

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Aligning Education and the Workforce for Promise Programs

BY: JOHN BARNSHAW, SENIOR LEADER, RESEARCH AND POLICY, COLLEGE PROMISE

Overview

College students are frequently encouraged to “follow their passion” when selecting majors, often prioritizing personal interests over labor market outcomes. National data show that far more students choose fields of study based on interest than on career prospects or earnings potential, despite strong evidence that perceived career and economic value is higher when education is closely aligned with jobs. This disconnect can be especially consequential for low-income and first-generation students, who may have less access to timely career guidance and labor market information. Promise programs—given their early engagement with students, trusted relationships, and position at the intersection of education, community, and employers—are uniquely suited to address this gap.

This brief explores how Promise programs are supporting students to completion, providing career guidance, and often integrating labor market insights early in the student experience. Drawing on three case studies from the eastern, central, and western United States, Promise programs aid students by (1) engaging students early, (2) intentionally connecting academic pathways to in-demand skills, and (3) anticipating students’ needs through proactive career exploration, employer partnerships, and structured workforce preparation.

These varied but complementary strategies underscore how early exposure to high-wage, high-demand fields; embedding career services at the start of college; teaching students to translate academic learning into workforce-relevant skills; and providing priority access to internships and professional networks can improve outcomes for students. Together, these approaches demonstrate how Promise programs can help students connect interests with economically prosperous career pathways, articulate their value to employers, and contribute to regional economic mobility. As Promise programs continue to expand nationwide, aligning education with the workforce will be central to transforming access initiatives into sustainable bridges toward long-term success for students and communities.

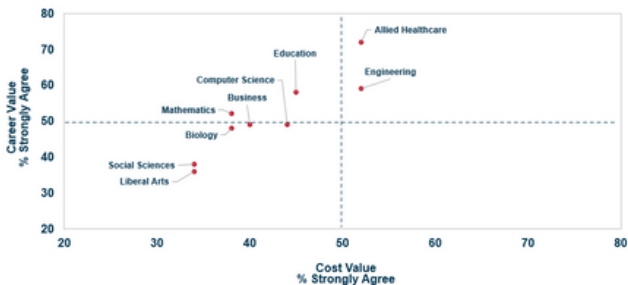
Introduction

College students receive countless messages about “following your passion” or “do what you love” ([Stebbleton, 2019](#)). Often, students internalize these messages, selecting a major that closely aligns with their personal interests rather than career outcomes. More than four-in-ten (43%) students select their majors based on “personal passion or interest,” compared to just 17% who prioritize career prospects and 13% who focus on salary ([Carlton, 2024](#)). Similarly, the National Survey of Student Engagement ([201224](#)) found that while 89% of seniors emphasized the importance of academic interest and fit, fewer seniors considered career mobility (59%), job availability (55%) or salary potential (52%) as important factors.

The tendency to focus on “following your passion” creates a disconnect between what students value when choosing majors and the realities of the labor market. The [Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Value Survey](#) (2019) found that American adults, including alumni aged 18-65, on average, saw greater career and cost value in their education if their majors were closely connected to jobs. As Figure 1 indicates, occupations like Healthcare, Engineering, and Education are closely associated with education being both worth the cost and providing strong career value. Other majors, such as Social Sciences and Liberal Arts and Sciences, were associated with significantly less career and cost value. Essentially, Americans feel that their education was worth the cost if they are able to see how it directly advanced their careers. However, when it is time for students (typically freshmen and sophomores) to choose their majors in college, job opportunities and salary are not the main criteria that they use to make their decisions.

Figure 1 - Selected Occupations and the Perception of Career and Cost Value by Respondents, United States, 2021

Selected Occupations by Salaries, Projected Size, and Percent Change, 2022 - 2032



While personal fulfillment is important, not all majors provide abundant or financially sustainable opportunities. Unfortunately, by the time many students realize the limited prospects of their chosen major, it is often too late to change paths.

The early years of college are critical for students. Students must understand that their choices carry long-term consequences for economic opportunity. While higher education encourages exploration and provides a wealth of academic options, Promise programs can play a vital role in helping students connect their passions with viable career pathways. When students are equipped with timely labor market insights, they are better positioned to make choices that serve their futures in sustainable and meaningful ways.

The Value of Providing Labor Market Insights through Promise Programs

Many students need clear, accessible information about the labor market to make informed choices during college. A lack of knowledge of in-demand careers and the best majors to study to gain access to those occupations is particularly acute for low-income students who may be less likely to have a parent attend college ([Sawhill, 2013](#)). Promise programs are uniquely positioned to provide this guidance early, helping students understand the opportunities tied to their educational and career decisions.

Addressing Gaps in Career Services Support

While career centers exist on nearly every college campus, they are often underutilized. In 2024, over 71% of undergraduates visited their career center only once or not at all, making it difficult to deliver comprehensive career support to students ([National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024](#)). Faculty—who often serve as students' closest mentors—face similar challenges. Nearly all faculty (92%) report being approached by students for career advice, yet only 64% feel confident guiding students on career pathways outside academia ([Gatta et al., 2024](#)). Although students may have access to faculty and career centers, these resources are either underutilized or insufficiently equipped to provide robust labor market support.

Promise Programs: Positioned to Lead

Since Promise programs often begin working with students prior to the start of their college enrollment, often by helping them complete the FAFSA, their early entrance into the college student journey offers a great opportunity to fill this gap left by career services and faculty. For students, Promise programs serve as a trusted partner who can provide practical, real-world guidance alongside financial and academic support. For institutions of higher education, Promise programs bring an external perspective on the importance of aligning academic offerings with workforce needs. Since many Promise programs have influential community members, often members of the largest employers in a community or region, Promise programs can act as intermediaries that help cultivate talent pipelines between colleges and employers.

Since Promise programs operate at the intersection of students, higher education, and employers, they are a natural partner in the education-to-workforce landscape—helping all parties align around labor market opportunities.

Expanding Beyond Access to Completion and Careers

The past decade has seen a more than 700% increase in Promise programs. Today, the more than 450 Promise programs have succeeded in expanding access to higher education for millions of students nationwide. However, access to higher education guarantees student completion or early career success in the labor market. Today's labor market is rapidly shifting toward a knowledge-based economy, where students' choices about majors, skills, and networks carry increasing weight. To prepare students for these realities, Promise programs must integrate labor market information into their support models.

By equipping students with a deeper understanding of workforce trends, Promise programs can guide them toward educational paths that not only provide access to college but also open doors to economically prosperous careers. In so doing, Promise programs will evolve from gateways to higher education to bridges between education and economic mobility.

How Promise Programs are Aligning Education and the Workforce

The following section highlights three Promise programs in the eastern, central, and western United States that demonstrate how Promise programs align education with workforce needs. While these programs vary in structure and local context, they share several core strategies. Each engages students early in their academic journeys, intentionally demonstrates how educational pathways connect to in-demand workforce skills, and anticipates student needs through proactive supports. These supports include building employer partnerships in advance, offering intensive career-focused experiences such as "Blitz Week," and providing structured interventions like Second Year Success courses.

Lynchburg Beacon of Hope

Beacon of Hope, a Promise program based in Lynchburg, Virginia, engages students as early as sixth grade to prepare them for college and careers. Through their Career Centers and early college and career readiness efforts, the community has experienced a substantial increase in college enrollment through its partnership with more than 20

colleges and universities in the region.

Beacon of Hope offers a compelling model for aligning college attainment, skill development, and the workforce of the future. Beacon of Hope provides free college education to students pursuing frontier occupations in healthcare, nuclear technology, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing—equipping them with in-demand skills for future employment.

The early results are impressive: participating students see a projected 59% salary increase, equating to more than \$40,000 over their previous earnings (see Figure 2). This translates into a projected annual increase in taxable earnings of more than \$1 million to the Commonwealth of Virginia. Perhaps most importantly, graduating students stay and work in the Lynchburg region, earning a family-sustaining wage of \$52,000 annually.

Figure 2: Career Pathways Results for Lynchburg Beacon of Hope



This "Stay Close, Go Far" model has the potential to serve as a national blueprint. Nearly every state has rural or small urban regions where skilled talent leaves for larger metropolitan areas, leaving behind communities less equipped and prepared for tomorrow's economy. Beacon of Hope demonstrates how targeted educational investments can reverse this trend.

AlamoPROMISE

AlamoPROMISE emerged from the San Antonio, Texas region's recognition that financial barriers were preventing too many local students from accessing higher education. The program was officially launched in 2019, with the first cohort of scholars recruited in Fall 2019 and enrolling as AlamoPROMISE Scholars in Fall 2020. Since Fall 2020, the Alamo has steadily increased enrollment from more than 2,500 first-time college students to now, more than 6,500 students—an incredible 150% increase. As the program has expanded, leaders have not lost sight of the importance of retention, completion, and career readiness. The odds of a student enrolled in the AlamoPROMISE are about one-fifth greater (21 -27%) to be retained from one fall to the next, and 17 - 32% greater to graduate from Alamo Colleges than other students.

The focus is not only on college completion, but also on ensuring that the in-demand skills that are taught in the classroom are aligned with employers and the labor market. Like many colleges and universities, and the Promise programs aligned to those institutions, staff conduct labor market analyses, develop workforce boards, and discuss internships and jobs with prospective employers in the region. Alamo Colleges does this through their academic program review process. They ensure that all academic programs align with sustainable wages for graduates of the region, and, in many instances, that graduates can earn well above those of high school graduates for comparable jobs in the region. In addition, AlamoPROMISE and Alamo Colleges have built relationships with local business leaders to ensure that they are helping to deliver the in-demand skills employers require in the regional labor market.

However, what makes AlamoPROMISE and Alamo Colleges innovative in this space is their purposeful design of the student experience as career-focused, ensuring that students learn how the skills they learn in the classroom translate to the workforce.

San Antonio College President Francisco Solis stated that as part of their career-focused approach, career services plays a central role early in the student experience: “We are trying to connect students to the career center first. They have only heard from their friends or family that they want to be a ‘nurse.’ We are asking students, ‘Is there something else in a health institute you may be interested in because you have the skills for it? We are doing that to build skills.” President Solis and Alamo Colleges recognized that not all students were adequately discussing how the skills they were taught aligned with what employers sought.

To address this challenge, the Alamo Colleges create Blitz Week, which all AlamoPROMISE students participate in as part of their educational training. As President Solis describes, “Blitz week is talking about how your education aligns to the professional skills—critical thinking, communication, leadership—and listing those skills on the resume. This is important because today’s labor market is competitive, as they are often computer-read (through AI or Applicant Tracking Systems) and many employers don’t look at resumes.”

Los Angeles College Promise

The Los Angeles College Promise was established in 2016, with the first students entering the Los Angeles (California) Community College District in 2017. Since its inception, the Los Angeles Promise has served more than 30,000 students. The Los Angeles College Promise offers intentional career and major exploration throughout the program and has access to internships through many partners. All Los Angeles College Promise students are required to participate in a summer transition program prior to the start of their first semester. Students are often given the choice between a credit- or non-credit-bearing option and can participate either virtually or in person. The summer transition program introduces students to college resources, including career services, and includes major/career exploration activities integrated with the campus Guided Pathways frameworks.

Following the first spring semester, students who are taking summer classes participate in a Second Year Success workshop that includes career pathways preparation. The Second Year Success workshop explores how to write resumes and conduct professional interviews, provides general job search tips, and focuses on how students can distinguish themselves in the workplace. A well-curated professional persona signals self-awareness, professionalism, and career readiness. By intentionally aligning academic achievements with career goals—and strategically presenting them on social media and professional networking platforms—students can distinguish themselves in a competitive labor market. Ultimately, curating a professional persona is about crafting a coherent, authentic story that helps employers see a student not just as a candidate, but as a future colleague and contributor.



L-R Jessie Stewart, College Promise; Joanna Zimring-Towne and Deborah Harrington, LA Promise at the 2025 PromiseNet Conference



Dr. Mike Flores, Chancellor of Alamo Colleges District

Los Angeles College Promise students also have priority access to internship and career preparation job opportunities through a partnership with the City of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Mayor’s office, and various community partners. Previously, students have participated in the City of Los Angeles Pathways internship program, which hires students in a variety of city departments; the Early Childhood Education Student Advancement Program, which placed students in Spring or Summer internship within preschools and daycares; the AngelenoCorps program, which placed students in service-based internships and provided educational support (modeled after AmeriCorps); and most recently, the Alliance Sports Pathway Program. These opportunities have provided students with the opportunity to build professional skills, gain hands-on industry experience in their chosen career field, and create the social networks that are key to professional success.

Conclusion

Across these three case studies, Promise programs illustrate how intentional design, early engagement, and strong employer alignment can transform college access initiatives into powerful engines for workforce development and regional economic mobility. While Beacon of Hope, AlamoPROMISE, and the Los Angeles College Promise operate in very different geographic and institutional contexts, they share defining insights. First, effective alignment between education and the workforce begins early in the student experience, often well before students have a clear sense of their own career interests. Second, Promise programs are increasingly positioning students for success in ways students might not have anticipated themselves, by expanding access to internships, helping students articulate their skills, and creating clear pathways to succeed in the local economy.

Lynchburg Beacon of Hope demonstrates the power of early, proactive engagement by beginning career and college preparation as early as sixth grade. Many students at that age have limited exposure to emerging industries or high-wage technical fields, yet Beacon of Hope introduces them to both the career conversation and what steps are needed to accomplish career goals. By aligning free college tuition with regional workforce needs, the program not only prepares students academically but also helps them envision futures they may not have otherwise considered. The result is a model that benefits both students and the community: participants experience substantial projected wage gains, and graduates commit to staying and working in the Lynchburg region, strengthening the local economy rather than leaving it behind.

AlamoPROMISE similarly recognizes that many students arrive at college with only a vague or inherited understanding of careers—often shaped by family or peer influence rather than labor market realities. While the program removes financial barriers, its deeper innovation lies in intentionally reshaping how students engage with careers from the outset. Career services are positioned early in the student journey, prompting students to explore how their interests and skills align with a range of in-demand occupations, not just the most familiar ones. Through initiatives like Blitz Week, AlamoPROMISE helps students translate classroom learning into professional language, teaching them how to identify, name, and communicate transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, and leadership. This guidance equips students to navigate modern hiring processes and prepares them for careers they may not have initially envisioned.

The Los Angeles College Promise reinforces this anticipatory approach through structured, required career-focused experiences embedded throughout the program. Mandatory summer transition programs introduce students to career services and major exploration before their first semester, while subsequent workshops and internships help them build professional skills, industry experience, and networks. Partnerships with the City of Los Angeles and community organizations provide access to internships that many students would not independently secure, offering hands-on exposure to careers in public service, education, and emerging sectors. These experiences help students develop a professional identity and clarify career goals while still in college.

Together, these case studies underscore how Promise programs are evolving beyond access to become engines of career readiness and local economic development. By starting early and intentionally guiding students toward opportunities they may not have anticipated, Promise programs help students discover pathways, articulate their value, and commit to thriving in the communities they call home.

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