

Policy Brief No. 7

What Can States Learn from Local College Promise Programs?

By Michelle Miller-Adams

Introduction

Since the Tennessee Promise was launched in 2014, statewide tuition-free college scholarships, often called College Promise programs, have proliferated [1]. These programs are distinct from an earlier generation of merit-based scholarship programs, such as the Georgia Hope Scholarship, in that they seek to make at least two years of college tuition-free for a broad segment of a state's young people.

Current state-level College Promise programs differ from each other in ways large and small, but they have similar goals—to make post-secondary education more affordable, to address gaps in college attendance by race and socioeconomic status, and to prepare an educated workforce to meet a state's economic needs [2]. Most of these programs are too new to have yielded many results, and the variation among programs makes it difficult to generalize about impact. However, a body of evidence already exists that can inform state policymakers—a decade-plus of research into the structure and impact of local College Promise programs [3].

This knowledge has remained largely untapped by those making decisions about state scholarship design. One reason is that most rigorous research focuses on established Promise programs, many of which include four-year post-secondary options, such as those in Kalamazoo, El Dorado, and Pittsburgh, while most state programs limit attendance to two-year institutions. Even with this distinction, research on local Promise scholarships has yielded important insights for state policymakers.

Local Lessons on Promise

Free is a powerful message. Statewide Promise programs have been criticized from an equity standpoint because they award scholarships on a last-dollar basis, after Pell grants and other

[1] Statewide Promise Status Update. (2019, April 24). College Promise Campaign. Retrieved from collegepromise.org/news/april-24-2019-statewide-promise-status-update/

[2] Mishory, J. (2018, March 5). The Future of Statewide College Promise Programs. The Century Foundation. Retrieved from production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2018/03/16161350/Jen_PromiseFinal2-1.pdf

[3] Promise Programs Database. (n.d.). W.E. Upjohn Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.upjohn.org/promise/promiseSearch.html>

need-based aid has been applied, and they cover only the cost of tuition and fees [4][5]. This means that in practice, a low-income student will often receive no new money from the statewide program because tuition and fees are already covered by Pell grants. While first-dollar funding structures are preferable to last-dollar approaches because they allow students to use Pell grants to cover some living expenses—the most expensive component of community college attendance—this critique misses an important benefit of even last-dollar statewide programs. The message that college is free brings many new students into the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, and signals that continuing one’s education beyond high school is expected and supported. As Krissy DeAlejandro, the executive director of *tnAchieves* puts it, “When you walk into a room of students and you say ‘college is free,’ and then you provide students with the support they need to navigate the complex monstrosity that is higher education—it’s very different from saying ‘If you complete the FAFSA . . . then you might qualify.’” Research shows that it is not just the free-college message but the timing of when that message is delivered—early in a student’s K–12 experience—that changes incentives for students [6].

Not all Promise programs are created equal. Design choices, such as which students will be included, which post-secondary institutions they can attend, and the maximum dollar amount of the scholarship, will shape outcomes and impact. In designing statewide programs, policymakers will confront a tradeoff between increasing complexity to efficiently target resources and broadening eligibility to bring more people into the process. Policymakers should take the broader route. Universal eligibility programs reach more first-generation students and enjoy more broad-based political support (e.g. Social Security) than programs targeted toward the poor, which can be politically vulnerable. By limiting scholarship use to two-year colleges, policymakers can effectively target lower-income students, since affluent college-goers are unlikely to attend community colleges [7].

[4] Jones, T., & Berger, K. (2018). *A Promise Fulfilled: A Framework for Equitable Free College Programs*. The Education Trust. Retrieved from s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/edtrustmain/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/05155636/A-Promise-Fulfilled-A-Framework-for-Equitable-Free-College-Programs-9.6-18.pdf

[5] Poutre, A., & Voight, M. (n.d.). *The State of Free College: Tennessee Promise and New York’s Excelsior Scholarship*. Institute of Higher Education Policy. Retrieved from ihep.org/research/publications/state-free-college-tennessee-promise-and-new-yorks-excelsior-scholarship

[6] Dynarski, S., Libassi, C. J., Michelmore, K., & Owen, S. (2018). *Closing the Gap: The Effect of a Targeted, Tuition-Free Promise on College Choices of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students* (No. w25349). National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <https://www.aeaweb.org/conference/2019/preliminary/paper/RehssS62>

[7] Research into statewide Promise programs in Oregon and Tennessee suggest that in their initial year, enrollment gains are driven by students shifting from 4-year to 2-year institutions, although in subsequent years statewide Promise programs draw students who would not have attended college at all.

Moreover, simplicity is an ally. A program that can be explained in a few sentences will resonate more deeply with first-generation or low-income college-goers than a more complex set of requirements. Fine print and multiple conditions will discourage students from participating and can create confusion around messaging. It also makes program administration more expensive. Professor Susan Dynarski of the University of Michigan warns, “It’s entirely possible to create a Promise program that’s as complicated as what it’s trying to replace.” Many of the people involved in designing financial aid policies at the national and state level don’t have the personal experience to understand that they are potentially creating new barriers to college attendance. Dynarski advocates involving first-generation and low-income college-goers in the design process, as they can provide valuable insight into barriers that may arise.

Money alone is not enough. While a clear, consistent, and early message about college prices can change college-going behavior, money alone will not lead to many more degrees. The path to college remains complicated, and community colleges already struggle to meet student gaps in academic readiness. Many of the new students induced to enroll in post-secondary education because of a Promise program are even less well-prepared than the current community college population. Students and families need support as they navigate the transition from high school to college, and community colleges need resources to ensure that incoming students will be well served and supported. Recent research suggests that funding a college navigator produces more degrees (from existing students) than additional financial aid [8]. However, there are strategies available that allow the two to work together. Mentorship programs, such as the one that accompanied Knox Achieves and was scaled up to support Tennessee’s statewide initiative, have been shown to help students navigate the path to college [9]. Summer bridge programs ensure that entering freshmen who require remediation feel more confident about themselves as college students. Coaching models for the lowest-income students offer monthly outreach and connection to a wide range of services, many of them non-academic [10]. What these approaches have in common is that they are “high touch,” involving relationships between students and professionals whose job it is to support them. And while none of these strategies is technically complicated, they all cost money and must be designed for maximum impact.

[8] Deming, D., & Walters, C. (2017, August). The Impact of Price Caps and Spending Cuts on U.S. Postsecondary Attainment. Harvard University. Retrieved from scholar.harvard.edu/files/ddeming/files/DW_Aug2017.pdf

[9] Carruthers, C. K., & Fox, W. F. (2016). Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee. *Economics of Education review*, 51, 97-112.

[10] Ratledge, A., O’Donoghue, R., Cullinan, D., & Camo-Biogradlija, J. (2019, April). A Path from Access to Success: Interim Findings from the Detroit Promise Path Evaluation. MDRC. Retrieved from mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Detroit_Promise_Path_Report-Final_0.pdf

Good policy can help. State policymakers have a role that goes beyond creating and funding a statewide College Promise. Working with their higher education sectors, policymakers must address the transferability of credits across institutions and come up with alternatives to developmental coursework that slows student progress toward degrees. Money must be included in statewide Promise programs for messaging, marketing, data tracking, and evaluation. Tennessee's leaders note how valuable it has been to have an external researcher, along with internal evaluators, participate in the scaling up of their local program. Finally, policymakers must ensure that funding for Promise programs is secure and long term. Some local Promise initiatives have struggled with sustainable financing, and program changes can create confusion and uncertainty, thereby diluting the program's impact. As Tennessee's former governor Bill Haslam has said, "A Promise is not a promise unless it is financially sustainable."

Conclusion

The results of local Promise initiatives, along with early outcomes from the Tennessee Promise, provide grounds for optimism, showing that simple programs with strong messaging can lead to large increases in college enrollment. Even last-dollar scholarships used at two-year institutions can help low-income students by dramatically expanding Pell grant receipt—Tennessee, for instance, now leads the nation in FAFSA filings. Both the Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, the parallel program for adults without college degrees, are serving a high-need population. Mentorship support, scaled up from experience with an earlier local Promise program, is supporting students into and through college, while high-touch outreach to low-income students is yielding results in college success. Tennessee recently announced that the three-year graduation rate for Promise students is two-and-a-half times what it is for their non-Promise peers. As DeAlejandro says, "Free opens the door, mentors provide encouragement, consistent communication helps the first-generation parent."

Much of education is about remembering the past. When they were first established, many community colleges were tuition-free. As states return to this model, now as part of statewide attainment goals that prioritize access and equity, a decade of findings from local College Promise programs can help point the way.

About the Author

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