

MAKING GOOD ON

PROMISES

BY DAVID CONNER



COLLEGE PROMISE CAMPAIGN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MARTHA KANTER AND SENIOR STRATEGY ADVISER ANDRA ARMSTRONG DISCUSS THE GROWING POPULARITY OF TUITION-FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAMS.



Martha Kanter



Andra Armstrong

Q: Congratulations on the anniversary of the College Promise Campaign. Thinking back to the campaign's launch two years ago, how do your expectations from that time compare with the state of College Promise programs today?

When we launched the College Promise Campaign at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, on September 9, 2015, our expectations were high. We had identified about 50 College Promise initiatives. Our goal was to encourage exponential growth. Our mission was, and continues to be, to encourage more communities, cities, and states to recognize the need to establish College Promise programs and to inspire them to make community college or technical education as universal and free as public high schools have been for the last century.

Our approach is yielding some exciting results. Our latest tally now counts well over 200 College Promise initiatives in 35 states and statewide Promise programs in 11 states. Momentum is growing! Every new Promise program established is an inspiration and model for other communities and states to consider.

Just two years into our campaign, we are pleasantly surprised at its momentum. The dramatic pace is a reflection of the dire need for states and communities to find affordable ways to send more students to a community or technical college so they can get the education and training they need to enter the workforce and earn a living wage. We believe that none of this would have happened without the vision and leadership of cross-sector leaders committed to making free community college a reality.

The drumbeat for local and statewide Promise programs has picked up speed dramatically this year. The growth of statewide programs has been dramatic. Though approaches vary from state to state, we have now seen commitments to free college in 11 states, whether that's through legislation, grants, or scholarships: Tennessee, Oregon, Minnesota, California, Kentucky, Arkansas, Indiana, Hawaii, New York, Nevada, and Rhode Island.

We've spoken about how the proposed federal America's College Promise Act of 2015 gave way to a viable College Promise movement at state and local levels. How do College Promise programs continue to evolve, or have their characteristics and the ways by which they're administered stabilized into a fairly consistent pattern?

There is no one way that programs have evolved. Some use public funds, some use private donations, and others use a mixture of both. Some programs are statewide, some cover a single institution, and others serve entire cities, towns, counties, or regions.

But as the movement catches on, we find that many new programs find inspiration from those whose results have implemented sustainable solutions. Certainly, the Tennessee Promise has been the North Star for states that want to replicate

its success. Other governors are impressed that the Tennessee Promise has been able to build a college-going culture and to create support systems to enable students to start and complete their community college education.

As time progresses, the College Promise Campaign is keeping track of the many innovative ways that communities and states are designing and funding their College Promise programs and sharing that data with researchers and the general public at www.collegepromise.org.

In April, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed declaring that "New York's free-tuition program will help traditional, but not typical, students." Others have expressed similar concerns. Since most community college students are so-called non-traditional students, what can be done to ensure that College Promise programs help non-traditional students access, persist in, and complete a degree or certificate program, or to transfer to a four-year bachelor's degree program?

The College Promise Campaign is tracking the evolution of the movement, examining the progress of its champions and the concerns and caveats of its critics. Some of the most common concerns and criticisms include:

- Low college graduation rates
- College is not for everyone
- Part-time, adult students are not prioritized in many of the new College Promise programs
- Racial, ethnic, and income stratification concerns
- Limits on choice for students who qualify for more selective colleges and universities
- Could increase college costs for the junior and senior year with large numbers of qualified community college students
- Demand could outpace supply
- Public universities might be forced to limit access for qualified transfer students
- Financial sustainability of local or state funds raised for College Promise programs

The College Promise Campaign supports the design of financially sustainable College Promise programs at the local and state level that incorporate the right mix of educational interventions like mentoring and academic support with incentives to help students persist through their college or university program. Every sector has high-performing and low-performing community colleges and universities if you look at college completion rates, college costs, college debt after graduating or dropping out, earnings over time, and workforce outcomes, to name a few. There are models that enable part-time students to participate in the College Promise. Others have designed their programs to attract adults with little or no college, like Tennessee's Reconnect or North Carolina's Vance Guarantee.

College Promise initiatives can learn from one another and replicate the best designs from what's already underway. Even though we've had "free college" models available for select populations for many years, including the GI Bill and Pell Grant

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program, the College Promise movement is young. We are excited about the work of the University of Pennsylvania's Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, WestEd, MDRC, the Public Policy Institute of California, Institute for Higher Education Policy, and others that will inform the College Promise movement as it evolves in the years ahead.

[Does the College Promise Campaign support the extension of promise programs to four-year colleges and universities?](#)

From the beginning, our mission has been to build broad public support for states and localities to make the first two years of community college — at a minimum — as universal, free, and accessible as public high school has been for the last century. We applaud the efforts of several states extending free college to four-year colleges and universities, as well as Kalamazoo, El Dorado, and others for the range of public and private higher education institutions available to their Promise students. However, the College Promise Campaign has prioritized enabling students to enter and complete a community college degree, a technical certificate, or credits to transfer to a four-year university.

We emphasize that K-14 — at a minimum — should be the new 21st-century standard. A generation ago, a high school education was enough to prepare students to enter the workforce and to assure access to a good job and a decent quality of life. That is no longer true; to be ready for 21st century jobs, students must go on beyond high school. We want a community college education to be available at no cost to anyone willing to put in the work.

[The College Promise Campaign has created a database in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania to “spur further research.” How will the data amassed in this database be used?](#)

We have put together a user-friendly, open access database that researchers, policymakers, and the general public can use at any time. As we learn more about evolving College Promise programs, we put data into the online tracker on our website at www.collegepromise.org. Anyone interested in studying College Promise programs and assessing their designs and outcomes can use the tracker to determine what existing programs fit their research parameters. We are hoping that this easily accessible database will spur further study of Promise programs.

In working with Dr. Laura Perna and her research team at the

University of Pennsylvania, our goal is to share a rich body of data communities and states can use to make informed decisions about the best way to build sustainable College Promise programs. We know that communities and states are more likely to invest in free community college programs if they can be confident that they are a worthwhile investment, one that boosts economic prosperity, social inclusion, and healthy communities by increasing college enrollment and attainment.

The data examine a range of program characteristics such as eligibility criteria, funding streams, academic support, mentoring, and credit transfer from community colleges to participating universities. As College Promise programs evolve, we will make more information available to identify which models increase enrollment, college completion, workforce advancement, and economic and community success, to name just a few outcomes. Our research partners will continue to offer recommendations for the ideal structure and characteristics of Promise programs by using the latest research.

We also worked with the Educational Testing Service to co-sponsor a conference on designing sustainable funding College Promise models in June 2016. At that event, over 90 scholars, policymakers, business leaders, and government officials came together to examine different financial approaches for creating sustainable and effective Promise programs. Five design teams presented papers that analyzed different financial models for building College Promise programs. And on October 4, 2017, the Campaign will co-host a joint event with ETS at the National Press Club to announce the publication of those papers.

[At the PromiseNet 2016 conference on College Promise programs, there was a lot of talk about College Promise program outcomes. How are outcomes being gauged, and have any preliminary findings compared these outcomes yet to those of community colleges that do not offer College Promise benefits?](#)

A wide range of researchers are assessing the outcomes of local and state College Promise programs across the nation. Early findings (e.g., Tennessee Promise, Detroit Promise, Long Beach Promise, El Dorado Promise, Richmond Promise, etc.) are showing increases in college enrollment, especially for low-income, first generation students, and higher rates of persistence. While we are still in the early years when it comes to assessing the long-term

impact of College Promise programs versus those that do not offer free college benefits, we are establishing the College Promise Research Network to collect, publish, and share the results of the many College Promise outcomes studies and the range of factors that result in success, improvement, and/or re-engineering.

If a College Promise program enables more students to start and complete a college degree or certificate, that's success. If students can complete their educations without going into burdensome college debt, that's a victory. If a community can say that it attracts more industry and employers to the region and retains its employees and their families because the workforce is benefiting from its local or state free college program, that's progress.

What do you think would happen to education in the United States if everyone were able to complete a two-year college program at no direct personal cost? Would there be a butterfly effect on the economy and productivity? Do any data support the vision?

Today, we have a massive skills gap in this country that can only be solved if more people complete education beyond high school, whether that means earning a two or four-year college degree or certificate. The U.S. Department of Labor notes that there are 5.5 million vacancies in this country because industries cannot find workers with the right skill sets to match jobs. That's bad for students, employers, and local economies. What industries will invest in a community or state where they cannot attract and retain well-educated, well-prepared employees? What communities will remain vibrant and cohesive if there are no job prospects for their residents?

If we can get more students to start and complete their education, by covering college costs for the first one or two years of higher education, results from the Kalamazoo and El Dorado Promises already demonstrate positive effects on the local economy. Studies show that for every dollar invested in community colleges, the local community gets a threefold return on its investment.

What do you say to critics who say that College Promise programs are too expensive for taxpayers without any evidence of a return on the investment?

There is no one way to finance a College Promise program. Many communities have launched successful College Promise initiatives from multiple funding sources, using contributions from corporations, foundations, education, and/or government. The many communities and states that do use taxpayer dollars have found the cost to be a worthwhile investment — a necessary expense to develop the workforce and make a more productive community for their residents.

Taxpayers need to assess the cost of not acting on initiatives to make college more affordable. How much will it cost in lost revenue if the workforce is unprepared? What are the social costs for communities if people are unemployed? Research shows

that healthcare and prison costs decline as a function of better educated residents. Those are expenses, too.

And what would you say to college boards and presidents who haven't yet investigated bringing College Promise programs to their institutions? Why should they look into it, and what are the first steps toward learning about and implementing a College Promise program?

We encourage all community college boards and presidents to look into bringing College Promise programs to their campuses. It's a value proposition that will yield a high return on their investment — and it is the right thing to do. At a time when campuses face declining enrollments and low completion rates, we know that far too few students are starting and completing their education because of the unbearable cost of attending college. For too many students and families, the escalating cost of tuition, fees, living expenses, and loans makes a college education seem out of reach. By making a community college education free, we know that more youth and adults will enroll in and complete their programs of study.

For those boards and presidents that might be skeptical about starting a College Promise program, we point to the success of free college programs, such as Tennessee Promise, which has had dramatic results since its inception in 2014. In under three years, the state has seen a huge boost in college enrollment and retention. In its first two years, the state witnessed a 30 percent increase in full-time freshman enrollment at community colleges and a 32 percent increase at technical schools. New results show higher rates of college persistence. Education officials also have noted a cultural shift, as more students ascribe to a college-going culture. Tennessee now leads the states in the number of students who complete a FAFSA application.

We also encourage education leaders to consider what would happen if they don't invest in College Promise programs. We know that industries will not invest in communities that don't have enough workers with the needed skills. We also know that community colleges are uniquely equipped to tailor curricula to the needs of the workforce. And community colleges are the gateway to affordable baccalaureate and advanced degrees. We believe it is a local, state, and national imperative to make those first two years of college beyond high school — at a minimum — universal and free for any student willing to work hard by putting in the effort. The return on investment will more than double for this and future generations.



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