

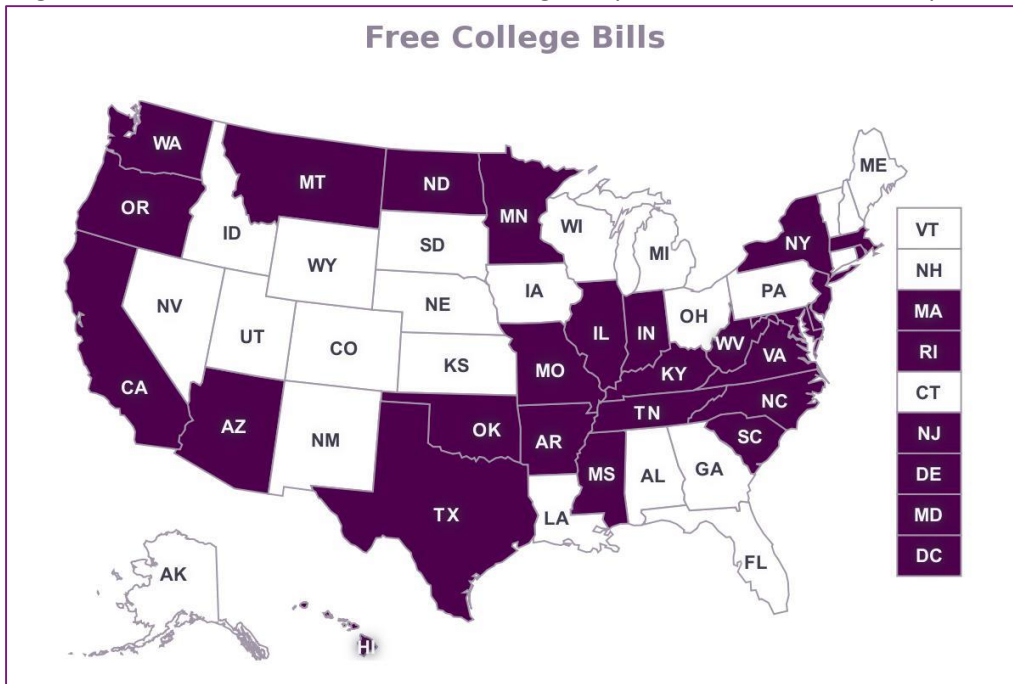
Your Question:

You asked about the current landscape of state-level free college proposals.

Our Response:

From 2014 to present, we have tracked 57 pieces of legislation and 2 governor’s announcements (New York on Tennessee) regarding the creation of a free college program. The map below illustrates the states that have considered one or more bill related to free college over the past three years.

Figure 1: States with at Least One Free College Proposal or Enactment, 2014-present



Additional ECS Resources

Policy Brief:
[Free Community College: An approach to increase adult student success in postsecondary education](#)

Blog Post:
[State-level Free Community College: Policy transformation or more of the same?](#)

To date, four states have enacted five pieces of legislation related to free college: Oregon, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Tennessee. The majority of free college proposals across the country have not made it past introduction.

Across the country, several themes emerge within the proposals. These include:

- **Focusing on resident students:** States have focused on students that are considered state residents, whether that is measured by length of residency, high school location, or in-state tuition eligibility.
- **Linking to high school graduation:** About a third of proposals- and enacted policies in Tennessee, Minnesota, and Oregon- require that the student enroll in college within a certain period of time after high school graduation to be eligible. Generally, students are required to enroll in the fall immediately following high school graduation. Some exceptions to this policy have been made in states, especially as it pertains that students who choose military service immediately following high school.

- **Full-Time Enrollment:** Just under a quarter of policy proposals require a student to be enrolled full-time in college to be eligible. Full-time is usually defined as 12 hours, however, a small number of states have defined full-time as 15 credit hours.
- **Age Limit:** A small number of state proposals require that students be under a certain age in order to qualify. Among states that have imposed an age requirement, 26 is the most common age cap.
- **FAFSA Required:** Because most state proposals are structured to fund students after all other sources of aid have been applied (also called last-dollar), over half require completion of the FAFSA. All of the enacted state free college policies require completion of the FAFSA.
- **Mentoring, Advising, or Community Service Requirements:** Several state proposals require students to work with a mentor or advisor as they move through the college selection and matriculation process. The most notable example is Tennessee Promise, which requires students to complete mentoring, advising, and service milestones throughout the senior year and summer before college matriculation.

States have included eligibility criteria such as those listed above to aid in budgetary projections and to delimit the student population eligible to benefit. As a consequence, many of these eligibility criteria preclude the enrollment of nontraditional and adult student populations. Mathematically, it is impossible for states to reach attainment imperatives without reaching adult students. While the free college programs proposed and enacted in states to-date may be a promising tool to help students afford college, it's key to point out that many programs are not universally beneficial for all students.

Education Commission of the States is committed to assisting states in their consideration of free college policies. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can be of any further assistance on this issue; we are available for consultation, advice on policy plans, and legislative testimony.