

# Promise Success Initiative

## Request for Proposals



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## Summary

MDRC's Promise Success Initiative will provide technical assistance and continuous improvement research support to the nation's College Promise and Free College programs. Programs will partner with MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, to develop and implement student support components for their scholarship programs. The goal is to assist programs in helping students succeed in college once they have enrolled by implementing support components that are based on research evidence of what works for low-income college students. Participating programs will receive comprehensive technical assistance and formative feedback from MDRC free of charge. MDRC's work will be funded by the Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates.

**MDRC invites proposals from College Promise scholarship programs to join this initiative.** Selected programs will begin work with MDRC in January 2018 for an 18-month project period.

## Project Overview

Despite great strides in increasing access to higher education and a growing need for a skilled workforce, graduation rates remain low. At community colleges, only one-fifth of students graduate within three years of entry. Meanwhile, the cost of attendance at colleges – even open-access colleges – has grown at a rate greater than inflation, leading many low-income families to think that postsecondary education is financially out of reach. At MDRC, we believe it is critical for interventions to target both *access* to college and *success* once students enroll. College Promise and Free College programs are at a unique advantage to do this. These programs are already confronting the issue of financial barriers to college. Yet tuition is just one piece of the puzzle. Most low-income students face multiple barriers to success once they enroll in postsecondary education, resulting in many of them not being able to take full advantage of the program's available financial support. MDRC's portfolio of research evidence on “what works” for postsecondary success has shown strategies to address these barriers. Building such strategies into existing Promise programs could be an efficient and scalable way to maximize access and substantially increase graduation rates, while also improving the impact of existing investments.

The Promise Success Initiative will provide College Promise and Free College programs across the country with technical assistance to strengthen their models and support students more comprehensively than scholarship dollars alone. (Although this document refers to these programs as College Promise programs, we offer this opportunity to an inclusive definition of programs and use the “college promise” terminology for simplicity's sake.) Since 2016, MDRC has been working with the Detroit Regional Chamber to create Detroit Promise Path, which added evidence-based college success components to the existing scholarship program. Early findings from a randomized controlled trial conducted by MDRC show that the additional components lead to significant differences in student success. The program had a sizeable impact

on enrollment in the second semester and full-time enrollment in the first and second semesters, compared with the scholarship alone. (For more information, see <http://www.mdrc.org/project/detroit-promise-path>) MDRC's broader portfolio of evaluation work, including performance-based scholarships, advising interventions, learning communities interventions, and comprehensive programs like the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP), provides lessons on "what works" for low-income college students that will inform this work.

Based on the encouraging early findings in Detroit, and the interest from many Promise programs to implement something similar to meet students' needs, MDRC and Great Lakes are launching the Promise Success Initiative. MDRC invites all College Promise scholarship programs interested in technical assistance to create and implement new support services to apply to participate in this Initiative. MDRC will provide these services free of charge thanks to a grant from Great Lakes. MDRC will also bring in partners such as the College Promise Campaign and the State Higher Education Executive Officers association (SHEEO) to provide targeted technical assistance around areas of interest to the participating programs. The goal of this work is to strengthen existing Promise programs to ensure that students have the tools to be academically successful and reach graduation. This in turn will maximize investment in these programs by improving attainment rates.

As noted above, we offer this opportunity to an inclusive definition of College Promise and Free College programs. Applicant programs will include any scholarship program offering students a guarantee of free tuition (including last-dollar scholarships after financial aid has been applied).

Selected programs will receive a personalized action plan that may include the following activities:

- Development/diagnosis to assess the program's current practice and the needs of the program's particular student population, with a focus on practices with research evidence of success for that population
- In-depth technical assistance to design and implement new support components based on research-driven best practices
- Behavioral science training to develop a strategy around behavioral science principles that can be incorporated into the program to improve take-up and compliance
- Personalized data coaching to help programs improve data collection, management, and monitoring, with a goal of creating report templates around key outcomes that programs can use to monitor their students' progress
- Participation in a cohort of like-minded College Promise programs to share and learn from each other's best practices and solutions
- A small financial stipend to offset travel costs

This work will begin in January 2018 and will span 18 months.

## MDRC's Role

With 40+ years of experience developing, evaluating, and improving social programs, MDRC offers nonprofit partners a unique mix of experience and skills to help assess and improve their programs and service systems. Our staff comprise a diverse set of perspectives including quantitative researchers, implementation experts, and former school staff who operated programs. As a result, we can play a multi-faceted role including program design, technical assistance on program implementation, data training and support, and behavioral science training, in addition to our traditional evaluation role. MDRC's work in postsecondary education spans a great number of studies in financial aid, developmental (remedial) education, student support services, and behavioral nudges to influence student performance.

## Proposed Scope of Work

### Activities

Selected programs will participate in the following activities over 18 months:

**Planning Period: Work with MDRC during winter 2018 to prepare an action plan. Activities during this phase include:**

- **Kick-off meeting with MDRC staff**

In winter of 2018, a kick-off meeting will be scheduled that will include key members of the program team and MDRC staff. This kick-off meeting will focus on understanding the current state of the program and conducting a needs assessment.

- **Action Plan**

MDRC will prepare an action plan for each program, including recommendations for strengthening the program and improving data capabilities. The assessment and action plan will be used to guide the recommended components during the technical assistance phase.

**Technical Assistance Period: Engage with MDRC in technical assistance, beginning spring 2018 through spring 2019. Activities during this phase include:**

- **Operational support**

Programs will meet regularly (biweekly calls) with MDRC to plan for implementing the recommended program components and to track progress on implementation.

- **Data/technology support and coaching**

Programs will provide data to MDRC to assess the current state of data capabilities. For colleges to participate, they must be able to provide de-identified administrative data to understand the population of students being targeted and served by the program. In addition, programs must be able to create aggregate reports on key academic outcomes, such as retention, credit accumulation,

and degree receipt, to understand students' current performance level and areas for improvement. In addition, a focus of the work will be understanding data capacity within the program so that students' participation can be accurately tracked and monitored.

- **Behavioral science training**

Programs will participate in a two-day behavioral science training where staff will learn behavioral diagnosis processes in which they can identify areas of improvement and design behavioral interventions to address them. Behavioral science explores how and why people make decisions and acknowledges the ways that students' past experiences, personalities, and context affect their behaviors. This training will provide information about understanding students' behaviors and how to nudge them in more positive directions.

- **Continuous improvement**

MDRC will work with program staff to assess the new components on an ongoing basis, by setting benchmarks in conjunction with program staff and reviewing the data against these benchmarks together. This will allow program staff to know how the program is operating and proactively address issues. MDRC will administer a student survey and interview program staff to understand how the program operates on the ground. Getting the participant voice through an external party will help program staff understand students' and staff's experiences in the program and how it is working. Programs will support these activities by facilitating the distribution of the survey to students and identifying key staff for MDRC to interview. MDRC will then partner with staff for continuous improvement work to further strengthen the program.

- **Engage with college leadership to implement suggested additions**

Selected programs are expected to display a commitment to collaborating with MDRC and to following through with implementation of suggested program modifications. In order to complete program modifications, programs will likely require buy-in and support from college leadership and should have a plan to engage key college staff in various stages of the technical assistance.

## Program Team

Each College Promise program will identify staff for this effort. The program team is crucial to successfully creating an action plan and implementing recommendations from MDRC. We understand that no two Promise programs are the same. In some cases Promise programs exist across multiple colleges, cities, or a whole state; in other cases they may be confined to one community college or university system. The ideal program team will be comprised of the following individuals.

- **Designated "Site Lead"** – Program representative(s) who manage the relationship with MDRC, ensuring the team is making progress on the project (i.e., organizing meetings, bringing key players to the table, and initiating next steps). The liaison will lead regular biweekly calls with the MDRC research team. In addition, this person will ensure all necessary information is shared across program partners and college leadership in a timely manner and will oversee the implementation of the program component recommendations.

- **Student Success Representative** – College representative(s) who oversee initiatives in

student services tied to College Promise program. This team member will be highly involved in the development and implementation of the new components.

- **Institutional Research (IR) or Institutional Effectiveness Representative** – College representative(s) who manage student data. This team member will be involved in the early work on the project to understand the student population and data capacity.

- **Information Technology (IT) or Program Data Lead** – College/program representative(s) who manage college software, data tracking, and/or email systems. This team member will be involved in the early work on the project to help understand the current data collection and capacity for data integration.

## Timeline

### Program Selection

September 6, 2017	Request for Proposals released
September 12, 2017 12:00 PM ET	RFP Informational Webinar - <a href="#">Webinar 1 Registration</a>
September 25, 2017 12:00 PM ET	RFP Informational Webinar - <a href="#">Webinar 2 Registration</a>
September 29, 2017	Deadline to submit questions. (Note: Answers to questions will be posted as they come in on MDRC’s website <a href="#">here</a> .)
October 6, 2017 By 3:00 PM ET	Proposal submissions due
December 2017	Notification of selected colleges

### Phase II Project Timeline: Key Activities

January – February 2018	Planning Period: Kick-off meeting and action plan creation
February 2018 – Spring 2019	Technical Assistance period: Programs meet regularly with MDRC team. Programs collaborate on continuous improvement and engage college leadership as needed. Data collection is ongoing during this period.
Spring 2018	Programs attend Behavioral Science Training
Fall 2018	Implement additional program components

Spring 2019	MDRC administers student survey and interviews program staff
Spring 2019	MDRC shares recommendations memo with Program

## Program Eligibility and Selection Criteria

All Promise programs with secured funding are eligible to apply. Submitted proposals will be reviewed by a selection committee comprised of MDRC project team members. Notification of selected programs will occur in December 2017. Only complete applications submitted by the deadline will be considered.

Based on the submissions, a diverse group of programs will be selected with a goal of including programs at various stages, from newly developed to established, that serve varying student populations, from recent high school graduates to nontraditional populations. Using an overall scoring system of 0 to 100, applications will be evaluated using the following criteria:

1. **Broad Support for the Program.** Assesses a program’s support from multiple levels within the organization, from leadership to administrators to program staff, as well as with partner organizations (e.g., college and community partners). (20 points)
2. **Financial Stability.** Assesses a program’s finances for running and sustaining their Promise program. Does the program have the support of local funders to operate the program and to consider the implementation of college success components (beyond the scholarship) long-term? (20 points)
3. **Program and Evidence.** Assesses a program’s current or proposed model and intention to use evidence-based best practices; commitment to use data to improve performance; and commitment and capacity to build on its current evidence base. (20 points)
4. **Student Population.** Assesses to what extent a program serves low-income students in communities with great need throughout the United States, and the total number of students who could be served. (20 points)
5. **Commitment to Promise Success Initiative.** Assesses a program’s motivation for the project; interest in goal of adding new evidence-based supports; designation of a strong project team; participation/commitment from all partners; and willingness to work with MDRC on technical assistance activities through 2019. (20 points)

## Application Requirements

All interested and eligible Promise programs must submit an application as a single PDF file in electronic form that includes the following information:

**Summary Statement**

*Please provide a brief summary of your application, including your reasons for interest in participating in the project. (1 page)*

**Program Eligibility Criteria**

*Provide a list of all current and/or planned eligibility criteria for students to receive tuition dollars. Please be sure to include criteria for entry and continued receipt (if applicable). (250 words maximum)*

**Program Model**

*Describe the current program model and any additional components that you are considering adding to it (please distinguish between existing and planned components). Please list the postsecondary institutions where students can use the scholarship, and for how long. (750 words maximum)*

**Outreach & Application Process**

*Please describe your current application process, including the steps a student needs to take to apply, and the timing of applying and notification of award. Please also indicate whether there are a limited number of slots available each year; if so, how many; and whether demand typically exceeds available slots. (500 words maximum)*

**Data Capacity**

*Describe the channels through which you currently receive data on Promise students, either through third-parties or through your own data collection processes. Please also provide details on the ways in which these data are used to create internal and external reports, and which staff are involved. Finally, provide any details on the strategies currently used to leverage the reports to improve the outcomes of the program. (500 words maximum)*

**Characteristics of Promise Recipients**

*For the most recent cohort of Promise students, please provide the following data points if available. We understand that programs will not be able to complete some fields. If you have not yet enrolled a cohort of students, please provide these numbers based on the postsecondary institution(s) that you will be serving, in aggregate.*

Characteristic	Fall 2017 Cohort
Number of Promise students	
Pell receipt	
Gender	
Age (average or by category)	
Race/ethnicity	
First in family to attend college	
High school graduate	
First time in college	
Major	
Other characteristics you collect	

**Current Outcomes for Promise Recipients**

*Please provide the information listed below as available, or other measures of success that you collect. We understand that newer programs will not be able to complete some columns.*

	Fall 2017 Cohort	Fall 2016 Cohort	Fall 2015 Cohort
Number of eligible students in the community			
Number of Promise students enrolled in college in first semester			
Number of Promise students enrolled in college in second semester	N/A		
Number of Promise students enrolled in college third semester (fall-to-fall)	N/A		

**Program Organization and Broad Support**

*Describe the proposed program team for the work with MDRC, including a one-paragraph bio for the proposed site lead. Describe the organizational structure of your program, including who administers it, who the partners are, and how key decisions are made. (If desired, include an organizational chart.) In an appendix, please provide letters of commitment from all key partners, such as the college(s), state higher education agency, and/or community partners involved in the project. (no word limit)*

**Financial and Operational Strength**

*Describe how the program is funded currently and what the plans are for sustaining the program in the long run. Does the program have support of local funders to operate the program and to consider the implementation of college success components (beyond the scholarship)? Please provide letters of commitment from local funder(s), if applicable, in an appendix. (250 words maximum)*

**Other Initiatives** (optional)

*What other initiatives, if any, is your institution, city, or state participating in that relate to your program? (250 words maximum)*

**Other Relevant Information** (optional)

*Is there any other relevant/clarifying information you would like to share? (250 words maximum)*

## Submission Instructions and Other Questions

Your submission must follow the above template. The deadline for submission of the application is Friday, October 6, 2017 at 3:00 PM EDT. Please email your submission to [Promise@mdrc.org](mailto:Promise@mdrc.org)

Further questions about this Request for Proposals can be directed to:

Alyssa Ratledge  
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Project Manager, MDRC  
[Promise@mdrc.org](mailto:Promise@mdrc.org)  
(212) 340-8861

## Project Webinars and Q&A

MDRC will host two webinars to share information about the project and application process, and to answer questions. Webinars will be held on Tuesday, September 12, at 12:30 PM EDT, and Monday, September 25, at 2:30 PM EDT.

[Webinar 1 Registration](#)

[Webinar 2 Registration](#)

Both webinars will include time for Q&A. Answers to applicants' questions will also be published on MDRC's website. The deadline to submit questions is Friday, September 29.