

# Promise Programs: Current Strength, Future Planning

WINTER 2026





## **Promise Programs: Current Strength, Future Planning**

College Promise

Winter 2026

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## Executive Summary: Promise Programs: Current Strength, Future Planning

**Overview:** Promise programs report strong financial health today (73% good/excellent) and maintain full commitment to students—zero programs have cut services. At the same time, leaders are responding to significant changes in the landscape: student basic needs concerns rose 24 points year-over-year, economic uncertainty increased 29 points, and mental health needs climbed 14 points. Programs are building capacity strategically to meet evolving demands.

**Study Overview:** 38 Promise programs across 21 states responded to College Promise's fall 2025 survey, examining program operations, student needs, and capacity-building priorities.

### Key Findings

**1. Student Needs Increasing, Programs Adapting.** Student challenges have intensified across multiple dimensions: basic needs concerns (up 24 points), financial pressures (up 18 points), and mental health needs (up 14 points). Programs are responding by expanding partnerships (60%) and securing additional funding (50%). Two-thirds have identified opportunities to strengthen student support services, reflecting ongoing commitment to program improvement.

**2. Efficient Operations, Strategic Investment Priorities.** Half of Promise programs operate with 1-3 FTE staff while maintaining comprehensive services. Financial position remains solid: 40% improved, 50% stable, with diversified funding from state sources (60%), private donors (55%), local government (31%), and federal programs (28%). Programs identify strategic priorities for enhanced effectiveness: communications capacity (79%), data systems, technology infrastructure, and staff professional development.

**3. Maintaining Commitments While Planning Strategically.** Programs express near-term confidence (80%+) while preparing for various scenarios. There are diverse perspectives on external factors, with some programs anticipating headwinds while others see opportunities. Regardless of outlook, all programs maintain their core student commitments.

### What Programs Need

Top priorities: (1) Data and evidence resources (30%), (2) Communications and advocacy capacity (30%), (3) Financial sustainability planning (22%), (4) Workforce development (22%), (5) Partnership strategies (22%), (6) Student support innovations (22%).

Barriers are primarily operational: limited capacity (65%), time constraints (51%), and program model diversity (54%). Effective support must be practical, flexible, and adaptable to local contexts.

### Path Forward

Promise programs have demonstrated sustainability and student focus. Investment in six key areas can strengthen their continued impact: (1) practical tools and resources for immediate use, (2) peer learning and knowledge-sharing networks, (3) capacity building in communications, data, and technology, (4), support for securing diverse funding sources, (5) financial planning and sustainability strategies and (6) workforce development and retention.

Promise programs serve students across diverse communities with efficiency and commitment. Supporting their strategic priorities enables them to meet growing needs and sustain impact for students pursuing educational opportunity.

## 1. Introduction

For more than a decade, College Promise has worked to support a movement built on bipartisan principles: opportunity should never depend on your ZIP code. When communities invest in education, they invest in their own future.

When College Promise was founded in 2015 to support and strengthen this emerging movement, 53 Promise programs were already serving students in their communities. Today, more than 450 programs operate across all 50 states—a 750% increase. This growth reflects hundreds of communities that have deliberately chosen to expand educational access through local investment.

Promise programs are not "free college." They are strategic community investments funded through partnerships among colleges and universities, government at multiple levels, philanthropic organizations, and local leaders who understand that education builds economic opportunity and community strength. Like any sound investment, Promise programs require sustainable funding, strategic planning, and ongoing commitment.

Programs also recognize that removing tuition barriers is necessary but not sufficient. Students need comprehensive support to succeed—including help with food security, stable housing, reliable transportation, and childcare. Promise programs increasingly address these basic needs alongside financial aid, creating pathways to completion rather than just access to enrollment.

The past five years have challenged both that commitment and funding models in unprecedented ways. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted enrollment and strained household budgets. The economic aftermath led to inflation, making it harder for families to cover costs that Promise programs usually don't cover—housing, food, transportation, and childcare. State and local budgets faced competing pressures, forcing tough decisions about funding priorities. These challenges highlighted a crucial fact: sustainable Promise programs need diversified funding, careful planning, and strong partnerships.

As 2025 has unfolded, College Promise has worked to understand how Promise programs are managing this moment. The findings show a clear contrast. Most programs report strong or excellent financial health, have formed new partnerships over the past year, and remain confident in their near-term viability. However, concerns are rising sharply. Compared to a year ago, leaders report significant increases in worry about students' basic needs (up 24 percentage points for extreme concern), economic uncertainty (up 29 percentage points), and mental health issues (up 14 percentage points). More than half expect the political climate to negatively affect their programs.

This report examines how 38 Promise programs across 21 states are managing this tension—and what they need to sustain their work in an uncertain landscape.

### The Grand Question

**How financially viable and resilient is the Promise program movement, and what support does it need to thrive in a changing landscape?**

To answer this question, the "Promise Program Community Voices Survey" examined three critical dimensions of Promise programs:

- **The students and families they serve** – What challenges are students facing, and do programs have adequate resources to address them?
- **The people who make programs possible** – How are staff and organizations adapting, and what capacity do they have to sustain their work?

- **The systems and environment they navigate** – How are funding, policy, and external pressures shaping programs' ability to deliver on their promise?

The insights shared by program leaders reveal where students are thriving, where challenges remain, and what resources are needed to ensure that Promise programs can continue to change lives.

## 2. The Students and Families Promise Programs Serve

**The picture Promise program leaders paint of their students is one of growing strain.**

The numbers tell a stark story. A year ago, leaders were concerned about their students' basic needs and financial stability. Today, that concern has intensified dramatically. Three-quarters expressed concern about students' basic needs and financial pressures both last year and this year—but the intensity has deepened dramatically. Reports of *extreme* concern jumped 24 percentage points for basic needs and 18 percentage points for financial worries. The sharpest increase came in a new area: economic and employment uncertainty, which rose 29 percentage points in a single year.

Mental health tells a similar story. More than two-thirds of Promise program leaders now express moderate or extreme concern about students' mental health and wellness—up 14 percentage points from last year. Social isolation is also rising as a concern, increasing 13 percentage points to reach nearly 40% of programs.

These aren't abstract worries. When asked whether they have adequate resources to address these challenges in the coming year, program leaders expressed significant doubt:

- **70% lack confidence** in their ability to adequately support student success, retention, and completion.
- **65% worry** that they can't fully address basic needs.
- **62% are concerned** about supporting students' work/school balance.
- **More than half** express moderate or extreme concern about every financial support category—from tuition assistance to helping students navigate aid eligibility changes.

The gap between student needs and program offerings is widening. Two-thirds of Promise programs express concern about students' academic readiness and preparation for college-to-career transitions. Over half now worry that students will question the value of higher education itself—mainly due to an eight-percentage-point increase in extreme concern.

One bright spot: Work/school balance concerns decreased slightly (from 53% to 49%), though it remains a challenge for nearly half of the Promise programs.

**The picture is clear: student challenges are intensifying, and programs need additional resources to meet growing needs.**

**Figure 1: Rising Student Challenges and Inadequate Program Resources**

AS STUDENT CHALLENGES GROW...	...PROGRAMS STRUGGLE TO RESPOND
<b>Basic Needs:</b> Extreme concern ↑ 24 pts	<b>65%</b> lack confidence in basic needs support
<b>Financial Worries:</b> Extreme concern ↑ 18 pts	<b>50%+</b> concerned about financial resources
<b>Economic Uncertainty:</b> Concern ↑ 29 pts	<b>70%</b> worried about student success/retention
<b>Mental Health:</b> Concern ↑ 14 pts	<b>49%</b> concerned about mental health resources
<b>Social Isolation:</b> Concern ↑ 13 pts	<b>62%</b> worried about work/school balance support

Community Voice Survey, 2025 (N=38 Promise Programs)

### 3. The People Who Make Promise Programs Possible

**Promise programs are accomplishing remarkable work—often with remarkably small teams.**

Nearly half of Promise programs (49%) deliver their mission with lean teams of just 1-3 full-time staff. Another 14% operate with 4-10 staff members, 11% with 11-20 staff members, and 8% with 21-30 staff members. These programs are making strategic choices every day about where to focus their energy, how to maximize their impact, and which partnerships to pursue to extend their reach. 19% have teams of more than 30 staff, indicating that Promise programs operate successfully across a wide range of organizational sizes.

#### Effectiveness Where It Matters Most

When asked to rate both the importance and effectiveness of their work across key operational areas, program leaders revealed a powerful pattern: **Promise programs are excelling at their core mission.**

**Program delivery and design, financial management and planning, and human resources and staffing** all show strong alignment between importance and effectiveness—typically within 5 percentage points. Programs are getting the fundamentals right: they're designing effective programs, managing their budgets responsibly, and building functional teams.

Programs also demonstrate strong effectiveness in **grant writing, fundraising, and board governance**—in some cases rating their effectiveness even higher than the importance of these activities. This reflects the reality that Promise programs have learned to secure resources and build governance structures that enable their work. When funding is essential for survival, programs rise to meet that challenge.

## Building Momentum Through Partnership

**The past year brought significant gains in partnerships and funding**—evidence that programs are successfully making their case to communities and stakeholders.

**Partnerships are expanding:** More than 60% of programs gained new partnerships over the past year, while only 5% lost partnerships. Over 80% actively partner with higher education institutions and community organizations, creating the collaborative networks essential for student success.

**Funding is growing:** Half of programs (50%) reported gaining new funding over the past year, while 42% reported stable funding. These gains reflect communities' continued investment in Promise programs and programs' effectiveness in demonstrating their value.

### Strategic Priorities for Growth

Programs also identified areas where they see opportunities for increased capacity and effectiveness. These aren't deficits—they're strategic priorities that could strengthen programs' ability to sustain and expand their impact:

**Telling the story more effectively:** While 79% of programs rate marketing, communications, and storytelling as moderately or extremely important, 55% rate themselves as effective in this area. Many programs are successfully delivering outcomes but haven't yet built the capacity to share their impact stories as broadly as they'd like.

**Strengthening data and evaluation systems:** Programs recognize the value of robust data collection, research, and program evaluation to demonstrate impact and refine their work. Building these systems requires dedicated expertise and time—investments that could enhance programs' ability to show what's working.

**Leveraging technology and AI:** As technology becomes increasingly central to operational efficiency and program delivery, many programs see opportunities to build their digital infrastructure and explore how emerging tools could extend their capacity.

**Investing in staff development:** Programs view staff training and professional development as essential for building organizational capacity. Expanding access to learning opportunities could strengthen teams' abilities to adapt and grow.

**Enhancing partnership coordination:** With partnerships expanding rapidly, programs identify coordination and engagement as areas where additional capacity could maximize the impact of these collaborations.

### Managing Challenges with Strategic Focus

Like any organization working in a dynamic landscape, Promise programs are navigating challenges that require ongoing attention and resources. When asked about their present-day concerns, respondents highlighted:

- **Financial sustainability:** Nearly 60% express moderate or extreme concern about appropriations and long-term sustainability, reflecting the reality that stable, diversified funding is essential for making and keeping promises to students.
- **Fundraising:** 53% identify this as a significant concern, underscoring the ongoing work required to secure resources.
- **Marketing and community engagement:** 47% cite this as a concern, consistent with the growth opportunity noted above.

- **Compliance and evaluation:** More than 40% are focused on building stronger systems in these areas.

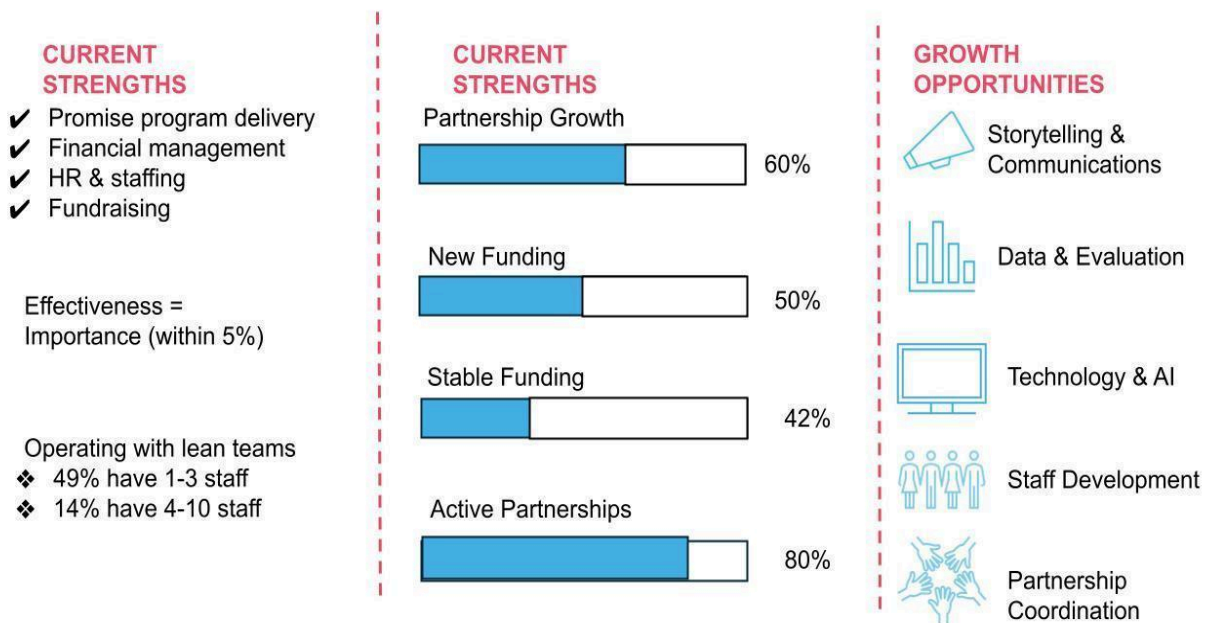
Notably, concerns about human resource challenges are comparatively lower—staff engagement (45%), turnover and retention (37%), professional development (37%), and recruiting (34%)—suggesting that programs have built stable, committed teams even while operating lean.

### What This Means

Promise programs are demonstrating resilience and effectiveness. They're delivering on their core mission, managing finances responsibly, growing partnerships, and securing new funding. They've identified clear opportunities to build capacity in areas such as communications, technology, and evaluation—investments that could amplify the impact they're already achieving. Programs are proud of the work they do and the doors they open for students.

The question isn't whether Promise programs are effective—they clearly are. The question is: **what targeted support and resources could help them build capacity in strategic areas, strengthen their sustainability, and ensure they can continue to make and keep promises to students in a time of uncertainty?**

**Figure 2: Promise Programs: Progress and Priorities**



Community Voice Survey, 2025 (N=38 Promise Programs)

## 4. The Systems and Environment Promise Programs Navigate

**Promise programs are financially stable today—and actively preparing for an uncertain tomorrow.**

When asked about their financial situation over the past year, Promise programs reported largely positive news: 40% reported improvement (24% somewhat improved, 16% significantly improved), while half reported that their financial situation remained unchanged. Only 11% reported their situation had somewhat worsened, and no program reported significant deterioration.

Looking at current financial health, nearly three-quarters of programs (73%) rate their financial condition as good or excellent. Another 16% describe it as fair, and 11% report it as poor. Importantly, no programs reported being in very poor financial health.

**Over 80% of programs express confidence in their financial sustainability over the next two years**—a remarkable show of stability given the challenges of recent years.

### Diverse Funding Models

Promise programs have built diverse funding portfolios that reflect their communities' commitment to college access:

- **60%** receive state government support
- **55%** receive private contributions (foundations/individual donors)
- **31%** receive local government funding
- **28%** receive federal government support
- **28%** receive corporate funding
- **7%** generate earned revenue (program service fees/membership/events/leasing)

On average, individual funding sources contribute between 10% and 49% of annual operating budgets, with some programs relying primarily on a single source while others have built highly diversified models. This range reflects the creativity and adaptability of Promise programs in securing resources from multiple streams.

Annual operating budgets span a wide range, demonstrating that Promise programs operate effectively at different scales:

- 8% operate with less than \$250,000
- 22% operate with \$250,000-\$500,000
- 14% operate with \$500,001-\$1 million
- 14% operate with \$1-\$3 million
- 11% operate with \$3-\$5 million
- 32% operate with budgets over \$5 million

## Planning for Uncertainty

While confident about their near-term sustainability, program leaders are taking a clear-eyed, proactive approach to managing potential challenges. When asked about activities they're discussing, planning, or acting on in response to fiscal uncertainty, programs revealed thoughtful contingency planning:

### ***Most commonly discussed strategies:***

- **34%** are discussing delayed hiring or delayed backfilling of positions (16% have acted)
- **29%** are exploring how to leverage AI to reduce costs (8% have acted)
- **26%** are discussing discretionary reductions like limiting non-essential travel (11% have acted)

### ***Other strategies under consideration:***

- Reducing renewable contracts (18% discussed, 11% acted)
- Adjusting physical/office space (13% discussed, 3% acted)
- Evaluating services and partnerships (16% discussed services, 11% discussed commitments)

Notably, **programs are protecting their core commitments:** none have reduced services to students, and very few have reduced benefits to staff (0% acted) or community partnerships (3% acted). This demonstrates that, even when contemplating difficult trade-offs, programs prioritize their mission and the people who make it possible.

## The External Landscape: Navigating Political and Economic Pressures

Programs operate within broader systems they don't control, and these external forces shape their planning and concerns.

**The political climate looms large:** More than half of programs (54%) anticipate it will negatively impact their work, while 38% expect no impact. Programs cite specific concerns about:

- **Political climate's impact on funding** (50%+ moderate/extreme concern)
- **Economic uncertainty** (45% moderate/extreme concern)
- **Increased restrictions on funding** (34% moderate/extreme concern)
- **Pell grant availability and funding levels** (cited repeatedly in open-ended responses)
- **Legislative and appropriations changes**

**Yet programs are not paralyzed by these concerns.** Instead, they're naming them honestly while continuing to plan strategically for multiple scenarios.

## Where Concerns Focus

Beyond external political and economic pressures, program leaders identified specific areas requiring ongoing attention:

### ***Financial sustainability priorities:***

- Diversifying revenue streams
- Preparing for potential changes in major funding sources (state/local government, private donors)
- Managing potential budget shortages

### ***Operational capacity:***

- 40%+ are focused on expanding capacity to meet student demand
- Programs are balancing growth aspirations with sustainable operations
- Compliance and administrative requirements need ongoing attention

### ***Program performance:***

- About 25% are working to strengthen systems for demonstrating impact
- Programs recognize the importance of showing outcomes as they make the case for continued support
- Scaling initiatives while maintaining quality remains a focus

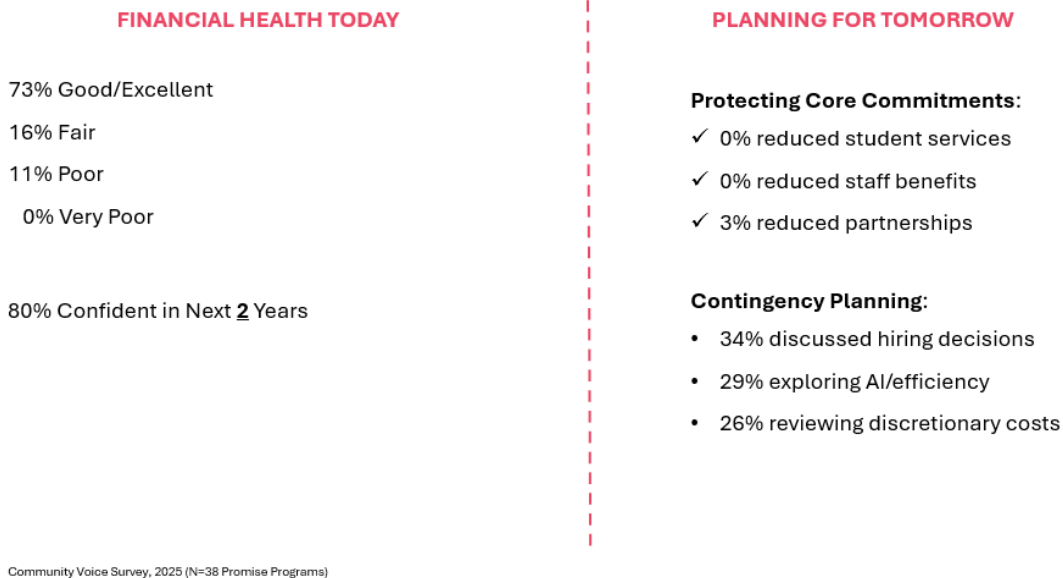
## What This Tells Us

Promise programs have built financial stability and diverse funding models that reflect genuine community investment. They've weathered recent challenges—pandemic disruption, economic uncertainty, enrollment shifts—and emerged largely stable, with most programs improving or maintaining their financial position.

At the same time, program leaders are realistic about the future. They're confident in the near term but watchful of external forces they can't control, such as shifts in the political climate, economic volatility, and potential changes in federal and state funding. Instead of reacting with alarm, they're planning strategically—finding potential cost-saving measures while safeguarding core commitments to students and staff.

**The question isn't whether programs can sustain themselves in stable times—they've proven they can. The question is: what support would help programs build resilience against external shocks they can't predict or control?** Strengthening financial diversity, building reserves, and creating flexible funding models could help programs weather future uncertainty while maintaining their promise to students.

**Figure 3: Current Health, Future Planning**



## 5. Looking Forward Together: How College Promise Can Support the Movement

**Promise program leaders know what they need—and they're ready to work together to get there.**

When asked about their interest in support from College Promise, programs expressed strong enthusiasm for collaboration and shared resources. Their responses paint a clear picture of how the national organization can best serve the movement.

### What Programs Want Most

**Nearly 80% of programs are interested in shared resources**—templates, toolkits, and promising practices—that enable them to learn from each other's successes rather than reinventing the wheel. This overwhelming interest reflects a fundamental truth: Promise programs don't need to solve every challenge on their own. What works in one community can often be adapted for another.

**63% want collaborative activities with other Promise programs**, creating opportunities to learn, problem-solve, and build relationships across the movement. Programs recognize the value of peer learning and mutual support.

**46% are interested in cohort training**—structured learning opportunities that enable programs to develop skills and knowledge together.

**Shared services related to technology, licenses, and outreach also attracted interest, indicating that programs recognize the benefits of pooling resources for tools and infrastructure that might be difficult or costly to develop on their own.**

Interestingly, **joint funding opportunities were least in demand**—perhaps because programs have successfully developed diverse funding models that work for their specific contexts, or because they see more immediate value in capacity-building support.

### **Understanding the Barriers**

Programs also identified what prevents them from participating in collaborative activities—insights that can help College Promise design more accessible support:

#### ***Internal capacity constraints:***

- **65%** cite limited staff or available capacity
- **51%** point to time and scheduling challenges
- **22%** note the cost of participation as a barrier

These barriers reflect the reality we've seen throughout this report: programs operate with lean teams who are already stretched.

**Implication for College Promise:** Support needs to be accessible, flexible, and designed for busy practitioners. Short, focused offerings may work better than intensive, time-consuming programs. Virtual options and recorded content can address scheduling challenges.

#### ***External barriers:***

- **54%** cite differences in Promise program models
- **32%** mention geographic distance
- **30%** report a lack of relevant opportunities

**Implication for College Promise:** One-size-fits-all approaches won't work. Programs need offerings tailored to different models, contexts, and stages of development. Geographic distance matters less with virtual options, but programs may also value regional connections with peers facing similar policy environments.

### **The Support Programs Need Most**

When asked directly what additional resources or support would be most valuable, programs identified clear priorities (61% of programs responded):

#### ***Top priorities (each cited by 22-30% of respondents):***

1. **Data and evidence (30%)** - Programs want help demonstrating their impact, building evaluation systems, and using data to improve their work and make their case to funders and policymakers.
2. **Advocacy and communication (30%)** - Programs need support telling their story, engaging stakeholders, and advocating for policies that sustain Promise programs.
3. **Financial resources (22%)** - Direct funding support and help accessing capital remain important.

4. **Human capital (22%)** - Programs need help recruiting, developing, and retaining talented staff.
5. **Partnerships and networks (22%)** - Programs value connections with other organizations, institutions, and programs.
6. **Student support (22%)** - Programs want resources to better serve students' comprehensive needs.

The breadth of these priorities—spanning data, communications, funding, people, partnerships, and student services—reflects the multi-faceted nature of running Promise programs. It also suggests that **College Promise can add value across multiple dimensions**, not just in one area.

### **What Programs Are Saying**

When given an open-ended opportunity to share what's on their minds, 37% of program leaders responded. Their reflections reinforce and deepen the priorities above:

- **43%** discussed data and evidence needs
- **36%** raised financial resource concerns
- **29%** mentioned advocacy and communication
- **29%** reflected on program structure challenges
- **29%** shared thoughts about culture and context
- **21%** focused on student support
- **14%** discussed partnerships and networks

These unprompted reflections suggest that **data/evidence and financial sustainability are top-of-mind concerns, while programs are also grappling with how** to structure their work, navigate their unique contexts, and build the right relationships to support students comprehensively.

Promise programs have been clear: they're interested in learning from each other, they need practical tools and resources, and they're ready to collaborate—if the opportunities are accessible, relevant, and responsive to their capacity constraints.

The programs identified as priorities—data and evidence, advocacy and communications, financial sustainability, human capital, partnerships, and student support—provide a roadmap for how College Promise can support the movement.







### **The path forward involves:**

1. **Creating accessible, practical resources** that busy, lean teams can actually use—templates, toolkits, and promising practices that save time rather than require it.
2. **Facilitating peer learning and collaboration** through flexible formats that accommodate different schedules, contexts, and program models.
3. **Building capacity in high-priority areas** like data systems, communications, and evaluation—the areas where programs identified gaps between importance and effectiveness.
4. **Strengthening advocacy** to address external forces programs can't control—political climate, policy changes, and funding volatility.
5. **Supporting financial resilience** through direct resources, fundraising guidance, and strategies for diversification.
6. **Investing in people** through professional development, leadership support, and networks that reduce isolation.

**Promise programs are strong, effective, and committed to their students.** With targeted support in the areas they've identified—and delivered in formats they can access—College Promise can help programs build on their strengths, weather external uncertainty, and ensure that the promises made to students can be kept for years to come.

The next chapter of the Promise movement is about ensuring every program can sustain and deepen its impact. That work begins with listening to what programs need—and this survey has given us a clear mandate for action.

**Figure 4: From Listening to Action: Translating Promise Program Needs into College Promise Support**

WHAT WE HEARD	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT WE'LL DO
 80% want shared resources	Promise programs don't want to reinvent the wheel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Create accessible templates and toolkits</li> <li>✓ Curate promising practices library</li> </ul>
 30% need data & evidence support	Promise programs struggle to demonstrate impact with limited capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Build evaluation frameworks</li> <li>✓ Provide data tools &amp; training</li> </ul>
 30% need advocacy & communication support	External forces threaten stability; Promise programs need help telling their story effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Launch communications workshop series</li> <li>✓ Strengthen policy advocacy</li> <li>✓ Build communications resource library</li> </ul>
 63% want collaborative activities	Peer learning valued but capacity limited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Facilitate collaborative opportunities</li> </ul>
 65% cite limited capacity as barrier	Support must be accessible & flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Design flexible, accessible formats</li> </ul>
 22% need financial resources	Financial sustainability requires multiple strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Support diversified funding strategies</li> <li>✓ Provide fundraising guidance</li> </ul>
 22% need human capital support	Small teams need development opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Offer professional development</li> <li>✓ Create leadership networks</li> </ul>

## 6. Conclusion

Promise programs demonstrate a defining characteristic: they deliver results while planning strategically for the future. Most programs report strong financial health, growing partnerships, and confidence in their sustainability. At the same time, leaders are clear-eyed about evolving student needs—basic needs support, economic pressures, and mental health services—and are actively building capacity to respond.

This reflects an important reality: Promise programs are effective stewards of their operations while operating within broader educational and economic systems. They manage budgets responsibly, build skilled teams, and deliver strong outcomes—consistently and well. They also recognize opportunities to strengthen their impact through enhanced capacity in communications, data systems, and student support infrastructure.

The response from programs has been notable: lean teams accomplish significant results daily. Programs are expanding partnerships, securing diverse funding sources, and maintaining full commitment to student services even as they plan for various scenarios. They're protecting core priorities: student access, staff support, and community partnerships.

Behind every data point are dedicated professionals and passionate leaders working to keep promises made to students. As one program leader shared: "I'm just really proud of the work we're doing. When a student writes in their exit survey that they couldn't have attended our college without our Promise program, it makes all the hard work that goes into administering the program feel VERY worthwhile!"

This is the impact that matters. Every day, Promise programs open doors—students realizing college is possible, families seeing pathways forward, communities united around educational opportunity. These outcomes represent the Promise movement's core mission.

This survey helps answer a crucial question: what targeted support and investment would help programs strengthen their impact, build operational resilience, and ensure sustainable service to students?

The 38 programs participating have provided a clear roadmap. They've identified student support priorities, capacity-building opportunities, and areas where collective advocacy could be valuable. They've demonstrated that the Promise movement is operationally strong, strategically adaptive, and deeply committed—and that focused support can enhance their continued effectiveness.

As a Promise community, collective understanding strengthens individual programs. This survey represents collaborative learning that can inform strategic action. The Promise movement's next chapter builds on these insights and the commitment to translate findings into practical support for programs serving students and communities nationwide.

## Appendix A: Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on survey data collected, analyzed, and interpreted by College Promise. Thirty-eight Promise programs completed the Community Voices survey. Information regarding the process for collecting and analyzing the data is below.

### Sample Characteristics

College Promise invited 453 Promise program leaders to participate in a survey examining the students and families they serve, the individuals who make their programs possible, and the systems they navigate daily. We received 38 responses from program leaders who answered at least 80% of the core survey questions. Respondents did not receive compensation for their participation.

### Survey Response Rates

Survey Period	Number of eligible respondents	Number of completed responses	Survey Response Rate
October 7, 2025 – November 14, 2025	453	38	8%

### Survey Administration

We conducted the online survey over five weeks from October 7 to November 14, 2025. One week before the launch, program leaders received an introductory email about the research study. The survey invitation included details about the study's aims, assurances of confidentiality, and access to the survey platform. We sent up to three follow-up reminders to non-respondents during the survey period.

### Promise Program Details

The 38 responding programs span 21 states and include a variety of program types, with 16 programs offering multiple types. Four programs operate dual enrollment programs, 37 focus on community college initiatives, and 17 serve baccalaureate institutions and universities.

Among responding Promise programs, 60% had been operating for 5-10 years, reflecting the pre-pandemic expansion era. Programs with less than 5 years of operation accounted for 14% of respondents, while those operating for 11-15 years and those with more than 15 years of operation each accounted for 14% of the sample.

Respondents reported utilizing multiple funding streams to cover students' tuition and fees. More than 70% indicated receiving federal and state aid, 62% reported Promise program aid, 28% cited other sources of support, and 24% mentioned independent private aid. Individual funding sources covered an average of 30-46% of total tuition and fees, with some programs reporting full coverage from a single source.

Program size varied considerably, with annual student enrollment ranging from fewer than 25 to over 5,000 students. Forty-one percent served more than 1,000 students, 27% served between 101 and 500 students, 19% served 100 or fewer students, and 14% served between 501 and 1,000 students.

## **Response Bias**

We received 38 responses from the 453 Promise program leaders contacted for the Community Voices Survey, yielding an 8% response rate. While this response rate is lower than desired, it is important to contextualize this within the study's scope and limitations.

### ***Implications for Interpretation***

These findings should be considered exploratory and descriptive rather than representative of all Promise programs. The 8% response rate means the results reflect the experiences of programs that chose to participate and cannot be generalized to the broader Promise program population.

We were unable to systematically compare responding programs to non-responding programs on key characteristics, which limits our ability to assess how representative this sample is of the broader Promise program population.

Readers should interpret findings as illustrative of challenges and practices among this specific set of programs rather than as population-level estimates.

### ***Potential Sources of Response Bias***

Several factors may have contributed to differential response rates and potentially introduced bias:

**Capacity and resource constraints:** Programs with greater administrative capacity, dedicated research staff, or more stable operations may have been more likely to complete the survey. Conversely, programs facing significant operational challenges, understaffing, or financial instability may have lacked the time or resources to participate. If true, our findings may underrepresent the experiences of struggling programs and overrepresent well-resourced ones.

**Survey topic sensitivity:** Because the survey focuses on financial sustainability and program operations, programs experiencing financial difficulties or operational challenges may have been less inclined to participate. This could result in a more positive picture of Promise program stability than what may exist across all programs.

**Practical barriers:** Email invitations may have been filtered to spam folders, overlooked among competing priorities, or directed to staff members who were no longer in their roles. Program leaders manage demanding schedules with multiple competing priorities.

**Self-selection:** Programs that are more engaged with College Promise or have stronger connections to the broader Promise network may have been more likely to respond.

## **Survey Instrument**

The “Promise Program Community Voices Survey” has five parts: (1) Your Promise program profile, (2) the students and families you serve, (3) program organization (supporting people behind the promise), (4) funding, policy, and systems (the environment Promise programs navigate), and (5) looking forward together. The survey contained 28 items. A copy of the survey instrument is available from College Promise.

### **Quantitative Analysis of Survey Data**

Given the sample size and response rate, we limit our analysis to descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency). We do not conduct inferential statistical tests or attempt to make population-level generalizations.

Despite these limitations, the 38 responding programs represent diverse contexts across 21 states and include a range of program types, funding models, and student populations. The feedback provides valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and practices of these specific Promise programs and can inform future research with larger, more representative samples.

### **Qualitative Analysis of Survey Data**

The survey included three optional open-ended questions, with response rates ranging from 14 to 23 participants per question. Several closed-ended questions also provided "other" options for responses, typically completed by no more than three respondents. Given the small number of qualitative responses, College Promise's senior leader for education coded all open-ended responses inductively, identifying recurring themes and patterns that emerged from participants' experiences.

### **Research Limitations**

This survey represents a valuable effort to understand the financial sustainability and operational health of Promise programs nationwide, capturing important insights from program leaders on funding, resources, and organizational challenges. Like any research study, however, it has certain methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings.

The survey asks respondents to compare past and present concerns, but these comparisons depend on memories rather than purely objective measures. Terms such as "adequate resources" or "financial health" may mean different things to different programs. As a snapshot in time, the survey can identify important correlations—such as links between funding sources and financial confidence—but cannot determine if one factor causes another.

Overall, this survey provides meaningful data to inform support, resource allocation, and advocacy for Promise programs, and its findings will be most powerful when considered alongside other evidence on program sustainability.