

# MAKING THE COLLEGE PROMISE REAL



A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW THE COLLEGE  
PROMISE CAMPAIGN IS TRANSFORMING THE  
LIVES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS.

BY MARTHA KANTER AND ANDRA ARMSTRONG



## AS THE COLLEGE PROMISE MOVEMENT EVOLVES IN THE YEARS AHEAD, COMMUNITY AND STATE LEADERS ARE LOOKING FOR INNOVATIVE WAYS TO INCORPORATE SORELY NEEDED PROGRAM ELEMENTS TO ACCELERATE DEGREE AND CERTIFICATE COMPLETION AND BOOST STUDENT SUCCESS.

THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, A BOLD VISION FOR THE 21st century is shaping a new mindset for local communities and states. It is called the College Promise. Its origin is centuries old, but to many students, families, communities, and states, it is a new, transformational idea that is sweeping the nation.

College Promise programs are making a community college education universal, free, and accessible as high school has been for nearly a century. They do this by covering tuition and fees, improving pathways to and through college, and offering student supports to increase student access and success. To receive a College Promise, students must meet local or state eligibility and persistence requirements that illustrate their commitment to completing their educational goals.

Building on the early results of local Promise programs, now more than 15 years in the making and inspired by President Obama's America's College Promise Act of 2015 proposal and the Tennessee Promise, College Promise programs have mushroomed. In January 2019, the national College Promise Campaign reported more than quadrupled growth, from 53 programs identified in 2015 to more than 300 underway in 44 states and 23 established at the statewide level today. The movement is also growing to include four-year colleges and universities.

From coast to coast, community college trustees, presidents, faculty, and staff are joining with locally elected officials to build strategic partnerships with leaders from business, education, philanthropy, labor, and nonprofit organizations to keep higher education and the pursuit of the American Dream within reach of their residents. By enacting local College Promise programs, these leaders are committed to accelerating degree and certificate attainment, building the talent pipeline for a vibrant workforce, and strengthening the economic and social fabric of their communities and states, while freeing students from unmanageable college debt.

There is no single way to build a Promise program. Just as each community college tailors its offerings to meet its local needs, communities and states determine what Promise features and funding models work best to drive their collective impacts.

### The Origins of the Promise

While College Promise initiatives are a contemporary approach for a new century, the idea behind them is as old as the American Dream, as timeless as the Founding Fathers' notion that education is the catalyst for a prosperous, sustainable democracy driven by an educated citizenry. The College Promise is this generation's repetition of that age-old idea.

In the waning decades of the 20th century, the nation slowly began to pull away from its historic promise of ensuring that America would have the best educated and most highly skilled population in the world. Even as the American economy grew in the 1990s and early 2000s, the nation's public investments in education declined. Other countries outpaced the U.S. in the percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) devoted to education, vigorously committing to investments at all levels.

Today's challenges are great. The United States went from being first in the world in the proportion of 25-34-year-old adults with college degrees to 13th. College costs dramatically escalated, while 99 percent of jobs now require more than a high school education. Seven million U.S. jobs are unfilled, and college debt has become a staggering \$1.6 trillion crisis for our nation. These challenges have collided to catalyze the College Promise expansion.

In 2005, the Kalamazoo Promise broke new ground in how it awarded scholarships: residency and graduation from one of the city's high schools were the only requirements to receive an award; neither merit nor financial need was considered. This unprecedented experiment in urban development through education guarantees potentially every graduate of Kalamazoo High School a full scholarship to attend any of Michigan's community and technical colleges or approved public or private postsecondary institutions.

Inspired by Kalamazoo's success, approximately 50 new College Promise programs emerged in the ensuing decade as communities and states grappled with the challenge of sending more students to college through the Great Recession as college costs continued to rise.

On February 24, 2009, President Obama embedded the idea of "free community college" into the nation's consciousness, urging every American to commit to at least one year of postsecondary education or training beyond high school. The Tennessee Promise led by Governor Bill Haslam also emerged during those years. In 2015, America's College Promise legislation was introduced, proposing federal-state partnership grants to fund community college tuition and fees for students enrolled at least half-time with a 2.5 grade point average and committed to earn their degrees or certificates. That legislation came to a halt in the 114th Congress due to the declining bipartisan political environment. But the grassroots College Promise movement kept growing at the local and state level, building on the results of the more than 50 local Promise initiatives, the statewide Tennessee Promise, and the America's College Promise legislation.

## A National Movement Begins

On September 9, 2015, the College Promise Campaign was established as a non-partisan effort led by Dr. Jill Biden and Gov. Jim Geringer (R-Wyo.) to build support for the creation and sustainability of College Promise programs at the local and state level with bipartisan support. The Campaign widely shares the latest research, high-impact practices, and policy designs to help communities and states build effective and financially sustainable Promise programs that increase student success.

Across the nation, from Hawaii to Rhode Island, from Seattle to Jacksonville, and from Lansing to Houston, communities are removing barriers and giving students the financial, social, and academic support they need to succeed through College Promise. Some noteworthy local and state initiatives that continue to inspire the College Promise movement include Tennessee Promise, Dallas County Promise, Detroit Promise Path, Indiana's "Adult Promise" Workforce Grant, West Sacramento, California's "Home Run" Promise, and the Boston Bridge Pilot Program.

To ensure that Promise programs make a significant difference in the lives of America's students, Strive Together, Say Yes to Education/Weiss Institute, National College Access Network, MDRC, WestEd, UPenn AHEAD, University of Alabama, and other institutions and organizations are collaborating with Promise researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

The College Promise Campaign is now working to identify and showcase the Promise programs that have the greatest impact on student access and success, while providing caveats to communities and states on unintended or negative consequences based on evidence-based results from independent scholars and reputable research and policy organizations across the nation.

As the movement evolves, communities and states are reminded that the promise of delivering a College Promise is hollow if students enrolling in a community college, technical college, and/or four-year institution fail to complete their degree or certificate.

Today, the evidence is clear that a high school education is no longer enough to secure a good job and a decent quality of life. The College Promise has emerged as a national imperative because too many Americans lack sufficient financial resources, social support, and clear pathways to and through postsecondary education. Hundreds of College Promise programs are being launched and sustained to cover tuition, fees, and, in many cases, the additional costs of attending college (e.g., textbooks, supplies, food, transportation, child care, housing, etc.) as well as offering student supports (e.g., mentoring, advising, coaching, etc.). They are making the difference between success and failure for thousands of Americans who want to participate in the American Dream.

This article is drawn from Chapter 4 in *13 Ideas that Are Transforming the Community College World*, edited by Terry U. O'Banion and published by Rowman & Littlefield and the American Association of Community Colleges. All rights reserved. When ordering the book from Rowman & Littlefield (call toll free 1-800-462-6420 or order online at [www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com)), mention special code "RLEGEN18" and receive a 20% discount. Copies also can be purchased from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other booksellers.

As the College Promise movement evolves in the years ahead, community and state leaders are looking for innovative ways to incorporate sorely needed program elements to accelerate degree and certificate completion and boost student success. Seamless, aligned guided pathways in high-demand fields of study, academic and social guidance, emergency grants, paid internships, redesigned class schedules, and childcare support for the student parents who comprise 40 percent of community college students are among the College Promise features that are being leveraged to increase graduation rates.

This vast expansion of the College Promise idea is transforming thousands of lives and serves as a bellwether for the nation that a free and universal postsecondary education — starting in America's community colleges — can become a reality for the nation's students and families in the 21st century. College Promise is growing new roots among the great movements in American education, fundamentally steeped in the ideals of our Founding Fathers to cultivate an educated citizenry that will sustain American democracy and prosperity for the 21st century and beyond.



Martha Kanter is executive director of the College Promise Campaign & senior fellow at the Steinhardt Institute of Higher Education Policy, New York University. Andra Armstrong is the College Promise Campaign's senior strategist.