Mary Rauner
Amelia Smith
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College Promise Programs:
A Description of the California Landscape

College Promise programs provide supports intended to help students attend, persevere in, and complete college. The programs serve students based on where they live or attend school.[1] The first such program in the country was established 15 years ago; as of 2019, there were more than 320 programs in 47 states.[2] The name *College Promise* does not denote one specific program model. Rather, it serves as an umbrella term that covers a wide range of student support programs led by colleges, universities, foundations, and local and state governments.

Some states — Tennessee, Washington, and New York, for example — operate state-wide programs, with the same eligibility requirements and benefits for all students. In contrast, California's programs are all locally initiated and tailored to local student and community needs, with programs that are anchored in community colleges receiving some state funding.[3] California programs vary in scope, with those that provide only financial support at one end of the spectrum and those that offer comprehensive financial, academic, and social support at the other end. Such variation notwithstanding, all California programs share a common goal, which is to help students succeed in higher education and beyond.

This brief, which focuses on California's College Promise programs, is the second in a series on the topic produced by the California College Promise Project (CCPP). The first CCPP brief outlines the policy context that helped fuel the growth of such programs in California; highlights implementation

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[1] Rauner, M., Perna, L., & Kanter, M. (2018). California College Promise program characteristics and perceptions from the field. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from

https://www.wested.org/resources/california-college-promise-program-characteristics-and-perceptions/

[2] College Promise Campaign. (2019). College Promise Campaign 2018–2019 Annual Report. Washington, D.C.

[3] For details about the policy context that helped fuel the growth of College Promise in California, see Rauner, M., & Lundquist, S. (2019). *College Promise in California: Recommendations for advancing implementation, impact, and equity*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from https://californiacollegepromise.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/California-College-Promise-Legislation-Brief-FINAL.pdf

challenges; and makes recommendations for maximizing programs' equity and impact.[4] This second brief describes the current landscape and evolving structures of California's programs, which have proliferated in recent years and reflects on how program characteristics relate to equitable student access and outcomes. An upcoming brief will explore how the College Promise landscape changed after the state began providing community colleges with funding for such programs.

Defining College Promise

There is no common definition for College Promise, as is evident in the wide variation in program features across the country. However, most researchers agree that, minimally, a College Promise program provides financial support for students who live or attend school in the particular area served by that program.[5] In choosing the California programs for this analysis, the CCPP included financial support and place-based eligibility as the first two of six selection criteria:

1. Providing direct financial support for college costs

2. Serving students based on where they live or attend school

3. Establishing an objective selection process for eligible students

4. Expecting that the program will be ongoing

5. Developing programs locally to meet college and community needs, not exclusively to distribute state-mandated financial assistance (such as the California College Promise Grant, CCPG)[6]

6. Providing financial support to students as of fall 2019

Based on these criteria, 121 College Promise programs in California are eligible to be included in the analysis, as of November 2019.

Data

Features of California College Promise programs described in this brief reflect the field as of November 2019. The data were gathered over a three-year period beginning in spring 2016. During the first round of data collection, from May to June 2016, CCPP staff gathered data from program websites and used phone and email correspondence to validate that information with program administrators. During

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[4] Rauner, M., & Lundquist, S. (2019). *College Promise in California: Recommendations for advancing implementation, impact, and equity*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Retrieved from https://californiacollegepromise.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/California-College-Promise-Legislation-Brief-FINAL.pdf

[5] Miller-Adams, M. (2015). *Promise nation: Transforming communities through place-based scholarships*. Kalamazoo, MI: W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. Retrieved from https://research.upjohn.org/up_press/235/; Perna, L. W. (2016). *Delivering on the promise: Structuring College Promise programs to promote higher education attainment for students from underserved groups*. Philadelphia, PA: Penn Ahead, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from https://www.ahead-penn.org/sites/default/files/u2/Delivering_On_the_Promise_Perna.pdf

[6] Nine community colleges were excluded from the analysis because they only administer the California College Promise Grant (CCPG), a state-mandated fee-waiver program for low-income students that has been required of all community colleges since the mid-1980s. The California College Promise Grant (CCPG) was formerly called the Board of Governor's Fee Waiver Program. See College Promise in California: Recommendations for Advancing Implementation, Impact, and Equity (2019) for details about this program.

summer 2018, CCPP staff gathered new data and confirmed existing information through program surveys, internet searches, and direct communication with program administrators. In addition to these formal data-gathering efforts, the CCPP database is continually updated through Google alerts, program contacts, and targeted website searches as new programs are launched and existing programs undergo changes.

Data Limitations

Despite multiple rounds of intensive data collection, some program data may be inaccurate. In some cases, program website information may not have been updated after a change, or CCPP staff were unable to reach program administrators to verify data. In addition, some program features may have changed since November 2019, the end of the data collection period, and, therefore, would not be reflected in this analysis.

Findings About the Landscape

The 121 California College Promise programs included in this analysis differ in their size, their eligibility requirements, the supports they offer, where they're based, and how long students can participate. This section describes some key characteristics of the programs.

Most College Promise programs are based in community colleges

Ninety-one percent (110 of 121) of California's College Promise programs are implemented by a community college or a community college district (table 1). These programs are locally designed and branded, meaning that the program name is unique to that institution or district and that each has customized eligibility requirements and student benefits.

Of the remaining programs, five (4 percent of the 121 programs) are based in local nonprofits, three (2 of the 121 program) in local governments, two (2 percent of the 121 programs) in private institutions of higher education (IHEs), and one (1 percent of the 121 programs) in a K-12 school district. Like the programs based in community colleges, the two College Promise programs in IHEs require participants to be enrolled at the institution running the program. Likewise, the program anchored in a K-12 school district partners with a community college and limits attendance to students at that institution. For programs administered by nonprofit organizations and local governments, the extent to which participating students have flexibility in where they attend college varies. Some of the programs require that the students attend a specified institution, while others allow students to use their funding to attend any accredited two- or four-year institution. One of the programs specifies that its funding can be used at any community college in California.

In several California communities, local students are potentially eligible for two or more College Promise programs. For example, Corcoran High School graduates have access to the Corcoran Promise, which is led by the city's community foundation, as well as to programs at both colleges in the West Hills Community College District (i.e., Coalinga and Lemoore). In addition, five community colleges[7]

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[7] Five colleges (i.e., Cabrillo College, City College of San Francisco, Folsom Lake College, West Hills College Coalinga, and West Hills College Lemoore) have more than one College Promise program.

administer or co-administer two distinctly different College Promise programs, and their students may be eligible for both.[8] Folsom Lake College students, for example, may be eligible for both the Folsom Lake/Rancho Cordova Promise, a partnership between the college and the city of Rancho Cordova, and the Los Rios Promise, a community college-based program that provides tuition and fees to any California resident who is a first-time college student and enrolls full-time.[9]

Table 1. Institutional lead for California College Promise programs (n = 121)

Institution	Number of programs	Percentage of total programs
Community college	110	91
Local nonprofit	5	4
Local government	3	2
Private college/university	2	2
K-12 school district	1	1

Most College Promise programs have inclusive residency and merit requirements

All California College Promise programs require students to meet a residency requirement of some sort. About half of them (56 of 121) only require state residency. This state-residency requirement means that California residents (including students who are undocumented or otherwise eligible for in-state tuition rates through AB 540[10]) who live outside the specific program service area but who meet all other program requirements can participate in the program.

Fifty-five percent of the programs (66 of 121) have place-based eligibility requirements that go beyond a student needing to have California residency; they only accept students from a particular geographic location within the state. These programs include the 11 that are run by local governments and nonprofit organizations, as well as 54 of the 110 community college–based programs in the state. Some of these 66 programs only serve students who have attended specific high schools (e.g., only Corcoran High School graduates are eligible for the Corcoran Promise program), while other programs serve

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[8] Colleges with two programs either allow eligible students to receive benefits from both programs or limit them to participation in one program.

[9] The Folsom Lake/Rancho Cordova Promise offers a first-dollar scholarship (i.e., a fixed amount of funding for students regardless of other awards they might receive), so students who are eligible for the Los Rios Promise can also receive the Folsom Lake award and use the money for remaining college fees, textbooks, and/or class materials purchased through the college store.

[10] AB 540 exempts college students from California residency requirements if they have graduated with or have the equivalent of a California high school diploma and have attended an elementary school, high school, or community college in California for three or more years. It was passed with the intention of reducing access barriers for students who are undocumented, commonly known as DREAMers. For more information, see https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/tuition-financial-aid/tuition-cost-of-attendance/ab-540-nonresident-tuition-exemption.html.

students who live in a certain city, county, or community college service area, as is the case with the Siskiyou Promise and Mendocino College Promise, among others.

Although eligibility requirements vary across the 121 programs included in this analysis, 101 of the programs (83 percent) do not have a merit requirement, which means that a student's high school grade point average (GPA) does not limit the student's access to these programs. For those programs that do have a merit eligibility criterion, most require a 2.0 GPA, but a few programs limit access to students with a 2.5 or 3.0 GPA.

Most College Promise programs serve only full-time students, recent high school graduates, and/or first-time college students

The majority of California community college students attend school on a part-time basis,[11] yet only 10 of the 121 College Promise programs (8 percent) allow part-time students to participate (table 2). The full-time eligibility requirement is at least partly explained by recent state legislation that stipulates this requirement for community colleges using state-provided College Promise funding to cover student fees.[12]

Slightly more than half (55 percent) of California's College Promise programs require students to be recent high school graduates. Although the details of these requirements vary — some require students to enroll the fall after high school graduation, some allow up to a year, and others include exceptions for those returning from military service — underemployed and unemployed adults without college degrees are unable to join these programs. Only seven programs (6 percent) accept students who have already earned some college credits.[13]

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[11] Zinshteyn, M. (2018, July 6). Work less, study more: California will give grants to community college students attending full-time [Web article]. Oakland, CA: EdSource. Retrieved from https://edsource.org/2018/work-less-study-more-california-to-offer-as-much-as-4000-to-community-college-students-attending-full-time/600025?

[12] Colleges can also use state College Promise funding for non-tuition expenses. For more details, see Rauner, M., & Lundquist, S. (2019). *College Promise in California: Recommendations for advancing implementation, impact, and equity.* San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Available at https://californiacollegepromise.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/California-College-Promise-Legislation-Brief-FINAL.pdf

[13] The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) defines first-time college students as individuals who have no prior postsecondary experience and who are attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. Dual enrollment classes for high school students are not considered prior postsecondary experience. See https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisFaqView.aspx?mode=reg&id=5&show=all#166

Table 2. California College Promise eligibility requirements (n = 121)

Eligibility requirement	Number of programs	Percentage of total programs
High school merit/GPA minimum	20	17
State residency required exclusively	56	46
Specific city or county residency and/or school or district enrollment	66	55
Full-time enrollment (i.e., part-time students are not eligible)	111	92
Recent high school graduate	67	55
First-time college student (i.e., no previous postsecondary credits)	114	94

Note. The total number of programs in this table exceeds the number of programs in the analysis because most programs have more than one eligibility requirement.

Most programs provide students with benefits for one year

More than half of the programs (63 of 121 programs) provide students with one year of program support, while 46 programs (38 percent) offer two years of support (table 3). The 6 programs that provide less than one year of support include those that, like Palo Verde College's PVC Choice, provide students with one semester of support, as well as those that provide a set dollar amount, like the Santa Cruz County College Commitment, which provides each student with a $500 grant. One community college-based program, Lake Tahoe College Promise, provides benefits for up to three years, acknowledging that two years are not sufficient for most students to complete their studies.

Five programs (4 percent) provide students with benefits for up to four years. The San Marcos Promise, Oakland Promise, Richmond Promise, and Stockton Scholars are nonprofit or government-based programs that allow students to choose a two-year, four-year, or transfer pathway. The other program is the PACE program at the University of La Verne, a private four-year university.

Table 3. Length of program benefits in California College Promise programs (n = 121)

Length of program	Number of programs	Percentage of total programs
Less than 1 year	6	5
1 year	63	52
2 years	46	38
3 years	1	1
Up to 4 years	5	4

Twenty-two percent of programs provide financial support beyond tuition

By definition, College Promise programs include some degree of financial support for students. In California, 83 programs (69 percent) limit financial support to tuition and fees (table 4). An additional 28 (23 percent) provide financial support that exceeds the price of tuition and fees to cover specific costs, such as books and/or transportation. Some programs allow students to choose how to use the additional financial support. Students who participate in the Salinas Valley Promise, for example, can elect to receive a laptop or the equivalent value in a voucher to spend on books or on-campus meals.

Ten programs (8 percent) provide one-time grants to students instead of guaranteeing to pay for student tuition. Most of these programs provide between $500 and $1,000 to students per year. The PACE program at the private University of La Verne provides at least $10,000 per year.

Table 4. Type of financial support in California College Promise programs (n = 121)

Type of financial support	Number of programs	Percentage of total programs
Tuition and fees only	83	69
Financial support beyond tuition and fees[a]	28	23
Set dollar amount[b]	10	8

[a]Financial support beyond tuition and fees includes book scholarships, transportation passes, and other non-tuition financial support. [b]The programs that provide a set dollar amount to some or all program participants include Stockton Scholars, Oakland Promise, Richmond Promise, Santa Cruz County College Commitment, AB 19 at Las Positas College, Cerro Coso Promise, San Marcos Promise, Santiago Canyon College Promise, Southwestern College Promise, and the Partnership for College Access (PACE) at the University of La Verne.

Over three quarters of programs provide students with academic support and student services

One hallmark of College Promise programs in California is that most provide students with more than just financial support. They provide students with a wide range of activities throughout their college years and sometimes during high school, as well as during the summer before they enter college. Of 121 programs, 92 (76 percent) offer academic support and/or student services, usually multiple types. Further, 82 (68 percent) require students to participate in at least one form of support, such as attending at least one academic counseling session per semester or participating in a minimum number of student success workshops per year (table 5). The South Bay College Promise program ensures that its students have comprehensive support by requiring them to participate in an existing student support program, such as First Year Experience or Extended Opportunities Programs and Services.

More than half of California's programs (72 programs, 60 percent) provide College Promise students with academic support during college. Tutoring, learning communities, group study sessions, workshops on academic success strategies, advising and transfer planning, a designated College Promise counselor, and early alert feedback on academic progress are examples of supports that students receive through College Promise programs. Some programs also provide academic support to prospective or committed

College Promise students through summer transition-to-college programming. These programs include academic preparation in math and English, tutoring, mentoring, and help with completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and college applications.

Sixty-two (51 percent) of the programs also provide student services for their students such as mentoring and peer mentoring, success coaching, financial literacy classes, and/or guidance to navigate the social and cultural elements of college, career, and life. The Riverside City College Promise program, for example, offers students a series of college success workshops on such topics as study tips and maximizing financial aid, and it requires students to attend at least one workshop per term. The Moreno Valley College Promise Initiative includes an extended Summer Bridge program, success coaches, peer-to-peer mentoring, and cohort programs in which groups of College Promise students share coursework and support structures.

Students in 24 of California's College Promise programs (20 percent) receive career planning support and experiences through workshops, lectures, trainings, job shadowing, and company visits. The College of the Desert's plEDGE program requires that students attend a career readiness workshop and participate in 10 hours of community service that can be fulfilled through job shadowing or an internship. The Long Beach College Promise program collaborates with a local workforce development initiative to provide internship opportunities. Several programs also provide prospective students with information about career opportunities related to various programs of study.

Table 5. Availability of non-financial supports in California College Promise programs (n = 121)

Type of support	Number of programs	Percentage of total programs
Academic support	72	56
Student services	62	51
Career/workforce support (internships, career workshops)	24	20

Note. The total number of programs in this table exceeds the total number of programs in this analysis because many programs include support in more than one category (academic, student services, and career/workforce).

About 10 percent of California's programs focus on low-income students

Thirteen College Promise programs (11 percent) either provide benefits exclusively to low-income students or provide some benefits to all eligible students with additional benefits available for low-income students (table 6). For example, only students who are eligible for the need-based CCPG can participate in the College Promise program at Las Positas College. These students have their tuition waived through the CCPG and receive an additional $500 for books or other education-related expenses per semester.[14]

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[14] Las Positas College. (2019). AB19 'The California College Promise Scholarship' at Las Positas College [Web page]. Retrieved from http://www.laspositascollege.edu/financialaid/ab19.php

A variation of this model at the Free City program at San Francisco City College differentiates benefits based on student needs. Although the San Francisco program provides a tuition waiver for all eligible students regardless of family income, CCPG-eligible students receive an additional grant equivalent to $46 for each credit unit a student is taking (e.g., a student taking 10 units receives a $460 grant).

Table 6. Eligibility based on family financial status (i.e., income-based eligibility) in California College Promise programs (n = 121)

Income-related eligibility requirement	Number of programs	Percentage of total programs
Only low-income students are eligible for program	7	6
Low-income students receive more benefits than other students	6	5
Students of all income levels are eligible and receive the same benefits	108	89

Almost one fifth of California's programs have limited capacity

Twenty-four of the 121 programs (18 percent) in this analysis limit the number of students who can participate rather than include all eligible students. These programs are included in this analysis because they do not employ subjective selection processes. Instead, eligible students are admitted based on the order in which they apply, until the program reaches capacity.

Despite rapid growth in programs from 2014 to 2019, the California College Promise movement is still in its infancy

The number of College Promise programs in California almost doubled every year from 2014 to 2018. Multiple factors contributed to this rapid growth, most notably the 2017 legislation instituting financial support for College Promise programs in community colleges, beginning in fall 2018.[15] It was during these years — 2017, 2018, and 2019 — that the highest number of new programs were launched (table 7). Given the large number of recently implemented programs, the average program age is little more than a year (1.19).

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[15] For a discussion of the factors that contributed to the growth of College Promise in California, including College Promise legislation AB 19 and AB 2, see Rauner, M., & Lundquist, S. (2019). *College Promise in California: Recommendations for advancing implementation, impact, and equity*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Available at https://californiacollegepromise.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/California-College-Promise-Legislation-Brief-FINAL.pdf .

Table 7. Number of new College Promise programs per year, 1998–2019 (n = 121)

First active program year	Number of new programs	Percentage of total programs	Total programs
1998	1	1	1
2003	1	1	2
2006	1	1	3
2008	1	1	4
2009	1	1	5
2012	2	2	7
2014	3	2	10
2016	14	12	24
2017	32	26	56
2018	50	41	106
2019	15	12	121

Discussion

The data presented in this brief show that most College Promise programs in California exceed the minimum expectation of providing students with financial support to attend college. Although the specific non-financial characteristics of programs vary, most also provide academic support, student services, career planning and support, or some combination of these features.

When reviewing the data in this brief, it is tempting to categorize program features as having either a positive or negative impact on equity or student outcomes. However, such as assessment would be an oversimplification.

For example, one may be tempted to assume that programs allowing students to attend any college or university are preferable to those that require students to attend a specific college. Consider, however, that a college- or university-specific program has the ability to create structures that can actively support students to successfully navigate their way through a college's or university's specific requirements in a way that a city or nonprofit-based program cannot.

Fewer and less restrictive College Promise eligibility requirements would minimize barriers that students face to enter College Promise programs, especially for students from groups that are less likely to attend college. However, because programs with less-restrictive eligibility criteria are likely to be bigger, program resources may be spread more thinly and they may be unable to provide robust financial and non-financial support for students. In the case of programs without secure long-term funding, slowly scaling up the program may be preferable to promising more than can be delivered and having to scale back.

Another factor to consider is whether the eligibility requirements are aligned with the program's goals. For example, equity-oriented programs may require participants to be from low-income families. While restrictive, this eligibility requirement could enable programs to provide more extensive support to those students who are the intended focus of the program. On the other hand, requiring a minimum high school GPA, enrollment directly after high school, and full-time student status may limit program access for students who are underrepresented in higher education and who are a high-priority student population for many programs.[16]

Similar debates relate to how long students can be served in a College Promise program. Longer periods of support seem preferable, but given limited resources, it is possible that shorter programs may be better able to provide support structures that are more robust and, thus, better able to serve students in a program's high-priority population.

Likewise, simply including non-financial support in College Promise programs does not necessarily improve student outcomes. The type of support, whether it is required, and the exact combination of support features may make a difference in success rates, especially for some student groups. For example, students who are the first in their family to attend college may benefit from programs that orient them to college life and provide college coaches. It is also important to consider that requiring students to participate in multiple, time-consuming student support activities may be especially challenging for low-income students because it may further stretch the limited time they can spend on their studies, work, and family obligations.

Because the number of College Promise programs has risen so rapidly in recent years, there are more questions than there are answers about what works best, and for which students. As programs mature, more data will become available about who participates, what their needs are, and the effects of the various program models on student outcomes, especially students from groups that have been underrepresented in higher education.

Additional questions needing to be studied in the next few years include: What types and levels of support predict college access, persistence, and completion? Which student groups benefit and which do not? Do certain College Promise models help reduce achievement gaps?

The answers to these questions are critical as programs seek to revise their design to help achieve the equity goals of their institutions. The CCPG intends to continue its analyses of College Promise programs. The next brief will examine the changes in the College Promise landscape following the passage of AB 19 and AB 2, which authorize how community colleges can and cannot use their state College Promise funds. Future research will also begin to answer the broader questions about the impact of various program types on student outcomes.

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[16] Horn, L., Cataldi, E. F., & Sikora, A. (2005). *Waiting to attend college: Undergraduates who delay their postsecondary enrollment: Postsecondary education descriptive analysis report (NCES 2005-152)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005152.pdf; Hubbard, C., Rolfes, M., Hussak, L., Richards, R., & Hinnenkamp, K. (2018). *Reframing the question of equity: Understanding the growing importance of success for community colleges' part-time students*. Washington D.C.: EAB Global, Inc. Retrieved from https://eab.com/research/community-college/whitepaper/new-equity-data-shows-you-should-focus-on-part-time-students/

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