

# College Promise Movement: Learnings, Insights, and Forecast for the Future

Fall 2025



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

College Promise is a nationwide, nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to making higher education more accessible and affordable for students throughout the United States. Since 2015, the College Promise movement has expanded from 53 local programs to over 450 initiatives in all 50 states, affecting more than 1,700 colleges and universities. This swift growth demonstrates a nationwide commitment to increasing educational access, reducing opportunity gaps, and preparing students for careers that provide family-sustaining wages.

## Key Learnings and Trends

- **Promise Programs are Evolving:** They once mainly offered tuition assistance to improve access to higher education. Now, they focus on credential completion, workforce alignment, and economic mobility, helping students move smoothly from education to employment.
- **Wraparound Supports Promote Degree Completion:** Academic advising, mentoring, and basic needs assistance are essential for supporting underserved students, particularly those who are first-generation, low-income, or working adults.
- **States Are Leading the Way:** Thirty-eight states have established statewide Promise programs with Louisiana and Massachusetts as notable examples of recent, forward-looking policy innovations. As policymakers and staff explored new approaches, they drew upon a range of sources—including the College Promise Playbook, which has previously guided numerous other communities to start or refine programs. Massachusetts state legislators and Governor Healey enacted linked reforms to align postsecondary access with workforce needs in a manner that directly benefits students and employers across the Commonwealth. Additionally, College Promise has partnered with leaders in nine states to advance the adoption, expansion, and long-term sustainability of Promise programs. These partnerships help states translate research and best practices into actionable strategies—ensuring that Promise policies remain responsive, equitable, and aligned with the evolving needs of students and employers.
- **Gender and Racial Gaps Need Urgent Action:** Young men—especially men of color and student fathers—face systemic barriers to accessing and completing postsecondary education. College Promise is investing in research and technical assistance to support Promise programs that serve these students.
- **Storytelling Strengthens the Movement:** Strategic storytelling has become a powerful tool for linking data with human impact, influencing policy, and boosting community support.



## Promise Program Challenges

- **Sustainability:** Many Promise programs depend on private, public, and philanthropic funding. Achieving long-term viability requires diverse revenue streams, employer collaborations, and public investments.
- **Workforce Alignment:** Promise programs must intentionally align with labor market demands to ensure students earn valuable credentials.
- **Promise Program Management Capacity:** Local Promise programs often operate with limited resources, making it difficult to scale, evaluate, or communicate their work effectively.

## Strategic Recommendations

1. **Align Promise Student Pathways with Workforce Needs:** Embed career counseling, apprenticeships, and stackable credentials into Promise program design.
2. **Advance Equity for Underserved Populations:** Customize outreach and support for men of color, parenting students, and opportunity youth.
3. **Invest in Sustainability and Infrastructure:** Provide local Promise program teams with tools, training, evaluation resources, and fundraising support.
4. **Strengthen Policy and Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Institutionalize Promise programs within state education and workforce strategies.

## Looking Ahead

The next chapter of the Promise movement will focus on career acceleration, equity, and long-term impact. College Promise is building the infrastructure, partnerships, and policy support to ensure every student can access an affordable education, earn credentials of value, and secure meaningful employment. Through continued collaboration with states, institutions, funders, and local leaders, the movement will meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy—equipping the next generation with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities they need to thrive.



Attendees and Participants at the "Decade of Promise: College Promise and Hope Chicago" convening in Chicago, IL, April 29, 2025

# INTRODUCTION: ADVANCING ACCESS, EQUITY, AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Since its founding in 2015, College Promise has grown from a bold idea to a national movement, now supporting more than 450 Promise programs across all 50 states. These initiatives eliminate financial barriers and build student support systems to promote equitable access to higher education and economic mobility. From technical assistance and strategic advising to convenings and policy leadership, College Promise has helped shape the education and workforce alignment critical for America's future.

## What Promise Programs Do

Promise programs are regional and statewide initiatives that eliminate financial barriers to higher education by providing high-need, high-potential students with funding and comprehensive support services (e.g., academic advising, career counseling, and mentoring). By working closely with states, local governments, and institutions, Promise programs play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting upward mobility. They align education and workforce systems to expand access to postsecondary credentials and career pathways that lead to family-sustaining wages and long-term economic opportunity.

## A Growing Movement with Expanding Impact

In the past decade, Promise programs have rapidly expanded from just 53 programs to more than 450 today—a 750 percent increase that has transformed College Promise into a national movement reaching all 50 states. While rooted in the mission of increasing access to higher education, the College Promise movement has evolved to focus more intentionally on advancing career outcomes, building wealth, and improving both economic and social mobility for low-income students and their families. Through targeted supports, innovative tools, and events like our annual Careers Institute, which began in 2020, College Promise has strengthened its commitment to aligning postsecondary pathways with the workforce, ensuring students not only attend college but also complete their education and transition into meaningful, family-sustaining careers.

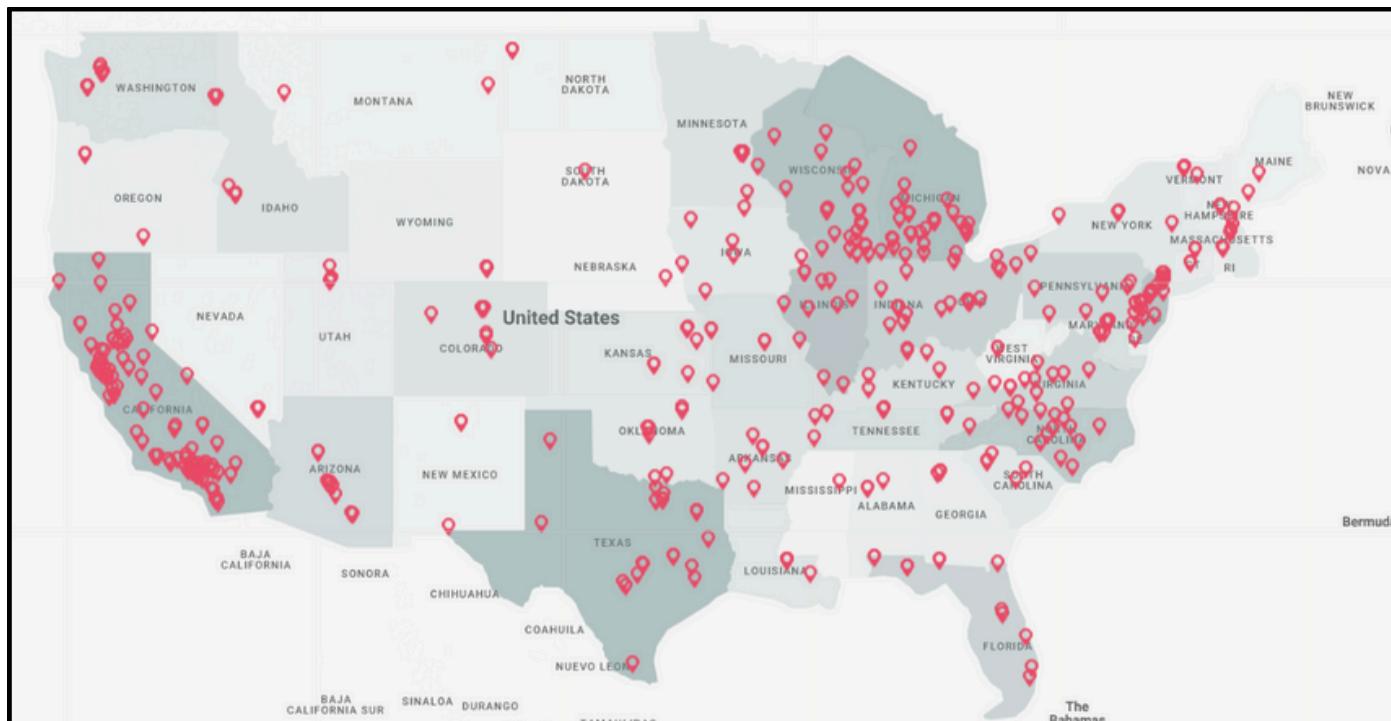


Hope Chicago Graduate and Michele Howard, Chief Program Officer, College Promise 10th Anniversary Celebration October 20, 2025.



## Our Impact Summary:

- **Technical Assistance:** We collaborate with governors and states to enhance the quality and quantity of statewide Promise programs, and partner with regional philanthropy and nonprofits to expand the number and reach of place-based Promise programs.
- **Program Support:** We provided strategic support (policy advice, research help, and stakeholder guidance) to 60% of the 38 statewide programs.
- **Research and Development Assistance:** We provided specialized assistance to enhance Promise programs through research, policy development, and the design of practical procedures. We have produced nine reports, 13 implementation guides, and 42 policy briefs.
- **MyPromise Digital Tool:** We created the leading dataset that includes every recognized Promise program, documenting available student supports and institutional alignments.



Visit the MyPromise Digital Tool at [www.mypromisetool.org](http://www.mypromisetool.org).

## College Promise delivers its mission by:

- Influencing policy at local, state, and federal levels through advisory committees, model policy design, and the development of reports to advance social and economic mobility.
- Researching and advocating for training and credentials of value, while delivering insights to key student populations to advance social and economic mobility.
- Connecting students to educational opportunities through the MyPromise Tool, which aids students in finding Promise programs that may cover tuition, fees, and related college costs, along with other student supports to advance social and economic mobility.
- Providing technical assistance and developing digital tools that empower learners and practitioners to identify and navigate college and career pathways to advance social and economic mobility.
- Promoting evidence-based research and identifying high-impact practices for communities and states to implement, thereby increasing the quality and quantity of Promise programs nationwide to advance social and economic mobility.



Top: (L-R) Catherine Millett, Cameron Hardamon, Brian Barney, Norma Mejia, Yesenia Olivera, Jedianis Mercado sharing Hope Chicago's Two-Generation Model, April 29, 2025

Left: Chancellor Mike Flores welcoming College Promise to the Alamo Colleges District, May 28, 2025

Right: Students sharing their experiences at the Student Parent Convening, May 29, 2025

# KEY TRENDS IN THE PROMISE MOVEMENT

## 1. From Access to Outcomes: Credential & Career Alignment

Promise programs have evolved beyond tuition coverage to focus on **career acceleration, credential attainment, and aligning with the labor market**. Programs are increasingly:

- Embedding **career counseling** and workforce connections.
- Investing in **credential pathways** tied to regional economic needs.
- Leveraging **wraparound supports** to promote completion and post-graduation success.

## 2. State Leadership and Local Adaptation

The most effective programs are driven by **state and local partnerships**, grounded in political will and informed by local economic and demographic realities. Statewide Promise programs are now active in **38 states**, with recent adoption in **Massachusetts**.

**Minnesota, New Mexico, and Michigan** stand out as leaders, demonstrating how sustained commitment at the state level can build robust, widely accessible programs that adapt to community needs and expand educational opportunity. In addition to enacting the North Star Promise—the new statewide tuition-free program for Minnesota—state legislators and Governor Walz approved a requirement that every postsecondary institution designate a student parent liaison. This policy responds directly to the needs of student parents, who now represent more than one-in-five college students nationwide. By expanding affordability and embedding supports for a key and growing student population, Minnesota is aligning postsecondary access with workforce development, strengthening its talent pipeline, and ensuring that more residents can participate fully in the state's economic future.



Rathi Sudhakara of the Washington Student Achievement Council shares her insights on AI and the workforce, College Promise Careers Institute, October 21, 2025

### 3. Holistic Student Supports

Programs are increasingly integrating **academic advising, mental health resources, basic needs support**, and mentoring. These supports are essential for the success of **first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students**—especially in community colleges.

### 4. Equity-Driven Innovation

There is growing recognition of the need to **tailor Promise programs** for underserved populations, including **young men of color, fathers, and working adults**. These populations face structural barriers that require culturally relevant outreach and support strategies.

### 5. Storytelling and Public Engagement

The Promise movement is elevating **storytelling** to make its case to the public and policymakers. Initiatives, such as workshops led by Terry Szuplat, a former White House speechwriter, have equipped Promise leaders to communicate their program's impact better and share student success stories. These workshops were conducted at national meetings in Arizona and Massachusetts, as well as during a site visit in Hawaii.



Terry Szuplat, Presidential speechwriter and author of "Say It Well" shares his insights on the power of narrative and storytelling with the Hawai'i Promise and University of Hawai'i System leaders, October 15, 2024.

# PERSISTENT AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

## 1. Sustainability and Long-Term Funding

Many programs face uncertainty in funding beyond initial philanthropic or public investments. Without sustainable revenue streams and public-private partnerships, **long-term viability** is at risk.

## 2. Return on Investment (ROI) Scrutiny

Increased perception of the declining value of higher education has created pressure for Promise programs to **demonstrate outcomes**—particularly around **graduation, job placement, and economically sustainable employment**.

## 3. Gender Gaps in Postsecondary Enrollment

A sharp decline in enrollment and completion among **men, particularly Black, Latino, and Native men**, has become an urgent issue. Addressing these gaps will require **intentional programming, targeted data collection, and the development of new support models**.

## 4. Capacity and Management Strain

Lean Promise program teams manage numerous **local programs** with insufficient resources for **evaluation, data systems, and communications**. This limits their ability to grow, secure funding, or scale impact.



(L-R) Jericho Doherty, Saul Valdez, Rosye Cloud, Rodell Asher listen as Wesley Wells, Vice President at St. Philips College shares insights on best practices for support males and student fathers, Student Parent Convening, San Antonio, May 29, 2025.



# KEY LEARNINGS FROM 2024 CONVENINGS

## A. Phoenix, AZ (June 2024)

**Focus:** Workforce alignment, collective impact, regional collaboration

**Key Takeaway:** Local business and education sectors must coordinate to build a strong **talent pipeline**, especially in advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and clean energy.

**Quote:** "We're not just training students for jobs—we're helping them build careers and wealth." – Stakeholder at Phoenix convening



Krissy DeAlejandro, President and CEO, tnAchieves, and Stephanie Rodriguez, Secretary, NM Higher Education Department, New Mexico Promise

## B. Boston, MA (August 2024)

**Focus:** Multi-generational support, policy momentum, storytelling



Participants at the Boston Convening, August 14, 2024.

**Key Takeaway:** Wraparound supports and narrative change are **powerful levers** for building trust and expanding impact. Massachusetts emerged as a **model for statewide momentum**.

**Milestone:** Celebrated the 10th anniversary of **Tennessee Promise**; welcomed **Massachusetts as the 37th** statewide program.

## C. Riverside, CA (October 2024)

**Focus:** Holistic program design, labor market outcomes, opportunity populations

**Key Takeaway:** Holistic supports improve student persistence and reinforce community-wide ROI. Convening highlighted **student-centered design** as a driving force behind Promise success.

Following this series of convenings, College Promise published three policy briefs, summarizing featured topics:

- [A Decade of Promise: Expanding Access, Completion, and Opportunity](#)
- [Advancing In-Demand Skills to Address Cost-Value Challenges of Higher Education](#)
- [Strengthening the Cornerstones of College Promise Programs for the Decade Ahead](#)



# STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

## 1. Deepen Workforce Integration

Promise programs must expand partnerships with employers, workforce boards, and sector-based training providers to align with local labor market needs. Programs should:

- Embed **career pathways** into Promise eligibility and supports.
- Provide **support toward multiple secondary pathways including 2- and 4-year degrees, certificates, trades programs, and other credentials** that meet workforce demands.
- Leverage **registered apprenticeships**, stackable credentials, and internships.

## 2. Scale Equity-Driven Strategies

To better serve opportunity populations, especially **fathers and men of color**, College Promise recommends:

- Expanding **culturally responsive advising and mentoring**.
- Piloting initiatives to support student-parents.
- Funding **research and interventions** to close gender and racial gaps.

## 3. Invest in Capacity and Sustainability

Local programs need technical assistance in:

- **Fundraising** and developing public-private partnerships.
- Implementing **data tracking and evaluation tools**.
- **Communicating** Promise program's **ROI** to stakeholders.

## 4. Enhance Policy Infrastructure

States should embed Promise into broader systems reform by:

- Connecting Promise with **state higher education attainment goals**.
- Aligning funding with **economic development** strategies.
- Institutionalizing Promise programs within state agencies to ensure long-term support.

# FORECAST: THE FUTURE OF THE PROMISE MOVEMENT

Over the next decade, the Promise movement will continue to evolve from a tuition-focused initiative to a **comprehensive vehicle for social and economic mobility**. Key projections include:

- **Increased federal and state investments** to scale proven Promise models.
- **Wider adoption of cross-sector partnerships** that blend education, workforce, and economic development.
- **New digital tools and platforms** to expand student access, including enhanced versions of the **MyPromise Tool**.
- Greater use of **longitudinal data and ROI metrics** to guide funding and program design.
- Expansion of Promise programs to **non-traditional learners**, including working adults, returning citizens, and military-connected students.

## STRATEGIC STATE ENGAGEMENT

To catalyze state-level transformation, College Promise is advancing a **targeted state strategy** to support economic mobility, especially among men. States of focus include:

- **Louisiana, Texas, and New Mexico** – Promise trailblazers with robust programs and policy innovation.
- **Massachusetts and Washington** – Emerging models with strong momentum.
- **Louisiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, and North Carolina** – Key opportunities for Promise expansion and cross-sector engagement.

Through **advocacy, technical assistance, and capacity building**, College Promise aims to help these states deepen their Promise infrastructure and close opportunity gaps.



Former NFL players and Palo Alto College Student Athletes at the 2025 Careers Institute, October 21, 2025.

# CONCLUSION: THE NEXT CHAPTER OF PROMISE

The Promise movement stands at a pivotal moment. As national attention shifts toward **skills, credentials, and career acceleration**, College Promise is committed to leading with innovation, equity, and impact. With stronger cross-sector partnerships, a refined policy agenda, and renewed investment in underserved populations, we are building a future where **every student—regardless of background—can access an affordable, high-quality education** and thrive in the workforce.

By continuing to **listen, adapt, and lead**, College Promise will ensure the next decade of the movement delivers not only access—but **achievement and advancement** for all.



Participants from the Student Parent Convening, May 28, 2025.