

Creating A Connecticut Ecosystem of Promise
Task Force to Support Promise Programs in the State of Connecticut



Connecticut General Assembly
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

January 2026

Members:

Jeffrey Barry, Ed.D., Connecticut Office of Higher Education
Ayana Encarnacion, UConn and Hartford Promise Alumna
Nathan Fuerst, UConn
Sivan Hines, M.D., Hartford Promise
Mona Lucas, UConn
Kelonda Maull, Waterbury Promise
Patricia Melton, New Haven Promise
Katherine Presutti, University of Hartford
Kelvin Roldán, Ed.L.D., Amira Learning
Richard Sugarman, Formerly Hartford Promise
Daniel C. Giungi, CHESLA

Special Thanks to:

Monnica Chan, Ph.D., UMass Boston
Dan Dilworth, Office of Fiscal Analysis
Megan Villanova, Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Jennifer Widness, CCIC

This report is respectfully submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly pursuant to Special Act No. 25-10, *An Act Establishing a Task Force to Support Promise Programs in the State of Connecticut*.



Table of Contents

LETTER FROM THE CO-CHAIRS	4
BACKGROUND	6
CREATING AN ECOSYSTEM OF PROMISE RECOMMENDATIONS	7
THE CONNECTICUT CONTEXT: KEY FINDINGS	9
RETURN ON INVESTMENT	11
SUMMARY OF FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS	12
THE PROMISE MODEL: INTEGRATED COLLEGE SUCCESS	13
BEST PRACTICES IN DESIGNING STATE GRANT PROGRAMS	15
EXISTING AND EXPANDED PROMISE PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS	17
SCHOLAR SUCCESS GRANT PROGRAM DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS	19
SCHOLAR SUCCESS GRANT FINANCIAL ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	20
CONCLUSION	25
REFERENCES	26

January 2026

Letter from the Co-Chairs

To the Honorable Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee and the Connecticut General Assembly:

Over the next decade, demographic, economic, and workforce shifts are expected to significantly reshape the state's economic landscape. This report identifies a series of structural challenges and opportunities that, if addressed strategically, can position Connecticut to pivot toward a more competitive and sustainable future in both higher education and the broader economy. By acting now, the state has a chance to transform current constraints into a long-term advantage—strengthening its talent pipeline, supporting families, and driving inclusive economic growth.

To that end, we recommend that the state adopt a policy approach that views higher education as an interconnected ecosystem¹—one in which multiple actors play strategic, complementary roles in expanding opportunity for Connecticut's students and families.

This **Ecosystem of Promise** includes local Promise programs, which have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting students from high school through college completion; public and private higher education institutions; philanthropic partners; government agencies; and community-based organizations. Each of these stakeholders brings unique assets and capabilities that, when aligned intentionally, can maximize access, persistence, and long-term student success. Recognizing and investing in this ecosystem approach ensures shared responsibility among partners and maximizes the collective impact of all contributors.

Today, Connecticut ranks among the bottom ten states in per-student investment in higher education. At the same time, college costs continue to rise, financial aid remains insufficient, and federal policy uncertainty has created further instability for students and institutions alike. These trends jeopardize the state's ability to retain talent, foster equitable opportunity, and sustain long-term economic vitality.

To remain competitive, Connecticut must move beyond fragmented efforts and build an intentional, aligned ecosystem that supports educational access, success, and workforce connection. This means rethinking how we invest—not only in financial aid, but in a system that ensures students can see a clear path from high school to postsecondary achievement to meaningful careers and civic life in Connecticut. Creating such an ecosystem will require

¹ Professor Irvin Scott, Harvard University, describes a similar ecosystem in the P–12 sector. See: Scott, I. L. (2021, February 9). *A new PK–12 education ecosystem framework for a new normal*. *Harvard Social Impact Review*. <https://www.sir.advancedleadership.harvard.edu/articles/a-new-pk-12-education-ecosystem-framework-for-a-new-normal>

sustained public investment, institutional accountability, strong cross-sector partnerships, and a unified vision that connects education with the economic future of the state.

We believe that by designing for the long term, Connecticut can transition from underinvestment to national leadership. The ecosystem we envision would enable students not just to attend college, but to graduate with purpose and to contribute meaningfully to the civic and economic life of the state.

We respectfully submit this report as a starting point for action and stand ready to support state leaders in advancing an agenda that meets this pivotal moment with the urgency and foresight it demands.

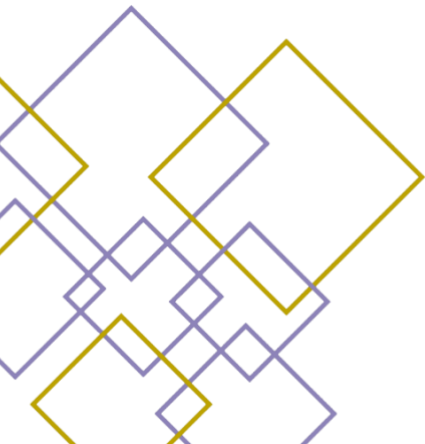
Respectfully submitted,



Kelvin Roldán, Ed.L.D.
Co-Chair



Richard Sugarman
Co-Chair



Background

The Task Force was established by *Special Act No. 25-10, An Act Establishing a Task Force to Support Promise Programs in the State of Connecticut*. The act delineated the scope of work of the Task Force, which was further aligned with the legislative intent of the Connecticut General Assembly through coordination with the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee Co-Chairs Senator Derek Slap and Representative Gregg Haddad.

The Task Force was charged with the following tasks:

1. **Review existing Promise programs** and provide recommendations for their long-term sustainability.
2. **Identify unmet student needs** across Connecticut and explore the development of new Promise initiatives.
3. **Propose strategies to expand access** to comprehensive scholarship services, including through the establishment of a statewide public-private partnership.

Over the course of four months, the Task Force engaged in rigorous discussion and research to fulfill this charge. The process and deliberations were grounded in data, research, and best practices. The members analyzed research provided by the Office of Legislative Research, collaborated closely with the Office of Fiscal Analysis, reviewed postsecondary access and completion data from the Connecticut State Department of Education, and consulted with experts from other states, national organizations, and researchers.

In addition to the formal meetings below, the Task Force established two workgroups, Statewide Program Design and Local Existing and New Programs, to carry out the work between the formal full task force meetings.

DATES	AGENDA
SEPTEMBER 24	Organizational and Visioning Meeting
OCTOBER 8	Data Dive and Program Review
OCTOBER 22	Postsecondary Data and Existing Programs Review
NOVEMBER 5	Workgroups Presentations
NOVEMBER 19	Statewide Program Recommendations
DECEMBER 3	Federal and Local Policy
DECEMBER 10	Findings and Recommendations Approval
JANUARY 7	Final Report Review and Approval

Creating an Ecosystem of Promise Recommendations²

1. Financial Framework – The Scholar Success Grant Program

- **Implement a Tiered, Inclusive Grant Structure Based on Income Bands**

Establish a statewide grant program that uses income bands to determine award levels. This approach ensures equitable access across the income spectrum, supports middle-income families, which are often excluded from traditional aid, and promotes long-term economic growth through increased college enrollment, persistence, and completion.

- **Dramatically Increase State Investment in Student Financial Aid**

The state should invest an additional \$124 million in a *Scholar Success Grant Program* to increase postsecondary enrollment and completion and to position Connecticut competitively among national leaders in student aid.

- **Establish a Permanent Trust Fund to Support Student Financial Aid and Promote Grant Stability (Long-Term)**

To ensure sustainable funding for the Scholar Success Grant, the state should explore establishing a permanent trust fund. Modeled after the Early Childhood Trust Fund, this mechanism could stabilize the grant program against annual budget fluctuations and allow for both public and private contributions. Given the potential scale and long-term commitment, this approach would require thoughtful planning, strategic design, and a phased implementation strategy.

2. Institutional Responsibility and Partnerships

- **Require Accountability Agreements with Participating Institutions**

All participating BA/BS-granting institutions should sign formal partnership agreements outlining commitments to student success, including first-year experience programs, financial literacy supports, and proactive student engagement.

- **Ensure Institutional Transparency in Financial Aid**

Require institutions to provide clear, multi-year financial aid award letters, including true costs, loan expectations, and any one-time or front-loaded awards. Institutions must commit to transparent, student-friendly communication practices and supports.

- **Provide Progress Monitoring and Policy Coordination Support**

To support the creation and long-term success of a statewide Ecosystem of Promise, Connecticut should establish a standing coordinating body composed of policy experts, corporate partners, community representatives, state agencies, higher education leaders, and other key stakeholders. This body would provide ongoing progress

² In addition to the core recommendations, this report includes a set of secondary recommendations focused on enhancing data quality, improving financial forecasting, and strengthening the overall effectiveness of student aid programs. While important, these operational strategies are embedded within the body of the report rather than highlighted here, as they are more detailed in scope and intended to support effective implementation.

monitoring, policy coordination, and cross-sector alignment, ensuring that initiatives remain effective, equitable, and responsive across public and private partners.

3. Local Innovation and Ecosystem Building

- **Invest in and Scale Local Promise Programs**

Provide targeted funding to expand the reach and impact of established local Promise programs (e.g., Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury), particularly for their high yield supports like advising, mentoring, and career development.

- **Seed and Support the Creation of New Local Promise Programs**

The state should launch a seed fund and technical assistance initiative to help underserved and rural communities develop local Promise programs. A centralized team—potentially within the Office of Postsecondary Success—could guide communities on core design elements, funding strategies, and partnerships while allowing local customization. Encouraging regional collaboration will improve efficiency and enable smaller towns to benefit from shared services and scale.

- **Establish an Office of Post-Secondary Success**

Create a dedicated state office to lead and coordinate postsecondary success efforts across Connecticut. College completion requires intentional focus, evidence-based strategies, and strong institutional collaboration. This office would ensure consistent, data-informed implementation by overseeing local Promise program support and expansion, aligning financial aid and student services, and fostering cross-sector partnerships to advance statewide completion and career readiness.

4. Student-Centered Supports

- **Require Early Financial Literacy and Planning Activities**

As part of their commitment to and participation in the Scholar Success Grant Program, colleges and universities should provide early, accessible financial literacy and college cost planning workshops—ideally in the spring or early summer before enrollment. These sessions would clarify the full cost of attendance, financial aid, budgeting, and loan implications. Institutions should also designate a consistent advisor or support contact for each Scholar Success Grant recipient from pre-enrollment through graduation to help students navigate systems and make informed decisions.

- **Promote Consistent Messaging Through a Unified Communications Strategy**

Develop a statewide communications strategy that clearly and accessibly presents the full range of postsecondary opportunities and supports within Connecticut’s higher education ecosystem, including the Scholar Success Grant Program, local Promise programs, institutional supports, and workforce development pathways. The goal is to reduce confusion, foster a strong college- and career-going culture, and reinforce the connection between higher education and Connecticut’s long-term economic growth.

The Connecticut Context: Key Findings

Connecticut stands on strong economic footing, consistently ranking among the top states in per-capita income with low unemployment and high average wages. Yet, to fully capitalize on these strengths, the state must address persistent income inequality and regional disparities that continue to challenge college affordability and workforce development. As demographic shifts reshape Connecticut's population, this moment presents a strategic opportunity to turn existing gaps into pathways for progress. By proactively investing in a more inclusive and future-ready higher education ecosystem, the state can reinforce its economic leadership, expand opportunity, and ensure long-term prosperity for all communities.

Committee members found the following data compelling in making a case:

- **Connecticut is an exporter of college students** - Connecticut ranks **41st in the nation** in the percentage of college-bound students who stay in-state, with only **61%** of first-time, degree-seeking undergraduates enrolling at Connecticut institutions—well below the **national average of 76%**. This means nearly **4 in 10 students leave the state** to attend college elsewhere, making Connecticut one of the top exporters of college-bound talent (NCES, 2023). More than half of these students enroll in neighboring New England or Mid-Atlantic states—**Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire** (NCES, 2024).
- **Changing demographics in high school graduation** - Connecticut's total number of high school graduates is projected to decline sharply through 2036, but the number of Hispanic graduates will rise substantially, making them the fastest-growing group while all others plateau or decline (WICHE, 2024).
- **Growth in minority enrollment** - Minority enrollment at Connecticut's public and non-profit independent colleges has grown steadily over the past decade, nearly doubling between 2015 and 2024. The most significant increases have been among Hispanic and Black students, with a sharp rise in overall minority enrollment beginning in 2022 (OHE, 2024).
- **High percentage of unmet financial need** - Only **40% of eligible Connecticut students** received a state need-based grant in FY23, despite evident financial need across the state. This suggests that existing aid programs are under-resourced or inaccessible, leaving many students without sufficient financial support. A Success Grant program—especially one that is simpler and broader in eligibility—could help close this gap and provide more predictable support to a larger share of students (OHE, 2024).
- **College affordability struggles have no end in sight.** The rising cost of college has placed a heavier burden on families at both ends of the income spectrum—while high-income

families face much higher dollar amounts for college, low-income families are forced to pay a much larger share of their income toward tuition ([Upjohn Institute, 2025](#)). According to US News and World Report, Connecticut ranks #48 out of 50 states in affordability ([US News & World Report, 2025](#)). According to EducationData.org ([2025](#)), **“the total cost to attend a 4-year institution in Connecticut is 37.5% more than the national average.”** In addition, Connecticut also ranks **#7 nationally** in terms of **college costs as a percentage of household income**, with families spending an estimated **59.7%** of their income on college expenses—a clear indicator of the significant affordability challenges facing students and families in the state.

- **Connecticut is significantly underinvesting in financial aid as compared to states across the country.** In 2024, Connecticut allocated approximately \$245 in state grant aid per undergraduate student, compared to the national average of \$1,283. This means Connecticut provides **81% less** in state-funded financial aid per student than the national average—placing it near the **bottom of all U.S. states** in this category (National Association State Student Grant Aid Program, 2024).
- **Scholarship program information and supports are housed in multiple locations and are uncoordinated.** Connecticut offers a variety of high-quality programs and resources to support students pursuing post-secondary education; however, information about these programs is dispersed across multiple agencies and platforms, leading to confusion and reduced accessibility for students and families. Currently, there is no centralized, user-friendly single location where individuals can easily understand and navigate the full range of scholarship opportunities, grants, financial literacy tools, and admissions supports available in the state.
- **Federal loan and postsecondary education policy is increasingly volatile**, marked by frequent shifts in loan eligibility, repayment terms, access programs, and even degree classification standards. These ongoing and unpredictable changes have created uncertainty for students, families, institutions, and policymakers—making it difficult to plan for long-term college affordability and access. By investing in transparent and reliable state-based programs, Connecticut can help shield students from federal fluctuations and ensure that educational opportunity remains within reach for all.



Return on Investment

This investment delivers long-term workforce, economic, and fiscal returns for Connecticut.

- Reverses Connecticut’s role as an exporter of college students, increasing in-state enrollment and completion
- Leverages Promise programs as a proven affordability and retention strategy
- Strengthens the workforce pipeline in high-demand and growth sectors
- Improves talent retention, increasing the likelihood that graduates live and work in Connecticut
- Expands the state’s tax base over time through higher lifetime earnings and employment stability
- Improves system efficiency by reducing student stop-out and dropout
- Advances equity and economic mobility across income, race, and geography

Investing in a comprehensive **Ecosystem of Promise**—anchored by a fully funded Scholar Success Grant Program—represents a strategic, long-term investment in Connecticut’s workforce, economy, and fiscal stability. Connecticut currently exports a disproportionate share of its college-bound students, with nearly four in ten residents leaving the state to pursue postsecondary education elsewhere. This outmigration results in lost tuition revenue, diminished public return on investment, and a weakened long-term talent pipeline. Notably, more than half of Connecticut students who attend college out of state enroll in nearby New England or Mid-Atlantic states (including Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire), indicating that affordability, proximity, and state financial aid policy are central drivers of student mobility. Reversing this trend is essential to Connecticut’s economic future.

Integrating local and statewide Promise programs into the state’s affordability strategy is a critical part of the solution. Evidence from Connecticut’s local Promise programs and national research shows that these models increase college-going, persistence, and completion—particularly for low- and middle-income students—and improve the likelihood that graduates remain in-state for employment. Students who enroll and complete college in Connecticut, especially those receiving state financial aid, are significantly more likely to contribute to the state’s workforce and economy over the long term.

The returns of this investment extend beyond enrollment gains. Higher education is a major economic engine in Connecticut, supporting tens of thousands of jobs and generating substantial economic activity statewide (New England Board of Higher Education & New England Council, 2025). Even modest improvements in in-state enrollment, persistence, and completion can strengthen workforce pipelines, reduce employer recruitment challenges, and expand the tax base over time. Taken together, a strengthened Promise ecosystem positions Connecticut to retain its talent, improve equity, and build a more resilient and competitive economy.

Summary of Funding Recommendations

The Task Force recommends a coordinated state investment of **\$129.4 million annually** to establish and sustain a comprehensive **Ecosystem of Promise** that expands postsecondary access, improves college completion, and strengthens Connecticut’s long-term workforce pipeline. This integrated investment strategy addresses college affordability, student outmigration, and workforce readiness, while building on proven Promise models already delivering results in Connecticut communities.

First, the Task Force recommends **\$4.8 million annually** to support the four existing Local Promise programs in **Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury**. This investment would provide \$1.2 million per program to expand scholarships and high-touch student supports that have demonstrated strong outcomes in college enrollment, persistence, completion, and in-state talent retention. For Bridgeport, which is in the early stages of implementation, this support would enable full adoption of the proven Integrated College Success Model used successfully in other cities.

Second, the Task Force recommends **\$600,000 annually** to establish a statewide advisory and technical support function to guide the expansion of Promise programs into additional Connecticut communities. This capacity would support program design, data and evaluation, alignment with state education and workforce goals, and development of sustainable public-private funding strategies and could be reduced if embedded within a future Office of Postsecondary Success.

Third, the Task Force recommends **\$124 million annually** to establish and sustain the **Scholar Success Grant Program**, a statewide need-based financial aid program focused exclusively on direct support for students. This investment is designed to increase affordability, reduce unmet financial need, retain Connecticut students in-state, and strengthen workforce pipelines.

Together, these investments prioritize direct support for students, leverage proven Promise models, and create a coordinated, sustainable **Ecosystem of Promise**—positioning Connecticut to reverse student outmigration, advance equity, and build a stronger, more competitive economy.



The Promise Model: Integrated College Success

The Promise of a Talent-Focused Future for Connecticut

Promise programs represent a powerful policy tool that signal a concrete investment in a state's future workforce and economic vitality. By reducing financial barriers to college, these programs increase postsecondary enrollment and completion rates—especially among low- and middle-income students. Their predictability and transparency in college costs encourage public and private institutions to develop complementary financial aid strategies that ease the burden on students and families, strengthening access and affordability across the system.

First launched with the Kalamazoo Promise in Michigan in 2005, Promise programs are place-based financial aid initiatives that typically provide full or partial tuition coverage for eligible students attending in-state colleges or universities. Since then, the model has expanded to more than 200 communities nationwide and has been associated with improved college outcomes and broader community benefits.

In Connecticut, New Haven, Hartford, Waterbury, and Bridgeport have adapted this model to meet local needs. While program structures vary, each one pairs financial support with wraparound services that improve college-going rates and long-term success, particularly for historically underserved students. These Integrated College Success Models have produced strong outcomes, including college graduation rates between 70–76 percent and meaningful career placements with local employers.

While the core structure of each program is similar, local customization plays a vital role. All programs require a GPA of 3.0, though New Haven offers a "Passport" scholarship at 2.5 GPA. Attendance requirements range from 90–93%, and residency criteria differ: for instance, Hartford Promise allows students to attend any accredited college nationwide, Waterbury Promise limits eligibility to Connecticut institutions, and New Haven, in addition to Connecticut institutions, Promise now includes scholarships for students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). New Haven also uses a tiered residency model for its scholarship amounts, while Hartford and Waterbury require four years of continuous residency and enrollment in the public school system. These differences underscore the importance of tailoring Promise programs to meet community needs while maintaining a shared commitment to access, equity, and completion.

The program outcomes demonstrate the potential for Promise models to scale and serve as a foundation for future statewide expansion. Their maturity, flexibility, and strong outcomes have not only advanced postsecondary success in urban centers but also created proof points for equitable, place-based investment. As Connecticut looks to build a resilient, inclusive economy, these programs show that targeted financial support and student-centered services can work together to strengthen educational pathways, increase in-state talent retention, and drive economic mobility.

Hartford Promise

Launched in 2015 with its first class in 2016, Hartford Promise has served over 1,200 students, with 500 currently in college and 460 graduates, achieving a graduation rate of 70–76%. The program has delivered 150+ internship placements and 75 career placements, collaborating with 40+ local partners. Notably, 80% of graduates remain in Connecticut, reinforcing the program’s role in supporting the local workforce. Over \$15 million in scholarships has been awarded to date.

New Haven Promise

Launched in 2011, New Haven Promise has supported over 3,200 scholars, with 780 students currently enrolled and 1,400 college graduates. The program maintains a strong graduation rate of 68–70% and has facilitated 1,550 internships through a network of 250+ business partners. With more than \$40 million in scholarships awarded, New Haven Promise demonstrates a significant return on investment for students, families, and the broader community.

Waterbury Promise

Launched in 2021 with its first cohort in 2022, Waterbury Promise has supported more than 875 students, with 853 currently enrolled in college. The program is on track to achieve graduation rates above 70%, with scholars enrolling in accredited two or four-year colleges and universities in Connecticut. Scholars engage in career-readiness activities to prepare students for careers after graduation in their field of choice. In May 2026, Waterbury Promise will celebrate a major milestone as scholars graduate from four-year institutions, earn their degrees, and enter Connecticut’s workforce. Since its inception, the program has collaborated with more than 50+ local partners and disbursed over \$1.7 million in scholarships.

Category	Metric
Total Scholars Served	5,275 since inception
Annual Class Size	~550 scholars/year
Currently Enrolled in College	~1,850
College Graduates / Alumni	~1,860 (New Haven & Hartford) ³
Internships Completed	1,700
Career Placements	275+
Business & Nonprofit Partners	~250
Scholarship Dollars Awarded	Over \$55 million

³ Waterbury and Bridgeport are the newest Promise programs in Connecticut. Waterbury is on its fifth year of operations and Bridgeport was launched in the Fall of 2025. However, both programs have adopted proven elements from more established models and are positioned to deliver strong outcomes as their first cohorts progress through college.

Best Practices in Designing State Grant Programs

To ensure that sound program design principles were used to guide the work of the task force, members looked to the research to understand what has worked and what has not worked over the years. Extensive national research underscores that program design is a critical determinant of participation, equity, and student outcomes in statewide programs (Rosinger, Meyer, & Wang, 2021). Programs that reduce administrative burden and simplify access—particularly through streamlined eligibility requirements and universal messaging—tend to reach more students, especially those from historically underserved backgrounds. Program design should be effective and inclusive:

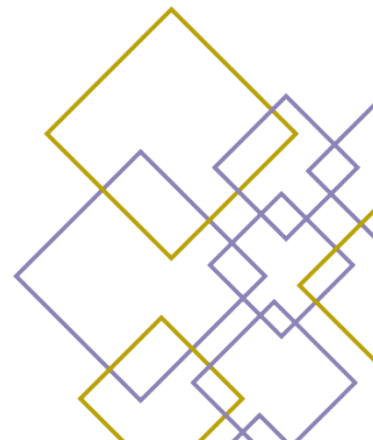
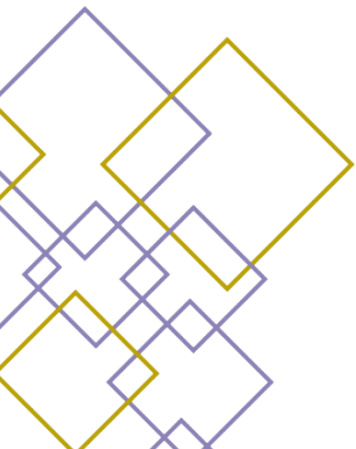
1. **Simplicity and Universal Messaging Increases Uptake** - Programs that reduce complexity in both eligibility and application processes see significantly higher enrollment. Simplicity reduces learning costs, which is especially important for first-generation and low-income students.
2. **Broad Eligibility Supports Equity** - Criteria such as GPA minimums, income caps, and residency requirements can influence who participates in a Promise program—potentially including or excluding students who most need support. The design of these eligibility requirements may also affect compliance complexity and administrative cost, with implications for both access and sustainability.
3. **Student Supports Are Critical for Completion** - Tuition coverage alone does not ensure persistence. Ongoing supports such as academic advising, mentorship, career services, and FAFSA renewal help keep students enrolled and progressing.
4. **Leverage Existing Aid (FAFSA, Pell) for Efficiency** - Designing the grant award structure around federal aid systems improves efficiency and ensures state funding is additive.
5. **Labor Market Connections Increase In-State Retention** - Programs that integrate work-based learning, internship pipelines, and incentives for high-need fields help align educational outcomes with economic needs and keep talent in-state.
6. **Administrative Burden Shapes Who Benefits** - Programs that minimize paperwork, streamline compliance, and offer proactive supports to increase equitable access and reduce dropout risk. Overly burdensome programs unintentionally exclude underserved students.

Typology of Programs Design

Behavioral Support ↓ / **Low Administrative Burden** **High Administrative Burden**
Admin Burden →

<p>Low Behavioral Support</p>	<p>Minimal Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Minimal paperwork & barriers ✗ No student support or outreach → Rare and low impact 	<p>Burdensome & Isolating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Extensive forms and docs ✗ No guidance or engagement → Can deter participation
<p>High Behavioral Support</p>	<p>Supportive & Accessible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Low barriers to entry ✓ Robust mentoring & advising → Examples: <i>Tennessee Promise, Mississippi</i> 	<p>Intensive but Helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ High compliance ✓ Strong coaching and outreach → Encourages success, but initial participation may drop

Note: Adapted from Rosinger et al. (2021)



Existing and Expanded Promise Programs Recommendations

Connecticut's local Promise programs are among the state's most powerful tools for expanding educational opportunity, closing equity gaps, and strengthening the future workforce. Despite operating with limited private funding, these programs have demonstrated consistent, measurable success in critical outcomes—including improved high school GPA and attendance, increased college enrollment and persistence, higher graduation rates, and meaningful post-graduate employment. Their success is rooted in a deep understanding of community needs and in strong partnerships with businesses, nonprofits, philanthropic foundations, and public institutions. As such, the Task Force recommends that the State of Connecticut:

- 1. Support local Promise programs at a rate of approximately \$3,000 per student.**

Program design is responsive to the unique context of each city. Hartford and New Haven—the state's most mature programs—have operated for over a decade, evolving through years of implementation, outcome analysis, and community feedback. Bridgeport (entering its first year) and Waterbury (entering its fifth year), while newer, have adopted similar models of hands-on support, informed by best practices. Across all sites, core services such as FAFSA workshops, assistance with college applications and essays, academic mentoring and tutoring, financial literacy, transition-to-college workshops, resume support, interviewing practice, well-being and self-care coaching, and real-time feedback loops with high schools and colleges play a critical role in helping students navigate the complex journey to and through college. This combination of financial support and wraparound services constitutes the Integrated College Success Model that the Task Force recommends the state support and help sustain.

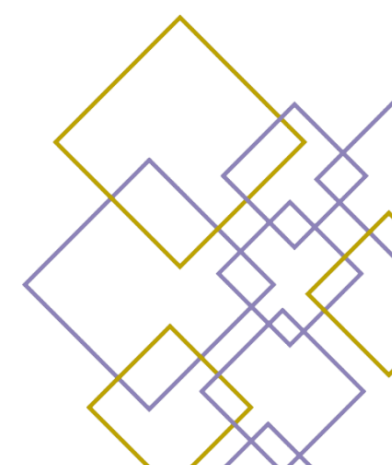
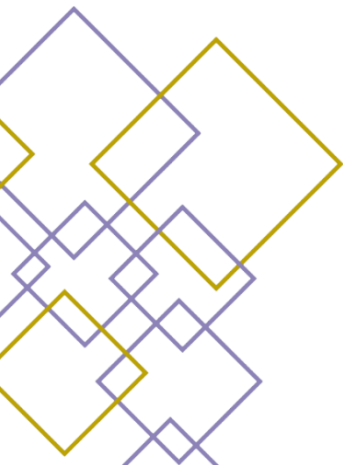
To sustain and scale this impact, increased state investment is essential. The working group estimates that the cost of delivering scholarships and comprehensive services from high school through college and early career is approximately \$6,000 to \$7,000 per student. For the three active programs, that equates to a total investment of \$4 million to \$5 million annually—an amount that would significantly expand scholar access, deepen program reach, and accelerate the long-term return for the state in talent development, economic competitiveness, and social equity. The programs would continue to raise the balance of the funds from individual, corporate, and foundation philanthropic partners.

- 2. Encourage and support the creation of new Promise programs in Connecticut.** Building on the demonstrated success of local Promise programs in Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury—and supported by a growing national body of research—the Task Force recommends expanding Promise programs across Connecticut. These locally rooted initiatives have consistently produced measurable gains in student achievement, postsecondary access, persistence, and workforce alignment. Expanding Promise programs will require intentional planning, access to proven models, and targeted support to ensure quality, consistency, and impact.

To support the expansion of Promise programs, the Task Force believes that there should be a single location where communities can access information and receive technical assistance in assessing conditions to establish new Promise programs. The function, which could be housed in the proposed Office for Postsecondary Success, would serve as a strategic resource and facilitator, helping towns and regional coalitions explore and execute the roadmap for launching successful Promise programs. Services could include initial funding strategies, key stakeholder engagement (e.g., school districts, local government, nonprofits, businesses), program design, customization based on local context, developing evaluation metrics, and sustainability planning.

Alliance Districts could serve as an initial beta cohort, testing scalable model communities with the most urgent need and highest potential for impact. In areas where single-town programs may not be viable, regional collaboration through shared services models could maximize efficiency and reduce costs—creating collective Promise programs that support multiple communities. Furthermore, alumni of existing Promise programs should be strategically engaged in promotion, planning, mentorship, and operations to amplify impact and reinforce community ties.

Connecticut could aim to seed 8 new Promise programs within five years, which would represent significant statewide growth while maintaining quality and alignment to proven standards. This strategy not only supports equity and economic mobility at the local level but also builds a stronger, more interconnected ecosystem of college and career success across the entire state.



Scholar Success Grant Program Design Recommendations

The State of Connecticut should establish a statewide grant program that positions Connecticut to be a national leader in the higher education sector and ultimately brings Connecticut to par with other states across the country. Using best-practice frameworks in program design, the Task Force recommends that a statewide grant program incorporate the following goals and components. In reviewing dozens of national programs, the Task Force identified the [Washington College Grant](#) as one of the closest models aligned with its vision, particularly for its broad income eligibility, strong student supports, and long-term sustainability, which informed the recommendations for Connecticut.

CT Scholar Success Grant Program Goals

- Expand access to postsecondary education for all CT residents
- Increase enrollment and completion at CT four-year institutions
- Retain talent and reduce graduate outmigration
- Strengthen the workforce pipelines
- Simplify financial aid and reduce student debt burden
- Promote equity, especially for historically underserved populations

Design Principles

- Affordability
- Simplicity
- Equity
- Sustainability
- Accountability

Proposed Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility Criteria:

- CT Resident (at least four years)
- CT High School Graduate: 4 years of in-state schooling required
- Acceptance letter from a public or non-profit BA/BS-granting institution located in CT
- FAFSA Completion (needed to maximize Pell Grant and other financial aid)
- Must use award within one year of HS graduation
- Must have 90% or higher cumulative attendance record in high school
- Participate in a first-year program that addresses financial consideration and other potential campus support resources

Continuing Eligibility:

- Maintain full-time enrollment and satisfactory academic progress (SAP) (12+ credits/semester)
- Maintain good academic standing as defined by the academic institution
- Four-year completion (not to exceed six years)

Scholar Success Grant Financial Analysis and Recommendations

In partnership with the Office of Fiscal Analysis (OFA), the Task Force examined multiple approaches to assessing Connecticut’s higher education financial aid landscape. This analysis was grounded in a commitment to data integrity, transparency, and comparability across institutions and sectors. The Task Force’s recommendations were therefore informed by both quantitative analysis and synthesis of national benchmarks, with particular attention to how Connecticut’s investments compare to those of peer states.

To ensure consistency and comparability across public and private institutions, the Task Force relied primarily on 1) publicly available data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). IPEDS provides standardized, institution-level data on enrollment, tuition and fees, institutional revenues and expenditures, and student financial aid, allowing for cross-sector and cross-state comparisons. These data were used to assess patterns in tuition pricing, net price, student aid distribution, and institutional financial capacity.

In order to inform funding benchmarks and contextualize Connecticut’s current investment levels, the Task Force also relied on national data on state-sponsored student financial aid. Specifically, the Task Force also examined 2) information published by the National Association of State Student Grant Aid Programs (NASSGAP), with emphasis on the 55th Annual Survey Report on State-Sponsored Student Financial Aid (2024). This report provides the most comprehensive and current national overview of state investments in grant aid, including total state expenditures, aid by sector, aid by program type (need-based versus merit-based), and per-capita and per-student comparisons across states.

By triangulating IPEDS institutional data with NASSGAP’s state-level financial aid data, the Task Force was able to evaluate Connecticut’s higher education aid system relative to national norms and other states. This combined approach enabled the Task Force to identify structural gaps, assess the adequacy and targeting of existing aid programs, and develop financially grounded recommendations aligned with both state fiscal capacity and national best practices.

The accompanying chart, *Estimated 2022–23 First-Year, Full-Time, In-State Undergraduate Enrollment by Income at Connecticut Public and Private Nonprofit Institutions*, presents a one-year snapshot of first-year college enrollment and average net price of attendance across Connecticut’s public and private nonprofit institutions for the 2022–23 academic year. Enrollment is shown across five family income bands—from less than \$30,000 to more than \$110,000—alongside the corresponding average net price students pay after grants and scholarships.

Estimated 2022-23 First-Year, Full-Time, In-State Undergraduate Enrollment by Income at Connecticut Public and Private, Not-for-Profit Institutions

Institution	First-Time, First-Year Enrollment by Income Band (#) ⁴					Net Price by Income (\$) ⁵				
	\$0-\$30k	\$30k-\$48k	\$48k-\$75k	\$75k-\$110k	\$110k+	\$0-\$30k	\$30k-\$48k	\$48k-\$75k	\$75k-\$110k	\$110k+
Albertus Magnus College	28	21	12	13	28	32,923	32,830	30,898	33,567	32,651
Connecticut College	4	3	4	3	15	13,666	20,097	26,760	30,787	44,604
Fairfield University	7	4	5	9	89	32,161	28,062	35,003	39,355	49,644
Goodwin University	27	6	5	2	2	27,515	29,573	30,788	35,472	27,319
Mitchell College	13	8	4	5	16	27,427	29,762	26,085	36,769	33,628
Quinnipiac University	34	21	35	38	205	31,257	34,294	34,111	39,079	41,944
Sacred Heart University	26	17	25	33	175	37,374	38,526	43,128	47,177	47,318
Trinity College	4	4	3	3	18	19,032	16,202	18,756	26,084	46,149
University of Bridgeport	35	17	21	16	25	21,943	23,572	25,830	27,339	27,063
University of Hartford	74	53	58	63	152	25,641	24,564	26,720	30,873	33,759
University of New Haven	80	54	59	71	238	28,133	29,345	32,749	35,868	36,975
University of Saint Joseph	19	10	19	17	62	21,080	25,118	27,448	25,346	30,212
Wesleyan University	2	2	3	1	8	4,432	5,898	10,310	10,905	50,788
Yale University	3	6	7	2	6	1,729	2,521	3,005	10,070	49,024
Central Connecticut State University	173	119	122	130	237	11,562	12,817	15,178	18,572	21,300
Eastern Connecticut State University	65	49	56	69	168	15,167	15,141	18,136	22,882	23,882
Southern Connecticut State University	243	126	119	111	147	18,568	18,126	18,938	23,340	26,783
Western Connecticut State University	149	36	41	40	83	17,055	15,942	16,697	19,825	22,946
UConn - Storrs	179	141	126	101	320	13,936	14,656	18,705	26,945	31,886
UConn - Avery Point	25	24	18	10	32	4,820	6,993	8,988	13,760	20,876
UConn-Hartford	94	101	65	47	97	7,387	8,299	11,663	17,908	23,256
UConn-Stamford	128	78	77	31	53	9,196	10,418	14,767	21,374	25,757
UConn-Waterbury	45	26	43	28	22	4,695	3,649	8,414	13,850	18,325

⁴ Estimates calculated by the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges using data from the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. These figures represent the number of in-state, full-time students enrolled in the first-year class in 2022-23 at the listed institutions. Students who did not file for financial aid are excluded.

⁵ Data reported by the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. "Net price" is a calculation of the total cost of attending an institution, including room and board, minus average scholarships and grants received at each income bracket, for students who applied for financial aid.

Data Improvement Recommendations

This snapshot serves as a strong foundation, and expanding the analysis over multiple years and income levels would allow Connecticut to more fully capture affordability dynamics and inform long-term policy decisions. To strengthen the state's ability to make informed, equitable, and forward-looking financial aid decisions, the Task Force recommends the following improvements to future data collection and analysis:

1. **Expand income bands beyond \$110,000.** Many Connecticut families earning above this threshold still experience affordability challenges due to the state's high cost of living and tuition. Additional income bands would provide a more accurate picture of middle- and upper-middle-income need and inform more precise policy design.
2. **Incorporate multi-year trend analysis.** Relying on a single year of data may obscure structural patterns or short-term anomalies. Analyzing three to five years of enrollment and net price data would improve forecasting and highlight persistent access and affordability gaps.
3. **Link financial aid data to student outcomes.** Connecting aid levels and net price to outcomes such as persistence, graduation, transfer, and loan borrowing would allow the state to better assess return on investment and identify which aid strategies are most effective.
4. **Disaggregate data by key student characteristics.** Income alone does not fully capture equity challenges. Where possible, data should be analyzed by race, ethnicity, first-generation status, and other relevant demographics to better understand who is most impacted by affordability barriers.

Scholar Success Grant Funding Recommendation

Connecticut should commit to funding the Scholar Success Grant (CSG) Program at least to the national average level of state-sponsored need-based grant aid to remain competitive with peer states, ensure adequate financial support for students with financial need, and directly address the findings identified in this report.

Currently, through the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program, Connecticut invests approximately **\$41 million** annually in direct state grant aid. National benchmarking data from the National Association of State Student Grant Aid Programs (NASSGAP) indicate that this level of investment places Connecticut near the bottom among states in both per-student and per-capita need-based grant funding. To reach the national average level of state need-based aid—and to move Connecticut out of the lowest tier of states—the Task Force estimates that an additional annual investment of approximately **\$124 million** would be required, **phased in across four graduating classes**, or roughly **\$30 million per class per year**.

There are multiple ways in which this additional \$124 million could be allocated to advance the policy goals associated with an expanded Scholar Success Grant Program. The table below presents several illustrative allocation scenarios, distributed across five family income bands, reflecting different policy choices regarding the targeting and scale of grant awards. To support clarity and accessibility, the scenarios also include examples demonstrating how increased grant aid would translate into meaningful financial support for students and families at varying income levels.

Specifically, the table illustrates three different approaches for applying the recommended funding level to cover portions of the net price at the University of Connecticut, the four Connecticut State Universities, and eligible private institutions. The discussion that follows provides concrete examples of how students from families with annual incomes of \$100,000 and \$50,000, respectively, attending UConn or one of the Connecticut State Universities, would be impacted under each illustration. These examples are intended to clarify the practical implications of each funding approach and to highlight how different allocation strategies affect affordability across income levels and institutional sector

**How Recommended Funding Could
be Used to Cover Portions of Net Price, by Income**

Institution	\$0 to \$30,000	\$30,000 to \$48,000	\$48,000 to \$75,000	\$75,000 to \$110,000	\$110,000+
	<i>Illustration 1: % of Net Price Covered</i>				
UConn	27%	27%	27%	27%	27%
CT State Universities	27%	27%	27%	27%	27%
Private Institutions	14%	14%	14%	14%	14%
	<i>Illustration 2: % of Net Price Covered</i>				
UConn	36%	36%	29%	29%	21%
CT State Universities	36%	36%	29%	29%	21%
Private Institutions	18%	18%	14%	14%	11%
	<i>Illustration 3: % of Net Price Covered</i>				
UConn	40%	36%	32%	28%	24%
CT State Universities	40%	36%	32%	28%	24%
Private Institutions	20%	16%	12%	8%	8%

Family Income of \$100,000

At UConn-Storrs, the estimated average net price at a family income of \$100,000 is \$26,945 (based on 2022-23 data). At the other state universities, the estimated average net price varies by school. For illustrative purposes, at Central Connecticut State University it is \$18,572.

- UConn: Under Illustration 1, the state would provide a grant of \$7,275, covering 27% of the net price. Under Illustration 2, the grant would increase to approximately \$7,814 (29% of net price). Under Illustration 3, the grant would be approximately \$7,545 (28% of net price).
- Central: Under Illustration 1, the state would provide a grant of \$5,014, covering 27% of the net price. Under Illustration 2, the grant would increase to approximately \$5,386 (29% of net price). Under Illustration 3, the grant would be approximately \$5,200 (28% of net price).

Family Income of \$50,000

At UConn-Storrs, the estimated average net price at a family income of \$50,000 is \$18,705. At the other state universities, the estimated average net price varies by school. For illustrative purposes, at Central it is \$15,178.

- UConn: Under Illustrations 1 and 2, the state would provide a grant of \$5,050, covering the same share of the net price as provided to a student from a family with an income of \$100,000 under those scenarios. Under Illustration 3, the grant would increase to \$5,986, covering 32% of the net price.
- Central: Under Illustrations 1 and 2, the state would provide a grant of \$4,098, again covering the same share of the net price as provided to a student from a family with an income of \$100,000. Under Illustration 3, the grant would increase to \$4,857, covering 32% of the net price.

It is important to note that these illustrations are based on 2022-23 enrollment and net price data. At a constant funding level, the share of the net price covered by the grant could vary significantly as net price and enrollment fluctuate. It is possible that the recommended investment would increase enrollment of in-state students and the number of students who file for financial aid (particularly in the higher income brackets), or cause changes in the net price. These effects would result in lower shares of the net price being covered than in the illustrations above, if funding is capped at \$124 million.

Conclusion

Connecticut stands at a pivotal moment as demographic shifts, rising college costs, and persistent student outmigration threaten the state’s long-term economic competitiveness. With nearly four in ten college-bound students leaving the state—and a majority enrolling in nearby New England and Mid-Atlantic states—Connecticut is losing talent largely to peer states where affordability and predictability are stronger (NCES, 2023; NCES, 2024). This pattern underscores that student mobility is not inevitable, but responsive to state policy choices.

The recommendations outlined in this report are intended as a starting point for sustained dialogue and action, offering an evidence-based framework to guide future investment and coordination. By investing in a coordinated **Ecosystem of Promise**—combining statewide need-based aid, proven local Promise programs, and system-level alignment—Connecticut can increase in-state enrollment and completion, retain more graduates, and strengthen workforce pipelines aligned to the state’s economic future.

Importantly, this report does not propose a single, static solution, but rather a shared framework that can evolve over time. Continued analysis, improved data, and ongoing stakeholder engagement will be essential to refining program design, aligning investments, and responding to changing demographic and economic conditions. The Task Force envisions this work as an invitation to policymakers, institutions, communities, and philanthropic partners to build collectively on what already works and to adapt strategies as evidence and experience grow.

While no single report can resolve these challenges alone, the Task Force believes this work provides a strong foundation for collaboration and informed decision-making. With deliberate next steps and sustained commitment, Connecticut can move from fragmented efforts toward a long-term strategy that advances equity, opportunity, and economic vitality for Connecticut students and families.

References

- Business-Higher Education Forum & New England Board of Higher Education. (2024). *The Connecticut Tech Talent Accelerator: Partnerships closing the tech skills gap*. <https://www.bhef.com/sites/default/files/2024%20BHEF%20Connecticut%20TTA-FINAL-online.pdf>
- EducationData.org. (2025). *College affordability by state*. <https://educationdata.org>
- Free, R., & Perkins, B. (2021, August 9). *Opinion: We need to keep our college graduates in CT*. *Connecticut Post*. <https://www.ctpost.com/opinion/article/Opinion-We-need-to-keep-our-college-graduates-in-16374412.php>
- Miller-Adams, M., & Iriti, J. (Eds.). (2025). *The free college handbook: A practitioner's guide to promise research* (Revised and expanded ed.). Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
- National Association of State Student Grant Aid Programs. (2024). *55th annual survey report on state-sponsored student financial aid*. <https://www.nassgap.org>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), fall enrollment survey, fall 2022*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), fall enrollment survey, fall 2024*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds>
- New England Board of Higher Education & New England Council. (2025). *2025 Connecticut economic impact of higher education*. <https://www.nebhe.org/info/pdf/policy/nec/2025-Connecticut-Economic-Impact-of-Higher-Education.pdf>
- Office of Higher Education. (2025). *2024 Connecticut Higher Education System data and trends report*. Connecticut Office of Higher Education. <https://portal.ct.gov/ohe/-/media/ohe-beta/reports-and-publications/systemtrends2025.pdf?rev=12fea591d02b4f8f8cb1396b9116974d>
- Reinhart, C. (2025). *Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program (2025-R-0160)*. Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research.
- Rosinger, K. O., Meyer, K., & Wang, J. (2021). Leveraging insights from behavioral science to reduce administrative burden in free college program design: A typology. *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 4(2), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.30636/jbpa.42.197>

Scott, I. (2021). *A new PK–12 education ecosystem framework for a new normal*. Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative. <https://www.sir.advancedleadership.harvard.edu/articles/a-new-pk-12-education-ecosystem-framework-for-a-new-normal>

Tata, S. (2024). *Tuition-free and debt-free higher education programs across states* (2024-R-0175). Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research.

Tata, S. (2025). *An overview of city- and state-sponsored Promise programs* (2025-R-0161). Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research.

Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. (2025). *College affordability and family income burden*. <https://www.upjohn.org>

U.S. News & World Report. (2025). *Best states for higher education affordability*. <https://www.usnews.com>

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (2024). *Knocking at the college door: Projections of high school graduates*. <https://www.wiche.edu>