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Who should sit at the planning table?

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The people who sit at the planning table will have an important impact on the design and operation of a Promise program.

The people and organizations engaged in launching a Promise program will vary across different types of programs. Community college leadership is the key party involved in creating institution-based programs, while the leadership of high-level elected officials is essential for statewide initiatives. Community-based Promise programs involve a more complex set of stakeholders, as they require collaboration across sectors. The makeup of the people invited to the planning table can have important implications for program design; strong agreement around the purpose of the program (the critical need stakeholders are trying to address) is an essential first step.

Policy Considerations

- The group of stakeholders needed to sustain a program's operations over time may look different from the stakeholders needed to launch a Promise program; in other words, it may make sense to think of the planning and governance function in two stages— launch and operations.
- Institution-level Promise programs benefit from including the college's leadership (president and trustees), representatives from various departments (including financial aid, institutional development, student support, enrollment analytics), K-12 district leaders, regional workforce development leaders, students who are intended to benefit, and local business community leaders.
- Community-level Promise programs benefit from including K-12 district leaders, representatives from higher education, municipal government leaders, regional business owners, workforce development entities, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and the students who are intended to benefit.
- Statewide Promise programs generally require buy-in and leadership from governors and other high-level elected officials. In most states, these programs will also require a bipartisan coalition of legislators, especially those on education and budget committees.

What We Know

No two Promise programs are exactly alike. The variation comes from both contextual differences among the places and people they are intended to benefit and from the input of the initial stakeholders who design the program.

For example, a Promise program is likely to end up with very different goals, policies, and funding structures if the business community is part of the initial design discussions than if it is not. Business leaders tend to inject linkages to workforce development that may be less prominent if K-12 schools and government stakeholders are the main drivers of the Promise design.

Bringing the right stakeholders to the table and keeping them there is critical to Promise success because most Promise programs require ongoing funding design adaptations based on what is learned from early implementation. Promise programs also benefit from ongoing broad-based commitment and enthusiasm. Who should be at the table is determined by the goals and approach of the proposed Promise, the structures of the local schools, and whether there are already cross-sector collaborative efforts in place.

Regardless of the type of Promise you intend to develop, key potential stakeholder groups to consider include K-12 school district leaders, business and workforce development, higher education, local and state government (especially leaders representing the populations intended to benefit from the Promise), philanthropy, and community-based organizations such as those focused on student support, youth development, and workforce development.

Institution level

Institution-based Promise programs are typically initiated and driven by a community college, which makes them quite different from community or

state level programs in terms of stakeholders. Such programs will benefit if the broader community is engaged, but decision-making will be based at the institution itself. Key stakeholders include senior community college leadership (often the president plays an important role), as well as representatives from departments of financial aid, institutional development, student support, and enrollment analytics; representatives of the institution's trustees (who may have control over funding) or endowment; K-12 district leaders from the "feeder" district(s); county- or regional-level workforce development leaders; representatives of the population intended to benefit; and potential business partners aware of skill demands and training needs of the region.

Community level

Community-based programs require a broader set of stakeholders to build and maintain a Promise. Those initiating a Promise program will benefit from being intentional about which stakeholders are at the table during the design phase. Public school districts are rarely the initiators of such efforts but are crucial partners. Promise programs need funding, so stakeholders must include those with resources to invest (this can sometimes shift the goals and scope of Promise programs). An important initial step is to have agreement around the intended purpose of the program. From there, decisions about the design (such as who is eligible) and the necessary stakeholders can flow.

Ideally, initial stakeholders should include leadership and representatives from the school district, local higher-education institutions, municipal government leaders, regional business owners, economic and workforce development entities, philanthropy, and community-based organizations that support young people. Other stakeholder groups, such as political organizations and labor unions, can also be crucial to advancing Promise models in some locales.

“ The breakthrough component of Say Yes Buffalo is the transparent, collaborative governance structure that guides all efforts and reports on progress to the public at large. This collaborative approach recognizes that Erie County, the city of Buffalo, and the Buffalo Public School District all hold pieces of the puzzle, that the solutions reside between and among these systems, and that improving academic outcomes for urban youth with scale demands a cross-sector, cross-government approach. ”

Say Yes Buffalo

State level

Statewide Promise programs generally require buy-in and leadership from governors and other high-level elected officials. In most states, these programs will also require a bipartisan coalition of legislators, especially those on education and budget committees. State programs often involve higher-education system leaders, business leaders, and key advocacy groups. Some state Promise programs are components of broader postsecondary attainment goals,¹ in which case the business community can speak to specific skills and fields that are lacking in the state workforce.

Recommended Reading

Campaign for Free College Tuition. (2022, Revised). [*Making public colleges tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders*](#). Campaign for Free College Tuition.

A compendium of existing statewide Promise programs and “how to” guide for state leaders covering best practices and steps needed to launch a statewide Promise program.

College Promise Campaign. (2018). [*Playbook: How to build a Promise*](#). College Promise Campaign.

A resource for city and county elected officials to build College Promise programs for their communities. It includes information on the steps needed to create a Promise program and provides planning documents from several existing Promise programs.

Rauner, M., Lundquist, S., & Smith, A. (2019). [*The College Promise guidebook for California and beyond*](#). WestED.

This guidebook is geared toward institution-based Promise program development, with a specific focus on doing so within the California state policy context. The guidebook includes exercises and tools to support the execution of each of the steps and offers many examples from real programs. See, for example, Step 1 (pp. 7–19), which outlines forming a “Promise Team” and provides useful tips and exercises to ensure that you are identifying the right set of stakeholders.

National Implementation Research Network (n.d.). [*Stakeholder engagement guide*](#). Adapted from the Community Engagement Toolkit developed by the Collective Impact Forum.

A persistent challenge that improvement work faces is ensuring equity in the design and implementation of the initiative. Promise programs are no different, especially because they often explicitly seek to improve conditions for students who are from low-income families, first-generation college-goers, and/or those who are from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. The stakeholder engagement guide, developed by KITAMBA on behalf of the National Implementation Research Network, is helpful in considering the composition of the stakeholder group in relation to the intended beneficiaries.

¹ Lumina Foundation. (n.d). [*A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent*](#).