Traditional-aged College Students (18–24 Years): How College Promise Programs Can Support College Access, Persistence and Completion — Chapter Reprint

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Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated

Veterans

Dreamers

Traditional Age

Adults

Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations

The college promise movement is aimed toward making the attendance and completion of college affordable for eligible Americans in hundreds of local communities and states throughout the United States. Many college promise programs are designed with the intent of enabling students to start and complete college degree and/or postsecondary certificate programs without taking on unmanageable college debt. Two significant issues were examined at the June 2019 symposium, "Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations," sponsored by ETS and the College Promise Campaign (CPC) — with the generous support of the ECMC Foundation and the Strada Education Network. Those issues were:

- How would college promise programs be enhanced if they were reconceived with a deeper understanding and intent to accommodate the diversity within the postsecondary student population?

- How could extant and new funding models be aligned to leverage the financial support needed to develop and implement subpopulation-targeted ecosystem designs?

ETS and CPC identified five student populations to initially consider for tailored college promise program designs (see Figure 1):

1. traditional-aged college students (18–24 years old),
2. adult students,
3. undocumented students (DREAMers),
4. student veterans and
5. justice-impacted students (incarcerated/formerly incarcerated students)[1].

Figure 1 The Five College Promise Student Populations

| Traditional Students | Adult Students | Undocumented Students | Student Veterans | Justice-Impacted Students |

Next, ETS and CPC invited scholars, practitioners and student representatives to join a design team and co-create the college promise program for their student population.

The symposium united design teams with members of the higher education community, scholars, policymakers, student representatives and other stakeholders to review and comment on comprehensive ecosystems of support for the five postsecondary subpopulations as they make their way to, through and beyond college. The premise was that postsecondary students across subpopulations vary in their needs and benefits accrued from assistance with academic support, health care, employment, transportation, food, housing and other financial support as they navigate college access and success.

[1] During the symposium, the design team introduced the terminology of justice impacted to describe all students involved in the criminal justice system — noting that student involvement with the probation and court system without incarceration may also be a challenging issue while pursuing their postsecondary education.

5. Traditional-Aged College Students (18–24 Years): How College Promise Programs Can Support College Access, Persistence, and Completion

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The US economy has shifted from the post–WWII era, when workers with a high school education could find solid middle-class jobs, to 2020, when 65% of all jobs will require at least some postsecondary education or training beyond a high school degree (Carnevale et al., 2013; Carnevale & Rose, 2015). Preparing students for the current labor market requires greater access to higher education, but several barriers exist. First, the cost of higher education has increased over the last 10 years by an average of 45%, while income has declined by 7% (Lumina Foundation, 2015). As a result, higher education seems out of reach for many students, especially first-generation students and those from families with low incomes (Poutré et al., 2017). Second, a greater share of college students attends 2-year degree-granting institutions—from 27% in 1970 to 33% in 2015 (Snyder et al., 2019).

With the overwhelming majority of community colleges offering open-access admissions, the wide range of participating students and lower levels of funding have generally produced student persistence and completion rates that fall far behind those of 4-year public and private institutions (Bailey, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Finally, the persistent economic and racial inequities in the US education system lead to inequitable outcomes (Cahalan et al., 2017). Students who attend the nation's least-resourced schools in terms of teacher quality and longevity, facilities, and learning supports are less likely to enter college. Those who do enroll are less likely to be academically prepared and more likely to require remedial education, which increases time to graduation and is associated with a lower likelihood of degree completion (Jimenez et al., 2016).

College promise programs have the potential to provide students with the support they need to access and complete their education and prepare for the demands of the changing workforce. Although there is no single definition of college promise, most scholars and practitioners agree that college promise programs provide financial support to eligible students who live or attend school in a particular place (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Increasingly, promise programs collaborate with partners from both within and beyond institutions of higher education to provide the academic support, student support, and basic services that students need to prepare for, gain access to, and successfully complete an education that prepares them for a living-wage career (Iriti et al., 2017; Miller-Adams, 2015; Rauner, 2018; Rauner et al., 2019). Further, because many college promise programs are either based in community colleges or provide support for students who attend them, they often serve student populations that are predominately students of color, students in low-income situations, and first-generation students.

In this report, we focus on college students who are between 18 and 24 years of age—the traditional-aged college students. Traditional-aged college students have declined as a proportion of total college enrollees (from 69% in 1970 to 58% in 2016), yet their overall number has increased from 5.9 million students in 1970 to 11.6 million in 2015 (Snyder et al., 2019). We describe the characteristics of today's traditional-aged college student,[9] outline a college promise framework that can support this subgroup of students, explore how programs can be strengthened through internal and external partnerships, identify strategies for maintaining financial sustainability over time, and suggest a process for incorporating promise program research and evaluation.

Traditional-Aged College Students

College students today are notably different from the student of the past, who enrolled in college the fall after high school graduation, attended a 4-year institution, took a full load of classes, lived on campus, and completed a baccalaureate degree in 4 years (Chung et al., 2014). Today, nearly 75% of college students embody at least one of seven characteristics that were once considered nontraditional:

- Being independent for financial aid purposes,
- Having one or more dependents,
- Being an unmarried caregiver,
- Not having a traditional high school diploma,

- Delaying postsecondary enrollment after high school graduation,
- Attending school part-time, and/or
- Being employed full-time (Walton Radford et al., 2015).

These differences are not fully explained by the increase in the number of students who begin or return to college as adults; they are also characteristic of traditional-aged students — of today and tomorrow who are 18 – 24 years old.

While many traditional-aged college students attend college directly after high school, others' paths to college are not direct, placing them in the upper end of the 18- to 24-year age range. In 2017, 1.9 million (67%) of high school completers enrolled in college by the following October; 33% did not (McFarland et al., 2019).[10] Students may delay college enrollment or stop-out due to financial, family, and/or health issues. Others may suspend their studies because they question their intended field of study but decide to reengage with a new field later. College promise programs that target traditional-aged students will want to consider these students in their program design.

Demographics of Traditional-Aged College Students

Understanding the demographics of this segment of the college student population helps teams design comprehensive college promise programs that can enable students to access higher education, to thrive once they are enrolled, and to successfully complete their education goals.

The data needed to gain this understanding extend beyond typical student demographics such as age and race to include measures of family background, employment, and basic needs. Selected national-level demographic data for traditional-aged students are highlighted here. While these data provide national-level context for traditional-aged students, we recommend that college promise programs use data from the student populations they are serving to design a program that meets their needs.

- *Type of higher education institution:* In 2017, almost one fourth (23%) of students ages 18 – 24 attended a 2-year higher education institution (Snyder et al., 2019).
- *Enrollment status:* In 2014, 38% of all 2- and 4-year college students enrolled on a part-time basis (Snyder et al., 2016). Data in this study were not disaggregated by age.
- *Racial and ethnic diversity:* Today's traditional-aged students are racially and ethnically diverse (Espinosa et al., 2019). In 1976, only 16% of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions were people of color. By 2015, the percentage of students of color increased by more than 25 points to 42%[11] and is expected to make up the majority of college students by 2023 (Snyder et al., 2016).
- *First-generation students:* In AY 2011 – 2012, over a quarter (27%) of students at 2- and 4-year institutions between 19 and 23 years old were the first in their families to attend college (Skomsvold, 2014), a known barrier to college access and persistence (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The percentage of first-generation students was much lower (18%) among first-time, full-time freshmen at 4-year colleges and universities in 2017 (Stolzenberg et al., 2019).
- *Employment status:* During the 2011 – 2012 AY, 9% of college students who were 18 years old or younger reported working full-time (35 hours or more per week) and 36% worked part-time (less than 35 hours per week; Walton Radford et al., 2015). A higher percentage of students between the ages of 19 and 23 years were employed while taking courses — 16% reported working full-time and 45.1% reported working part-time that same year (Walton Radford et al., 2015).
- *Student – Parents:* During the 2011 – 2012 AY, 10% of students younger than 24 at 2- and 4-year institutions had dependent children. Two percent of all students that year were parents who were 18 years of age or younger[12] (Walton Radford et al., 2015).
- *Basic Needs:* In their national survey of 167,000 college students, Baker-Smith et al. (2020) found that 32% of 2-year students and 20% of 4-year students were both food and housing insecure in the past year and that individuals from marginalized and/or vulnerable backgrounds (people of color, LGBTQ students, former foster kids, disabled students, formerly incarcerated students, and Pell Grant recipients) were at greater risk of basic needs insecurity than their nonmarginalized/vulnerable counterparts. Understanding whether the basic needs of food, shelter, and health care are being met for traditional-aged college students is important to consider when designing a college promise program that meets students' needs.

Food and Shelter

Among students of all ages who attended 2- or 4-year institutions in the 2011–2012 AY, the majority (79%) lived off campus (Blagg & Rosenbloom, 2017). On-campus housing is most common for freshmen at 4-year institutions — 77% in 2013 reported living in a college resident hall. For all students, the cost of room and board is outpacing inflation, further contributing to the increasing cost of a college education (Eagan et al., 2013).

A 2018 study of the basic needs of 86,000 students attending 2- and 4-year institutions across the United States provides a more complete understanding of the context of traditional-aged students' lives (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). The data presented here combines two age groups from the study (18–20 and 21–25) to reflect the reality of the traditional-aged college students addressed in this report.

- *Housing insecurity:* 38% of traditional-aged college students at 2-year institutions and 34% at 4-year institutions experienced housing insecurity.
- *Homelessness:* 13% of traditional-aged college students at 2-year institutions and 9% at 4-year institutions reported being homeless, as measured by a positive response to any one of the following survey responses: not knowing where you were going to sleep (even for one night), being thrown out of home, staying in an abandoned building or other place not meant for housing, and being evicted from home or staying in a shelter.
- *Food insecurity:* 39% of traditional-aged college students at 2-year institutions and 33% at 4-year institutions experienced food insecurity.

Data from all age groups show that students from certain demographic, economic, and life experiences are disproportionately represented in each of the basic needs categories (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). At least 50% of the students in the following subgroups experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness: students of color; Pell-eligible students; former military; student-parents; students with a psychological disability; transgender students and nonbinary students; and students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or neither heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). In particular, former foster youth and students who have been convicted of a crime fare worse than all other student subgroups. Of former foster youth, 66% reported food insecurity, 77% reported housing insecurity, and 38% reported homelessness. Of students who were previously convicted of a crime, 64% reported food insecurity, 81% reported housing insecurity, and 40% reported homelessness (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

Mental Health Needs

Studies show that there are adverse academic consequences for students experiencing social and emotional difficulties (Douce & Keeling, 2014), a significant issue for traditional-aged college students. Ninety-five percent of college counseling center directors surveyed said the number of students with significant psychological problems was a growing concern (Mistler et al., 2012). Students also report high rates of mental-health issues, despite being in good to excellent health overall (American College Health Association, 2018). Twenty-six percent of students reported that anxiety affected their individual academic performance, and 17% reported that depression had an adverse impact on their ability to succeed in college (American College Health Association, 2018). In that same survey, 53% of students reported feelings of hopelessness, 86% reported feeling overwhelmed, and 63% reported feeling very lonely over the previous 12 months. Another analysis found that one in four freshmen at 4-year colleges or universities used student psychological services in 2018 (Higher Education Research Institute, 2018).

College Promise Framework for Supporting Traditional-Aged College Students

Because college promise programs are as unique as the school districts, regions, or states they belong to and the students they serve, a single college promise model does not exist for traditional-aged students. Instead, we provide a framework that incorporates features that address the needs of traditional-aged college students. For each feature, we summarize the research on the potential impact on student outcomes, describe its salient characteristics, and highlight ways that partners can participate in their implementation. College promise program teams can use this framework to design or augment a design that can provide students with a robust set of supports.

The goals of each college promise program will inform its design and implementation. Administrators can expect tensions and tradeoffs with each design decision. For instance, if a program subsidizes tuition costs for all high school
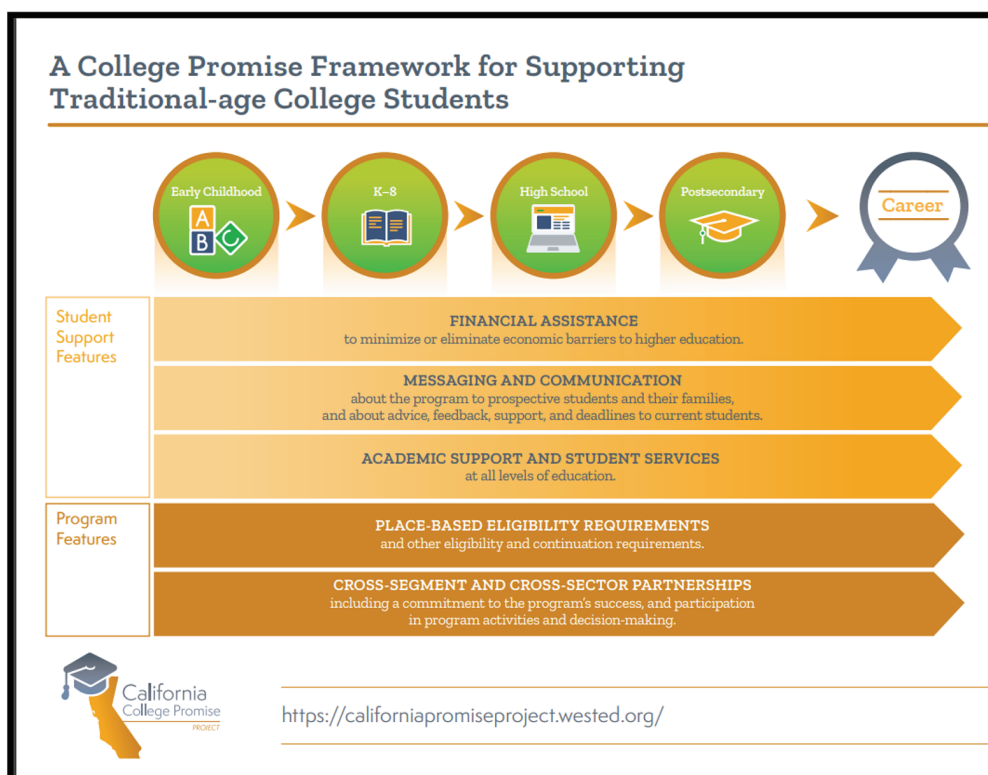
Figure 5.1 A college promise framework for supporting traditional-aged college students.

graduates regardless of financial need with the goal of developing a college-going culture, it will be easy to communicate about the program and fund more students but may result in less funding for additional support for at-risk students (for example, students in low-income situations, students with lower English proficiency, etc.). In contrast, a program with the primary goal of closing equity gaps may narrow the eligibility requirements to a high-need population of students (for example, students in low-income situations, students of color, etc.) to provide more robust support, but that would come at the expense of the number of students reached.

Framework Features

The college promise framework for supporting traditional-aged college students includes three student support features (financial assistance, messaging and communication, and academic support and student services) and two program features (place-based eligibility requirements and cross-segment and cross-sector partnerships; see Figure 5.1).

The two program features are found at the bottom of the graphic—place-based eligibility requirements and cross-segment and cross-sector partnerships. Place-based eligibility requirements are one of the defining features of college promise programs and should be tightly aligned with the goals of the program to ensure that the program is serving the intended student populations. The designation of place can vary, but it is generally based on school attendance, place of residence, or both. Other common types of eligibility and continuation requirements include merit, need, age, timing of enrollment, credits enrolled, FAFSA completion, and participation in specific student support activities. A program's requirements determine the number of eligible students, their demographic profile, and thus the support systems they need to succeed. The specific parameters of each requirement have equity implications as well, as described in detail in *The College Promise Guidebook: For California and Beyond* (Rauner et al., 2019). The second program feature is cross-segment and cross-sector partnerships. Descriptions of typical college promise partnerships and the roles that partners can play are incorporated in the descriptions of each of the three student support features.

The three student support features highlighted at the top of the graphic are the financial assistance provided to students; the messaging and communication strategies to increase awareness of the program to all stakeholder groups and to provide

reminders, advice and support to college promise students once they join a program; and the academic and support services linked to the program. The following sections describe each student support feature in more detail, including the literature that shows its importance in student success and the ways that cross-segment and cross-sector partners can collaborate to strengthen the feature.

Financial Assistance

Financial support is a central feature of college promise programs, most often providing coverage for tuition (Perna & Leigh, 2018). However, the cost of tuition is a fraction of the total cost of attending college—only 20% for community college students, according to the Institute for College Access & Success (2016). Other costs include required student fees, housing, books and materials, transportation, and other living expenses. Findings suggest that when community college students in low-income situations received multiple public benefits (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], or TANF-funded child care), they enrolled in more academic terms, completed more credits overall, and were more likely to earn a college credential than students who received only one benefit (Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016). A 2016 study found that when students were provided with financial support beyond tuition and fees, they were more likely to enroll full-time and work fewer hours (Broton et al., 2016).

The level of financial support provided to students and the disbursement model adopted are key decisions for college promise program designers. First-dollar programs, which provide a fixed amount of funding to students regardless of other awards they receive, are most beneficial to students in low-income situations because they can use other financial aid to cover additional expenses that might otherwise have to be funded by increased work hours or expanding debt through loans. On the other hand, last-dollar programs, which cover the remaining portion of promised costs after federal, state, and other aid is applied, are at risk of disproportionately benefitting students who have the least financial need. Regardless of the disbursement model selected, there are strategies that allow programs to ensure equitable support. One is to provide a higher level of financial support to a smaller segment of students by limiting eligibility to, for example, first-generation students in low-income situations. Another is to provide different benefits for different students, such as providing tuition coverage for all students, as well as book vouchers, transportation costs, and free childcare on campus to students in low-income situations.

College promise programs can leverage support from partners to provide students with the financial assistance they need. In addition to foundations and individual donors, who can provide funding for student financial support, transportation agencies can provide subsidized or discounted passes for public transportation, local government agencies and nonprofits can help coordinate housing and food subsidies, and financial services companies can provide financial education and planning. To improve online access, Internet service providers and cellular phone companies can provide services to students unable to afford basic connectivity, especially those in rural areas with high service rates and less robust technology infrastructure.

Messaging and Communication

To Students, Families, and the Community

Research shows that the right messaging at the right time can influence students' decision-making related to college attendance. Pluhta and Penny (2013) found that pairing messaging about promised financial support with intensive outreach to local high school students helped quadruple the number of graduates who matriculated into college in one low-income, urban community. In the Kalamazoo Promise program, coordinated messaging from the community helped shape perceptions of the program, and recipients of the scholarship were found to have "significant extrinsic motivation" to excel academically (Collier & Parnther, 2018, p. 8). But getting the message right is not easy, nor does it guarantee that the target audiences will fully understand the critical details. Even when the content is clear and consistent over time, some students and families may lack access to accurate information (Perna & Steele, 2011). The Kalamazoo Promise program, for example, has remained stable in structure and message since it began in 2005. Despite overall positive perceptions about the program, some students lacked confidence in or did not understand the program requirements and benefits, especially African American students and students in low-income situations as well as students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Miron et al., 2012).

Crafting and broadcasting a simple and understandable core message that describes a college promise program can capture the attention of the target audiences and shape the public perception of the program. Although the core message will remain consistent across all program communications, different audiences require slightly different messages based on their specific interests and concerns and the actions they need to take as a result of that message. Ideal outcomes, for example, are for students to take steps to join the program, for parents to encourage their children to attend college, and for potential donors to be inspired to contribute.

College promise programs can employ a broad range of communication modalities. Messages to students and their families can be shared through K–12 classroom presentations, commitment contracts, home page web messages, school banners, and back-to-school-night programs. Messages can also be integrated into education planning, campus visits, and FAFSA/California Dream Act completion workshops. Messaging to community groups, local government officials, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and potential funders can be transmitted through email and social media campaigns, as well as through local newspapers, magazines, community newsletters and blogs, and existing community events.

To College Promise Students

Communication to college promise students once they arrive on campus builds on, but is qualitatively different from, previous messages that they received as potential students and during the summer between high school and college. Because students are on campus, the messages can be delivered at required in-person orientation sessions and meetings, during required college promise courses, on posters around campus, and through on-campus partners, such as counselors who may meet with college promise students during required sessions. A variety of communication technologies can complement the in-person modalities and be used to track student participation in required support activities, reach out to students congratulating them on progress and course success, provide just-in-time reminders about deadlines and support opportunities, and signal the need for action when an early alert report is submitted by a professor. Higher education institutions in Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee reported increases in retention and graduation rates after implementing big data approaches to monitoring student success (Snelling, 2017). Another study showed gains in achievement and persistence for academically at-risk students when they were exposed to an early and frequent learning analytics feedback system (Espinoza & Genna, 2018).

Early alert systems provide college administrators with timely data on students whose academic performance and other campus-related behaviors indicate they may be at risk of course failure or dropping out (Tampke, 2013). Direct text messaging to students to encourage completion of specified continuation milestones, such as renewing the FAFSA, showed an increase in reenrolling for sophomore year (Castleman & Page, 2016).

Academic Support and Student Services

College promise leaders cannot rely exclusively on financial assistance to ensure student access and success, particularly for students in low-income situations and students of color (Perna & Kurban, 2013). Students from low-income communities are less likely to have the information and support needed to gain access to college, to be prepared to navigate the complexities of college life, and to be prepared academically to succeed (De La Rosa, 2006; Harris et al., 2018; Roderick et al., 2009). College promise programs can provide the additional support needed through academic support and student services.

There is evidence that combining financial support with academic support and student services can increase college persistence and other student outcomes (Deming & Dynarski, 2009). The Detroit Promise program provided incentivized coaching meetings to a sample of their students and found a positive effect on persistence, full-time enrollment, and overall credit accumulation (Ratledge et al., 2019). Positive effects were also found on measures of enrollment and retention in a randomized controlled trial of the Opening Doors program, which combined financial support with learning communities, counseling, and mentoring for community college students in low-income situations (Scrivener et al., 2008; Scrivener & Pih, 2007). In another study, students who participated in a program that combined financial support with advising, a first-year seminar, career services, and tutoring at three City University of New York community colleges had higher enrollment, credit completion and accumulation, and degree completion than students who did not participate in the program (Scrivener et al., 2015).

College promise programs across the country, notably in California, are beginning to address multiple barriers to college enrollment and completion by including academic and student support services into their programs (Rauner, 2018).

Academic Support and Student Services for Traditional-Age College Promise Students

Student support during K–12

- Tutoring
- Academic counseling
- Dual enrollment programs
- Parent and family engagment
- Field trips to campuses
- Academic preparation sessions
- FAFSA completion support
- College application support
- Financial literacy programming

Student support during the transition to college

- Orientation programs
- Academic boot camps
- Remedial courses with corequisites
- College success courses
- Career exploration sessions
- Educational plan development
- Messaging and Communication with available support from high school and college staff

Student support during college

- Comprehensive counseling services
- Peer mentoring and tutoring
- Academic advisement including developing and adjusting education plans
- Learning communities
- Student success workshops
- Career planning workshops
- Academic support (study groups, content tutoring, dedicated study space on campus, access to needed technology)
- Early alert feedback and associated supports

Figure 5.2 Academic support and student services for traditional-aged college promise students.

Support services encompass a wide range of programs and activities to help traditional-aged college students prepare for college, enroll in college, and persist to completion. These supports can be particularly valuable to students of color, students in low-income situations, and first-generation students. Figure 5.2 represents three critical intervals for delivering those supports, and the sections that follow include a summary of the literature and common student support strategies.

Student Support During K–12

Research shows that when students and their parents understand that college is an option and receive information and guidance about college costs and application processes, including completing the FAFSA, they are more likely to have a smooth transition to college (Bartik et al., 2017; Bettinger et al., 2012; Cornwell et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Harris et al., 2018; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Maynard et al., 2014; Radunzel, 2014; Roderick et al., 2009). College promise programs, along with their K–12 system partners and local media, can collaborate to provide targeted messages and specific supports to students and their families as early as kindergarten and throughout their high school years.

In addition to sharing program information, college promise programs can provide students with academic counseling, tutoring, and mentoring, as well as the opportunity to start college early through dual enrollment programs. To make the concept of college more tangible and to ease the future transition to college, faculty, staff, and enrolled college promise students can give presentations to potential students, parents, and guardians that might include field trips to college campuses for information sessions, campus tours, class visits, and academic "jump start" sessions. High schools, after-school programs, and colleges can also help students complete high-stakes tasks, such as the FAFSA and supplementary college promise applications. An example of a collaboration to increase FAFSA completion is taking place at the federal level between the Departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development. The project is sending messaging about FAFSA completion to a sample of students with housing vouchers who are identified by matching data across departments. The pilot will test, through a randomized controlled trial, the most effective messaging and modality (PD&R Edge, 2016).

Student Support During the Transition to College

"Summer melt," when recent high school graduates with plans to attend college do not enroll in the fall, is most common for first-generation students, students in low-income situations, and students of color (Castleman & Page, 2014). Interventions intended to combat this phenomenon have been shown to increase college enrollment among students who have less access to high-quality counseling support (Castleman & Page, 2015) and to have a lasting effect on persistence over several college semesters (Castleman et al., 2014). Given the number of students entering postsecondary education

who are deemed not academically college ready, many colleges offer summer bridge programs to aid in the transition (Sablan, 2014). Most summer bridge programs target participants who have been identified as needing additional transition support, such as underrepresented students and those in need of academic remediation. Other college promise programs see universal benefits and require participation in these activities for every entering student (Kallison Jr. & Stader, 2012).

In addition to summer bridge programs, college promise programs can provide a variety of other summer support services designed to minimize the effects of summer melt and to strengthen entering students for the rigors of college life ahead. These can include activities that build academic skills, foster a sense of belonging on campus, and ensure that students are able to navigate campus resources. Examples of such programs and services include orientation programs, remedial courses with co-requisites, academic boot camps, college success courses, career exploration, and educational plan development. Increasingly, college promise programs remain connected to students through personalized text messages that invite them to activities on campus, remind them to complete application and enrollment steps and introduce them to resources on campus. Some programs also offer two-way messaging to enable students to receive answers to their questions in time to take meaningful action. College promise partners that are integral to the success of summer interventions include high school staff, college faculty, counselors, and parents.

Student Support During College

Providing comprehensive support to college promise students after they enroll requires strong partnerships across the college. Internal collaboration will enable the program to leverage existing funding and student support structures, such as first year experience, federal TRIO programs, student athlete support programs, and peer mentoring programs. Programs that prepare students for higher education and other initiatives with eligibility requirements similar to those of college promise (such as equal opportunity programs, math-science initiatives, and career academies) are also potential partners. Advising and counseling services and academic support services in college promise programs are described in more detail in the following sections.

Advising and Counseling Services

When starting college, students commonly find it challenging to adjust to the higher expectations surrounding academic performance (Lee et al., 2013). First-year college students may frequently experience social and emotional challenges, such as low self-esteem and difficulty establishing key relationships with college personnel and fellow students, all of which may contribute to how they perform academically (Barr, 2007). In response to these realities, counseling services are becoming more comprehensive in scope, encompassing not just traditional academic planning, but also a range of social – emotional support services as well. An examination of the relationship between counseling experiences and college students' academic performance and retention in a sample of 10,009 college freshmen and transfer students found that students receiving counseling services were more likely to stay enrolled in school (Lee et al., 2013).

The types of advising and counseling services and modes of delivery vary across college promise programs but often include developing educational plans that map students' courses from entry to completion. Programs sometimes encourage or require students to join a learning community (with integrated advisement and other student support services), meet with academic advisors a specified number of times per term, participate in a mentoring program, and attend student success/career planning workshops. Required counseling sessions can also be activated in response to an early alert submitted by a faculty or staff member.

Academic Support Services

For some students, classroom instruction is not enough to facilitate learning without the assistance of academic supports outside normal course contact hours. More than three decades ago, Abrams and Jernigan (1984) showed that high-risk students exposed to tutoring, small classes, and a reading and study skills program improved their college GPA and their reading skills. Angrist et al. (2009) evaluated a combined financial aid and academic support intervention that included providing students with access to a peer-advising service, a supplemental instruction service, and study habit sessions. Peer advisors offered academic advice and suggestions for coping with the first year of school.

The study found that students who received both financial and academic interventions earned more credits and had a significantly lower rate of academic probation at the end of the academic year. Additional research has shown that student retention is positively impacted when students who enrolled in the same developmental writing and English courses also participated in course-specific learning communities with their peers (Barnes & Piland, 2010). A synthesis of six randomized control trials of learning communities in community colleges found small, positive effects on students attempting and earning credits in the designated subject area and on their overall academic progress (Weiss et al., 2012).

Academic support features in college promise programs include, but are not limited to, content tutoring, study groups, early alert feedback on academic progress while a course is active, a dedicated study space on campus, and access to needed technology. These support systems enable students to more deeply absorb course material, make meaning of the content with fellow students, prepare for tests, and refine skills to prepare academic deliverables, such as reports, research papers, and presentations. Most colleges offer optional academic support services, but college promise programs can require students to participate, especially in cases when faculty identify students who need extra support. When college promise programs are not implemented in a single college setting, the colleges where students attend are critical partners in ensuring that students get the support they need.

Program Costs and Strategies for Financial Sustainability

College promise programs must be financially sustainable to successfully create a college-going culture in the community and for students and families to have confidence in the program. Depending on the program design, costs will likely include direct financial subsidies to students, facilities for program offices and study centers, and costs associated with staff who coordinate the program, deliver advice and academic support to students, and guide students to resources within and beyond the institution. Other program costs include expenses associated with communications, fundraising, and evaluation efforts. The expenses associated with program partners are wide-ranging and can include staff time to coordinate and implement the program, transportation passes, food and housing subsidies, mentoring services, technology services, and complementary advertising space in newspapers and magazines.

A diverse group of funding sources also helps to underscore the value of the program to different stakeholders and, when braided together, can enable a program to offer unique and comprehensive benefits to students. Potential sources of funding include, but are not limited to, federal and state grant programs, existing public funding, direct municipal allocations, and tax revenues. Private funding sources can include corporate underwriting, philanthropic gifts, awards from private foundations and community-wide fund-raising events and campaigns.

The establishment of a college promise program endowment ensures that the program will be funded over time. Endowments can be built by investing funds from direct capital campaigns, committed high-net-worth individuals, small donors within a community, and corporate partners. Other sources of endowment funding can include lottery revenue and interest income. Community foundations often play a leading role in bringing promise investors together.

Research and Evaluation

When program goals are developed collaboratively with college promise program partners, they are likely to align closely with those of the education institution, labor market, local government, and the broader community. These goals guide the evaluation and research design that allows the program to track progress, identify areas for program improvement, and communicate program successes and needs to constituents, while contributing to the broader college promise knowledge base.

A first step in the evaluation and research process is to identify the student, program, and community outcomes that are associated with each goal and the data required to measure the outcomes. Some of the identified measures may already be systematically gathered by each partner, which can minimize data collection costs and be used as baseline data. For instance, K–12 partners will have education, contact, and background data on their students; social service agencies will have data on eligibility for federal assistance; nonprofit agencies may have data relevant to students who need extra support; and local governments and business organizations will have measures of community economic development. College promise student-level data will likely include the number of units enrolled and passed each session, English and math course enrollment and passing rates, grade point average (GPA) by session, semester to semester persistence, student

eligibility to transfer and successful transfer to a 4-year program (for community college students), and certificate or degree completion rates. All data should be disaggregated by race, income, gender, and other characteristics to understand variation in program experiences and track equity goals. Programs based in a single higher education institution or district can collaborate with the institutional research department to track college promise students and potentially compare their outcomes to that of a matched sample of non-college promise students. Programs with students who attend many different institutions can collect data from each institution, with permission from the student directly or as an embedded permission included in the college promise program application. For all programs, additional data will likely be needed, such as student participation in student support activities.

The process of sharing data is simplified in states with a cross-sector longitudinal data system. In all cases, it is likely that the team will need to develop a program-level data set. They can simultaneously support the development of a regional- or state-level system but should not expect it to be developed quickly, given the potential political hurdles and high cost. After signing a memorandum of understanding and data sharing agreements, leadership at each partner institution should identify staff with dedicated time to provide the data in a timely manner. One partner, likely the college promise lead institution, will also identify staff who are responsible for compiling the data in a secured system in a format for easy tracking and analysis.

Conclusion

The features of the college promise framework that are presented in this report can provide traditional-aged students with the support they need to prepare for, enroll in, and successfully complete their higher education goals. Traditional-aged students who are underrepresented in higher education—including students of color, students in low-income situations, and first-generation students—are likely to have the greatest need and receive the greatest benefit from these support structures. The framework presented here may also be a useful starting point for designing the college promise support systems for the other student populations in this project—adult students, DREAMers, student veterans, and incarcerated/formerly incarcerated students. In all cases, the support systems aligned with college promise programs are strongest when key stakeholders collaborate to design a program that aligns with the articulated goals, partners exist across segments and sectors, systems are implemented with long-term sustainability in mind, and data are used to inform continuous program improvements.

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See the full report for the bibliography (pp. 92-102) and page 24 for additional information and statistics on the traditional-aged college student population.

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