



College Promise: Supporting Students in College Access and Success

Capitol Hill Forum
Friday, April 26, 2019

Background

Community college students face many barriers to success including tuition costs, a lack of support on campus, academic underpreparedness, and financial barriers not fully covered by financial aid, such as the cost of books and transportation. College Promise programs provide financial support to pay students' tuition and fees. These programs have received bipartisan support from state and municipal policymakers as a way to improve students' access to college, putting college financially in reach.

While College Promise programs have been shown to improve college access through tuition assistance, not all of them address other barriers to college success. MDRC's College Promise Success Initiative takes the College Promise program one step further by implementing evidence-based student support practices to improve college completion. The evidence of the proven benefits of these programs is coming at the right time to inform the reauthorization of the [Higher Education Act](#) (HEA) in helping students access and complete college.

On April 26, 2019, the [American Youth Policy Forum](#) (AYPF) and [MDRC](#) convened a [Capitol Hill forum](#) to discuss the impact of College Promise programs and MDRC's College Promise Success Initiative on college access and success, highlighting the Detroit Promise Path.

The panel of experts included:

- **Martha Kanter**, Executive Director, College Promise Campaign
- **Alyssa Ratledge**, Research Analyst, MDRC
- **Monica Rodriguez**, Director of Children and Youth Services, City of Detroit Mayor's Office

Respondents included:

- **Katie Berger**, Professional Staff Member, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives
- **Alex Ricci**, Professional Staff Member, Committee on Education and Labor, Republicans, U.S. House of Representatives

Betsy Brand, Executive Director at AYPF, opened the forum by providing an overview of College Promise programs. Brand spoke about the proven positive outcomes of College Promise programs and ways such programs can be leveraged to inform the reauthorization of HEA.

Panelist Presentations

Martha Kanter, Executive Director, College Promise Campaign

Kanter began her presentation by providing background on College Promise programs from a national perspective. She explained when folks hear the words College Promise, they immediately think “free college.” Though she admits the word ‘free’ is politically charged, Kanter argued “the word free brings people to the table; it brings people into opportunity.” To reinforce this point, she cited outcomes from the [Dallas County Promise program](#), which increased the number of students of color graduating high school and enrolling in a two- or four-year college by 40 percent. Acknowledging the diversity within the U.S., she emphasized the importance of tracking how College Promise systems are funded and what supports and designs are applied. Currently, over one hundred research studies are assessing College Promise programs in an effort to track the most impactful designs, supports, and frameworks. Kanter was excited to announce that the [American Educational Research Association](#) (AERA) will be publishing a book this summer about the impact of College Promise programs across the U.S. Ultimately, advocates of College Promise programs hope to learn best practices through research to “continue doing more of what is working.”

Next, Kanter considered the evolution of “free education” in the U.S. She mentioned that [Boston Latin School](#) became the first free high school in the U.S. during the 17th century. In 1929, Alaska made high school free for every young person. She also recognized higher education institutions like the [State University of New York](#) (SUNY), the [City University of New York](#) (CUNY), and other institutions in California that have historically been free and accessible. Given that times have changed, she encouraged the consideration of important questions like “Who had the privilege to attend these institutions, and was it really an ‘open system’? Who got left behind?” When thinking about College Promise programs more broadly, Kanter shared the following questions to frame the conversation:

- What are the problems we face today?
- How can hard working people in this country have the opportunity to attend college?

Interestingly, Kanter was not only referring to young people having the opportunity to attend college; she was also referring to thousands of disconnected adults. Kanter’s inclusion of individuals beyond youth is timely given recent concerns about talent shortages due to most jobs in the 21st-century economy requiring education and/or training beyond high school. With increasing pressure for citizens to pursue some form of postsecondary education, it is critical to consider real barriers limiting access to these opportunities such as labor market shortages, food insecurity, housing insecurity, student debt, and equity challenges. Specifically, Kanter drew attention to the fact that although all racial groups are improving performance, the persistent racial gaps in access to postsecondary education are not closing fast enough. Thus, College Promise programs aim to provide students of color with appropriate guidance and wraparound services in hopes of increasing their chances of attending a quality two- or four-year institution. She also emphasized the importance of educating parents and communities given that students of color are often first-generation college students.

Kanter noted that people often ask “why College Promise?” From an economic standpoint, the more education individuals obtain throughout their lifetime, the more they will earn on average, and as a result, pay more in taxes. However, College Promise programs do not only focus on the economic return on investment (RIO) of educating citizens, they also focus on social and civic prosperity. She cited research from the [University of Maine](#), which shows that compared to individuals who have no college experience, college graduates utilize 39 percent fewer government resources, are healthier and happier, and are five times less likely to be incarcerated.

In 2015, the vision for the College Promise campaign was created. The vision articulates a clear goal of increasing students' social, economic, and civic mobility by advancing their educational opportunities regardless of their income, race, ethnicity, background, or culture. Kanter explained that although the campaign is not exclusively working with community colleges, it was a good starting point given almost half of students attend community colleges. Kanter admits in some states there are many nuances with College Promise programs, but hopes to use research to replicate and scale best practices. For example, in the State of New York the [Excelsior Scholarship Program](#) provides families earning \$125,000 or less opportunities to attend two- and four-year colleges. However, since this is a retention program, if the individual leaves New York paid expenses turn into loans.

College Promise programs can look vastly different across states. Kanter explained that programs are funded differently depending on the resources available. Some are funded with private funds, others with public funds, and some with a public-private partnership. In Tennessee for example, after implementing the [Tennessee Promise program](#) and developing a partnering organization, [Tennessee Achieves](#), the [Tennessee Reconnecting initiative](#) was developed to encourage more adults to earn a degree and/or credential. Additionally, College Promise advocates were able to gain buy-in from key players such as the [Chamber of Commerce](#), business, education, government and philanthropy leaders, which resulted in the accessibility to infrastructure for wraparound services and housing. Although programs vary by region, College Promise programs have key similar features:

1. Place-based (college, city, region, or state)
2. Guaranteed financial support for college
3. Evidence and performance-based
4. Financially sustainable
5. Cross sector, sustainable leadership
6. Robust infrastructure

The growth of College Promise programs within recent years has been remarkable. To date, there are over 300 programs across the U.S. in 24 states. Given there is no single model, Kanter emphasizes the importance of using research to inform best practices. She explained the [College Promise Campaign](#) is currently focused on outcomes and equity impacts and highlighted [Dallas County Promise](#) for providing robust supports to students such as bus passes and on-campus food pantries. Kanter concluded her remarks by discussing next steps. She prompted important questions such as "How do we expand to more than 300 programs? How do we know these college programs are going beyond what a student would find in federal or state aid?" Lastly, Kanter encouraged everyone to learn from current innovation and Promise designs and promote and scale what works.

Alyssa Ratledge, Research Analyst, MDRC

Ratledge opened her presentation by explaining that [MDRC](#) is a nonprofit nonpartisan research organization focused on using the highest research standards to evaluate the effectiveness of programs aiming to improve the lives of low-income students. MDRC's social policy work focuses on different sectors such as early childhood, K-12, postsecondary education, housing, welfare, and prison anti-recidivism. MDRC also provides technical assistance to help programs and schools strengthen their work. Ratledge focused on using research to highlight access and retention gaps and described their evaluation of the [Detroit Promise Path](#) program.

Ratledge provided data on students' graduation rates at public two-year institutions. After three years of students matriculating in a public two-year institution, data shows that only 14 percent of students have graduated. In regards to retention rates during this same time period, about 44 percent of students

are either still enrolled (either at the same two-year institution or at another institution), and 42 percent have dropped out. Given such high dropout rates, Ratledge emphasized the importance of reengaging these youth so they can obtain their degree. A good starting point, then, is considering *why* students drop out of college at such high rates. According to the academic literature, there are five main reasons students, particularly low-income students and students from traditionally underrepresented populations, drop out: (1) academic challenges; (2) financial barriers; (3) work-life-school balance; (4) lack of college know-how; and (5) institutional barriers.

Ratledge then focused on describing how College Promise programs can mitigate these barriers. She began by explaining that College Promise programs can offer students additional support and alert students that financial aid is available. For example, a student who is eligible for a Pell grant might think college is financially out of reach, even though they qualify for such grant. Thus, involvement in a College Promise program can change students' perception of college costs and financial aid available to them. MDRC is interested in understanding how these programs can make college accessible to students, but also how they help students succeed once they are enrolled. Through the [College Promise Success Initiative](#), MDRC works with various programs across the country to "think about how these scholarships can build-in additional success components to help students be more successful."

MDRC conducted a randomized control trial study of the [Detroit Promise Path](#). The Chamber approached MDRC about this program and study because they had observed that more students were enrolling in college, but retention rates were still very low. After talking with students, they found students were facing other barriers to success beyond tuition and fees. In response, MDRC worked with the Chamber's Promise staff to develop additional student supports based on the research literature of what works for low-income students. These additional supports included: (1) campus coaching (students were required to meet with a coach twice a month); (2) students received \$50 each month for expenses not covered by financial aid (bus passes, books, etc.); (3) students were engaged in the summer by connecting them to local initiatives and summer job programs; and (4) a management information system was used to track student participation and automate appointments and financial incentives for better monitoring. For the purposes of the study, only students entering a community college in fall 2016 and 2017 in Detroit were assessed, which included 1,268 students. Most students identified as first-generation students of color and were low-income. The goal of the study was to measure the impact of the Detroit Promise program (with the additional four services) and assess whether or not receiving the additional services increased students' retention rates.

Quantitative key findings from the study suggested that during students' first semester, there was a five percentage point program impact on enrollment rates and a six percentage point impact on full-time enrollment as compared to students in the control group who only received the College Promise scholarship and no additional services. In particular, the full-time enrollment impact is important because it correlates with the likelihood of students persisting and graduating. During students' second semester, the program's impact on enrollment and full-time enrollment was even larger, eight percentage points and ten percentage points, respectively. Additionally, students who received additional services were three times more likely than their counterparts to enroll in summer classes. Even more exciting, the program had a significant impact on the number of credits students earned in the summer. Thus, not only did the additional services increase students' summer enrollment, they also increased students' chances of completing their courses. Lastly, students receiving the additional services were twice as likely as their counterparts to complete a full-time course load in the first year, and as a result, earned more credits and stayed on track.

Key results from qualitative findings included students' appreciation for the program. Students reported that participation in the program gave them a better understanding of college processes such as financial aid and academic requirements. Students also reported that the coaching was the most valuable part of the program, best reflected by the following response from a student: "[The coach] keeps you on track and reminds you that you are trying to do something positive with your life."

However, despite the College Promise scholarship and the additional services in place, Ratledge admitted that many students' needs are still not being met. When talking to students who have left school, the reasons they give for dropping out are predominantly non-academic. Most students still have to work; many have childcare and family responsibilities and cannot afford to continue paying for school, and others are facing barriers outside of the community college's control such as food and/or housing insecurity.

Monica Rodriguez, Director of Children and Youth Services, City of Detroit Mayor's Office

Rodriguez provided an in-depth overview of [Detroit's College Promise program](#). Previous to her current position at the City of Detroit's Mayor Office, she was involved with the Detroit College Promise program for a total of six years. Throughout her presentation, she focused on providing insight on what the College Promise program looks like internally and shared students' experiences.

Rodriguez began by answering the important question of "what is the Detroit College Promise program hoping to accomplish?" She shared that early on leaders identified a problem: they were sending kids to college but did not consider how to *keep* students enrolled. Rodriguez explained she is always startled by the positive results previously shared by Ratledge, because "they are the accumulation of a period of time when we had no idea what we were doing." She described the program's positive outcomes as "the result of people who really care, trying really hard to figure out what we can do for our kids," and she noted success and access are the heart and center of the program. She then prompted the following questions:

1. What is it that we are going to do beyond just getting kids to the front door?
2. How will we continue to support them to ensure they have what they need to obtain their degree, certificate, and/or whatever opportunity it is they want?

Next, Rodriguez showcased [a video](#) which captured Detroit's College Promise program and highlighted students' experiences and program services. Below are the key takeaways from the video:

- The heart of the College Promise program is the relationship between students and coaches.
- The style of coaching is intrusive, with coaches calling, texting, and emailing students to stay up-to-date on their progress.
- The program is not pitching education as a certificate and/or degree to students. Instead, they are asking students "what is it that you want for your life?" and at the end, students themselves realize in order to obtain their goal, education is needed.
- Ultimately, the program seeks to change the culture around higher education in the city.

As the video showcased, the program is structured around students' needs, and therefore, there is not one specific curriculum being followed. The acknowledgment of students' varying needs at different points reinforces the idea that "education is inherently intimate."

To fully understand how the College Promise program works, it is important to understand the fragmented education landscape in Detroit. Rodriguez explained that leaders of College Promise programs are not in the K-12 nor postsecondary landscape, and therefore, a big challenge was finding

creative ways to get all community partners at the same table. They considered questions like “how do we have a say on whether or not our kids are successful?” Rodriguez described [Detroit’s College Promise program](#) as a collaborative, community effort in which everyone is invested in the success of students because they realize the benefits for the community and workforce.

Rodriguez explained that inherently the structure of Promise programs make sense. Students are attending institutions that have historically been hard to navigate and are not receiving the appropriate services and supports needed to help them navigate such spaces. When thinking about why Detroit’s College Promise program is successful, Rodriguez provided a simple answer: “We have really well-intended people sitting down and asking questions.” When asked what it takes to roll out a successful program, Rodriguez gave an untraditional answer: “It takes whatever it is your kids need.” Sometimes this means looking at the academic structures, streamlining processes, and other times it means asking what is going on in students’ communities and homes. She emphasized the entire process must be student-centric if the goal is to better serve students.

Rodriguez concluded her remarks by reflecting on what they have learned and what is next. One of the major lessons learned is the realization that there are some things they do not know about how to support kids. Now that they have assessed the impact of the program, the next steps include being more intentional about the entire pipeline. Specifically, they are considering reaching into high schools and trying to connect coaches to kids while they are still in high school. Rodriguez asserted they have learned a lot and have a lot to learn, but remained firm in championing the promise of helping students get to where they want to go.

Respondents

After the presentations, Katie Berger and Alex Ricci, both Professional Staff Members on the [Committee on Education and Labor in the U.S. House of Representatives](#), provided thoughts about the research on the Detroit Promise Program and how it might inform conversations about the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) as well as the federal role in College Promise programs.

Katie Berger, Professional Staff Member, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives

It has been over a decade since the last reauthorization of HEA. Berger admits higher education is a tricky policy area, specifically when considering the variation in institutional goals and resources. She argued that issues of access to postsecondary education have not been solved, as there is still variation between enrollment and access and whether or not students are able to access institutions that best meet their needs. In terms of affordability, Berger recognized there are still issues of costs, particularly for low-income students, despite promising programs and initiatives at the state and local levels. Specifically, she spoke about the burden of student debt and the high rates of low-income students working long hours to pay for college. She noted that completion is one of the biggest policy problem areas as completion gaps are huge and have not shrunk. While there has been some progress, low-income students and students of color are graduating at significantly lower rates than their white peers. She said that this is not just about degree attainment and increasing course completion rates, “This is central to fulfilling HEA’s central mission which is a civil rights law.”

Berger also reflected on the presentations. First, she acknowledged leaders must meet students where they are and must realize and understand that life circumstances affect students’ ability to obtain a degree. Second, she emphasized the importance of messaging. She agreed on the fact that “free [college] gets people to the table,” but also recognized that policymakers often say “college isn’t for

everyone.” She continued, “That’s not a message they take home to their kids and friends, that is a message they share with students in this country who have been flushed out of the higher education system. So while we’re considering saying that college is affordable or free, we have to think about both, fulfilling that promise and ensuring that the messaging is getting to those students who are most in need.” Berger also spoke about the importance of individual level relationships: “So often, this is about having caring adults with reasonable caseloads that can support students on the path to completion.” Regrettably, from a federal policy lens, she admits this element is often lost.

In terms of the federal role, Berger noted that many programs are targeted at specific populations and have done a good job of figuring out how to best meet their needs. However, she argues the federal government should address the broader population. Berger also spoke about the importance of ensuring institutions have the proper resources to support and develop this work at-scale and said the federal government can be a key player in reversing state disinvestments. Berger was also in favor of continued efforts to strengthen the Pell grant, which would help address affordability issues specifically for non-tuition costs (since the Pell grant is not limited to tuition). Lastly, Berger discouraged focusing only on getting students into college and instead encouraged the consideration of students’ whole life-span and how to best support their needs.

Audience Q&A

Q: When considering the federal role in regards to structural elements and social supports, what have the conversations been around these two areas, and what are some other pieces of legislation that might be a part of the conversation?

Berger admitted there is a structural challenge in figuring out the alignment between K-12, higher education, and the workforce due to different funding processes within the current system. On the workforce side, she urged stakeholders to better inform students about how academic programs can lead to good jobs. In regards to addressing structural barriers, she stated that the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA) is unnecessarily complex and burdensome, often making students go through multiple hoops to prove they are poor. From a federal lens, she suggested the federal government should ensure that processes support students. On the institutional side, she encouraged stakeholders to think about barriers that can simply be removed, such as not allowing students to complete a semester in college due to outstanding parking tickets.

Rodriguez then stressed the importance of urgency, mentioning the fact that all too often, students do not enroll in college due to navigation barriers and not understanding the FAFSA process. Lastly, she stressed the importance of properly monitoring the use of money and resources.

Q: How have you seen states play an effective role in supporting institutions and building programs with student wraparound support services? And alternatively, if you haven’t seen this, how do you think states should play a role?

Kanter shared an example of how governors have enacted some form of a promise. When thinking about how governors have worked alongside communities, she shared most have built a bottom-up movement. A question for governors to consider is “Can I build from the innovation and impacts locally?” Kanter mentioned there are numerous things governors can learn from local College Promise programs. She encouraged governors to work with the research community in their state to identify what the best and most promising designs are. Ultimately, the idea is for governors to be able to replicate in their state what is happening in one city and bring that to scale statewide.

Q: Are there conversations happening around using tiered evidence programs at the postsecondary level?

Berger encouraged careful consideration of where funds are invested for student success initiatives. She also brought up resource inequities in higher education and specifically talked about how students with the most significant needs often attend institutions with the least amount of resources. When considering investing in programs with the best results in an environment where institutions pick their students, “You risk reinforcing some of those inequities.”

Q: How do you honor the boundaries of everyone’s role and at the same time leverage their impact?

Rodriguez spoke about the importance of figuring out how to help students move through different systems (K-12, higher education, workforce, etc.) in a way that is coherent. Rodriguez explained often it is about alignment and figuring out the role each person plays in each sector.

Ratledge recognized there are many touchpoints along the way and stressed the importance of teaching students self-sufficiency so they can manage their educational journey on their own. She provided an example of having coaches model how students should talk with faculty and explained that with practice, students should be able to talk with faculty on their own.

Kanter added that the interface between evidence and practice has to come together. She spoke about afterschool programs and the consolidation of expertise in an effort to make it easier for individual student needs to be met. Lastly, she shared there is a lot of work to do in regards to alignment because there are a lot of people involved, and there are a lot of parallel processes within systems.

Final Remarks

Brand concluded the forum by thanking everyone for their time and expressed her enthusiasm for bringing leaders from different organizations and political parties together to discuss the future of College Promise programs.