

Higher Ed Rewired

Season 2, Episode 3

Making (and Keeping) A Promise for a College Degree

Host: Annet Rangel

Guests: Martha Kanter, Ed Smith, Kate Mahar and Denise Palomera

College Promise programs are not new to higher education. But they have gained momentum in recent years with the rise of “free college” initiatives across the country. They developed out of the need to increase a workforce to meet the labor-needs of a community and have evolved in addressing access and equity. Given the variety of models that exist and the thousands of students who have participated in these programs, the question is: What does it mean for a campus to make a promise and what has that promise meant for students and their communities?

This episode features Martha Kanter, Executive Director for the [College Promise Campaign](#), Edward Smith, Program Officer with [The Kresge Foundation](#), and Kate Mahar, Dean of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives at [Shasta College](#). They share their research findings, innovative practices and recommendations on leveraging College Promise Programs to support student success.

Martha Kanter, Executive Director, College Promise Campaign

Ed Smith, Program Officer, Kresge Foundation

Kate Mahar, Dean of Institutional Effectiveness, Shasta College

Denise Palomera, Alum and College Advisor at University Outreach and School Relations, California State University, Long Beach

Cold Open

[Denise Theme music starts]

Denise Palomera: The farthest back I can remember being introduced to the Long beach College Promise was when I was actually in fourth grade.

This is Denise Palomera— born and raised in Long Beach, California.

DP: I remember we were in the classroom and I guess it was an advisor at the time...had came to our school and they had us sit outside and we all sat around the advisor and she was telling us this is Cal State, Long Beach. We have a big blue pyramid. You know, she was just telling us about how beautiful the campus was and and what the promise was. So, she was kind of explaining like, hey, you know, we have a safe spot for you guys.

Denise is part of the “Long Beach College Promise” which works like this: if you attend and graduate from Long Beach High School, get good grades, and meet specific requirements, you are guaranteed a place at Cal State Long Beach.

The Promise is a partnership between Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach City College, California State University Long Beach, and the City of Long Beach.

It starts in 4th grade, with a full campus tour.

DP: So, when I went, I just remember stepping foot on campus and thinking everything was so beautiful and the school was so big. Like, I was kind of overwhelmed with how huge it was because you know I felt like the campus represented change for me and my family just because I knew that nobody before me had ever even, you know, stepped foot on a college campus. It was something special for me. It was also pretty scary just because I knew that nobody before me had done it. So, I can't really come to my family members and be like, hey, how is this gonna be or what should I expect?

[Intro music fade in]

[Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country. Each episode looks at exciting innovations taking place across the Cal-State -- Transforming the landscape of higher education for the 23 campuses and half a million students.]

I'm Annet Rangel, your host of this season of Higher Ed Rewired...a podcast focused on bringing you inspirational stories from faculty... staff...and students who are transforming the higher education landscape.

<BEAT>

Denise, who we just heard from, is a participant in one kind of effort to make higher ed institutions more reflective of their communities.

The College Promise.

It's not without its controversies, and we'll hear more from Denise and her experiences throughout this episode ... but first, we need to understand

What *is* a college promise program? And why are so many communities creating their own?

[Intro music fade out]

First, let's get some context.

Martha Kanter: So, for more than one hundred years, high school has been available to every American in this country...and what happens is it stops.

Dr. Martha Kanter was the undersecretary of education for President Obama.

MK: And then it becomes expensive. And then it becomes a whole set of choices for students.

She is now the executive director of the college promise campaign.

MK: What college promise does is say to students, you can go beyond high school and we're going to provide you the way to do it financially and with support that you need so that you don't drop out, so that you can continue into the workforce and into having a quality of life that you dream of which is part of the big macro American dream.

Leaders in higher ed knew that the “American Dream” required getting a college degree, but realized that only a *small fraction* of their community members were enrolling in college.

In 1990, just over 30 percent of 18 to 24-year old’s were enrolled in college in the U.S.

Unsurprisingly, for Black and Latinx students, those numbers were at 25 and 15 percent.

The response to this disparity came as early as 1994.

Prominent programs like the Long Beach Seamless Education Initiative, and later, the Kalamazoo Promise in Michigan, were created to make sure that higher education could be accessible —and affordable — for all students.

MK: The Pittsburgh Promise — “Say Yes to Education in Buffalo”. The Long Beach Promise— when... you look at the outcomes, you're seeing a five to 10 percent increase in not only progression and completion, but in closing equity gaps. How did they do it? They gave the students more support and the financing they needed.

MK: And I think when we bring public and private partnerships together, when we bring people to the promise table to figure out, you know, how did Long Beach do it, the mayor did it with the K-12 superintendent, with the community college president, with the chancellor, with all of the workforce systems and the businesses and the funders, the Philanthropy's, Irvine Foundation, others that really care about the future of these students in our country. That's how it's done. It takes time. It's not a panacea. It's not an overnight kind of thing. But again,

looking at where communities start and where they can go, there is an energy and a commitment that the promise brings to these communities that make them do more and make them want to do more to create the kinds of economically and socially and civic minded communities that this country so badly needs....

Some promise programs gave guidance and support through mentorship opportunities. *Others* provided financial aid to students, *beyond* existing grants and scholarships.

BUT continued rising costs of higher education led to the question:

Can college promise programs be adopted as THE solution to equity gaps in higher ed?

MK: You know, right now, looking on the last five years, we've had more than a 250 percent increase. We've got more than 320 promise programs in communities from Los Angeles and San Diego and San Francisco all the way over to, you know, Houston and Dallas and San Antonio to Boston, to Kalamazoo, to Shasta. If I look all over the country, we're seeing these partners coming together and doing things differently, which gives me hope that we can tackle this challenge together.

[stinger starts]

Edward Smith: Higher education was extremely transformative in my life.

This is Dr. Edward Smith, a program officer at the Kresge Foundation, and co-author of the book, "Improving Research Based Knowledge of College Promise Programs."

ES: Not only did it enable social mobility, growth, evolution, personal satisfaction, but it also allowed that for my family.

He says that, while some programs DO live up to their promise...there are a lot that don't.

ES: When the promise program operates in isolation from the school district it serves... It can be ineffective.

Dr. Smith cites the Milwaukee Promise, which provided high schoolers money for college...but *only* if they met certain academic standards. And there was no partnership to help students reach those goals.

ES: Very few students achieved the minimum GPA and college enrollment was only marginally better than pre-adoption periods. And I think what the

researchers concluded was you could have this grant hanging above a student's head as some type of ticket to a better future. but without working to both improve practice at the K-12 level or in the high schools and without building a bridge to ease the facilitation from high school to a postsecondary setting, you'll never truly maximize the potential of that grant. And students will ultimately suffer because of that, or they will underperform, for example....

The other shortcoming? Money. College promise programs are expensive. And without long term, sustainable funding, the programs stop being so universal ... and students are left hanging.

ES: I think, again, relationships with the school district and financial sustainability are certainly some blind spots that I think promise program leaders often overlook when considering the operation of their programs.

It's important to get clear on the goals for the promised program at the outset... I think sometimes, we question, what are the true ends of these promise programs, right? Is it a brand management exercise? Is it a signal to the community that you're open and welcoming? Is it a ploy to increase enrollment? Is it a ploy to increase revenue? I think those questions are justified.

So how *does* a college promise program get it right?

ES: You know, harnessing public will is going to be important as well. Right, because you'll need a cross-section of the community's leaders, to offer their support, champion the promise and hopefully participate in the governance of it... You know, as I mentioned, a strong relationship with the school district you hope to serve. I think that's key in having the transformation perhaps within the school district needed to prepare students academically, socially, financially to make full use of the promise.

And finally, support for the students *throughout* their time in college. To make sure the promise has follow-through.

ES: And in fact, we'd love to see more of that, because, as I mentioned earlier, these supports can be sometimes even more important than a cash grant. And we know that these are sometimes the reasons why students stop, drop out or never show up on campus at all.

AR : Right. So, in a perfect world, how *would* the promise programs impact students, institutions, and their communities?

ES: I would love to see a student, you know, from as early as four or five or six years old, knowing that this community has this resource available to them. And it starts to craft rich and thoughtful aspirations about what that student can do in their life. And, you know, there's a public/private line of support that nourishes

those aspirations through middle school and into high school. That helps that student become academically prepared. It helps them socio-emotionally and then once they graduate, helps that student make full use of that financial grant that propels them into a thriving and purposeful college experience. And that's kind of how I would frame my ideal college promise program.

AR: In your opinion, would you say that the promise programs are effective in closing the equity gaps in higher ed?

ES: There are plenty of good reasons to adopt a college promise program and reasons I would support. But is it closing an equity or reducing inequities? I'm not sure. I think they have tremendous potential to, but I wouldn't say that right now. Here's why... I don't know that equity is a goal in many college promise programs. Certainly not those that are reviewed in our book.

ES: That said, I do think, for example, they are effective in bringing additional public resources to students in the way that invests in their future and for that reason, I'm supportive of them. But I would like to see programs become more equitable in their focus and in the outcomes they are able to generate.

ES: You know, I wouldn't necessarily advocate for more of them at this point, although we will certainly see that going forward. What I would advocate for, rather, is the refinement of these programs and designs that take into account who is being served, but also who's not being served.

I hope that these programs can offer some flexibility in the case that these students may need it and hopefully the promise engenders broader transformation and broader changes that best serve students.

[Music starts]

Denise Palomera: So, my parents weren't able to afford for me to go to college. I knew of that growing up...

This is Denise Palomera again.

DP: I felt like I had to work for my own money to make it to college. I knew that I was capable of attending a school. I knew that I was capable of being admitted into a university. But the only thing was, how was I going to pay for it?

DP: I do feel like the Long Beach College Promise and my parents together is what actually led me up to going here and being where I am today. Just because it was such a strong implementation on me in my career like it was always introduced to me, it was always a possibility. So I knew that no matter what— I was going to be able to go in... it was possible for me.

DP: So knowing that I am a part of such a big promise in such a big plan for me to graduate on time and stuff like that made me feel really secure. Made me feel super comfortable. It made me even excited, you know, to be a part of a family that I wasn't even physically there with yet.

[Music continues and slowly fades out]

Shasta College is in Redding California. It's a small, rural town, about three hours north of Sacramento. And Shasta's one of the largest community colleges in the area.

Kate Mahar: The promise as we look at is we are going to promise that education can be accessible, can be affordable, and it can get you where you want to go. So anything short of that becomes an empty promise.

Dr. Kate Mahar is a leader in education equity at Shasta college ... and she's passionate about her community.

So, because of Redding's history and culture, in addition to how remote it is, a college degree hasn't always been a priority for residents.

KM: The far north in general has always been an economy based on extraction, whether it's logging or forestry or minerals. So for the longest time, folks in this community were able to get a great living wage career with benefits by serving in those industries, but the culture has been slow to embrace post-secondary education as a way of life. And it's interesting, too. There's often a negative impact about the idea of college, because historically that's meant that students have had to leave.

KM: we were at a neighborhood barbecue and folks were talking about what math class their students were taking in the K-12 system or were they going to take Spanish? I talked to them about college and...And a couple of the moms said, why would I want my child to take those courses? Because that means they're going to go off to a four year and they're not going to come back. So the idea that of the worrying about them having to leave the area to go to CSU and not coming back was impacting the courses that they were taking in their K-12 experience, which whether they're going to go to college or not, that was going to impact the level of the high school degree that they were able to achieve and the knowledge that they're allowed to get out of high school.

When she wanted to start a college promise program in Redding, Dr. Mahar knew that her community had very different needs. She couldn't just take a one-size-fits-all approach.

KM: When we really started looking at the promise programs are so different, there's some fabulous examples of promise programs. Long Beach of course is

you know, they were a leader in the state and they're just a great program. But when you look at Long Beach Promise, they have one K-12 school district, one community college and a CSU in the backyard. So, their promise to students, it was fabulous, we can't just, you know, take that and plop that into rural environments. So, we really started digging into what would be the difference of a rural promise versus an urban or even a suburban promise

For Shasta, that meant making tuition free, and starting various support programs that helped students tailor their education.

For example, students could get a four year degree from Cal State University Chico... through online courses they could take on Shasta's campus.

So, students wouldn't have to drive hours to attend class anymore.

And if students *did* leave their hometowns, Shasta created partnerships with Cal State Universities, and their local communities, to create jobs and internship programs that would lead students back home after getting their education.

KM: We have 22 school districts in Shasta County alone. How do we make sure that folks are aware of the fact that they can access Shasta College for free?

AR: So as someone who has worked to eliminate equity gaps, have you seen college promise programs as a way to tackle this issue?

KM: I would say a lot of the work we're doing is exposing the equity work that we need to do. So, it's you know, we dove into this work. And then as you examine it every step of the way, you recognize, like, OK, this just excluded somebody that we didn't mean to. Now what are we going to do about it?

For example, recognizing that our high schools with more capacity, the students were more likely to apply for the promise than are high schools that didn't have that same capacity. And we're dealing with a lot more trauma in their students and families. Those are the students that the promise is really for in many cases. And yet they weren't getting access to the information.

The weaknesses in the promise program had been exposed. So Shasta set out to fix them.

From getting students high speed broadband, so they could easily access online courses—to hiring more school counselors, and creating clear pathways that led from kindergarten...to a four year degree.

KM: And when we create good systems that are accessible and clear and supportive of the capacity in each individual, is just endless. And the potential for

what that can do for for these students and families and communities just holds no bounds.

[Sound design of students taking a CSULB tour]

This is the sound of high school students taking the promise tour at Cal State Long Beach ... the same tour Denise Palomera took when she was in middle school. Eventually, Denise applied ... and ...

[music starts]

Denise Palomera: One day my friend, you know, she was like, oh my God, I got accepted to Long Beach, you know? And she was so excited. And I was like, how did you find out? Because I didn't get an email or anything like that...and she was like you got to sign in through their website and that's how you found out. So I was like okay, I'm going to sign in. So I signed in-and the first thing I saw was congratulations. And I immediately started like screaming. I remember I was screaming and I was like, oh, my God, I got into Long Beach. I was so proud of myself at that moment. I was so excited. I was so happy.

DP: And I texted my mom right away and she was so happy. She immediately went on Instagram and posted about it. And she said, her caption was like, my daughter's going to Cal State, Long Beach how about your daughter? And I was laughing. And it was so funny to me cause she, like, you know, was so happy for me. And she always wanted to show us off and stuff like that. So, it made me really happy that she was happy and that she was excited for me. It made me even more excited to attend the school.

Even though Denise was excited to start her first year, the big university campus was overwhelming.

DP: You know, I did go through some hard times my freshman year and I did kind of set myself back. But my school and the promise actually really helped me to get back on track. They stick with me... they held my hand through the entire process. So for that, I am forever grateful because without them, I wouldn't be where I am now.

Denise's story reminds me of something that Dr. Martha Kanter said at the beginning of the episode.

MK: What are the great equalizers in this country? One of them is money. And one of them is support, which builds community. But I think the third one is the kind of confidence that inspiration can give people, the kind of mentorship that brings people to be confident about taking risks that they might be afraid of. And building that confidence in every student is such a critical piece that I think often gets overlooked.

Kids lose confidence in the early grades. And we've got to stop that. We've got to inspire people at all levels to do what they are fully capable of doing and not zap the confidence out of them.

We make the investment in you because you're worth it. Right. That to me is a statement that at whatever level you are to hear that you're worth it. And to hear that we believe you can do it and you have the capabilities...think about if that could be the moniker for the country, you're worth it...

[OUTRO MUSIC FADES IN]

[CREDITS: Higher ED Rewired is a production of the California State University Office of the Chancellor as part of the CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025. This podcast is made possible in part by the support of the College Futures Foundation; more graduates for a thriving California. Learn more at CollegeFutures.org. To hear more stories like this, listen at HigherEdRewired.com or subscribe wherever you get your podcast.]