



THE FUTURE OF COLLEGE PROMISE

Nearly 400 state and local programs have flourished as federal advocacy continues.

By Rosario Durán

EIGHT YEARS AGO, THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION PUT forth the America's College Promise proposal, which reignited interest in making a two-year community college education an extension of the American public K-12 school system. This proposal would allow students to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to jumpstart their careers without having to take on decades of debt. By making education more accessible to all, the proposal sought to help the American workforce meet the demands of a growing global economy.

That same year, the Tennessee Promise program was enacted, and it became the first state in the country to offer students two years of community or technical college tuition-free. To help build national momentum for the proposal, former U.S. Under Secretary of Education Martha J. Kanter founded the College Promise Campaign shortly afterward. Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) introduced the America's College Promise Act of 2015 to move the effort forward at a federal level.

The America's College Promise Act has been reintroduced in every Congress since, with Senators Baldwin and Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representatives Scott and Andy Levin (D-MI) introducing the latest iteration in 2021. Most recently, President Joe Biden made headlines when he included free community college in his landmark Build Back Better agenda — though the provision ultimately failed to gain adequate support.

Outside the halls of Congress, the majority of Americans agree with the ideas behind College Promise. A recent May 2021 Morning Consult survey found that 59% of Americans favor tuition-free community college. Employers report a growing demand for "middle skills" workers, with jobs available to be filled but no qualified employees to fill them. Many higher education and thought leaders, including the Pew Research Center, have stated that College Promise would help fix the skills gap.

We can see the growing popularity of College Promise programs reflected in the significant increase of such programs at the state and local level throughout the country, despite the absence of a federal program. Currently, there are 393 programs nationwide, which includes 33 states plus Washington, D.C. with statewide programs. New Mexico recently established the most extensive tuition-free scholarship program in the country. Only two holdout states, Idaho and Mississippi, do not have any type of promise program.

The future of the program looks bright, as we are closer to fulfilling America's College Promise than ever before. As we continue our advocacy for a federal-level College Promise program, ACCT encourages community college boards, CEOs, and other leaders to learn about the College Promise movement and to consider whether a promise program is right for your students. ACCT, in partnership with the Campaign and with the American Association of Community Colleges, created a College Promise Campaign toolkit for community college board members and presidents who are interested in advancing the movement.

To learn more about different program designs and a wide variety of funding models, answer some of the most asked questions, and see additional resources, visit our College Promise page at www.acct.org/page/college-promise-resources.



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