

# Opportunities to Support Promise Zone Students

Prepared for the Grand Rapids Promise Zone Authority

In order to begin to inform options for consideration by the Grand Rapids Promise Zone Authority (GRPZA) for a student support framework, Public Policy Associates, Inc. (PPA) staff and consultants conducted a scan of existing supports offered by the Michigan Promise Zones and a selection of other promise programs nationally, as well as a review of the research literature around student supports in higher education, specifically at community colleges.

This review, captures common strategies at work across the state and around the nation to help promise zone students persist in college and complete degrees. Student supports is an under-researched area, so the evidence of effectiveness for any given approach likely is limited at this time.

## What Other Promise Programs are Doing

The GRPZA now has over a dozen peers across the state, with Michigan Promise Zones stretching from Detroit to Baldwin, as well as peers in other states such as Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas.

While these programs share certain characteristics, their emphasis on student success supports differs. Many programs place their focus on helping students to connect to college in order to utilize their scholarship. In these cases, they generally rely on the enrolling colleges to carry the students forward. For those few promise programs that offer supports after students enter college, approaches include coaching or mentoring, peer support linkages, summer engagement opportunities, community resource lists, and crisis relief.

The programs that work with a limited number of colleges, like the GRPZA, have the potential to coordinate and leverage the supports that already exist at the partner colleges.

## Coaching and Mentoring

The most common way promise programs support students outside of college access is to offer coaching through staff or mentoring through volunteers.

- The Detroit Promise Path pilot placed success coaches on each college campus where the scholarship can be used. Students meet with their coaches twice a month and receive \$50 for each month of participation, beginning late summer before their first semester. The evaluation of the pilot has shown increased persistence, full-time enrollment, and credit accumulation.
- Hazel Park offers a postsecondary success coach and a community mentoring program. The success coach initiates contact with students on a regular schedule. .



Grand Rapids  
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Strengthening All  
Grand Rapids  
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- The Pittsburgh Promise Navigators are professionals who help students along educational and career paths. Alumni/peer mentors are also available on an as-needed basis. Students are matched to mentor staff.

## Peer Supports

Some Promise Zone programs offer to connect students to peers (either current students or scholarship alumni) in order to build social capital. It is unclear how many students engage in these relationships or how helpful they find them based on the information and/or research available.

- The Pittsburgh Promise matches students with program alumni or peer mentors as needed.
- The Hartford Promise offers the web-based Hartford Promise Connect for current students and program alumni. It also operates a Facebook group for alumni.

## Summer Engagement

A few programs connect students to summer employment opportunities or recommend that they take summer courses to stay motivated in their college-going process.

- The Detroit Promise makes students aware of the opportunities available through the city's youth summer employment program. The program also encourages summer college attendance.
- The Hartford Promise, the Benton Harbor Promise, and Pittsburgh Promise also offer opportunities for students to access internships.
- The Kalamazoo Promise pays for students to take summer courses.

## Additional Resources

A passive step that some Promise Zone programs take is to provide students with lists of resources or guides on navigating their colleges. For instance, the Flint Promise posts two extensive lists of community resources on its website, and Hartford and Hazel Park include tips for college success. In addition, Pittsburgh is offering a pandemic relief fund

## What Community Colleges Are Doing

Community colleges often combine a number of services and practices to support their students. Some options require a larger commitment from the institution, while others can be considered supplemental to the services that the college offers students regularly.

## Coaching Services

Based on the available information, coaching program structure is largely dependent on the campus context. Some colleges require all of their scholarship recipients to meet with a coach regularly, while others only require that students falling below certain thresholds to establish a connection with a coach (e.g., students with a GPA below 2.0).

For the most part, coaches serve as a first point of contact for students, and work to connect them to other campus services, based on the needs they are facing. Coaches are usually professional college staff, but can be hired through a third-party organization (like a non-profit), or be graduate assistants.

A key feature programs that have shown to have an effect on student persistence and completion is that those coaches have access to student records, including financial aid, and course records, in order to provide more tailored and proactive support.

## Early Warning Systems

In an effort to identify students most at need of supportive services, colleges have used predictive analytic tools to build early warning systems. The most effective examples use historical data from colleges themselves to identify barriers and risk factors and target those students whose academic and demographic profiles suggest they are at greatest risk for dropping out.

Currently, there are a number of companies offering these services to institutions of higher education, but similar profiles can also be built internally through collaborations with institutional research staff.

## Course Supports

Research shows that remedial and gateway courses, particularly math courses, can pose a barrier to degree attainment.

Several strategies have been piloted nationally and within community colleges in Michigan, including the Right Math at the Right Time taskforce, which provided recommendations for math pathways across Michigan's higher education institutions.

Other strategies include targeted tutoring and support provided by near-peers who have recently successfully completed a course, as well as co-requisite instruction models of instruction, where students enroll in a college-level math course, but receive additional instruction and support through a concurrent, non-credit bearing course.

## Considerations for Grand Rapids

The GRPZA knows it wants to have a student support framework for its students. That framework relies on core decisions about the level of support and the degree of coordination with existing resources. Further planning efforts will explore these choices; for now, here are some considerations based on the results of the review.

***Be proactive.*** The literature shows that the more proactive and engaging efforts to support students, although more resource intensive, have a greater impact on student progress.

***Look closely at coaching models.*** Approaches can vary from “available if you need it” to very structured monitoring and outreach. The GRPZA should consider the level of support is best for its students, the location of coaches, and the tools that coaches have at their disposal.

***Understand student population and Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) resources.*** Having a clear understanding of where Promise students are encountering barriers at GRCC should be one of the first steps in developing a support strategy. A clear understanding of whether students face academic, personal, or financial challenges will help with targeting interventions.

GRCC likely already has resources and programs in place to support students who are struggling to persist in college and complete a degree. A thorough cataloguing of those services, and assessing how they can be deployed to better meet the needs of Promise students should also happen early in the process.

***Build support for big changes.*** It may be necessary to make significant changes to programs and services in order to see an impact on student persistence and degree attainment. Building support within GRCC and the community for major initiatives – such as overhauling the math course sequence or aligning services from community agencies – will need to happen gradually and with a great deal of data to support proposed changes.

