

# PROMISE WITH A PURPOSE

COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS "BUILT FOR COMPLETION"

**COMPLETE  
COLLEGE  
AMERICA**

 **College  
Promise  
Campaign**

  
**Achieving  
the Dream™**

# I. THE PROBLEM

College Promise programs – initiatives designed to guarantee tuition and fees for eligible students – have swept across the country, unlocking the opportunity of higher education for students in more than 200 communities across 44 states, including 16 statewide programs that have passed through legislation or executive orders. These forward-thinking institutions, cities, regions, and states are setting a powerful example in these efforts to expand access to higher education.

But the “Promise” of a college degree or certificate is an empty one if newly accepted students don’t go on to complete their chosen credential. College Promise programs, then, must be “Built for Completion,” matching the promise of college access with the promise of college graduation.

Such a promise requires that increased investment in education also comes with an increased focus on student progress, an emphasis on the quality of education students receive, and a commitment to driving outcomes that lead to a more secure and fulfilling future for all those who come to our campuses, ultimately providing a better return on investment for students, families, and the public.

The College Promise Campaign, Achieving the Dream and Complete College America look forward to serving as a resource as education, business, government and philanthropy leaders work to build or refine College Promise programs in their communities and states. Focused attention on the purpose, design, and measurement of College Promise students and outcomes are essential to increasing the number of Americans with college degrees and certificates of purpose and value.

The simple yet staggering truth is this: a high school education is no longer sufficient for advancement in the fast-growing, knowledge economy of the 21st century. In this policy brief, we offer a collection of evidence-based strategies for institutions, communities, and states to incorporate into their Promise initiatives, boosting student success and the ultimate likelihood of completion. We hope that this report will inspire leaders to design high-quality College Promise programs that are intentionally “built for completion.” Our nation will need millions more well-prepared, career-ready graduates to increase and sustain our economic prosperity, and well-designed Promise programs are a dynamic tool to help us reach these goals.

## II. THE PATH FORWARD

The barriers to student success and completion are clear: long sequences of no-credit remedial courses, enrollment patterns that don't translate into on-time completion, and limitless program options without clear pathways for students to follow. A College Promise "Built for Completion" should help students address these challenges, encouraging institutions to implement evidence-based interventions that make it easier for students to move to and through programs of study. College Promise programs should drive institutions to restructure course scheduling and to offer guided, streamlined pathways to on-time graduation. They should also provide critical student services to advise and counsel as many students as possible as they manage school, work, and family responsibilities.

*15 to Finish* campaigns have demonstrated that when students understand the benefits of enrolling in 15 credits a semester (30 credits a year), they are more likely to do so, without any drop-off in academic performance. However, institutions must make the necessary changes to enable students to enroll in 15 credits. For example, many institutions have improved full-time enrollment and on-time completion, particularly for adult students, with a redesigned schedule that is built around shorter terms (with fewer courses in each) and year-round enrollment. Institutions

serving Promise students should consider structural changes like this, encouraging students to map out 30 credits on a year-round basis before funneling them into a part-time model, no matter how structured that model may be.

For College Promise programs serving part-time students – those for whom 30 credits annually is unrealistic – institutions should provide a structured, part-time pathway that adds no more than one year to the students' time to degree – an outcome more easily reached through clearly-defined pathways.

The growing movement around guided pathways provides a powerful strategy to ensure that Promise students enter higher education with a clear academic purpose, enabling them to develop a clear semester-by-semester plan to completion and receive proactive advising to support them along their pathway to completion.

Promise programs should ensure that all students receive intensive onboard advising that results in students choosing a program within their first academic year. They should make sure that students enroll in critical gateway math and English courses in the first academic year and have a clear academic plan outlining the courses they need to take each semester in order to graduate on time. Institutions that have implemented these

strategies have seen higher graduation rates, lower time to degree, and lower costs for completing a degree.

While re-engineering the mechanics of structures and pathways within higher education will contribute to greater success for students, institutions must also focus attention on improving quality throughout the entire education pipeline. Institutions committed to increasing college completion are redesigning general education, reorganizing various majors, and providing specific pathways based on targeted learning outcomes. The quality of the degree or certificate matters, and efforts to increase

completion must not compromise rigor.

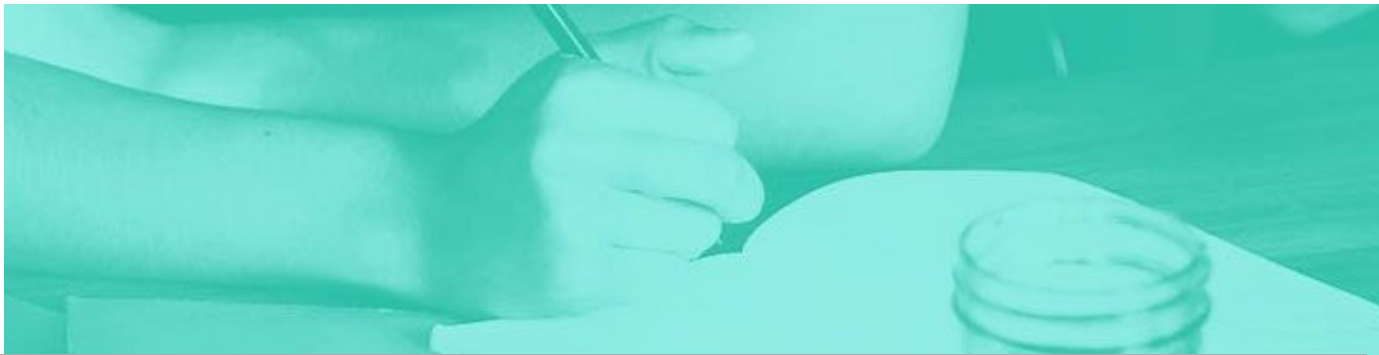
The following standards are designed such that if students, institutions, and state/local leaders follow them at scale, College Promise programs will not only greatly expand access to higher education, they will increase graduation rates at much higher levels than the field has been able to accomplish in decades past. These standards can be built into College Promise programs as strict participation requirements or simply suggested as impactful practices, but the stronger the incentives for students and institutions to follow these standards, the stronger the results are likely to be.



## PROMISE STUDENT RECIPIENTS ARE MOST LIKELY TO GRADUATE IF THEY:

- ✓ Complete **30 credits** per year (including fall, winter, spring, and/or summer sessions)
- ✓ Meet periodically (e.g., at least monthly) with their assigned counselor (sometimes referred to as an advisor, coach, or mentor); and
- ✓ Visit personally with each of their instructors (e.g., take advantage of the faculty office hours)





## INSTITUTIONS MAKE GRADUATION MORE LIKELY FOR PROMISE STUDENTS IF THEY:

- ✓ Deliver their required remediation as a **corequisite**, not a prerequisite;
- ✓ Assign a consistent, available counselor (sometimes referred to as an advisor, coach, or mentor) to each Promise recipient at the start of their academic journey and for the duration of the program, and ensure the counselor or responsible advisor has expertise to help students pursue a completion plan, develop meaningful relationships, and engage in productive discussions that result in persistence to their chosen degree and/or certificate;
- ✓ Provide students with term-by-term **degree and/or certificate maps** with the following characteristics proven to drive momentum:
  - **30 credits** per calendar year (fall, winter, spring, and summer sessions) for full-time students
  - **20-24 credits** per calendar year (fall, winter, spring, and summer sessions) for students who must attend part-time, facilitating graduation within one year of the published program length
  - Required completion of the program-aligned gateway **math** and **English** courses within the first year, for both full-time and part-time students
  - Inclusion of at least **nine credits** in the student's selected **content area** within the first year, for both full-time and part-time students
- ✓ Ensure that students register for all classes based on their degree and/or certificate maps;
- ✓ Provide students with financial affordability supports; and
- ✓ Offer high-quality programs and courses with clearly-defined learning outcomes and commit to assessing and demonstrating what students have achieved as they persist to graduation

## STATE AND/OR LOCAL LEADERS CAN BEST SUPPORT THE GRADUATION OF PROMISE RECIPIENTS WHEN THEY:

- ✓ **Collect and report** on-time graduation rates disaggregated by race, age, and income, at each participating institution on an annual basis;
- ✓ **Monitor** the percentage of students meeting credit completion benchmarks at each institution and address deficiencies, if they exist;
- ✓ Support institutions to **implement** high-quality, completion-focused courses, and interventions that incorporate guided pathways, Corequisite Remediation, and high-impact practices leading to quality outcomes;
- ✓ Operate an **appeals process** for students who do not complete their required credits due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., illness, hardship, etc.), providing a mechanism for affected students to continue receiving funding; and
- ✓ **Keep the Promise!** Implement a long-term financial sustainability plan to fully fund the Promise. In the event of unintended shortfalls, ensure that currently-enrolled students are not affected.



# III. THE EVIDENCE

## STUDENTS WHO TAKE 15 CREDITS DURING THEIR FIRST SEMESTER ARE MORE LIKELY TO PERSIST AND GRADUATE.

In a 2016 [study](#), the Community College Research Center showed substantial positive outcomes for students who take 15 credits their first semester, including a 6.4 percentage point increase in degree completion compared to students who take just 12 credits.

The University of Hawaii (UH) has been highlighted for their work putting this research into practice through their “[15 to Finish](#)” campaign. UH community colleges have nearly doubled the number of first-time freshmen taking 15 or more credits, resulting in higher end-of-semester GPAs and higher credit completion rates.

A recent [analysis](#) by EAB, a Washington, DC-based research firm, recently found that

students who take 15+ credits in their first semester finish with a higher GPA and have a greater retention rate than their full-time peers taking less than 15 credits. This study also found that students who took 15 credits per term in their first year were 19 percentage points more likely to graduate in four years.

An analysis by [Complete College America](#) found that less than a third of “full-time” community college students were taking 15 credits or more. The difference in first-year stop-out rates between students completing 30+ credits and those completing 24-29 was six percent.

## STUDENTS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO COMPLETE 30 CREDITS WHEN THEY ARE REQUIRED TO DO SO - EVEN MORE SO FOR MINORITY STUDENTS.

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education published its second year results in their March 2016 [policy analysis](#) quantifying the persistence and completion outcomes of their multi-year student financial reform efforts. Legislation requiring that scholarship recipients complete 30 college credits per year dramatically

increased the percentage of community college students completing 30 credits in fall and spring terms (from 11.7 percent to 32.5 percent). Further, nearly half of these students (45.9 percent), met the 30-credit benchmark when they successfully completed summer, AP, and/or dual enrollment credit courses.

A subsequent quasi-experimental [investigation by Postsecondary Analytics shows](#) that the policy had a greater positive impact for minority students than non-minority students. These positive benefits are demonstrated in three key success metrics: average fall credit hours attempted, fall credit hours earned, and

likelihood of earning 30 credits or more over fall and spring.

The number of Indiana students required to enroll in at least 30 credit hours rose by 55 percent, while completion rose by 56 percent. [Learn more >](#)

## **GUIDED PATHWAYS, INCLUDING DEGREE MAPS AND PROACTIVE ADVISING, DRIVE GRADUATION SUCCESS AND CLOSE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS.**

[Complete College America](#) and [Achieving the Dream](#) cite notable examples of institutions using Guided Pathways to drive results.

### **GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY**

As a result of implementing degree maps and proactive advising, Georgia State University achieved a 20 percentage point increase in graduation rates. Perhaps even more notable, its achievement gap closed entirely, with African American, Hispanic, and Pell-eligible students graduating at higher rates than the overall student body. [Learn more >](#)

### **FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY**

In the 10 years since Florida State University began combining degree maps and other strategies to increase college completion and to close attainment gaps, it has seen a marked increase in graduation rates, particularly among minority students. FSU's graduation rate for all students increased by 12 percentage points – up to 74 percent.

More significantly, the graduation rate for African American students increased to 77 percent, for first-generation Pell students to 72 percent, and for Hispanic students to more than 70 percent. [Learn more >](#)

### **UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

For its community colleges, part of the Achieving the Dream network, and universities, the University System of Hawai'i developed a state-of-the-art technology system (STAR GPS) that defaults students onto their academic pathways and recalculates whenever they veer from that path. Preliminary results show that the system has reduced the average percentage of off-track credits to four percent for students at the University of Hawai'i, far below the national average of 25 percent, with no additional expenditure required on advising resources. [Learn more >](#)



## **CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK**

Students in the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), were substantially more likely to complete a degree than their cohorts not in the program. Students in the program were 18 percent more likely to graduate in three years than their counterparts outside of the program. Guttman Community College implemented a newly-designed pathway, requiring students to enter a summer bridge program, enroll full time, and complete a common first-year curriculum. The result: 28 percent of the class completed an associate degree in two years, with 35 percent on track to complete their associate degree in three years. This is significantly higher than the state’s three-year graduation average of 13 percent. This program is now scaling to other community colleges. [Learn more >](#)

## **MIAMI DADE COLLEGE, FL**

The guided program pathway at Miami-Dade College, an Achieving the Dream Network college, is showing promising results. Half of the students who attended their boot camp scored at least one level higher in developmental education. More than twice as many academic plans were completed than in the prior year and retention rates for students who met with an advisor were about eight percentage points higher than those who did not. [Learn more >](#)

## **COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF PHILADELPHIA, PA**

The Community College of Philadelphia, a Leader College in the Achieving the Dream Network, has now implemented a Guided Pathway that includes a targeted intake process, curriculum maps, redesigned developmental education courses, and more extensive advising and progress tracking for accountability. As part of their advising redesign, the college moved to a case management approach and hired professional advisors to work with students to build out their academic plan and ensure students are enrolled in a mandated sequence of courses. [Learn more >](#)

## **MICHIGAN CENTER FOR STUDENT SUCCESS WITHIN THE MICHIGAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE ASSOCIATION**

Community colleges across Michigan are implementing completion reforms via the Michigan Guided Pathways Institute. They incorporated program mapping and created intentional “academic road maps,” outlined by program for students (part-time, full-time, college ready and those requiring preliminary developmental work). [Learn more >](#)

This impressive work on [Guided Pathways](#) is paving the way to increased college completion, especially for under prepared students who are—today—making substantial academic progress in their college programs of study as a result of these redesigned course sequences.

## STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE NINE CREDITS IN THEIR ACADEMIC FOCUS AREA IN THE FIRST YEAR ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO GRADUATE.

### [The Community College Research Center](#)

found that students who entered a program of study (taking nine or more credits in that area) in the first year were much more likely to complete a credential or transfer than students who did not enter a program until the second year or later.

Over half of the students who entered into a program of study their first year graduated with an associate degree, transferred to a four-year institution, or earned a bachelor's degree from an outside institution, compared to only 37 percent of those who did not enter

a concentration in their first year.

### [The Tennessee Board of Regents](#)

found that in state universities, students who earn nine hours in their focus area during their first-year graduate at a rate of 53 percent compared to only 35 percent for students who did not attempt nine hours in the focus area. In community colleges, the difference is even larger: students who did not attempt nine hours in their area of focus in their first year held a 16 percent graduation rate, while those who did held a 40 percent graduation rate.

## STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE GATEWAY MATH AND ENGLISH IN THEIR FIRST YEAR ARE MORE LIKELY TO GRADUATE.

Complete College America's report entitled [Spanning the Divide](#) cites that students who complete gateway courses (e.g., freshman English, math, etc.) and enter a program of study in their first year are far more likely to complete a postsecondary credential. Further, many community colleges and universities are implementing corequisite models, enabling

students to take gateway courses concurrently linked with remedial courses or labs, thereby saving students both time and money.

[Achieving the Dream](#) supports and tracks the outcomes of many community colleges applying gateway course reforms, demonstrating significant increases in student achievement and persistence.

## UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA-RENO

University of Nevada-Reno data showed that students who complete a gateway math course in their first academic year are about two times more likely to graduate or still be enrolled six years later than students who do not complete gateway math. [Learn more >](#)

## COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF BALTIMORE COUNTY (CCBC), MD

Achieving the Dream Leader College CCBC's Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) of corequisite education has scaled to more than 200 colleges, with six states also adopting ALP (Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, Michigan, and Virginia). These institutions co-enroll developmental students in the developmental course and the college-level English or math course taught by the same instructor. Significant increases in student success are reported across a wide range of community colleges using the ALP model. These students also save money for textbooks in that these courses use the college-level course textbooks for instruction. [Learn more >](#)

## BUNKER HILL COMMUNITY COLLEGE (BHCC), BOSTON, MA

A recipient of eligible "Boston Bridge" (College Promise) students, BHCC, an Achieving the Dream Leader College, has

profiled a five-year history of its mathematics redesign efforts to accelerate student progression. Their faculty compressed two levels of developmental math into a single semester, showing by the end of the Fall 2016 term, a course completion increase of 20 percent for the sample of 1,227 students finishing the one semester curriculum. Implementing several other reforms, BHCC faculty are now scaling corequisite support in mathematics for full implementation by 2019. [Learn more >](#)

## TENNESSEE'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

In Tennessee's 13 community colleges (12 of whom are in the Achieving the Dream Network), studies by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University showed that students who take prerequisite courses have a 12 percent progress rate towards completing the math and English gateway course, while 51 percent of students taking corequisite courses progressed towards completing the gateway courses. [Learn more >](#)

## STUDENTS WITH COLLEGE FINANCIAL AFFORDABILITY SUPPORTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO COMPLETE.

Each year, low-income students must reapply for a Pell grant which provides nearly \$6,000 toward college tuition and fees. Today, 45 percent of undergraduates are Pell-grant eligible. Thus, financial education is critical, especially for first-generation students who may be unfamiliar with navigating the ins and outs of financial planning.

### MONTGOMERY COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE, BLUE BELL, PA

Montgomery County Community College, an Achieving the Dream Leader College, has been working with ATD to implement new technology and processes to ensure every student develops both a career and financial plan in alignment with their academic plan in their first semester. After completing a career interest assessment, advisors help students focus their goals and build a plan for how to finance their studies and build their financial literacy. These aligned plans guide students throughout their chosen education path and enable advisors to support them in a personalized and holistic way in collaboration with faculty and other support staff.

[Learn more >](#)

Many institutions are incorporating financial planning orientations for students through their Student Financial Aid Offices. A growing number of community colleges and universities have put emergency grant programs in place, building on research studies showing that too many students drop

out of college over small dollar amounts. And completing the federal government's Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) enables low-income students to receive grants for college tuition and fees. The Tennessee Promise requires high school students to complete the FAFSA as one of its performance-based eligibility requirements to attend a Tennessee community college or technology center for free. Tennessee is now first in the country in the percentage of high school students completing the FAFSA, a financial gateway to college completion. The FAFSA completion requirement is prominent in the more than 200 local College Promise programs underway in 43 states, and in the other 15 states that have enacted a statewide Promise for their students.

With Pell grants now available in summer, enabling year-round financial aid, [research studies](#) are pointing to [increased retention and credit accumulation](#) toward degree and certificate completion. When MDRC evaluated the City University of New York's [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs \(ASAP\)](#) that significantly increased college completion in three years at a lower cost per graduate, impacts were dramatic (accounting for 25 percent or more of ASAP's total impact) due to student success in their winter and summer session courses.

[Performance-based scholarships](#) provided to students in addition to existing state and

federal aid, now available in more than 200 local communities and 16 states (e.g., Detroit and Tennessee Promise programs), are being leveraged to improve college persistence and completion rates. In addition to covering community college tuition and fees, many of these Promise programs provide mentoring, tutoring, transportation, and no or low-cost textbooks to increase student retention, persistence, and completion.

A [March 2017 study](#) of 33,000 students surveyed in 70 community colleges across 24 by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab and the Association of Community College Trustees reported that, “about two thirds of community college students were food insecure, about 50 percent were housing insecure and more than 13 percent were homeless.” It is compelling that “between 31 and 32 percent of students experiencing food or housing insecurity were both working and receiving financial aid.”

### **DALLAS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT, TX**

The Dallas County Community College District (five colleges in the District are in the Achieving the Dream Network) and its business, philanthropy, government, and K-12 partners now have food banks and transportation passes, and will begin offering

“Promise” performance-based scholarships for eligible students in the fall at their seven campuses. [Learn more >](#)

### **PORTERVILLE COLLEGE, PORTERVILLE, CA**

Porterville College in California, an Achieving the Dream Leader College, is another example of many colleges across the country opening a food pantry to support students facing food insecurity. However, unlike others, Porterville’s pantry has a booking process online or in-person to ensure the privacy of students using the pantry. They also ask each student a couple of questions before they access the pantry to learn more about their specific needs. This information helps staff direct the student to additional resources, such as daycare, financial literacy workshops, or employment services. [Learn more >](#)

Intentional coupling of financial aid support with guided pathways, curricular reforms, mentoring, and related evidence-based interventions and incentives are paving the way for the U.S. to make significant gains in increasing the number of college and career-ready graduates for the 21st century.

## QUALITY LEARNING MUST DRIVE COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS DESIGNED FOR COMPLETION.

More than 20 years of research studies illustrate that students who enroll in college programs that embed [high-impact practices](#) (e.g., first-year seminars, [learning communities](#), undergraduate research opportunities, etc.) increase their retention and persistence rates. An increasing number of community colleges and universities are embedding “gateway courses” in learning communities, especially for the first year of college.

### UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE

At UW-Milwaukee, the first year experience “Access to Success initiative” provides a variety of learning communities that integrate required courses with interventions (e.g., peer mentoring, tutoring and undergraduate research opportunities) to increase student persistence and completion. [Learn more >](#)

### UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

LEAP and BLOCK-U are two examples of learning communities underway at Utah State University. LEAP is a cohort-based seminar while the BlockU learning community addresses contemporary problems of society. Both are run for two semesters and satisfy general education courses required for the baccalaureate degree. [Learn more >](#)

### GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

All incoming freshmen may participate in a learning community to introduce them to “the

rigors and exigencies of college life.” These Freshmen Learning Communities are built around a major field of study (e.g., STEM, business, art & humanities, health, etc.), offering students an intentional cohort and faculty focused on successful completion of the first year of college. [Learn more >](#)

### DE ANZA COLLEGE

Learning in Communities (LinC) offers students two college courses linked together with a common theme, content and materials for the purpose of increasing student success. Students work together in a community with common readings and assignments led by two faculty who have integrated their courses into a coherent set of purposeful activities to increase student engagement, achievement, and collaboration. [Learn more >](#)

*Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement*, a [study](#) by two scholars at the Carnegie Institute for the Advancement of Teaching, found positive impacts of learning communities on student success and college completion: higher levels of academic performance and student engagement. Zhao and Kuh reported that “...participation in some form of learning community is positively related to student success, broadly defined to include enhanced academic performance, integration of academic and social experiences, positive perceptions of the college environment, and self-reported gains

since starting college. The effects are somewhat stronger for first-year students.”

The American Association of Colleges and Universities charts the adoption and implementation of high-impact practices in institutions and states through its national [LEAP](#) initiative. State higher education commissions, systems, and institutional consortia are actively implementing these practices in California, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, North

Dakota, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. Numerous surveys confirm that the majority of our nation’s students, families, employers, institutions, communities, and states share a common interest in increasing the number of college graduates with quality preparation for the 21st century. Promoting high-impact practices as design features of College Promise programs is important to ensure that quality drives the college completion agenda for our nation.

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