Learnings and Reflections from the 2023 College Promise Careers Institute

COLLEGE PROMISE POLICY & RESEARCH TEAM

Background
College Promise was founded in 2015 in response to the increasing need for Americans to acquire greater knowledge and skills to navigate a rapidly expanding global economy. Since 2020, College Promise has successfully hosted the College Promise Careers Institute (CPCI), a multi-day summit focused on the role of education in building career pathways that address our changing labor market and access to higher education. This event brings together education and workforce experts working together to increase the economic mobility of Americans. Secretary Miguel Cardona spoke at the Careers Institute in 2021, emphasizing that “We must resolve the tension between college affordability and opportunity.” In 2022, College Promise’s founding Honorary Chair and First Lady of the United States, Dr. Jill Biden, honored us with her presence and left the audience by stating, “Keep pushing for change. Keep making the case that free community colleges transform lives and make our nation stronger. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

Introduction
The 2023 Careers Institute explored several themes that will reshape how we approach education and career development through our Promise communities. From forging innovative college-to-career pathways and tackling social mobility to reimagining career exploration, promoting economic equity, and enhancing job placement strategies, we delved deep into the most pressing issues facing the next generation of workers.
On November 8th and 9th, 2023, College Promise hosted our fourth annual in-person conference at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (“UT-Knoxville”). tnAchieves, an organization rooted in their mission to enhance post-secondary opportunities and outcomes by providing holistic student supports rooted in community and accountability, also played a pivotal role in the success of the conference. UT-Knoxville and tnAchieves generously provided their space, time, and support in developing a strong agenda for local policymakers, leaders, and experts. Randy Boyd, President of the University of Tennessee System and College Promise National Advisory Board member, was honored with the College Promise National Impact Award for his notable contributions to advancing accessibility in higher education. In his address, he shared insights from his experiences, underscoring the importance of initiating small-scale efforts to achieve tangible results. Boyd emphasized that a culture of low expectations poses a significant challenge: “We expect too little from ourselves, our children, and our community, but with programs like the Tennessee Promise, we hope to change that culture.” Randy Boyd, a first-generation graduate, has led and served the community, leading to Tennessee’s sustained growth in accessibility to higher education.

On Day One, College Promise CEO, Dr. Martha Kanter extended a warm welcome and discussed the four components of the promise: education, learning, working, and serving. This was followed by keynote remarks, remarks from the President of UT-Knoxville, Dr. Donde Plowman, and a panel discussion on the transformation from local to state perspectives. The agenda continued with a presentation of the College Promise National Impact Award and two panels, one focused on working in America and the other addressing the advancement of economic mobility. Day One was rounded out with a HOPEx student plenary. HOPEx, an annual live speaker event in Lynchburg, Virginia, aims to inspire innovative approaches in narrowing the poverty gap by enhancing access to post-secondary education. The student plenary highlighted the success stories of students who have been impacted by the Promise.
Dr. Bill Fox, Boyd Distinguished Professor Emeritus and Special Advisor to the UTK Chancellor, emphasized the dynamic employment landscape and unprecedented speed of evolution, stating, “We've never experienced an era with such rapid changes. If we are to implement effective programs, there must be mechanisms in place to skill students and keep them abreast of the ongoing transformations.” An attendee highlighted the importance of students recognizing that “the crucial consideration should not be what one can earn at 22, but rather, what one can earn over the course of their lifetime.” Furthermore, during the two-day convention, attendees heard from scholars whom their own states’ Promise Programs have directly impacted. During a First Generation Day celebration session, HOPEx additionally spotlighted students who provided first-person accounts of Promise Programs' impact and success stories.

Day Two featured panel discussions covering a range of topics, including demystifying AI, HOPEx activation, enhancing diversity in the classroom, forging connections between Promise Programs and employers, safeguarding the Promise, recognizing College Promise champions, harnessing AI in the workplace, fostering a sense of belonging and connection, and exploring funding options for sustainable Promise programs.

The event also peered into our future, delving deeper into the repercussions of artificial intelligence on the job market through panels led by Kim Carson, CEO and Founder of Parallax Futures, and Kelly Ryan Bailey, Founder and CEO of Skills Baby. The two panels directly aligned by encompassing the importance of utilizing AI because it is here to stay. Kelly Ryan Bailey stated, "AI will impact us in every facet of our personal and professional lives." Further underscoring this notion, Kim Carson stated, “Anything new is scary, but AI is pervasive.” The discussions included investing in mental health within the workplace, promoting employee flexibility, championing upskilling initiatives, and cultivating a more sustainable and diverse workforce. College Promise Careers Institute also included breakout sessions that served as a place where individuals could gain specific knowledge on how to improve their Promise Program or implement tools to maximize their impact. To close out the College Promise Careers Institute, we heard from Reverend John C. Jones, President and CEO of Hope Toledo, who emphasized that “while our communities are different, we are all facing similar challenges.” The trend of a lack of affordability and, in turn, a lack of accessibility to higher education plagues our communities, and all who are committed to the College Promise movement recognize this and are putting their best foot forward to combat the changing economic implications.
The 2023 College Promise Careers Institute emphasized the need to step out of our comfort zones and focus on the future. In a constantly evolving society, learning to adapt and avoid being left behind is crucial. Navigating uncharted territory becomes challenging without knowledge of it. CPCI offered attendees multiple opportunities to learn about the current economic mobility landscape and the impact of AI on that landscape. Participants left with greater knowledge of how to move forward and navigate the uncharted territory ahead.

Throughout this annual summit, we explored cutting-edge themes and delved into innovative approaches to college-to-career pathways, social mobility, career exploration, economic equity, and job placement strategies. The event, now in its fourth year, has consistently brought together education and workforce experts to address the evolving needs of the American workforce. In a post-event survey, an attendee shared the insight they gained, emphasizing the importance of conveying to others that implementing a Promise Program may not yield immediate results; however, staying committed to the course for the long term is essential. We recognize the importance of putting our heads together to cultivate conversations about the future of higher education, and during these thought-provoking discussions, we were able to do so. For more information on the 2023 College Promise Careers Institute and past events, please visit our website.