



# How Harper College Established Its Promise

## College Promise Campaign Policy Brief No. 8

By Dr. Kenneth Ender

### Introduction

Postsecondary education is becoming increasingly inaccessible to thousands of American families and their children due to cost. And yet, never before in American history has the acquisition of a self- and family-sustaining job been more dependent on a postsecondary credential. This situation is made all the more tragic when one considers employers are unable to find qualified workers to fill millions of job vacancies.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, William Rainey Harper College, a large community college in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago, worked in partnership with its three sender high school districts to implement the Harper College Promise Scholarship Program (“Promise”) to incentivize a path to postsecondary and workforce readiness for students in these schools. The Promise Program, supported through a combination of public and private funding, commits to providing last-dollar tuition payments to Promise Scholars who commit to the program as ninth graders and consistently (over the next four years and the first four semesters at Harper) meet specific measures in attendance, rigor, persistence, quality, and service to the community.

The first cohort of Promise Scholars, enrolled as high school freshmen in fall 2015, will matriculate to Harper College in fall 2019. As of May 2019, more than \$18.6 million in private and public funding has been generated to support the Promise Program from more than 770 individual donors; the college’s long-term goal is to have the scholarship fully endowed so that the program will continue in perpetuity.

This brief provides a summary of how Harper College established a College Promise Leadership Consortium and collective impact strategy to support the creation of its Promise Program.

### Background

Harper College’s community college district, which has a population of more than 500,000 people, has experienced a significant demographic shift in recent years. In 2003, there were four schools in Harper’s district in which 50% or more of students qualified for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. By 2017, that



Promise kickoff celebration: Harper College in March 2015 held an event to celebrate the launch of the Promise Scholarship Program. In attendance were business and high school partners, as well as the families of area eighth-graders who as high school freshmen would join the first cohort of Promise Scholars.

<sup>1</sup> Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary. (2019, June 10). Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.nr0.htm>.

number had grown to 23 elementary and junior high schools.<sup>2</sup> At the state level, middle-skill jobs requiring education beyond high school (but not a four-year degree) account for 53% of Illinois' labor market, but only 42% of the state's workers are trained for these jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Decreased funding and chronic fiscal uncertainty has plagued higher education in Illinois. State higher education appropriations peaked in fiscal year 2002 at \$2.4 billion (\$3.5 billion today when adjusted for inflation); in fiscal year 2019, the state appropriation for higher education was just \$1.8 billion.<sup>4</sup> The pension crisis in Illinois continues, with a worst-in-the-country \$130 billion in unfunded pension obligations.<sup>5</sup> Community colleges and four-year institutions also are still grappling with the effects of a two-year state budget impasse. One result of the downward trend in funding: In 2017, 48.4% of public high school graduates left the state for college compared to 29.3% in 2002.<sup>6</sup>

## Program Design

Within this context, the Harper Promise Program provides students with an earned path to college – regardless of income – and fosters the responsibility and life skills that will help them succeed in school, on the job, and beyond. Ultimately, this program aims to build a stronger workforce, sustained economic viability and a stable, middle-income wage to sustain a family in the region.

There are standards that Promise Scholars must meet in order to qualify and continue to be eligible for the scholarship. As an early awareness program, Promise students sign up during the first semester of their freshman year of high school. Tracking begins second semester to give students some time to adjust to the demands of secondary education. The criteria becomes a bit more challenging as students progress through high school. For example, Promise Scholars may miss five days during their second semester as freshman and finish with a minimum 2.0 GPA. By the time they're seniors, Promise Scholars may miss only seven days during the entire school year and finish with a minimum 2.3 GPA. Likewise, community service requirements build from five hours during their second semester as freshmen to 20 hours as seniors. Other criteria include no semester grades of "D" or "F" both junior and senior years, meeting minimum credit standards at the end of each year, graduating on time, and graduating college-ready.

Similar criteria are in place for Promise Scholars once they matriculate to Harper. The last-dollar scholarship covers up to 60 credit hours and generally requires Promise Scholars to take 15 credit hours each fall and spring semester.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Illinois Report Card. (n.d.). Retrieved from [illinoisreportcard.com/](http://illinoisreportcard.com/).








<sup>3</sup> Illinois. (2018, July 18). *National Skills Coalition*. Retrieved from [nationalskillscoalition.org/state-policy/states/Illinois](http://nationalskillscoalition.org/state-policy/states/Illinois).

<sup>4</sup> IBHE-Board-Approves-Higher-Education-Budget-Request. (2018, December 5). Retrieved from [ibhe.org/PressReleases/IBHE-Board-Approves-Higher-Education-Budget-Request.htm](http://ibhe.org/PressReleases/IBHE-Board-Approves-Higher-Education-Budget-Request.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Illinois State Retirement Systems Financial Condition as of June 30, 2018. (2019, April). Retrieved from <http://cgfa.ilga.gov/Upload/FinConditionILStateRetirementSysApril2019.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> News Release Outmigration Numbers. (n.d.). Retrieved from [ibhe.org/PressReleases/2019.03.12-IBHE-Outmigration-Numbers-for-Web.htm](http://ibhe.org/PressReleases/2019.03.12-IBHE-Outmigration-Numbers-for-Web.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Introducing the Promise Scholarship: Harper College. (n.d.). *Harper College*. Retrieved from [harpercollege.edu/promise](http://harpercollege.edu/promise).

IN HIGH SCHOOL	AT HARPER COLLEGE																
<p>The Program starts in the second semester of a student's freshman year in high school. If the student meets attendance, rigor, quality, persistence and community service requirements, the student can earn up to two years tuition at Harper College.</p>	<p>A high school student who meets the Program's requirements will earn the first semester of Harper tuition free. The student can continue to attend Harper College tuition-free, semester by semester, for up to four semesters (60 credit hours)<sup>†</sup>, if the student meets the following criteria.</p>																
<p> <b>ATTENDANCE</b></p> <p>Students may only be absent:</p> <table> <tr> <td>2nd semester of freshman year</td><td>5 days or less</td></tr> <tr> <td>Sophomore year</td><td>9 days or less</td></tr> <tr> <td>Junior year</td><td>8 days or less</td></tr> <tr> <td>Senior year</td><td>7 days or less</td></tr> </table> <p>(3 tardies equal an absence)</p>	2nd semester of freshman year	5 days or less	Sophomore year	9 days or less	Junior year	8 days or less	Senior year	7 days or less	<p> <b>RIGOR/QUALITY</b></p> <p>Minimum grade point average:</p> <table> <tr> <td>1st semester</td><td>2.2</td></tr> <tr> <td>2nd semester</td><td>2.3</td></tr> <tr> <td>3rd semester</td><td>2.5</td></tr> <tr> <td>4th semester</td><td>2.5</td></tr> </table> <p>No grades of D or F or withdrawal</p>	1st semester	2.2	2nd semester	2.3	3rd semester	2.5	4th semester	2.5
2nd semester of freshman year	5 days or less																
Sophomore year	9 days or less																
Junior year	8 days or less																
Senior year	7 days or less																
1st semester	2.2																
2nd semester	2.3																
3rd semester	2.5																
4th semester	2.5																
<p> <b>RIGOR/QUALITY</b></p> <p>Graduate college-ready.</p> <p>Minimum annual grade point average (unweighted):</p> <table> <tr> <td>2nd semester of freshman year</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr> <td>Sophomore year</td><td>2.25</td></tr> <tr> <td>Junior year</td><td>2.25*</td></tr> <tr> <td>Senior year</td><td>2.3*</td></tr> </table> <p>*No semester grades of D or F</p>	2nd semester of freshman year	2.0	Sophomore year	2.25	Junior year	2.25*	Senior year	2.3*	<p> <b>PERSISTENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ A student must attend full-time each semester. (minimum 15 credit hours)</li> <li>✓ A student must attend each consecutive semester (fall/spring) until their certificate or degree is completed—up to four semesters.</li> <li>✓ Summer session tuition is not included in the program.</li> </ul>								
2nd semester of freshman year	2.0																
Sophomore year	2.25																
Junior year	2.25*																
Senior year	2.3*																
<p> <b>PERSISTENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Meet minimum credit standards at the end of each year.</li> <li>✓ Graduate on time with their class.</li> </ul>	<p> <b>COMMUNITY SERVICE</b></p> <p>Service requirements must be performed through a Harper-related program.</p> <p>Number of hours per semester:</p> <table> <tr> <td>1st semester</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr> <td>2nd semester</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr> <td>3rd semester</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr> <td>4th semester</td><td>10</td></tr> </table>	1st semester	10	2nd semester	10	3rd semester	10	4th semester	10								
1st semester	10																
2nd semester	10																
3rd semester	10																
4th semester	10																
<p> <b>COMMUNITY SERVICE</b></p> <p>Number of hours per year:</p> <table> <tr> <td>2nd semester of freshman year</td><td>5</td></tr> <tr> <td>Sophomore year</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr> <td>Junior year</td><td>15</td></tr> <tr> <td>Senior year</td><td>20</td></tr> </table>	2nd semester of freshman year	5	Sophomore year	10	Junior year	15	Senior year	20	<p>All participants are required to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA (Social Security number required) and complete the financial aid process. <sup>†</sup> The Promise Scholarship is for tuition only. Fees and books are additional. See Harper's website for current tuition and fees.</p>								
2nd semester of freshman year	5																
Sophomore year	10																
Junior year	15																
Senior year	20																

## A Community Investment

The Harper Promise Program could succeed only if a coalition of key stakeholders regarded the program as an important vehicle to increasing access for all students, developing behaviors that ensure workforce and college readiness, and ultimately contributing to a stable middle-class in the region. These stakeholders included the Harper College Educational Foundation's Board of Directors, which would be charged with essential fundraising over the course of several years, and the Harper College Board of Trustees, which needed to agree Promise was a worthy investment of the college's limited human and financial resources. There needed to be a commitment from Harper's three high school districts, which would monitor the tracking of and provide counseling to Promise Scholars during their four years of high school. The college also needed business partners to commit financial resources and professional opportunities for Promise Scholars.



To build support, the college worked to educate influencers about the demographic changes in Harper's district and the changing economy. By 2020, 65% of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.<sup>8</sup> The message emphasized that college and career readiness is critical for every high school graduate, and that a high school degree no longer provides Americans with family-sustaining jobs. Another key message underscored Promise being an earned scholarship rather than free tuition, and attainable for most hardworking students rather than only high achievers. In other words, a “scrappy ‘C’” student who shows up and puts in the effort is capable of earning the Promise Scholarship.

### **Partnerships with high schools and business**

Launching the Harper Promise Program would have been next to impossible had a strong foundation not already been laid with the college's three sender high school districts. In 2010, Harper College and its high school partners established the Northwest Educational Council for Student Success, a secondary and postsecondary regional educational collaborative focused on college and career readiness. It was a shift for all four organizations to move away from considering their work in isolation toward seeing their work in the context of a broader system. Efforts — intergovernmental framework agreements, sharing data and human resources — were put in place to ensure a lasting, durable structure. As a result of this groundwork, 83.8% of partner high school students started at Harper college-ready in math in 2017, up from 48.8% in 2009. This work has also led to a dramatic expansion of Harper's dual credit offerings; in 2017, more than 4,000 high school students were enrolled in dual credit coursework at Harper, up from about 1,100 in 2012. In the class of 2018, 29% of graduates earned 15 or more credits while in high school.

Our high school partners track the progress of Promise Scholars and provide that data to the college, which determines continued eligibility for Promise. Data sharing agreements are critical to guiding this work. As of June 2019, nearly 13,000 Promise Scholars (high school freshmen and the sophomore, juniors and seniors who remain eligible) are being monitored.<sup>9</sup> Due to the volume of students, the high school districts have benefitted from putting infrastructure into place to track community service hours. Gaining the buy-in of high school counselors and ensuring their comprehensive understanding of the Promise Program was also essential. The college holds an annual information session for high school counselors, but otherwise, the college's interaction with students and Promise Scholars is limited during their high school years.

Area employers also played an integral role in the design of the Harper Promise Program. Employers cited problems with attendance, persistence and commitment as primary issues when hiring new workers. The benchmarks Promise Scholars must meet to earn and continue their eligibility reflect the behaviors employers expect of their own employees. Harper also built a network of regional businesses that committed to varying degrees of support for the program including: providing financial support, equipment and in-kind donations to the Promise Program; giving consideration to Promise Scholars when hiring; providing mock interviewing and job shadowing experiences; and/or providing information on career options to small groups of Promise Scholars. While keeping businesses engaged during the first four years of the program was initially challenging, there's now a cohort of Promise Scholars that have demonstrated behaviors consistent with success in school and the workplace. The college attempted to mitigate any drop off in affinity for Promise through regular communication

<sup>8</sup> Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020. (2018, January 31). *CEW Georgetown*. Retrieved from [cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/](http://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/).

<sup>9</sup> Promise Program Status Update: Harper College. (n.d.). *Harper College*. Retrieved from [harpercollege.edu/about/promise/promise-status-update.php](http://harpercollege.edu/about/promise/promise-status-update.php).

and updates on the program's regional scope and progression<sup>10</sup> and area employers will know Promise Scholars upon graduating from Harper College.

### **Clear communication**

Harper College has worked to build a broad public understanding throughout the district so that families become familiar with the Promise Program before students enter high school. The college's Ambassador School program engages elementary and junior high schools that have over 50% free- and reduced-price lunch program students to ensure a college attendance mentality is developed at a young age. This includes interactive campus tours in which students also learn about the Promise Program. Harper representatives also speak about Promise at eighth-grade graduation ceremonies and attend high school orientation events for eighth-graders and their parents throughout the college's district.

Once students enter high school, they have the opportunity to sign up for the Promise Program. So families are fully aware of expectations, both students and parents/guardians are required to sign the initial commitment. At that time, they receive information showing the program's requirements for the next six years (four years in high school and two years at Harper). Promise Scholars and their parents also have access to their high school student portal, where they can track their progress toward meeting criteria. Every spring, Harper contacts Promise Scholars to reaffirm requirements and remind them of deadlines. Students also must recommit to the program each year.

### **Wrap-around services**

As the first cohort of Promise Scholars arrives in fall 2019, Harper College has implemented a number of wrap-around supports to improve their chances of persisting and completing. Promise Scholars and all degree-seeking students participate in a personalized orientation and onboarding experience, develop an academic plan and choose an Area of Interest (a grouping of majors based on commonalities) to help narrow their academic and career goals. Beginning in fall 2019, students with fewer than 12 credits earned prior to enrolling will participate in a "Start Smart" course that requires first-year students to utilize support services, demonstrate responsible academic behaviors and establish clear academic and career goals. Harper also moved to a case management model for academic advising, assigning Promise Scholars and all degree-seeking students with a dedicated academic advisor. All academic advisors receive training specific to the Promise Program.

## **Leveraging Data and Initial Results**

Harper College continues to prepare for the fall 2019 arrival of the first cohort of Promise Scholars. Early analysis is limited until the college can collect comprehensive data of cohorts as they complete the six-year program. A clear, early success has been increasing interest in the program. As awareness has grown, the initial enrollment of high school freshmen has grown from 65% of the class of 2019 to 95% of the class of 2022 [9]. The college also reports more than 100,000 volunteer hours have been completed by Promise Scholars (this represents the minimum number of hours completed to meet program criteria; the actual number of hours is likely significantly higher). There remains an opportunity to reduce the number of high school freshmen who leave the program due to the community service requirement. Though only five community service hours are required as a freshman, 26% of Class of 2020 and Class of 2021 Promise Scholars did not meet the community service requirement as freshmen. Efforts continue to increase the number of volunteer opportunities at the high schools and to encourage

---

<sup>10</sup> Promise Scholarship Impact Report: Harper College. (n.d.). *Harper College*. Retrieved from [harpercollege.edu/about/promise/promisequarterly.php](http://harpercollege.edu/about/promise/promisequarterly.php).

youth volunteer behavior. At this time, there are no plans to modify the program criteria, which the college established in collaboration with its high school and business partners.

### Initial Enrollment

	D211	D214	D220	D155 <sup>*</sup>	Total Enrolled	Total class population
Class of 2019 enrollment	<b>2,019</b> (64% of district)	<b>2,165</b> (68% of district)	<b>416</b> (57% of district)	<b>7</b> (29% of district)	<b>4,607</b> (65% of total class population)	<b>7,088</b>
Class of 2020 enrollment	<b>2,202</b> (74% of district)	<b>2,695</b> (92% of district)	<b>653</b> (83% of district)	<b>8</b> (32% of district)	<b>5,558</b> (83% of total class population)	<b>6,703</b>
Class of 2021 enrollment	<b>2,312</b> (80% of district)	<b>2,653</b> (92% of district)	<b>610</b> (85% of district)	<b>20</b> (87% of district)	<b>5,595</b> (86% of total class population)	<b>6,497</b>
Class of 2022 enrollment	<b>3,000</b> (99% of district)	<b>2,732</b> (91% of district)	<b>630</b> (87% of district)	<b>12</b> (60% of district)	<b>6,374</b> (95% of total class population)	<b>6,737</b>

<sup>\*</sup>A small number of District 155 students reside within Harper College's district and are eligible for the Promise Program.

### VOLUNTEERING by the NUMBERS (as of February 2019)

Class of 2019 53,580 Total Volunteer Hours

Class of 2020 35,100 Total Total Volunteer Hours

Class of 2021 13,905 Total Volunteer Hours

**102,585**

Total for all students

### Students Who Remain Eligible

#### Class of 2019

Freshman sign up	4,607 (65%) of total freshman class (enrolled/total class)
Sophomores continuing	2,576 (36%) of total class continuing on (continuing/total class)
Juniors continuing	2,000 (28%) of total class continuing on (continuing/total class)
Seniors continuing	1,380 (20%) of total class continuing on (continuing/total class)
7th Semester Graduates continuing	2
6th Semester Graduates continuing	1

#### Class of 2020

Freshman class sign up	5,558 (83%) of total freshman class (enrolled/total class)
Sophomore continuing	2,852 (43%) of total class continuing on (continuing/total class)
Juniors continuing	2,094 (31%) of total class continuing on (continuing/total class)

#### Class of 2021

Freshman class sign up	5,595 (86%) of total freshman class (enrolled/total class)
Sophomore continuing	2,781 (43%) of total class continuing on (continuing/total class)

#### Class of 2022

Freshman class sign up	6,374 (95%) of total freshman class (enrolled/total class)
------------------------	--

\*As of May 2019

## Conclusion

Although the first cohort of students will be enrolling at Harper College in the fall of 2019, community support from high school and business partners have laid a strong foundation for a successful program. By meeting attainable benchmarks for attendance, rigor, persistence, quality, and service to the community beginning freshman year of high school, hardworking students gain an affordable and accessible pathway to a high-quality college credential and develop behaviors that will help them succeed in school and in the work place. Embedded in the program design are consistent communication, wrap-around services, and opportunities with area employers in order to maximize the program's impact on eligible students. Early outcomes also have spurred continued public and private investment in the program, helping to ensure its long-term viability. The Harper Promise Program aims to remove financial barriers and foster college and career readiness in the short-term, which in turn will contribute to building a stronger workforce, sustained economic viability and a stable middle-class in the region.

## About the Author

---

Dr. Kenneth Ender served as the fifth President of William Rainey Harper College in Palatine, Illinois, for 10 years and became President Emeritus on July 1, 2019. He will become a Professor of Practice at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University. Through partnerships and alliances, Dr. Ender positioned Harper as a leading 21<sup>st</sup> century community college by increasing graduation, transfer and certificate completion rates, aligning Harper's curriculum with high schools, training students for new economy jobs and implementing new accountability and transparency standards. Under his leadership, Harper has experienced record graduation rates and a dramatic increase in the number of students who come to Harper college-ready.



Previously, Dr. Ender served as President of Cumberland County College in New Jersey for 11 years and held a variety of positions in higher education. He holds a Ph.D. in urban services leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University, a master's degree in education from the University of Georgia and a bachelor's degree in business management, also from Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Ender also served on the Board of Trustees for College Board; he recently served on the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community Colleges; he was Co-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Chicago/Cook Workforce Partnership and chaired the Workforce Development Committee of the Illinois Council of Community College Presidents.

---