

## Your Question:

A state education leader asked for a review of research on college promise programs.

## Our Response:

Over the last two decades, “free college” policies — commonly referred to as college promise programs — have become a popular way to address affordability issues for individual students and encourage postsecondary enrollment. In general, college promise programs offer scholarships to recent high school graduates to cover the cost of all tuition and fees a student would incur by attending a postsecondary institution. College promise programs can be provided by states as well as local sources, such as local governments, postsecondary institutions, and private/philanthropic entities. [College Promise](#) currently estimates that there are over 200 college promise programs in 41 states.

Although many programs began on a local level, as of the 2022 legislative session, Education Commission of the States can identify at least 20 states that have enacted some form of state-based college promise program: **Arkansas, California, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee** and **Washington**. Additionally, states have proposed more than 300 pieces of legislation related to college promise programs since 2020, demonstrating how this issue has been [top of mind](#) for many state policymakers. For more information on enacted state legislation, consult our [state education policy tracking database](#).

Our response first provides an analysis of how college promise policies can differ across states according to program design. Next, we offer a review of recent research on the impact college promise programs have made nationally and in certain states. Throughout and at the end of our response, we provide resources to further explore the intricacies of college promise programs.

### College Promise Program Design

While college promise programs have grown in popularity at both the state and local level, the scope and effectiveness of the program largely depends on how it is designed. State policymakers are often required to make [tradeoffs](#) in policy design that impact affordability, access and student outcomes. Key [decision points](#) for policymakers include:

- Award structure.
- Student eligibility criteria.
- Participating institutions.
- Student supports.

The following sections provide an overview of these policy components.

### Award Structure

College promise scholarships can be structured as first-, last-, or middle-dollar awards. A first-dollar scholarship program awards funding to students prior to accounting for other forms of federal and state aid, allowing students to use other forms of aid to cover non-tuition expenses. These programs tend to be more expensive since other forms of aid would help to bring the total cost per-student down. First-dollar scholarship programs are also viewed as more beneficial to low-income students. These programs are less common at the state level. The **California** College

Promise Grant [program](#) provides an example of a first-dollar program. The [program](#) limits [eligibility](#) to students whose families meet certain income qualifications and tuition waivers awarded through the grant program must be used at a state community college.

Last-dollar college promise programs are the most common award structure of statewide programs. These programs factor in federal and state financial aid prior to determining the award amount. These programs fund remaining tuition costs for students, thus bringing the total price tag for a program down. **Tennessee** Promise is a last-dollar [scholarship program](#) that [covers](#) tuition and fees and provides [mentoring services](#) for recent high school graduates enrolled in an associate degree or certificate program. Tennessee also established the [Reconnect program](#), a last-dollar scholarship program for adult students to earn an associate degree or certificate.

Finally, middle-dollar programs (sometimes known as last-dollar plus programs) represent a more recent iteration of statewide promise programs. They function as last-dollar scholarships while also providing a pre-determined amount of financial aid to cover costs other than tuition and mandatory fees. **Arkansas'** Future Grant [program](#) is considered a middle-dollar program since it [covers](#) tuition, fees, and other costs incurred by a participating student after other forms of state and federal aid are accounted for. **Oregon's** promise program is also [classified](#) as a middle-dollar program, with students [receiving](#) the [minimum grant award](#) to cover other educational costs if state and federal aid covers tuition in full.

### Student Eligibility Criteria

Statewide promise programs include a range of eligibility requirements that impact entry and continued access to program benefits. [Research for Action](#) and [EdTrust](#) outlined key eligibility requirements and identified their impact on student access and retention. Some of these requirements include:

- Age limit or timeframe to enroll.
- High school GPA minimum.
- Postsecondary GPA minimum.
- SAT/ACT score threshold.
- Citizenship or residency status.
- Enrollment level (full- or part-time).
- Field of study.
- Post-graduate residency requirements.

Some of these eligibility requirements could potentially limit access for [adult learners](#), students in need of additional [academic support](#), [undocumented students](#), and [post-traditional students](#). When designing promise programs, state policymakers may consider other factors, such as local labor and housing market conditions, as well as access to student and family supports that may support access, persistence, and attainment.

### Participating Institutions

Most statewide promise programs are limited to two-year institutions awarding associate degrees and other certificates. While these programs have led to promising outcomes in terms of enrollment and degree completion, limiting programs to two-year institutions may cause some students, especially [students from low-income backgrounds](#) and [students of color](#), to choose an associate degree pathway when they are qualified to enroll in a four-year institution. Since these students are already [underrepresented](#) in bachelor's degree programs, promise programs could unintentionally exacerbate these inequities and negatively impact [long-term earnings](#). In order to address these consequences, policymakers may consider expanding programs to include four-year institutions or laying out clear policies for the [transfer of credits](#).

## Student Supports

State policymakers have built in academic and financial supports for students enrolled in promise programs in an effort to increase retention and attainment. The Century Foundation conducted a [review](#) of existing statewide college promise programs in 2018 to identify common supports for students. Financially, some states cover costs beyond tuition and mandatory fees, including books, supplies and transportation. For example, **Hawaii** [operates](#) a debt-free program that [covers](#) costs for books, supplies and transportation for students with unmet needs. Academic supports typically consist of mentoring and community service requirements, which both [Arkansas](#) and [Tennessee](#) include in their programs. **Oregon** previously [required](#) students to complete a first-year experience designed by their institution.

## College Promise Program Research

The body of evidence on college promise programs has grown in recent years, corresponding with the increased prevalence of college promise programs across the country. In this section, we offer a high-level overview of some research of college promise programs at the national level as well as state and local case studies. For more research on college promise programs, consult College Promise’s useful [reference guide](#) (2020), which was created to centralize research about the design, implementation and improvement of college promise programs.

## National Research

Although research comparing various programs at a national level remains limited compared to state and local case studies, a few articles have come out over the years that provide some considerations. We would like to note that many of the studies are skewed since early programs like the Kalamazoo Promise are overrepresented in the literature, which may limit the generalizability of findings.

Overall, national research provides encouraging evidence for college promise programs to boost student enrollment, matriculation and completion of postsecondary education pathways. One [meta-analysis](#) available suggests college promise programs can help improve K-12 student outcomes and increase enrollment in postsecondary institutions. Other [studies](#) and [policy briefs](#) echo the finding that college promise programs [can increase](#) postsecondary student enrollment — something that state policymakers may be particularly interested in now given widespread [enrollment declines](#). Some research indicates that, if a program only allows students to enroll at certain institutions, it may disproportionately [divert students away](#) from excluded institutions or sectors. Research demonstrates that college promise programs help [improve student retention](#), with evidence that they help increase completion rates in turn. However, more research is required to figure out how program design influences these outcomes. [One study](#) points to eligibility requirements and the amount of financial assistance offered, with more assistance improving results, as the most impactful aspects of programmatic design. Unrelated to student or institution outcomes, a few [studies](#) also show housing prices increased in communities where promise programs are offered.

## State Research

While it is difficult to generalize findings across college promise programs, state case studies and program reports offer insights into the impact program design has on student enrollment, persistence and attainment.

### *Delaware*

Research for Action conducted a [review](#) of the design and outcomes of the Delaware Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) scholarship program, which is a last-dollar award for students pursuing an associate degree. The authors identified the impact of program design on access and success, in addition to identifying successes and challenges for the program. Among the successes, the authors found that SEED students were more likely than non-

SEED students to earn credentials and that services originally provided through the SEED program were expanded for all students. The authors did note that the requirement that students maintain full-time enrollment serves as a barrier for students who must balance other responsibilities, such as work and childcare.

### *Oregon*

The Institute for Education Sciences [reviewed](#) the impact of the Oregon Promise program in its first two years to determine the demographic characteristics of participating students, in addition to persistence and completion rates. The authors highlighted the following key findings:

- Oregon Promise applicants generally reflected the demographic composition of all Oregon public high school seniors in 2015-16 and 2016-17, although applicants were more likely to be female and less likely to have received special education services.
- The majority of recipients in the first and second years of the program were from a low-income household at some point during their K–12 enrollment.
- Just over half of recipients in the first year of the program renewed their Oregon Promise award and received it in their second year at a community college.

The authors also noted that the positive impact of the program on students just above the high school GPA requirement indicates that lowering the GPA requirement could increase the reach of the program.

A [review](#) of the fifth year of the program conducted by the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission found that:

- The program led to an initial increase in college enrollments that was not sustained beyond the first two years.
- The program only slightly narrowed college-going rate gaps across racial and ethnic groups.
- Promise recipients are generally representative of their graduating class.
- A majority of program recipients earn a credential or are still enrolled in their second, third and fourth years.

The report also addressed questions about the allocation of resources and potential opportunities to expand the program.

### *Tennessee*

Research for Action conducted a [review](#) of the Tennessee Promise program, which is a last-dollar program covering the cost of tuition and fees at in-state community and applied technology colleges. The authors highlighted that messaging around the promise program encouraged students to pursue postsecondary education or alter their college pathway, but students also remained concerned about costs not covered by the program. Despite these costs, the authors found that Tennessee Promise expanded access to postsecondary education.

The [annual report](#) on the program published by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation confirmed these findings. The report highlighted:

- A nearly 4% increase in participation among Hispanic students since the first cohort.
- Nearly 9,000 promise program students have transferred to state universities.
- Rising credential attainment rates across program cohorts. Forty-six percent of Cohort 1, 42% of Cohort 2, and 35% of Cohort 3 had earned an award as of summer 2020.

- Success rates (students that have graduated or are still enrolled) of around 50% for each cohort.

## Local Research

### *The Degree Project – Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

In partnership with Ascendium and Milwaukee Public Schools, researchers created The Degree Project in 2009. This college promise program offered first-time 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in half of Milwaukee Public Schools \$12,000 for college as a last-dollar financial assistance. The program was merit-based, meaning students had to graduate high school with a 2.5 GPA, have a class attendance rate of 90% and complete a FAFSA. This financial assistance could be used to attend any public postsecondary institution in Wisconsin.

An [initial analysis](#) and [follow-up study](#) of the program found the following results:

- The promise program led to a noticeable uptick in graduation from two-year institutions.
- Efforts to frame the promise program as “free two-year college” motivated students to enroll in two-year institutions more than four-year institutions.
- Although researchers found no improvement in high school academic achievement, the early commitment of financial assistance did increase participating students’ expectations and advancement toward college preparedness.
- Merit requirements were too onerous for students. About 21% of eligible students ended up meeting the merit requirements, undercutting the program’s effectiveness.

Overall, these findings indicate that early commitment and free college can help students get to college, but merit requirements may inadvertently undermine the goal of postsecondary enrollment and credential attainment.

### *The Kalamazoo Promise – Kalamazoo, Michigan*

Perhaps one of the most studied and cited examples, the Kalamazoo Promise offers all graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools a first-dollar scholarship that pays for up to 100% tuition and fees for any public postsecondary institution in Michigan. Funding is provided by anonymous, private donations to the school district. Here are common takeaways from a few studies on Kalamazoo Promise.

- [One prominent study](#) from 2015 found the program significantly raised college enrollments in Michigan, the number of college credits completed and the attainment of credentials and degrees. The authors found stronger effects for students of color and women. The overall percent of high school graduates who earned a college credential increased by 12% because of the program.
- A follow-up [study from 2017](#) shows that the program increased the number of students enrolling in any college within six months of completing high school by 14%, as well as the number of students enrolling in four-year colleges specifically by 23%.
- A newer, [comprehensive resource](#) looks at the benefits of the Kalamazoo Promise. It shows that recipients are more likely to attend college, graduate with less debt than their peers and have a higher chance of earning any type of postsecondary credential.
- Despite the widespread national enrollment declines during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, [one study](#) shows how Kalamazoo Promise students were more likely to enroll at four-year institutions than non-promise students. [Likewise](#), the overall school climate was shown to improve and the number of teachers applying to work in the district increased.
- [Research](#) has shown that the Kalamazoo Promise positively influenced students to choose public postsecondary institutions in Michigan.

- The college promise program [helped reverse declining enrollment](#) in the Kalamazoo Public School district, so that more students were attending the city's public K-12 schools despite general population decreases.