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What steps are needed to launch a Promise program?

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Although steps to establish a Promise program vary depending on who initiates it, the context, and the financial resources available, most programs are developed by following seven key steps.

Promise programs are built in a variety of ways depending on who initiates them, the local context, available fiscal resources, and the nature of the place where they are being created. Even so, there is a natural sequence of steps to building a Promise program, some of which are critical for its success. There are seven key steps: 1) form a design team, 2) build the foundation, 3) determine the program structures and requirements, 4) determine financial support and other supports, 5) develop a communication plan, 6) build a research and evaluation plan, and 7) implement the Promise.

Policy Considerations

- For institution-level programs, college leaders must convince their trustees of the Promise program value and engage key partners from the community, especially K-12 feeder districts and businesses with close ties to the education and training programs offered at the institution.
- Community-based Promise programs typically require a multisector development process that may unfold over a period of months or even years. Consensus-building around the area's critical need and ongoing engagement of partners are essential elements in a program's success.
- Statewide programs are dependent on the political machinery within the legislative process, so it is key to build a coalition of legislators and elected officials who have the requisite authority.

What We Know

Promise programs are built in a variety of ways depending on factors such as who initiates the discussion; whether the Promise is based at the institutional, community, or state level; the existing nature of cross-sector relationships in the place; and availability of fiscal resources, among many others. Despite this variation, there is a natural sequence of steps to building Promise programs, and some of these steps are particularly critical for success.¹

¹ College Promise Campaign (n.d.). *Playbook: How to build a Promise*. College Promise Campaign; Rauner, M., Lundquist, S., & Smith, A. (2019). *The college Promise guidebook for California and beyond*. WestED.

Step	Description	Goal
1	Form a design team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate the “why” question and answer for this institution, community, or state: What is the critical need stakeholders are trying to address and how can a Promise program help? • Identify needed partners/stakeholders for design phase; ensure equitable composition • Convene potential design team members and provide overview of development process • Formalize design team structure, roles, and responsibilities • Articulate partner roles and responsibilities
2	Build the foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a needs assessment and/or root cause analysis • Convene design team for critical need discussion • Establish shared need and goal(s) • Determine key stakeholders and partners needed to realize goal (including municipal, school district, higher education, funder/foundations, employers, community-based organizations, intended beneficiaries) • Determine organizational home and Promise leadership
3	Determine program structure and requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine eligibility and participation requirements • Establish appeals process • Determine distribution process • Identify needed partners
4	Determine financial support and other supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine financial support amount and structure • Use analytics to estimate program costs • Revise program structure, requirements, and financial support amounts based on analysis • Use root causes analysis and/or critical need results to plan for additional student supports • Build financial sustainability plan
5	Develop a communication plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop simple program message to partners/stakeholders, families, and students • Determine who needs to know what and when • Evaluate whether partners need additional training/support to implement
6	Build a research and evaluation plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify evaluation and research questions, including timeline and audiences for each • Establish measures and indicators • Establish targets with leadership team • Evaluation data availability across partners • Establish data-sharing agreements • Determine reporting cadence to stakeholder groups
7	Implement the Promise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor implementation quality • Implement communications plan • Implement financial sustainability plan • Implement evaluation and research plan • Modify program design and implementation based on emerging evidence

Different types of Promise programs may have slightly different sequences, or specific steps might be more/less salient. In the following paragraphs, we highlight some of these nuances.

Institution level

Compared to community and state-level Promise programs, institution-level programs initiated by community colleges tend to have fewer stakeholders and may have more readily visible needs (e.g., increase enrollment, improve completion rates). The support of college trustees and high-level institutional leaders is essential. Beyond that, institution-based Promise programs can benefit from engaging enrollment and fiscal analysts in the design phase to leverage all local, state, and federal financial resources and ensure that the Promise model yields an acceptable level of risk. It is also important to connect with key community partners, including local K-12 school districts and area employers. See Lake Michigan College Promise for an example.

Community level

Community-based programs can be quite complex—there are often many needs across constituencies, and thus it can be difficult to come to a consensus on which ones to address in the Promise program. As a result, community-based Promise programs usually emerge from a multi-year, multi-sector development process. Consensus-building around the area's critical need and ongoing engagement of partners are essential elements in a program's success. See Say Yes Buffalo for an example.

State level

Statewide programs can be difficult to establish because they require commitment from both legislators and a governor, as well as funding appropriated by state legislators. Thus, these

programs are dependent upon the political machinery within the legislative process. In some places, models have advanced based on workforce development needs, while in others, Promise programs have advanced with the goal of expanding access to higher education. See Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, and Michigan Reconnect as examples of the first approach, and New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship and California College Promise as examples of the latter.

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.

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.

Miller-Adams, M., & Timmeney, B. (2019, October 10). [*Program administration models*](#). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

This unpublished memo describes five different program administration models that reflect the variation across the set of Promise programs in existence up to 2019.

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.