

The Promise of Regional Talent Ecosystems

Lessons from a Multi-Site Evaluation of Rural Promise Programs

Economic Mobility Center

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Executive Summary

Across the United States, Promise programs have become a widely adopted strategy for expanding postsecondary access by reducing financial barriers and encouraging college enrollment. Yet many continue to operate primarily as scholarship programs rather than as comprehensive regional strategies that support learners from high school through employment by connecting education, workforce development, and economic mobility.

This white paper argues that the greatest value of Promise extends beyond the scholarship itself: it's the regional talent ecosystem the scholarship can build, aligning K–12, higher education, employers, and workforce systems around a shared commitment to student success. Funding gets a student in the door; the ecosystem is what carries them the rest of the way, from enrollment to credential to career. Drawing on a three-year, multi-site evaluation of the Rural Regional Talent Network (R-RTN) Initiative, the paper examines how shared governance, integrated data, coordinated student supports, workforce alignment, and cross-sector partnerships can connect K–12 education, higher education, employers, workforce organizations, philanthropy, and community partners around shared regional outcomes. As states adopt performance-based funding, employers seek stronger talent pipelines, and communities navigate demographic and economic change, educational institutions are increasingly called to serve as regional conveners—aligning education, workforce, and community partners around shared talent and economic mobility goals.

The external evaluation, conducted by Cohort Science across Howard College, Odessa College, and South Texas College, integrated longitudinal student outcomes, implementation scorecards, stakeholder interviews, and student focus groups. The results demonstrate measurable progress alongside important opportunities for improvement. Enrollment in the most recent cohorts increased 32% at Odessa College, 13% at Howard College, and 103% at South Texas College, while Fall-to-Spring persistence reached 82.7%, 75.6%, and approximately 82%, respectively. At Odessa, the 2025 cohort earned 195 credentials in its first year—a 160% increase from 75 in the 2024 cohort. At South Texas College, 35.1% of the 908-student Fall 2024 cohort returned after at least one stop-out—a temporary pause in enrollment, lasting one or more terms, followed by re-enrollment rather than permanent withdrawal— demonstrating the potential value of sustained engagement and re-enrollment strategies. Across the three sites, pledge-to-enrollment conversion also emerged as a critical point of leakage, underscoring the importance of financial aid navigation, advising, outreach, and integrated data systems.

Collectively, the findings suggest that expanding access is necessary but insufficient for sustained student success. Regions also need the infrastructure to help learners move from initial interest through enrollment, persistence, credential attainment, and ultimately economic

mobility. The resulting Regional Talent Ecosystem Framework offers a scalable approach for communities seeking to strengthen educational attainment, workforce alignment, and economic mobility through coordinated regional action.

Introduction

Communities across the United States face an increasingly complex challenge. Educational attainment is closely associated with economic mobility and regional prosperity, as higher levels of postsecondary attainment expand access to economic opportunity, increase lifetime earnings, and generate broader economic benefits for communities (Carnevale et al., 2024). However, the systems responsible for preparing students for postsecondary education and employment remain fragmented. School districts, colleges, workforce boards, employers, and community organizations often pursue similar objectives while operating through independent governance structures, disconnected technology platforms, separate funding streams, and distinct accountability systems. Students consequently experience multiple institutional transitions rather than a coherent educational pathway.

The Rural Regional Talent Network (R-RTN) Initiative was established with support from Greater Texas Foundation and Ascendium Education Group to strengthen postsecondary access, attainment, and regional talent development in rural Texas communities. The initiative brought together Howard College, Odessa College, and South Texas College with more than 100 rural high schools to develop and strengthen the regional infrastructure needed to support students from secondary education through postsecondary credential attainment and into the workforce. Rather than focusing exclusively on scholarship assistance, R-RTN investments supported the development of cross-sector partnerships, regional governance, integrated data and technology, coordinated learner supports, and stronger connections between education and workforce systems (Greater Texas Foundation, 2022; Ascendium Education Group, 2022).

Promise programs have emerged during the past decade as one response to these challenges. Beginning with initiatives such as the Tennessee Promise and rapidly expanding across the country, Promise programs have sought to remove financial barriers that prevent students from pursuing postsecondary education. Research consistently demonstrates that these initiatives improve college-going behavior, increase FAFSA completion, and encourage greater postsecondary participation. Nevertheless, the evidence also suggests that affordability alone does not eliminate many of the structural barriers affecting student persistence, credential completion, transfer success, and workforce readiness (Bartik et al., 2021; Billings et al., 2021; Millett et al., 2018; Monaghan, 2024).

These limitations raise a broader question for policymakers and educational leaders. If Promise successfully increases access, what additional conditions are required to sustain student success throughout the educational continuum? More specifically, can Promise serve as the

organizing framework through which communities redesign regional educational systems rather than simply finance college attendance?

Through R-RTN participating colleges sought to strengthen regional collaboration across more than one hundred rural high schools serving geographically diverse communities throughout Texas. Rather than treating Promise scholarships as the primary intervention, implementation focused on developing the institutional and regional infrastructure necessary to improve learner outcomes over time. Colleges strengthened governance, expanded cross-sector partnerships, implemented integrated technology platforms, redesigned learner support systems, improved workforce alignment, and developed regional data capabilities intended to sustain continuous improvement.

This paper presents findings from Cohort Science's multi-site evaluation of that work. Although the evaluation identifies measurable improvements in Promise participation, FAFSA completion, enrollment, persistence, and credential attainment, its most important contribution lies elsewhere. The findings demonstrate that sustainable regional transformation depends less upon scholarship funding than upon the development of coordinated regional systems capable of supporting learners from high school through employment. Across participating regions, governance structures, shared accountability, integrated data, and collaborative leadership consistently emerged as prominent implementation conditions associated with stronger student outcomes and organizational capacity .

The argument advanced throughout this paper is therefore straightforward: Promise should be understood not simply as a scholarship program but as regional infrastructure. When implemented within a comprehensive regional talent ecosystem, Promise becomes the catalyst through which educational institutions, employers, workforce organizations, and community partners collectively build the conditions necessary for long-term economic mobility.

The National Context: From Promise Programs to Regional Talent Ecosystems

The rapid expansion of Promise programs reflects growing national recognition that educational attainment is central to regional economic competitiveness. Rising tuition costs, demographic shifts, employer demand for skilled workers, and widening disparities in postsecondary participation have prompted states and communities to invest heavily in college affordability initiatives. Today, more than 200 place-based Promise programs operate across the United States, according to the W.E. Upjohn Institute's Promise Programs Database, which tracks community- and institution-based scholarship programs designed to expand access to postsecondary education (Miller-Adams et al., 2024).

While these investments have generated measurable gains in college enrollment, they have also revealed the limitations of scholarship-centered approaches. Many communities continue to experience fragmented advising systems, inconsistent transitions between secondary and postsecondary education, limited coordination between colleges and employers, and insufficient access to timely student data. As a result, gains in initial enrollment do not consistently translate into higher rates of persistence, credential completion, transfer, or workforce success.

At the same time, a parallel body of research has emphasized the importance of collective impact, cross-sector governance, regional collaboration, and continuous improvement as mechanisms for addressing complex educational challenges (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Rather than focusing on individual organizations, these approaches emphasize the capacity of regional partnerships to coordinate action around shared outcomes.

The Regional Talent Ecosystem Framework presented in this paper builds upon these complementary strands of research. It proposes that Promise programs become substantially more effective when embedded within regional systems that intentionally align leadership, governance, learner pathways, workforce priorities, integrated technology, and shared accountability, positioning the scholarship not as the intervention itself but as an entry point for building the broader regional infrastructure needed to improve educational attainment and workforce outcomes over time.

The R-RTN Evaluation: Promise as Regional Infrastructure in Practice

The evaluation presented in this paper begins with a central proposition: Promise programs achieve their greatest impact when they are implemented as components of intentionally designed regional talent ecosystems rather than as stand-alone financial aid initiatives.

Over the past decade, Promise programs have expanded rapidly as communities sought to reduce financial barriers to higher education. While these initiatives have demonstrated measurable improvements in college access and enrollment, implementation has often remained narrowly focused on scholarship administration and recruitment activities. Such approaches frequently overlook the broader systems that shape student success after enrollment, including advising, academic pathways, workforce alignment, data sharing, governance, and cross-sector collaboration.

Once the foundational Promise program is established, implementation can mature beyond financial aid to serve as a catalyst for shared governance, integrated technology, coordinated student supports, and continuous improvement capable of sustaining long-term educational attainment and economic mobility.

This distinction is significant. Rather than measuring success solely through scholarship utilization or enrollment growth, regional talent ecosystems evaluate success according to the strength of the relationships, structures, and institutional capacities that enable communities to improve learner outcomes over time. Promise therefore becomes the entry point for regional systems transformation rather than the end goal of implementation.

Evidence from a Multi-Site Evaluation

The conclusions advanced throughout this paper are grounded in a three-year mixed-method evaluation conducted across three geographically and demographically distinct rural Texas regions. Collectively, Howard College, Odessa College, and South Texas College represent diverse institutional contexts, student populations, governance structures, and workforce environments. Rather than treating each institution as an isolated case study, the evaluation synthesized findings across all three implementation sites to identify common implementation patterns, shared challenges, and transferable practices.

The evaluation incorporated four complementary sources of evidence: implementation scorecards measuring organizational readiness and operational fidelity; stakeholder interviews with institutional leaders, faculty, K–12 partners, and workforce organizations; student focus groups examining participant experiences; and longitudinal analyses of student recruitment, financial aid completion, enrollment, persistence, and credential attainment. Together, these

methods provided a comprehensive assessment of both implementation quality and student outcomes while allowing findings to be triangulated across multiple sources of evidence.

Across all participating regions, consistent themes emerged regardless of institutional size or geographic location. Colleges strengthened regional governance, expanded partnerships with school districts and employers, implemented integrated data systems, improved organizational coordination, and demonstrated measurable gains in student participation and success. Although implementation strategies varied according to local context, the implementation conditions associated with stronger outcomes remained remarkably consistent across all three institutions, suggesting that the Regional Talent Ecosystem model is adaptable while maintaining core implementation principles.

Cross-Site Evidence Supporting Regional Talent Ecosystems

Rather than presenting findings institution by institution, the evaluation synthesized evidence across participating regions to identify the implementation conditions most strongly associated with successful outcomes. Five major themes consistently emerged.

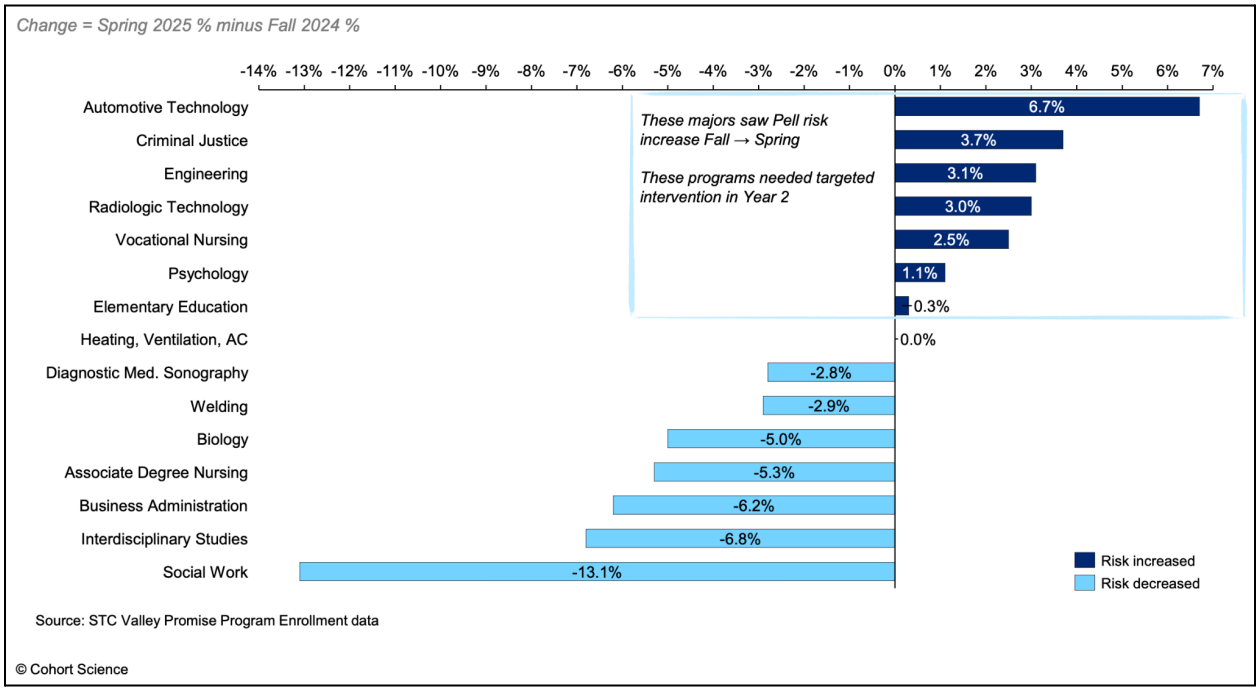
Regional Governance Creates Institutional Capacity

Across all three regions, formal governance structures became the foundation upon which implementation activities were coordinated. Executive leadership teams, cross-functional implementation committees, and regional advisory groups improved communication among institutional departments while strengthening collaboration with external partners. Governance enabled participating organizations to move beyond isolated initiatives toward coordinated regional decision-making supported by shared goals and clearly defined responsibilities.

Integrated Data Enables Continuous Improvement

Each participating institution demonstrated significant advances in the collection, integration, and use of student-level data. Salesforce-based case management systems, automated reporting processes, and regional dashboards increased institutional visibility into student progression while enabling earlier intervention for learners experiencing barriers. More importantly, data evolved from a reporting mechanism into a strategic resource supporting collaborative decision-making among educational and workforce partners. At South Texas College, this shift enabled the evaluation to surface the single highest-risk pattern in the dataset: approximately 83–87% of the 2024 cohort was Pell-eligible, and students who entered Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) warning or suspension status faced the compounding risk of losing both Pell and Promise funding simultaneously — a combination the evaluation identified as creating an exceptionally high risk of stop out or withdrawal. Integrated data allowed the college to identify the specific majors where SAP risk was rising between Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 (Automotive Technology, Criminal Justice, Engineering, and Radiologic Technology) and target academic support before aid loss became irreversible — the kind of proactive intervention a scholarship-only model has no mechanism to produce.

Notably, the risk data cuts both ways: alongside the four majors above, three more (Vocational Nursing, Psychology, and Elementary Education) also saw modest risk increases, while seven majors saw risk decrease over the same period — led by Social Work (−13.1 points), Interdisciplinary Studies (−6.8 points), Business Administration (−6.2 points), and Associate Degree Nursing (−5.3 points). Risk increased in some majors and decreased in others, in roughly equal numbers, so the picture is mixed rather than uniformly worse. Still, the majors where risk rose span a wide range of departments and program types, from nursing and education to psychology, so a narrow fix aimed at one program area wouldn't reach most of them. The college's intervention plan needs to account for that spread, targeting the specific majors at risk rather than treating this as an isolated, department-level problem.



Source: South Texas College, Valley Promise Program Enrollment Data, Fall 2024–Spring 2025; analysis by Cohort Science.

Regional Partnerships Strengthen Student Success

College leaders found that student outcomes improved when colleges expanded relationships with K–12 districts, universities, workforce boards, employers, and community organizations. These partnerships facilitated coordinated outreach, strengthened college transitions, aligned educational pathways with labor market demand, and created more comprehensive student support systems extending beyond institutional boundaries.

Promise Functions as Regional Infrastructure

Although scholarship funding served as an important incentive for student participation, the evaluation suggests that Promise itself was not the primary mechanism driving long-term institutional improvement. Instead, Promise provided a shared regional objective around which governance, technology, communications, advising, workforce alignment, and student supports

could be organized. As implementation matured, participating colleges increasingly viewed Promise as one component of a broader regional strategy rather than as an independent program. At Howard College, this pattern is evident within the 78-student cohort: students who participated in campus activities beyond Open Roads Promise—including Athletics, Cheerleading, and Construction Trades—completed credentials at rates of 100%, 67%, and 50%, respectively, compared with 29% among students participating in the Promise program alone. Given the small cohort and subgroup sizes, these findings should be interpreted as promising associations rather than evidence that extracurricular participation caused higher completion rates. Still, the direction of this pattern is consistent with the broader evaluation finding above: Promise's financial support is necessary but not sufficient on its own—students benefit most when the scholarship enables engagement and participation in a broader institutional community rather than operating as a standalone benefit.

Sustainability Emerges Through Systems

One of the most significant findings concerns long-term sustainability. Institutions demonstrating the greatest implementation maturity increasingly relied upon strengthened organizational capacity, performance-based funding opportunities, regional partnerships, and integrated technology rather than continued philanthropic support. This evolution suggests that regional infrastructure provides a pathway toward sustained institutional improvement beyond the life of individual grants.

Evidence, Data, and Outcomes: Cross-Site Results

The themes above describe how regional talent ecosystems are built; this section grounds those themes in the underlying student-level evidence. Cohort Science's R3 evaluation readouts for Howard College's Open Roads Promise, Odessa College's Wrangler Promise, and South Texas College's Valley Promise draw on implementation scorecards, stakeholder interviews, student focus groups, and longitudinal cohort data to answer **two questions at each site: how effectively is the program being implemented, and what impact is it having on student outcomes. The comparison below synthesizes the most recent readouts (June 2026) across all three colleges.**

Cross-Site Comparison: Pipeline, Persistence, and Completion

Metric	Odessa College Wrangler Promise	Howard College Open Roads Promise	South Texas College Valley Promise
Cohort Size (Pledge)	1,082 (2024) 1,447 (2025)	204 (2025) 416 (2026)	1,144 (2024) 3,792 (2025)
Most recent enrolled cohort	601 enrolled (2025), up from 454 (2024) — a 32.4% increase	88 enrolled (2026), up from 78 (2025) — a 12.8% increase	1,840 enrolled (2025), up from 908 (2024) — a 102.6% increase
Pledge-to-Enrollment yield	41% (2025 Cohort)	38% (2025 Cohort)	48% (2025 Cohort)
Most recent persistence rate	82.7% Fall-to-Spring (2025 cohort); 91.3% (2024 cohort)	75.6% Fall-to-Spring (2025 Cohort)	~82% short-term (Fall–Spring); ~58% Fall-to-Fall (one-year)
Credential completion	195 credentials earned by 2025 cohort in Year 1 (+160% vs. 75 in 2024); 1.65 credentials per student	24 completions by Spring 2026 — 30.8% of the enrolled cohort; completers average a 3.59 GPA	Cumulative 8.5% credential attainment by Summer 2025; skilled trades account for 47% of all credentials
Pell-eligible share	55% (2024) / 56% (2025)	Tracked via Promise-funded subset (38 of 78 funded via Promise)	~83% of enrolled cohort
Notable demographic shift	More Hispanic (>80%) and more male (40% vs. 32%) in 2025 vs. 2024	62% of pledged students report college-going intent	Gender mix moved from 63% female (2024) to 53% female (2025) as more males entered technical majors

Source: Cohort Science, Odessa Wrangler Promise R3 Summary Readout (June 2026); Howard College Open Roads Promise R3 Summary Readout (June 2026); South Texas College Valley Promise R3 Summary Readout (June 2026).

Enrollment Pipeline: The Pledge-to-Enrollment Gap

Across all three sites, the largest single point of attrition in the student pipeline occurs between pledging to the program and actually enrolling — not between enrollment and persistence. At Odessa, the 2025 pledged cohort included 1,447 students, of whom 601 enrolled, yielding a 41.5% pledge-to-enrollment conversion rate. Of those pledged students, 520 (36%) submitted financial aid materials. In comparison, the 2024 pledged cohort converted to enrollment at 42%, but financial aid clearance represented a more significant bottleneck: only 251 of 1,082 pledged students (23%) fully cleared financial aid requirements. Analysis of financial aid receipt by feeder high school reveals an S-curve relationship with enrollment yield — the share of pledged students who receive financial aid explains 60–80% of the variation in that school's ultimate enrollment yield, up to a threshold beyond which other, likely student-driven, factors take over. This makes targeted FAFSA completion support at high-volume feeder schools the single highest-leverage intervention available to grow Odessa's enrolled pipeline.

At Howard, the pledge-to-enrollment yield stood at 38.2% (78 of 204 pledged students), the highest-priority intervention opportunity flagged in the evaluation. At South Texas College, pledge participation itself remained modest relative to the prospect pool (9.3% in 2024, rising to 20.2% in 2025), and pledge-to-registration yield fell for the 2025 cohort compared to 2024, even as the prospect pool grew 9% year over year. The 2025 dip is concentrated in specific schools: Veterans Memorial High School converted only 10% of its pledged students to enrollment (34 of 340 pledged students enrolled; Mission High School converted 13%; PSJA North just 8%. The evaluation frames this as a process gap rather than a program failure — the 2024 cohort's yield performance, consistently 79–94% across the same top feeder schools, demonstrates that high conversion is achievable and already part of the program's track record.

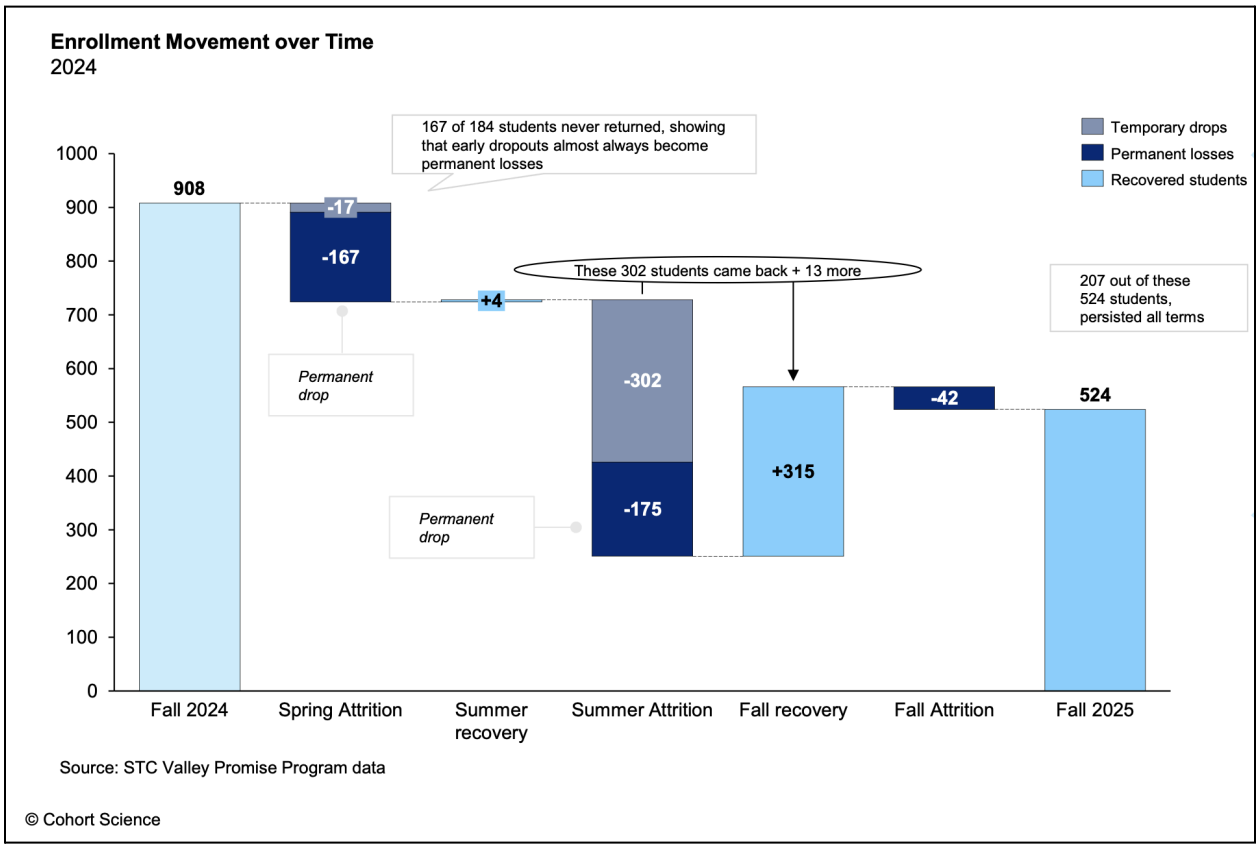
This consistent pattern suggests that once students are enrolled, Promise programs are succeeding at keeping them in school and moving them toward credentials — the bigger opportunity lies in converting pledges into enrolled students through earlier, more consistent financial aid navigation and outreach.

Persistence Is Strong Once Students Enroll

Across all three sites, students demonstrated strong short-term persistence once enrolled, with Howard closely tracking the national public two-year first-spring persistence benchmark. Howard College's Open Roads Promise cohort achieved a 75.6% Fall 2025-to-Spring 2026 persistence rate, closely aligning with the 75.9% national first-spring persistence rate for students beginning at public two-year institutions reported by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSC, 2026). This comparison uses equivalent measures: NSC defines first-spring persistence as continued enrollment at any institution in the spring following initial fall enrollment, including students who complete a credential before the spring

term. Howard's performance therefore tracks closely with the national community college benchmark, providing a more appropriate comparison than second-year retention measures.

Odessa's 2024 cohort held 91.3% term-to-term persistence into its second term, with the larger 2025 cohort maintaining 82.7% over the same window; female students showed stronger persistence across every credit-hour band and every top major at Odessa. At South Texas College, short-term (Fall-to-Spring) persistence held in the 75–95% range across majors and feeder high schools, though one-year (Fall-to-Fall) retention dropped to approximately 58%, and 302 students who stopped out over the summer re-enrolled by Fall 2025 — evidence that stop-out is not always permanent when colleges maintain contact with students. A full breakdown of the 908-student Fall 2024 cohort clarifies the scale of both effects: 207 students (22.8%) persisted every term without interruption, and 319 students (35.1%) recovered from at least one stop-out and returned. Against this, 382 students (42.1%) were permanent losses — including the 167 who dropped after Fall 2024 and never returned. The recovery pathway is real and substantial, but it does not offset the fact that more than four in ten enrolled students were ultimately lost from the cohort, underscoring why early intervention in the first semester remains the highest-leverage point in the pipeline.



South Texas College. (2024–2025). Valley Promise program enrollment data, Fall 2024–Fall 2025 [Unpublished institutional dataset]. Analysis by Cohort Science.

Skilled Trades Offer the Fastest Path to a Credential

Credential completion data across sites point to skilled trades and workforce-aligned programs as an early and reliable completion pathway. At Odessa, the 2025 cohort earned 195 credentials in its first year — a 160% increase over the 2024 cohort's 75 — concentrated in Welding, Automotive, Criminal Justice, Culinary Arts, and Business. At South Texas College, Welding, Electrician Technology, Electrician Assistant, and HVAC together accounted for 47% of all 2024 cohort credentials— fast-track Certificates of Completion that translate directly into workforce-ready skills. At Howard, completers carried a substantially higher GPA than non-completers (3.59 versus 3.22), and nearly two-thirds of completers held a GPA of 3.5 or above — suggesting higher academic performance was associated with credential completion. Credential attainment in the first year was led by skilled trades programs. GPA performance improved across most majors between Fall 2024 and Summer 2025, with notable recoveries in Automotive Technology (from 1.90 to 3.33) and Business Administration (from 1.99 to 2.57). These gains suggest that some students experiencing early academic challenges improved substantially over time.

The Programs Are Reaching Their Intended Students

Demographic data indicate that Promise is reaching lower-income and historically underserved students at scale. More than half of both Odessa cohorts were Pell-eligible (55% in 2024, 56% in 2025), and over 80% of Odessa's 2025 cohort identified as Hispanic. At South Texas College, roughly 83% of the enrolled cohort was Pell-eligible, and college readiness — a composite of math and reading measures — more than doubled from 36% in Fall 2024 to 77% by Summer 2025. Transfer patterns are also emerging at Odessa, where UT Permian Basin is the top transfer destination for Wrangler Promise students who transferred, and the 2025 cohort shows a broader spread of transfer destinations than 2024 — an early signal that as the program matures, students are gaining access to a wider range of institutions, not just a single regional pathway. Both Odessa and South Texas College also saw their student populations shift toward greater gender balance as more male students entered technical and trade majors, broadening the reach of the programs with each successive cohort.

What the Data Confirms About Promise as Regional Infrastructure

The primary point of attrition, or loss, of students across all three sites is pledge-to-enrollment conversion, not post-enrollment persistence — reinforcing the evaluation's core finding that regional systems of support (financial aid navigation, advising, data infrastructure) matter more than the scholarship dollar alone.

Once enrolled, students demonstrate strong short-term persistence across all three sites, with Howard closely tracking the national public two-year first-spring persistence benchmark, and skilled-trades credentials represent an early, workforce-aligned completion pathway.

Stakeholders at all three colleges independently raised the same operational themes: the need for more staffing capacity, stronger Salesforce/CRM data integration, and expanded social media and outreach presence — consistent with the paper's argument that integrated data and regional partnership infrastructure, not Promise funding alone, sustain long-term outcomes.

In Their Own Words: Student Voice

The quantitative findings show how Promise programs influence enrollment, persistence, and completion, while student experiences provide an equally important perspective on how those outcomes are achieved. Across interviews and focus groups, students described reduced financial stress, a stronger sense of support and belonging, the value of guidance and coaching, and greater confidence in pursuing education and career goals. Their voices reinforce a central finding of this evaluation: financial assistance is most powerful when it is paired with the relationships, advising, and opportunities that help students persist, complete credentials, and move toward economic mobility.

1. "Receiving the Wrangler Promise Scholarship lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. For the first time, I felt like I could focus fully on school instead of constantly worrying about finances or feeling guilty for burdening my family. It gave me room to breathe, to grow, and to believe in myself again." [Odessa College]
2. "Your generosity doesn't just help someone pay for school — it gives people hope during moments when they're questioning if they can keep going." [Howard College]
3. "I knew Valley Promise was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. It immediately took the stress off because I didn't have to worry about loans or putting that pressure on my family. It allowed me to focus on my classes and keep moving forward." [South Texas College]
4. "I actually started my job recently. It's exciting. You prepare for this for so long and then suddenly it's here. With the help of STC and Valley Promise, I have found a career that feels fulfilling." [South Texas College]
5. "I didn't realize how big Valley Promise was until I applied. When I got the call from my coach, it changed everything. Having someone there to guide me and help me when I needed it made a huge difference." [South Texas College]
6. "I've been crossing the border since I was 7 years old to go to school. It's stressful, but it's all worth it. It taught me discipline and not to give up." [South Texas College]
7. "The Wrangler Promise Scholarship gave me the ability to focus on my education, leadership opportunities, and personal growth without the overwhelming burden of financial stress. More than just financial assistance, it provided reassurance, stability, and the motivation to continue striving for excellence." [Odessa College]
8. "Wrangler Promise allowed me to focus on my studies and goals at Odessa College as a first-generation college graduate in my family. It helped me so much — letting me achieve my associate's degree." [Odessa College]

9. "It cleared my mind. I didn't have to worry about paying for college. I could focus on learning and getting through my classes." [Howard College]
10. "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something. If you've made it this far, keep going. Take every opportunity you're given and don't give up." [Howard College]

Sources: Cohort Science student focus groups and institution-produced student media interviews, 2024–2026; quotations reproduced with permission. Names intentionally omitted.

A Regional Talent Ecosystem Framework

The evaluation findings support the development of a Regional Talent Ecosystem Framework that conceptualizes Promise implementation as a comprehensive regional systems strategy rather than a scholarship initiative. The framework consists of six interdependent domains that collectively create the conditions necessary for sustained educational and workforce improvement.

- **Regional Leadership and Governance —** Regional leadership and governance establish the structures through which organizations coordinate decision-making and maintain shared accountability.
- **Learner Journey Design —** Learner journey design ensures that educational transitions are intentionally aligned from secondary education through credential attainment and employment.
- **College Affordability —** College affordability, including Promise scholarships, removes financial barriers while encouraging student participation and engagement in curricular and co-curricular activities.
- **Integrated Data and Technology —** Integrated data and technology provide real-time information necessary for coordinated intervention and continuous improvement.
- **Workforce Alignment —** Workforce alignment connects educational pathways to regional labor market demand and employer engagement.
- **Continuous Improvement —** Continuous improvement establishes the organizational learning processes required to adapt implementation over time.

These domains should not be understood as sequential implementation steps but as mutually reinforcing elements of a regional ecosystem. The effectiveness of each component depends upon its integration with the others, creating a comprehensive model capable of supporting long-term systems transformation.

Implications for Replication

One of the principal contributions of this evaluation lies in its implications for replication across diverse regional contexts. Although participating institutions differed substantially in geography, enrollment, organizational structure, and workforce conditions, the underlying implementation principles remained remarkably consistent. This finding suggests that regional talent ecosystems represent an adaptable implementation model rather than an institution-specific intervention.

Replication depends on a handful of preconditions that were present, in some form, at all three sites before measurable gains appeared: an executive sponsor able to convene K–12, workforce, and college leadership; a baseline data-sharing agreement between at least one college and its feeder districts; and dedicated staff capacity for case management, distinct from admissions or financial aid functions. Regions without these conditions in place should expect a longer runway before the model produces results comparable to those documented here.

Feeder-school concentration data illustrates how this adaptability unfolds over time. At Howard College, in its first cohort year, a single feeder school (Big Spring) accounts for 80 of 108 total pledges, 74% of the pledge pool across just seven feeder schools. At Odessa College, in its second cohort year, 16 of 29 feeder schools account for 98% of pledges and 99% of enrollments. At South Texas College, the most geographically mature site, the top 20 of 60-plus feeder schools account for approximately 65% of pledges and enrollments, with the remaining 40-plus schools still contributing a meaningful 35%.

This progression, from near-total single-school dependence to a concentrated but broadening base to wide geographic distribution, suggests a broad maturity timeline for regions considering replication. In year one, implementation is likely to concentrate around a small number of committed feeder schools while governance and data infrastructure are established. By year two, partnerships and enrollment typically broaden to a wider set of schools as trust and data systems mature. By year three and beyond, sites can expect a geographically diversified pipeline no longer dependent on one or two anchor relationships. Regions should calibrate expectations, and funder timelines, accordingly rather than expecting broad geographic reach in year one.

Replication is likely to be harder in regions lacking an existing anchor relationship between a college and its feeder districts, or where philanthropic or state funding is not available to bridge the gap before performance-based funding streams take effect. This evaluation cannot speak to replication in suburban or urban contexts, where feeder-school dynamics, employer density, and competition among postsecondary options differ substantially from the rural Texas settings studied here.

Future implementation should therefore emphasize the development of regional governance structures, cross-sector partnerships, integrated data infrastructure, and coordinated learner supports before focusing exclusively on scholarship expansion. Regions seeking to improve educational attainment should invest in organizational capacity alongside financial aid, recognizing that sustainable improvement depends upon strengthening the systems that support students rather than simply increasing access to postsecondary education. Across all three sites, the following conditions were consistently associated with successful replication:

- A named regional governance body with representation from K–12, higher education, and workforce partners
- A baseline data-sharing agreement in place before scholarship recruitment begins
- Dedicated advising or case-management staff, not layered onto existing admissions roles
- A funding bridge, philanthropic or state, covering the period before performance-based funding becomes available
- Executive-level sponsorship able to sustain the initiative through leadership transitions

The framework presented here is intentionally scalable and may be adapted to rural, suburban, or urban regions while accommodating differing policy environments, institutional capacities, and workforce priorities, though the pace and sequencing described above should be treated as a rural-context baseline rather than a fixed timeline.

Contribution to Scholarship and Practice

Although grounded in the evaluation of a specific implementation initiative, the broader contribution of this paper extends beyond program assessment. The findings advance emerging scholarship in educational leadership, regional development, collective impact, and workforce strategy by proposing a conceptual shift in how Promise programs are understood and evaluated.

Within educational leadership, the paper demonstrates that institutional transformation depends upon distributed leadership, cross-sector governance, and organizational learning rather than isolated administrative interventions. Within regional development, it illustrates how colleges can function as backbone organizations capable of convening education, workforce, employer, and community partners around shared regional outcomes. Within workforce strategy, the findings reinforce the importance of aligning educational pathways with regional labor market needs through integrated planning, shared data, and employer engagement (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Most importantly, the cross-site evidence suggests that the core components of the Regional Talent Ecosystem Framework were consistently associated with stronger implementation and

student outcomes. Rather than serving as a retrospective evaluation of a single grant-funded initiative, it offers a theory-informed model for designing, implementing, and sustaining regional talent ecosystems that improve postsecondary attainment, workforce readiness, and economic mobility. In doing so, the paper shifts the conversation from evaluating Promise programs as scholarship initiatives to understanding Promise as regional infrastructure capable of transforming educational systems and strengthening communities over the long term.

Evaluation Design and Limitations

This study was designed as a mixed-method, multi-site implementation evaluation examining the development and outcomes of Promise programs across Howard College, Odessa College, and South Texas College. The evaluation integrated longitudinal student outcomes, implementation scorecards, stakeholder interviews, and student focus groups to assess both measurable student outcomes and the regional systems supporting implementation. This approach provides a cross-site view of how Promise programs operate within different institutional and community contexts and identifies patterns associated with stronger implementation.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Cohort periods, program maturity, student populations, and some outcome definitions vary across the three institutions, limiting direct comparisons of certain measures. In addition, the evaluation was designed to examine implementation and outcomes rather than establish causal relationships. Findings should therefore be interpreted as patterns and associations that help identify promising practices and areas for continued improvement, rather than evidence that individual program components independently caused observed student outcomes.

Finally, the evaluation primarily captures outcomes during the early stages of students' postsecondary journeys. Continued longitudinal analysis will be important to assess credential completion, transfer and bachelor's-degree attainment, employment, wage progression, and longer-term economic mobility. As the R-RTN sites mature and additional cohorts progress through education and into the workforce, these measures can provide a more complete picture of whether—and under what conditions—regional talent ecosystems translate expanded postsecondary opportunity into sustained economic mobility.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper suggest that the future of Promise lies not in expanding scholarship programs alone, but in strengthening the regional systems that enable students to access, persist in, complete, and benefit from postsecondary education. While financial support remains an essential component of college access, this evaluation demonstrates that affordability alone is insufficient to address the complex educational and workforce challenges facing today's communities. Sustainable improvement requires coordinated regional action supported by shared leadership, integrated data, aligned learner pathways, workforce partnerships, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Across three rural Texas regions, the Rural Regional Talent Network Initiative demonstrated that Promise can serve as far more than an access and financial aid strategy. When intentionally embedded within a Regional Talent Ecosystem, Promise becomes a catalyst for systems transformation. Participating colleges strengthened institutional capacity, developed durable partnerships across education and workforce sectors, implemented data-informed decision-making processes, and created organizational structures capable of supporting students throughout the learner journey. Although each region reflects unique demographic, geographic, and institutional characteristics, the consistency of implementation patterns across sites suggests that the Regional Talent Ecosystem approach may be adaptable across differing regional contexts.

The implications extend beyond the participating institutions. As states increasingly adopt performance-based funding models, employers seek stronger talent pipelines, and communities confront demographic and economic change, educational institutions must assume new roles as regional conveners and collaborators. Community colleges, in particular, are uniquely positioned to function as backbone organizations that connect K–12 education, higher education, workforce development, employers, and community partners around shared regional goals (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The Regional Talent Ecosystem Framework presented in this paper offers one approach for organizing that work while balancing local flexibility with a common implementation strategy.

This paper also contributes to a growing body of scholarship emphasizing that complex educational challenges require systems-level solutions. Rather than evaluating Promise exclusively through traditional indicators such as scholarship utilization or first-year enrollment, the findings encourage researchers and practitioners to consider broader measures of regional capacity, organizational learning, governance, and cross-sector collaboration. These factors may ultimately prove to be stronger predictors of long-term student success and regional economic competitiveness than financial aid alone.

At the same time, this evaluation represents an important step rather than a final conclusion. Additional research is needed to examine the long-term effects of regional talent ecosystems on bachelor's degree attainment, employment outcomes, wage progression, and regional economic development. Future studies should also explore implementation in suburban and urban settings, investigate variations across state policy environments, and assess the role of emerging technologies and longitudinal data systems in strengthening regional collaboration. Continued research will help refine the framework and identify the conditions under which regional talent ecosystems are most effective.

Ultimately, the central lesson of this evaluation is both practical and aspirational. Communities do not improve educational attainment by investing solely in programs; they improve educational attainment by investing in the relationships, governance, infrastructure, and shared accountability that enable programs to succeed. Promise programs remain a powerful entry point for expanding opportunity, but their greatest potential is realized when they become part of a larger regional strategy that connects learners to education, education to workforce, and workforce to long-term economic mobility.

The next generation of educational reform will not be defined by individual initiatives operating in isolation. It will be defined by regions that intentionally build integrated talent ecosystems capable of supporting every learner from high school through postsecondary education and into meaningful careers. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that this transformation is not only possible — it is already underway.

About Us

Howard College

Founded in 1945, Howard College is a public community college headquartered in Big Spring, Texas, with additional instructional sites in San Angelo and Lamesa. The college is home to the SouthWest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf and is designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution, offering academic transfer, workforce, and technical programs across a geographically dispersed West Texas service area under the leadership of President Dr. Cheryl Sparks.

Odessa College

Founded in 1946, Odessa College is a public community college located in Odessa, Texas, serving the Permian Basin region of West Texas. The college offers academic transfer, workforce, and technical education programs, with a strong focus on programs aligned to the region's oil and gas, healthcare, and skilled trades industries. Odessa College operates under the leadership of President Dr. Gregory Williams and is known for its high-touch student

support model, which has drawn national recognition for its impact on student completion rates.

South Texas College

Founded in 1993, South Texas College offers more than 131 degree & certificate options, including associate degrees in a variety of liberal art, social science, business, math, science, technology, advanced manufacturing, and allied health fields of study. Additionally, South Texas College is the only community college in the State of Texas to offer 5 baccalaureate degrees. South Texas College has a faculty and staff of more than 2,200 to serve the college's five campuses, two higher education centers, and one virtual campus.

Economic Mobility Center

The Economic Mobility Center works with education, workforce, and community partners to build regional talent ecosystems that connect learners to meaningful careers and long-term economic mobility. Guided by our North Star—every student on a path to economic mobility—the Center focuses on aligning education with workforce needs, strengthening guidance for students and families, simplifying systems and removing barriers, and developing sustainable funding strategies. Through cross-sector collaboration, the Center helps regions create clearer pathways from education to credentials, employment, and living-wage careers.

Cohort Science

Cohort Science™ is a higher education intelligence firm that helps institutional leaders and mission-driven organizations turn complex data into actionable insights. Its work integrates institutional data, labor-market signals, and advanced analytics to evaluate student outcomes, program effectiveness, workforce alignment, and economic mobility. For this evaluation cycle, Cohort Science™ conducted a comprehensive, multi-method assessment of each program using four evaluation lenses: a program implementation scorecard covering 20+ questions and 100+ criteria; in-depth stakeholder interviews with college leaders and partners at each institution; focus group discussions with participating students; and longitudinal cohort data analyses tracking student progress from pledge through credential completion. This multi-method approach ensures findings are both quantitatively rigorous and grounded in the lived experience of the students and communities these programs serve.

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