CPSI ■ mdrc

COLLEGE PROMISE SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Looking Ahead Toward Equity
The College Promise Success Initiative

Marco Lepe and Evan Weissman

For low-income students, going to college is often viewed as an out-of-reach option. Many capable individuals never attempt to enroll, or do not stay in college because they lack much-needed support, both financial and otherwise. This contributes to the higher education achievement gap that divides low-income students and their higher-income counterparts, who enroll in college at much higher rates, and drop out at lower rates once enrolled. Over 300 College Promise programs established by communities and schools nationwide are attempting to close this gap.

Scholarships form the core of all College Promise programs: Eligible College Promise students receive scholarships that cover up to 100 percent of tuition and fees at postsecondary institutions. The College Promise movement seeks to transform perceptions about the affordability of college, give students the opportunity to earn college degrees without taking on significant debt, and significantly increase rates of college enrollment and completion.

But improving access to college addresses only part of the challenge for low-income students. College success and completion rates among the underserved students targeted by many College Promise programs remain unacceptably low, limiting these

---

The Programs in CPSI

- Detroit Promise Path (Detroit, MI)
- Flint Promise (Flint, MI)
- Los Angeles Promise (Los Angeles, CA)
- Oregon Promise at Portland Community College (Portland, OR)
- Rhode Island Promise at the Community College of Rhode Island (statewide, RI)
- Richmond Promise (Richmond, CA)

For more information on CPSI, see **Designing for Success: The Early Implementation of College Promise Programs**.

programs' overall effectiveness. But new evidence — including the findings from MDRC's evaluation of the **Detroit Promise Path** program — shows that building student support services into College Promise programs can have a meaningful effect on students' academic progress.

In 2017, MDRC launched the **College Promise Success Initiative** (CPSI) to expand on this evidence. MDRC worked with six College Promise programs to implement a "diagnosis and design" process — identifying problems by assessing student and program needs, creating potential solutions, and enhancing their offerings through evidence-based improvements or new methods of student support. MDRC provided individualized technical assistance to each of these programs, helping them strengthen their student support services in coaching and advising, targeted communications, and financial incentives. For example, the coaching component of Detroit Promise Path is designed to help students navigate academic and personal issues. Coaches meet with students twice a month, helping them resolve issues such as financial aid verification, referring them to existing college counselors or career advisors as needed, and addressing a range of topics from time management to food insecurity.

In November 2019, MDRC held a half-day gathering with staff from the programs in CPSI to reflect on lessons learned over the two-year initiative. This Issue Focus highlights two important lessons from this dialogue, offers links to some of the publicly available tools that were developed as part of CPSI, and briefly looks ahead at the future of the College Promise movement.

Assemble the Right Mix of Stakeholders

Having an effective combination of stakeholders to shape and guide the program across multiple levels of management remains a major challenge for many College Promise programs, staff at the gathering said. These programs often have at least three levels of management: an executive level consisting of senior stakeholders with funding and authorization discretion; a functional level consisting of contributors responsible for program design; and a working level consisting of ground-level program staff and students.

Achieving the Right Stakeholder Mix

Practitioners suggested a broad list of important stakeholder groups that should participate in one or more levels of management:

- Students
- Parents
- High school teachers, staff, and administrators
- College instructors, staff, and administrators (including admissions, financial aid, counselors or advisors, and senior leaders)
- College Promise program staff
- School district representatives
- Local or state elected officials and staff
- Regional workforce representatives (such as Chamber of Commerce or unions)

Each Promise program's organizational composition varies because of differences in design, funding sources, and operating organizations. For example, the two programs in CPSI operated by the Chamber of Commerce have an inherently strong workforce representation, with program leaders who have direct knowledge of local employers and labor market trends. Programs housed in college systems had to decide whether — or how — to develop stronger workforce connections to guide decisions related to advising, career counseling, or job placement for their students. Despite differences between specific programs, practitioners offered some common strategies for developing effective management arrangements.

First, they stressed the importance of including more — and more diverse — stakeholders than might typically be included in planning a College Promise program, adding that managers must be willing to reevaluate and adjust the membership of the management groups as needed. Ideally, those stakeholders should reflect the diversity of the student communities they want to serve.

Second, program managers and administrators need to show their support at the highest levels. In addition to financial support, that means participating in planning meetings and attending public events such as program launches or graduations. Some program staff said it was hard to get this concrete support from college or state leaders, while programs that got these high-level endorsements emphasized the value to their programs.

Finally, the group stressed the importance of executive, functional, and ground-level management agreeing on and supporting particular areas of focus. That could include specific program details, such as those addressed in a process map,[1] or could be higher-level objectives, such as an explicit focus on equity as a guiding principle of their work. As discussed below, this goal of working toward equity was the second vital lesson.

Make Equity Central to Your Program

Low-income students enroll in college at lower rates than their high-income peers, and the gap in graduation rates between the two groups is even wider. Program staff suggested addressing the dual challenges of college access and college success in tandem, a strategy that meeting attendees said could reduce both of these gaps. Thoughtful design and management can help College Promise programs reduce disparities in completion rates and close equity gaps by providing additional services or funds to their low-income and traditionally vulnerable students. To do this, organizations must agree on their own definition of equity, in their particular program's context, then articulate how it relates to their mission. Programs should ask the following questions: What are we promising? To whom are we making this promise? And, how does this help those most in need in our community? Depending on local context and priorities, the equity conversation may focus on economic, racial, geographic, or other important dimensions.

Participants said that all College Promise programs could benefit by asking these questions, then explicitly centering their objectives on equity. They noted that some programs may feel empowered to publicly broadcast their focus on equity, but also recognized that local context may lead others to keep equity in focus only as an internal guiding principle. Local politics could influence this decision, as well as factors such as funding sources, or even the personalities of program leaders.

Staff discussed two concrete examples of ways in which Promise programs may address equity by critically examining their designs:

Programs should review eligibility requirements — such as a minimum high school grade point average (GPA) or a full-time enrollment mandate — with an eye toward revising criteria that exclude the students most in need. While these requirements are rooted in evidence suggesting these students may be more likely to fail their courses or fail to persist, these criteria may also filter out students from low-income and vulnerable populations that these programs most want to support. Rather than excluding these students, programs could consider developing and improving onboarding and support services (such as college coaching and effective placement policies) for students with low GPAs. They could also consider providing scholarships or other supports for students who are unable to attend full time due to jobs or child care obligations. Programs may also consider incorporating an appeals process, so that deserving students who cannot meet existing requirements because of extenuating circumstances can receive program funding or services.

Programs should consider adopting Promise scholarship designs that target funds to low-income students. Whether they are first-dollar, last-dollar, or last-dollar plus (also called middle-dollar), Promise programs should closely examine their local data and program funding mechanisms to ensure that low-income students receive equitable funding and supports.[2] A common criticism of College Promise programs is that they have the potential to be a windfall for middle- and upper-class students and families because the scholarships often do not take income into account. In some cases, last-dollar Promise programs can pay out a majority of their scholarship funds to middle- and high-income students, while low-income students receive federal Pell funds but little additional local Promise funding. Many program leaders pointed to the value of scholarship designs that can provide extra funds to low-income students to counter this structural imbalance.

Practitioners acknowledged that these strategies are a first step, and added that programs should also develop ways to assess themselves and measure their progress toward equity and other principal goals. Creating

---

1   A process map, as described in MDRC's **Creating a Process Map for Higher Education**, is a tool that lists the steps students must take in a program or institution. These maps can be used to help programs identify and reduce the barriers that students face.

2   For definitions and discussion of these scholarship designs, see page 2 of **Designing for Success: The Early Implementation of College Promise Programs**.

benchmarks to measure program progress and establishing continuous improvement cycles can help achieve this goal.[3]

What's Next?

Local and statewide College Promise programs are being created and expanded nationwide. Meanwhile, the programs in CPSI will continue to refine and enhance their offerings based on the latest evidence-based research to honor the assurances given to the thousands of students who depend on the tuition and supports that College Promise provides. Going forward, they hope to expand their support services to cover the full population of students in need, and to address the range of barriers to college access and completion that their students face.

There are now more than 300 College Promise programs nationwide, many of which serve a broad base of students. These groups include high school students who will benefit from expanded outreach and support to get to college, adult and returning college students who are often going to school while working or caring for children, and students taking part in vocational programs. Based on accumulating evidence, many Promise programs now provide additional support services to improve their students' academic progress and college completion rates.

The CPSI project ended in 2019, but MDRC's work in the field continues. MDRC's final report on the Detroit Promise Path program, which will evaluate the longer-term impacts of building student support services into a Promise scholarship, will be released in 2021. MDRC will also continue disseminating lessons learned from CPSI and other research. More broadly, it will use these lessons to inform evidence-based technical assistance and the development and evaluation of innovative approaches to supporting students in Promise programs and beyond.

Finally, building off of its successful work with both Detroit Promise Path and CPSI, MDRC is implementing a new initiative, **Scaling Up Community College Efforts for Student Success** (SUCCESS). This program draws from MDRC's 15 years of experience designing and testing postsecondary interventions. It aims to improve graduation rates for traditionally underserved students at community colleges by helping states and institutions align their use of resources with evidence-driven practices. The SUCCESS program combines components from multiple programs (including Promise programs) that have proved effective in helping students succeed in college and attempts to sustain these approaches with strong local implementation and state support.

---

3   The **College Promise Success Initiative Benchmark Template** is a tool and how-to guide for benchmarking – the setting of outcome measures of success against prespecified targets. A continuous improvement cycle is described in MDRC's **Lessons from the Los Angeles College Promise Program: Improving Programs Using Students' Voices**.

Visit the **CPSI Resources page** for a full list of CPSI publications, archived webinars, and tools such as the CPSI Cost Calculator.

CPSI | COLLEGE PROMISE SUCCESS INITIATIVE
■ **mdrc**