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What are some common challenges Promise programs face?

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While diverse in structure, Promise programs face common challenges related to design, operation, growth, and sustainability.

Challenges during the design phase may include tensions around which stakeholders should be engaged and at what stage, and how to ensure design components are aligned with the program's goals. Challenges during the implementation phase may include ensuring that program rules support clear messaging and robust uptake, and that the right type and adequate amount of nonfinancial support is available. Once fully operational, programs may struggle with sustainable funding, leadership turnover, decisions about expansion, and/or how to measure program impact.

Policy Considerations

- Having a strong, representative stakeholder group is essential if Promise programs are to confront and resolve challenges that may arise during their lifespan.
- Partnering with existing college access programs, listening to students and community members about their problems with college access and affordability, and developing a strong leadership team that represents the community may help build cross-sector support and provide valuable input for a new Promise program.
- The collective impact approach used in many communities can help guide the collaboration needed for community and statewide Promise programs that must draw support from multiple sectors.

What We Know

Institution, community, and statewide Promise stakeholders will face challenges along the way in designing, implementing, operating, and sustaining their programs. One framework for thinking about how to address such challenges is provided by the literature on collective impact,¹ a strategy for community alignment that helps stakeholders work together across diverse sectors in pursuit of a common goal.

Here we review the main categories of challenges Promise programs may face at various stages, as well as the essential elements of the collective impact approach.

¹ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36–41.

Design challenges that can derail a Promise before launch:

- Disagreement among stakeholders and decision-makers over the goals for tuition-free college, and disagreement over the forecasted effects of offering new or expanded financial aid. This can lead to difficult decisions in the design phase, where, for example, some favor simple and universal aid, while others want aid to be targeted to the neediest students or the most in-demand occupations.
- Not enough disagreement among stakeholders. Divergent and irreconcilable views can derail a nascent Promise program, but at the same time, an emphasis on consensus or a limited scope for productive debate among decision-makers can lead to a weaker or overly complicated program that fails to gather external support.
- The design process becoming public too soon. If a planning effort is shared widely early on, the stakeholder group may experience pressure from various entities (for example, school districts, private schools, colleges, or advocacy groups) to address their specific interests. This can create a situation in which consensus cannot be achieved and can create confusion among key stakeholder groups.
- Too many decision-makers at the table when designing a new Promise program. Some successful Promise programs have launched from a relatively small coalition of highly invested stakeholders: Privately funded Kalamazoo Promise, Knox Achieves, and Pittsburgh Promise are three examples. But having too few stakeholders at the beginning is risky as well, especially if funding is in question, and if the captains of a new Promise idea have a limited vision of the interdependent

problems and structures at play. Also, if particular interest groups are left out and perceive their own objectives to be at odds with a new Promise, they may successfully oppose its implementation.

Implementation and operation challenges that can curtail student and program success:

- Confusion around what is and is not “free” among the long list of college expenses. Such expenses may include tuition, mandatory fees, additional fees (for certain programs of study, late registration, housing, meals, and so forth), textbooks and supplies, and living expenses.
- Confusion around what is and is not “college.” If aid covers non-degree certificate programs or apprenticeships, for example, program messaging should promote these pathways alongside degree programs.
- Low take-up. This may be due to restrictions that limit the number of eligible students, such as requirements that create uncertainty about eligibility or benefits. Weak communications or insufficient outreach and navigation resources may also be responsible for low take-up.
- Inadequate systems connecting students with wraparound services. Students need to be connected with Promise program staff, advisers, college bursars, and other individuals (who should be) engaged in running the program, such as social service agencies for programs with wraparound supports, or high school faculty and staff for programs targeting new high school graduates. Inadequate support or inadequate systems for connecting students to the support can lead to mismanagement, erroneous bills, and red tape that students are left to resolve, as well as a dissolution of trust and shared goals.

Challenges in sustaining or growing new programs:

- Renewed funding. This is a challenge that many Promise programs face, whether they rely on private donors or public appropriations. Some can draw on endowed or earmarked resources, but even in those circumstances, shifting priorities may pull funds into other purposes.
- Turnover among the people who run or champion Promise programs. High turnover can erode institutional memory or reorder state, community, or college priorities, placing Promise programs below priorities for newly urgent problems. This challenge is to be expected for state governments and colleges, where churning staff and leadership priorities are the norm.
- Measuring and evaluating impact. This will be challenging for most Promise programs, since they are rarely structured as randomized, controlled trials with immediate outcomes of interest. Is a community-based Promise revitalizing an area as hoped? Is a state Promise growing the skilled workforce? Long-term, multisector questions such as these can be difficult to answer with short-term enrollment and attainment measures. Is an institutional Promise expanding access to the college in question? Perhaps so, in which case a broader college pipeline may result in cohorts that have lower GPAs, lower rates of year-to-year persistence, and lower completion rates. At every level, it can be difficult to measure program success against readily available measures of student success.

The collective-impact literature holds important lessons about how stakeholders from diverse sectors can align their efforts. Essential elements of the collective impact model include forging a common agenda, agreement about how to measure

progress, mutually reinforcing activities (that is, strategic coordination that plays to each participant's strengths), continuous communication, and backbone support staff. The model is adaptable to different contexts and offers one way to develop a vibrant Promise and translate it into a well-executed program. The model has recently been updated to emphasize equity concerns.² One specific strategy is to “move from working in communities to working *with* communities and supporting work *by* communities” (italics added).

Recommended Reading

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(4), 36-41.

This magazine article presents a model of successful cross-sector collaboration for social change.

Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Juster, J. S. (2022). [Centering equity in collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 20(1), 38–45.

This article updates the collective impact model to position equity as a prerequisite and describes five specific strategies for doing so.

Miller-Adams, M. (2015). [Promise nation: Transforming communities through place-based scholarships](#). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

This free e-book provides a brief overview of the place-based scholarship movement, summarizing key design decisions, the diffusion of the Promise idea from Kalamazoo to other communities and states, and the challenges that stopped some Promise programs before they began.

Scott-Clayton, J. E., Libassi, C. J., & Sparks, D. D. (2022). [The fine print on free college: Who benefits from New York's Excelsior Scholarship?](#) Urban Institute.

This report describes low and uneven take-up of New York's Excelsior Scholarship among City University of New York students. Case Studies [adapted from Promise Nation, pp. 34–36]

² Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Juster, J. S. (2021). [Centering equity in collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 20(1), 38–45.

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Case Studies

[adapted from *Promise Nation*, pp. 34–36]

Several communities began exploring their own college Promises shortly after the surprise announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2005. Flint, Michigan, was one such community, where education, foundation, and business leaders began meeting with the goal of establishing a Promise for Flint students. Despite years of effort, however, the coalition was not able to get buy-in from the city or overcome large financial hurdles. The outlook for Flint changed in 2009 when Michigan established Promise Zones in several distressed cities. Promise Zones are funded by a combination of private donations and tax increment financing, which relies on future growth in local property taxes collected within each Zone. Flint was not one of the state’s initial Promise Zones but was included in a 2018 expansion.

Akron, Ohio, is another community that explored its own Promise in the wake of Kalamazoo’s announcement. A ballot initiative attached Promise scholarship funding to another proposal

to privatize the city’s sewer system. This was one reason for opposition, along with a requirement that scholarship recipients pay city income tax for 30 years if they move away, as well as a general sentiment that the scholarship’s champions did not elicit enough public input. The vote failed, with 63% opposed.

In Davenport, Iowa, a task force of city, school, and community leaders led the push to provide scholarships through a reallocation of proceeds from the city’s \$0.01 local-option sales tax. Despite a deliberate convening process that included multiple public consultations, extensive media coverage, and the commissioning of an economic impact study, the program failed when it was put to a vote in a special election in March 2009. Proponents blamed the harsh economic climate, although an organized opposition that insisted such a program be privately funded was clearly a factor.