise enters a second decade, much has been accomplished. A decade ago, there were 53 regional Promise Programs and only one statewide Program. Today, there are more than 450 Promise Programs in all 50 states, including 38 that are statewide, a growth rate exceeding 730 percent.

During this time, the College Promise Movement has evolved in scope to not only include a focus on postsecondary access, but also, degree completion of students, and upon completion, ensuring students have career opportunities, and increasingly, the capacity to ensure Program sustainability for the future.

The past decade has also brought a tremendous amount of research conducted by academics, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers (College Promise, 2020; Miller-Adams, 2021). This brief aims to distill many of the scholarly research over the past decade and offer insights into the four cornerstones of College Promise: access, completion, opportunity, and sustainability in an effort to provide greater clarity for Promise Programs and policymakers on how to foster and maintain Promise Programs for the future.

Figure 1 - Cornerstones of College Promise Programs



Access

As of the most recent College Promise Census date, there were 441 Promise Programs. As part of the publicly available MyPromiseTool, College Promise measures four broad funding categories of Promise Programs: (1) First Dollar Plus, (2) First Dollar, (3) Last Dollar Plus, and (4) Last Dollar. First and last dollar refer to the funding commitment, often from the external stakeholder. A First Dollar Program means that the external funds are applied to a student's tuition bill before any federal, state, or grant aid is applied. Essentially, with a First Dollar Program, the funder is ensuring postsecondary access before any additional aid available to the student is explored. In contrast, a Last Dollar Program means that the amount of aid available to a student is awarded after federal aid, public funding, and on occasion, grants are also taken into account. The Plus designation means whether or not a student can use the aid for educational expenditures other than tuition. For example, in a First Dollar Plus Promise Program, the external funds are applied first for tuition, and if any money awarded exceeds the cost of tuition, then the remaining balance may be used for other education expenditures such as fees, books, food, or transportation.

In our conversations with policymakers, many believe that nearly all Promise Programs are last dollar. This is not the case. Table 1 presents data on the funding source for College Promise Programs. About 60 percent of Promise Programs are last dollar, followed by Last Dollar Plus (22 percent) and First Dollar (13 percent). Many also believe that Promise Program funding is binary: a Program is either First Dollar or Last Dollar. Many Last Dollar programs should conduct an analysis to determine how much it would cost to expand coverage for fees, books, and/or other essentials students may need. In some instances, the additional cost per student for student fees would be less than \$500. Where it may be more, a gradual allocation toward full coverage would be welcomed by nearly all students. For example, if a state or municipality could only appropriate \$300 per student in a budgetary cycle, and fees were \$400, that would still substantially aid Promise students who are often most in need. In subsequent budget cycles, the unmet need could be sufficiently resolved.

Table 1 - College Promise Programs by Funding Source, United States, 2024

Funding Source	Number	Percentage
First Dollar Plus	2	0.5%
First Dollar	60	13.6%
Last Dollar Plus	101	22.9%
Last Dollar	268	60.8%
Unknown/Not Available	10	2.2%
TOTAL	441	100.0%

Completion

A decade ago, many academics, policymakers, and higher education professionals were skeptical that free college would improve higher education. They reasoned that since Promise Programs were likely to be disproportionately low-income and first-generation, providing access to these groups would only decrease institutional retention rates. Skeptics also noted that while Promise students may have less debt, their failure would certainly not help them in their careers. Central to their reasoning were the assumptions that Promise Programs would not help their students, nor would institutions of higher education as at the time, many four-year institutions graduated students in six, not four years, and most community colleges did not graduate most of their students.

Several studies have found that College Promise students outperform their non-Promise peers. Recently, the City University of New York Accelerate Complete Engage (CUNY ACE) program sought to address tuition, fees, and basic challenges students may face, such as course scheduling, transportation, and child care. By addressing these challenges systematically, and in one of the most rigorous studies to date, CUNY ACE students outperformed their peers by 17 percent in terms of graduation (59 percent to 42 percent), and the effects held for all race and gender groups. The effects were most significant for Black CUNY ACE students (+22 percent), Hispanic students (+19 percent), and men (+19 percent) (CUNY ACE, 2024).

In Hawai'i, a statewide Promise Program designed for those most in need of financial assistance, researchers have found that students of the statewide program (1) earn more credits than non-Hawai'i Promise students, (2) had higher passing rates, (3) are more likely to enroll full-time, and (4) have a higher retention rate than the comparable national average. Perhaps most encouraging: Hawai'i Promise students had higher graduation rates than their non-Hawai'i Promise peers (University of Hawai'i System, 2024).

While national data on College Promise Programs remains elusive, recent research (Hyder, 2024) utilizing a staggered difference-in-difference approach found that nationally, Promise Programs do increase the number of awards produced at an institution of higher education. This effect is due to the presence of Promise students at the institution, and Promise Programs often fulfill their goal of increasing the number of educated workers in those regional labor markets.

Taken together, these three recent studies offer two important lessons for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. First, there is a growing body of research utilizing either statewide population data of Promise students, or studies with rigorous methodological approaches to conclude that while Promise students may have the greatest financial need, they can do as well or better than other students at the college or university they attend.

Second, it is crucial to underscore the importance of providing supports for students, which can positively impact their educational outcomes. Table 2 presents data on some of the selected supports (in alphabetical order) tracked by College Promise among the 441 Programs nationally. While much has been accomplished over the past decade, much work remains to provide all students the full complement of supports that have been shown to aid in student success. While it is encouraging to see that over one-quarter of Promise Programs offer their students Counseling Services, and nearly as many offer textbook support (24 percent), the amount of services provided to many Promise Program students remains low.

Promise practitioners, policymakers, and higher education professionals can collaborate to better align the supports that students are entitled to or have access to, even if they might not be currently aware of them. Recently, the statewide Promise Program in Washington was able to secure funding to ensure that starting in 2026, any low-income student that is part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will receive free college (Krupnik, 2024; Washington Student Achievement Council, 2024). Many institutions offer valuable resources such as career services, child care, and food assistance through food pantries. However, there is an opportunity to better align these resources with Promise Programs for enhanced support and effectiveness.

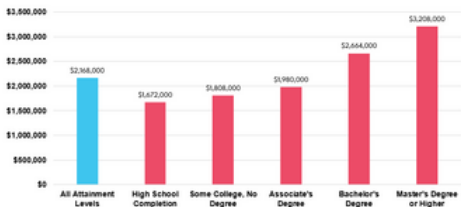
Table 2 - Selected Promise Program Supports, United States, 2024

Data	Number	Percentage (Yes)
Career Services	77	18%
Child Care	9	2%
Counseling Services	113	26%
Financial Education	29	7%
Food Assistance	34	8%
Housing Support	28	6%
Internship Opportunities	17	4%
Textbooks	105	24%
Transportation Support	37	8%
TOTAL	441	100%

Opportunity

College graduation is among the best predictors of economic opportunity and future earnings in the United States, and a college degree offers a higher return on investment than average stock market returns (Zhang et al., 2024). Figure 2 presents the estimated lifetime median annual earnings by educational attainment in the United States for 2022, the year for which the most recent data are available (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Figure 2 - Lifetime Earnings by Educational Attainment, United States, 2022



College completion is essential for Promise Programs, as many students are from low-income households where a college degree can be central to future economic opportunity. However, it is not just students that benefit from the investment in College Promise Programs. A recent study in Arizona found that a 20 percent expansion in enrollment across the state would generate an additional \$5.09 billion in social gains (i.e., gains related to earnings, health, welfare, and workforce productivity), while a ten-person increase in completion would generate an extra \$1.37 billion per cohort, a potentially massive return against the current outlay for the Arizona Promise (Belfield et al., 2023).

State investments in Promise Programs have related benefits that are central to the long-term viability of the United States economy. Utilizing data from the New York Federal Reserve, researchers found that increased state appropriations are positively associated with long-term economic effects. Specifically, state support increased the likelihood that students would later have higher credit scores, own a car, and own a home, all substantial milestones for economic opportunity and advancement (Chakrabarti et al., 2022).

Benefits also accrue to regions. While a recent economic impact study of the Alamo Colleges did not disaggregate Promise Program students, the broader returns of students are fairly robust regionally. For every dollar invested in a student's education, taxpayers receive \$3.70 through added tax revenue and public sector savings. Similarly, for every dollar invested in a student's education, \$7 is returned to the community, and the statewide return amounts to \$22.40 through the initial investment in college students (Alamo Colleges, 2024).

The incredible returns on educational investments of college attainment and Promise Programs in particular merit further consideration in regional and statewide planning. One recent higher education administrator noted that by demonstrating the economic benefits and returns of students in his state, the state legislature provided a higher rate of appropriations than at any point in recent history. Legislators explained to him previously they invested because it "was probably the right thing to do," but by demonstrating the return made on the investment, then policymakers felt more comfortable in expanding their education appropriations. For many Promise Program practitioners who began their career focusing on access, it may be instructive to develop a strategy and story to demonstrate economic returns, as that is often the focus of policymakers.

While there is an emerging body of evidence to support the alignment between Promise Programs and career opportunities, additional initiatives can help to better prepare Promise Programs students for economic opportunities upon graduation.

Table 3 - Promise Supports to Advance Economic Opportunity, United States, 2024

Data	Number	Percentage (Yes)
Mentoring Support	81	18%
Career Services	77	18%
Internship Opportunities	17	4%
Apprenticeship Opportunities	11	2%
TOTAL	441	100%

Table 3 presents the most recent data on Promise Program supports to advance economic opportunity. Nearly one-fifth of Promise Programs offer mentoring and career services support, but more work can be done to better align internship and apprenticeship opportunities for Promise Program students. At present, there are more than 700 two-year institutions aligned with College Promise Programs, yet less than a dozen Promise Programs offer apprenticeship opportunities. While the number of Promise Programs offering internship opportunities is slightly higher at 17, this number pales in comparison to the access provided: the 441 Promise Programs in these data are aligned to more than 1,750 institutions of higher education. Although the college degree and the associated skills matter a great deal to employers, an internship or apprenticeship matters a great deal to hiring managers, an important first stakeholder on the path to early career opportunity. When surveyed, the three most important skills and experiences that increase an employer's likelihood of hiring a college student are whether they: (1) held a job or work-study position (71 percent), (2) completed an internship or apprenticeship (70 percent), (3) held a leadership role (69 percent) (Finley, 2023).

Sustainability

This brief reaffirms the importance of access, completion, and opportunity, for Promise Program students as well as the potential benefits to employers, communities, and states. A final cornerstone for Promise Programs is sustainability. Without adequate attention to the maintenance and support of the Promise Program, challenges to sustainability could emerge. College Promise has undertaken research to understand what factors comprise and can ensure Program sustainability. These areas include (1) Program Design/Delivery, (2) Program Administration, (3) Marketing/Storytelling, (4) Research and Evaluation, (5) Continuous Improvement. Table 4 presents the area and key questions to address at each phase.

Table 4 - Key Areas and Questions to Address for Promise Program Sustainability

Area	Key Question(s)
Program Design/Delivery	What supports will our Promise Program (PP) provide? Next year?
Program Administration	Do we have the right personnel, facilities, funding for our PP?
Marketing/Storytelling	What are the stories we want to share about our PP? What audiences?
Research and Evaluation	What outcomes metrics will we track for our PP? For PP students?
Continuous Improvement	How can our PP improve? How can our PP endure?

Ultimately, the long-term sustainability of a Promise Program is not determined by a single factor but rather by the intersection of these five areas that, when aligned, offer a clear articulation of what is offered to students, by whom, with a powerful story, that can be supported by research and evidence, with the aim of improving each successive year.

Among the most common questions College Promise staff are asked by policymakers and practitioners is the question, "How do you recommend we administer our Promise Program?" College Promise is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, and our aim is not to engage in advocacy but rather to highlight how other successful programs are administered in the hope that it may help practitioners and policymakers find the structure that works best for their Promise Program. Although there are Promise Programs in all 50 states, there is no one singular administrative model for Promise Programs. Instead, Promise Programs have evolved administratively given the source of their funding, the type of Program design, and perhaps most importantly, what structure

makes sense to Promise practitioners and the students they serve. This model of working with stakeholders to determine the best way to deploy resources for the greatest positive impact on students is partly illustrative of how and why Promise Programs have flourished over the past decade.

As College Promise Programs enter their second decade, it will be increasingly important to think deliberatively about Program design, provide adequate training and support, consider how to tell the story of each Program, and share evidence and best practices. Without proper focus on sustainability, gains from the prior decade may be lost, imperiling college access, attainment, and economic opportunities for future cohorts. However, with adequate focus on sustainability, access, completion, and opportunity, Promise Programs could be one of the brightest areas of growth in education.

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