

6

How do Promise programs benefit students? **Student Support**

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Promise programs can spark the creation of new forms of student support around college access, financial aid, and employment.

Promise programs benefit students by providing them with college and career knowledge and support to navigate the high school-to-college transition. This is especially important for first-generation college-goers, whose families and peers may not have firsthand experience to draw on. Support can be delivered in various ways, but it generally will help students choose the best postsecondary program for their interests and abilities, complete the steps necessary to apply for college, access additional financial aid, avoid “summer melt,” (where students who intend to go to college fail to show up for classes in the fall), and facilitate transitions between college and employment opportunities.

Policy Considerations

- Promise programs can serve as catalysts for a robust FAFSA completion effort, in partnership with schools and the broader community.
- Collaboration with school-based staff is necessary for building a college-going culture and promoting Promise awareness and uptake.
- Strategic and intentional coordination with high school counselors and existing high school-to-college support staff can help Promise programs avoid duplicating efforts.
- Resources to support students’ nonfinancial needs can be deployed in various ways: college coaches or advisors can amplify high school-based resources, peer mentors can promote uptake, and text messaging campaigns can help students navigate their transition from high school to college.
- To prevent “summer melt” (planning for college then not enrolling the next fall) and “academic undermatch” (enrolling at a less selective institution than one to which the student can gain admission), Promise programs may consider enlisting more comprehensive student support services.

What We Know

Students with parents, family members, or friends who have attended college will have more access to college and career knowledge than students who are first-generation college-goers. The

college application and financial aid process is an often-complex barrier for many first-generation students and those without such access to social capital.¹ Students who do not have advocates with college experience have a more difficult time navigating this process. Promise programs can help create new support structures to address these issues.

Traditionally, high school counselors are expected to provide support for the college application process; however, school counselors often do not have the capacity to assist all students in making the right choices and carrying out the necessary steps to access financial aid and submit college applications. Counselors in urban and low-income districts are often overburdened with large caseloads of students and students who are transitory,² leading to further inequities in college and career knowledge and readiness.

For students and families who are not aware of scholarships and grants for which they are eligible, the sticker price of attending a higher-education institution can be shocking and off-putting. Additionally, the process of applying for financial aid is confusing for many families. This confusion has consequences: One study found that students who do not file the FAFSA forgo \$10,000 a year, on average, in grants and loans. This amounts to \$24 billion annually that eligible families miss out on because they do not complete the FAFSA.³

Promise programs can play a role in partnering with educational and community institutions to instill robust FAFSA completion efforts community-

or statewide. Assisting students in accessing financial aid can have big payoffs. For example, researchers partnered with H&R Block to offer families FAFSA completion assistance and to help families understand how much they would likely pay for tuition given their financial circumstances. The support provided in the experiment led to significant increases in FAFSA completion, financial aid receipt, college attendance, and persistence.⁴

There are also nonfinancial barriers to college entry that can hinder prospective college students. Lower-income and first-generation college students may struggle more than their peers to complete pre-college tasks, such as sending transcripts, paying a deposit, or navigating campus administration. There is also the problem of summer melt: one study estimates that around 10%–20% of students intending to enroll in the fall after high school graduation fail to show up on campus.⁵ These rates are even higher for low-income students, students from urban areas, and students intending to enroll in community college. A student with less college knowledge within their families and social sphere may also unintentionally undermatch—that is, attend an institution less academically rigorous than one they are qualified to attend. Research shows that academic undermatch leads some students to drop out of college.⁶

While Promise programs do not offer an easy solution to the challenge of providing effective student support, their introduction often catalyzes new support efforts or better alignment of existing resources; see Cases for examples.

¹ Chetty, R., et al. (2022). *Social capital I: Measurement and associations with economic mobility*. *Nature*, 608.

² Gagnon, D. J., & Mattingly, M. J. (2016). *Most US school districts have low access to school counselors: Poor, diverse, and city school districts exhibit particularly high student-to-counselor ratios* (National Issue Brief No. 108). Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire.

³ Kofoed, M. S. (2017). *To apply or not to apply: FAFSA completion and financial aid gaps*. *Higher Education*, 58(1).

⁴ Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., & Oreopoulos, P. (2013). *The FAFSA project: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment and next steps*. Harvard University.

⁵ Castleman, B. L., & Page, L. C. (2014). *A trickle or a torrent? Understanding the extent of summer “melt” among college-intending high school graduates*. *Social Science Quarterly*, 95(1), 202–220.

⁶ Cohodes, S. R., & Goodman, J. S. (2014). *Merit aid, college quality, and college completion: Massachusetts’ Adams scholarship as an in-kind subsidy*. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 6(4), 251–285.

Recommended Reading

Carruthers, C. K., Gurantz, O., & Page, L. (2022). [Helping students make informed choices about college \(Policy brief\)](#). EdResearch for Recovery.

This policy brief contains evidence-based research on building a college-going culture within a school or district. It is written specifically for K-12 practitioners and provides sensible strategies to assist students in planning for college.

Narehood, E. (2021). [Lynchburg Beacon of Hope: Building a collaborative framework for student success](#). College Promise.

This policy brief explores how a Promise program in Central Virginia implemented future centers that serve as hubs for college and career readiness programming at both city high schools and the local community college, along with related programming, to ensure a seamless high-school-to-college transition.

Page, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2015). [Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses](#). National Bureau of Economic Research.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the literature on experimental and quasi-experimental research that provides effective policies and strategies that programs can adopt to increase college access.

U.S. Department of Education. [The college scorecard](#).

This website, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, provides a simple-to-use, web-based tool to research colleges and universities in the United States. Students and families can learn about colleges' fields of study, their costs, admission rates, graduation rates, typical student debt burdens, and the success with which their graduates are able to repay their student loans.

Case Study: Approaches to Student Support

High school coaching. High school counselors and teachers who see students daily can be an important resource for Promise programs. Counselors already know the student population and can provide assistance in the college search and application process. But many high school guidance counselors are stretched to capacity, and additional support can help.

After more than a decade of successfully funding Promise Scholars to and through college, the Pittsburgh Promise saw its rates of scholarship usage stagnate. In the spring of 2020, the Pittsburgh Promise received funding to implement a pilot coaching initiative in three Pittsburgh public high schools. The goals of the coaching program are to assist students in identifying their interests, navigating financial aid, exploring both career and postsecondary options, and building soft skills. Past studies have demonstrated that high school students struggle to identify their own skills and interests and translate these into desired programs of study. Promise coaches will help students discover those skills and explore pathways to careers they will enjoy and that will provide them with a living wage.

Some Promise programs, including the Denver Scholarship Foundation and Lynchburg Beacon of Hope, have created Future Centers, one-stop locales within high schools to help students access additional financial aid and complete college-access activities. Still others, including the [Montgomery County, OH Promise](#) program or [tnAchieves](#), rely on adult volunteer community mentors to help students navigate the high-school-to-college transition. There is also a role for peer mentorship; for example, the Pittsburgh Promise designates “Promise Ambassadors” at each high school in the district to encourage other students to apply and use the Promise.

College coaching. Coaching can also reside at the postsecondary level. The Detroit Promise began in 2013 as a last-dollar scholarship for recent high school graduates to attend community college and partner four-year institutions. Program administrators developed the Detroit Promise Path for Detroit Promise recipients attending community colleges. Students meet with their coaches for the first time in the summer before beginning postsecondary education. They are encouraged to remain connected with their coach through a series of small financial incentives. Treated students were

more likely to persist, remain full time in college, and accumulate more credits. Students reported overall positive experiences with the program, especially their relationship to the coaches.⁷

Text-message campaigns. Utilizing text messages to support students in their transition from high school to college has worked in many contexts to produce modest increases in college matriculation. Research shows that the effectiveness of text messaging is more pronounced if the messages are coming from a known or trusted source to the student and messages are not being sent too frequently.⁸ Additionally, students are more likely to engage with text messaging campaigns if the messages provide specific information personalized to them (such as pre-college tasks required of them before enrolling in their specific college in the fall), rather than generic messages such as goal setting.

Comprehensive student support services. To prevent summer melt and academic undermatch, Promise programs may consider enlisting more comprehensive student support services. Programs such as College Possible and Bottom Line offer college search and application completion services to participating students. Evidence has shown that these College coaching programs have increased student enrollment, persistence, and eventual degree attainment at four-year institutions.⁹

⁷ Ratledge, A., O'Donoghue, R., Cullinan, D., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2019). [A path from access to success: Interim findings from the Detroit Promise Path Evaluation](#). MDRC.

⁸ Bird, K. A., Castleman, B. L., Denning, J. T., Goodman, J., Lambertson, C., & Rosinger, K. O. (2021). [Nudging at scale: Experimental evidence from FAFSA completion campaigns](#). *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 183, 105–128.

⁹ Barr, A., & Castleman, B. (2021). [The bottom line on college advising: Large increases in degree attainment \(EdWorkingPaper No. 21\)](#). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.