

# Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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## Minority-Serving Institutions and College Promise Programs: Supporting and Advancing the Success of Students of Color

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Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) play a critical role in ensuring college access and opportunity for underserved and underrepresented students. Although MSIs encompass only a small percentage of all colleges and universities, they are disproportionately responsible for educating and preparing a large proportion of students of color, as well as all students, for their future careers. More specifically, currently eligible and funded MSIs comprise only 19% of all postsecondary institutions, but enroll 34% of all college students, and over 51% of all students of color in the United States.

Undeniably, the strength of America's economy relies on the success of all of our students, including students of color. However, in the 21st century, a high school education no longer suffices for career and community success. Achieving prosperity centers on providing every student, from all backgrounds, the pathway to enter and complete a quality postsecondary education without acquiring burdensome and debilitating college debt. To address these goals, College Promise, a national, non-partisan initiative of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, is working to empower colleges, communities, states and their education, business, government, and philanthropy partners to enact solutions for students to graduate from college, advance in the workforce, becoming lifelong learners, and build rewarding lives throughout our nation.

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College Promise programs enable hardworking and resilient students to complete a college degree or certificate, starting in America's community colleges. With this in mind, supporting Minority-Serving Institutions through College Promise programs is a logical and proactive step to increase the number of students attending college, as well as serve the large number of students and students of color who are currently attending MSIs. Thus, this research brief will discuss the potential of MSI-based College Promise programs to enhance the college access, completion, and success of America's students.

## Background

In the past few years, over 360 College Promise programs have been established in 47 states, and 31 state legislatures and their governors have enacted their unique version of the Promise. College Promise programs are "initiatives designed to guarantee tuition, fees and critical student supports for eligible students," where they are "Built for Completion," matching the promise of college access with the promise of college graduation" [1]. They are increasingly becoming popular, so much so that local and state governments, along with community-based organizations and the private sector, are collaborating with colleges, universities, and K-12 schools to create and implement these programs.

These partnerships provide both scholarship dollars and mentorship opportunities to eligible students in order to facilitate greater college enrollment, completion rates, and in-demand workforce pathways. Simply put, these programs offer students the opportunity to attend a four-year, two-year, or technical college with tuition and fees covered by the Promise scholarship. While models and funding structures vary, the objective of each of these programs is to increase access to higher education, reduce costs, and improve retention and completion rates – in order to meet the demands of a growing global economy, while investing in America's future by achieving greater educational equity.

## What are Minority-Serving Institutions?

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) are defined as "institutions of higher education enrolling populations with significant percentages of undergraduate minority students, or that serve certain populations of minority students under various programs created by Congress" [2]. More specifically, MSIs are federally-funded designations for colleges and universities that serve high proportions of students of color. Eleven MSIs are currently funded and they include:

- **Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI)**
- **Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNH)**
- **Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)**
- **Historically Black Graduate Institutions (HBGI)**
- **Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI)**
- **Hispanic-Serving Institutions Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (HSI STEM)**
- **Master's Degree Programs at HBCUs (HBCU Masters)**
- **Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTI)**
- **Predominantly Black Institutions (PBI)**
- **Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA)**
- **Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities (TCCU)**

MSIs play a critical role in enhancing the college-going experiences and educational outcomes of students of color. Given the historical exclusion of students of color from higher education institutions, HBCUs and TCCUs were established to address the formal educational needs of African American and Native American students [3,4]. With the growth of the Latinx and Asian American and Pacific Islander populations over the past 50 years, Congress established HSIs and AANAPISIs at colleges and universities with a large enrollment of these populations.

Today, the purpose of MSIs is to serve low-income, first-generation, underserved, and underrepresented students of color in culturally engaging environments. Research has demonstrated that MSIs greatly benefit and excel at addressing the educational needs of students of color. For example, MSIs play a critical role in increasing student access and enrollment in higher education, particularly at community colleges [5]. Furthermore, of the MSIs that are community colleges, students often report higher rates of transfer to four-year universities, compared to non-MSIs [6,7,8]. Additionally, four-year MSIs have been reported to ensure higher completion rates compared to their non-MSI counterparts, for students of color [9], and graduates are typically successful in attending graduate school or obtaining gainful employment [10,11].

In order to achieve these outcomes, MSIs use a variety of curricular and co-curricular programming to positively impact student success, as well as specific and targeted outreach efforts in underserved communities of color. Some of these programs implement initiatives that offer validating classroom environments [12], positive identity development [13], as well as developing a civically engaged population and other democratic benefits [14]. This strategic approach to education and enhanced pedagogy benefits students of color in meaningful ways and reflects the importance of diversity-based learning. Indeed, policymakers have often called upon MSIs as critical and necessary vehicles to implement and achieve these positive educational outcomes for students of color [15].

Given that one primary mission of MSIs is to increase college access and improve college completion rates, especially for an overwhelming proportion of students, MSIs are obvious sites to establish and grow quality College Promise programs.

### **Minority-Serving Institutions with College Promise Programs**

Currently, there are 253 Minority-Serving Institutions integrated with College Promise programs. These MSI-based Promise programs are located across 30 different states and growing. California has the highest number of MSI-based promise programs with 82 institutions; while Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Kansas, and Ohio each have one institution. Of MSI-based Promise programs, the majority, 145 out of the 253, are designated Hispanic-Serving Institutions STEM. Predominantly Black Institutions account for 26, while 28 Historically Black Colleges or Universities maintain Promise programs.

There are 76 Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions and five Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities. Interestingly, many Promise programs are located at MSIs with dual or multi-designations.

It is no surprise that Congressional legislation to establish a formal federal-state partnership investment to support College Promise programs would include a large and significant role for Minority-Serving Institutions. In 2015, U.S. Representative Bobby Scott (VA-3) and Senator Tammy Baldwin (WI) introduced the America's College Promise Act, which sought to establish a direct federal investment in College Promise programs throughout the United States. Furthermore, their bill explicitly created a competitive grant program for MSI-based College Promise programs. The bill would provide an average of nearly \$1 billion per year, over the next 10 years for MSIs-based Promise programs. As Congress focuses on reauthorizing the Higher Education Act (HEA), there is also hope that MSI-based College Promise programs will be incorporated into the HEA. More recently, College Promise, as a leader in the Promise movement, outlined the details of what a policy framework for a national Promise might look like with the [College Promise for All](#) policy brief, in which they advocate for targeted funding and support for MSIs in any proposed federal legislation. The Biden administration's American Families plan has also proposed a major federal investment to make 2 years of community college free nationwide, with an explicit \$46 billion investment in HBCUs, TCCUs, and MSIs.

## Conclusion

Although there is a growing area of research on College Promise programs, a review of relevant research indicates a limited discussion on MSIs [16]. With COVID-19 recovery opportunities and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act on the horizon, more research focused on MSIs is sorely needed to inform federal and state policies in this area. And given that legislation could significantly enhance evidence-based investments in College Promise programs, especially for colleges and universities with Minority-Serving Institution status, there is great potential for MSIs to begin considering, designing, and implementing Promise programs to serve some of our most underrepresented students. While there are currently only 253 MSIs with College Promise programs, there are nearly 800 MSIs across the majority of states and U.S. territories. Establishing College Promise programs on MSI campuses supported by engaged regional partners could enable eligibility for potentially new federal, state, local, and tribal funding streams ahead. But most importantly, doing so creates great potential and possibility to further the educational and workforce needs of our most underserved communities, while driving America's prosperity in the years ahead.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: [collegepromise.org](http://collegepromise.org) or email [info@collegepromise.org](mailto:info@collegepromise.org)

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