

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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How New Jersey Scaled-up their Promise to College Students

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When New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy took office in 2018, his Administration began tackling the long-standing trend of rising tuition and fees at the state's two- and four-year public institutions, which, for many years, outpaced the national average and priced many residents out of the opportunity to earn a high-quality degree or certificate [1]. This financial burden has fallen hardest on New Jersey's most vulnerable and historically-marginalized populations, who pay the nation's fourth-highest average net price for public four-year colleges [2], even after taking into account both federal student aid and New Jersey Tuition Aid Grants (TAG), the nation's most generous need-based state financial aid program.[3]

New Jersey set out to address this affordability issue in 2019 with the release of its State Plan for Higher Education, which included an attainment goal for 65% of working-age residents to earn a high-quality postsecondary credential by 2025. However, this goal is unattainable without a bold strategy dedicated to closing the state's persistent racial, geographic, and ethnic gaps in credential attainment.

Enter the elements of New Jersey's College Promise Program.

Around the same time that the State Plan was released in 2019, New Jersey took the first steps toward expanding equitable and affordable access to a college degree or certificate through the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) pilot program. This initiative provides a \$0 net price of tuition and approved educational fees for nearly half of the students at New Jersey's 18 county colleges, making it one of the most inclusive tuition-free college programs in the nation. Recognizing that today's students are not all recent high school graduates, eligibility is open to part-time, adult, and eligible students with undocumented immigration status.

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Brian Bridges, Ph.D., currently serves as Secretary of Higher Education for the state of New Jersey, a role he began on November 16, 2020 as part of Governor Phil Murphy’s administration.

As Secretary, Dr. Bridges is responsible for policy development and coordination of higher education activities for the state, including supporting institutions amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. He also coordinates initiatives to improve college affordability in New Jersey through the State Plan for Higher Education and enhance postsecondary opportunities while promoting equity and access for all through programs such as the state’s Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG).

Dr. Bridges earned his Doctorate in Higher Education Administration from Indiana University–Bloomington, a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, and a Bachelor’s of Arts in English Language and Literature from Francis Marion University. Dr. Bridges was born in Brooklyn, NY and reared in Beaufort, SC.

More than half of the population served through CCOG are aged 25 or older. Following the initial pilot year, CCOG was expanded to cover students with adjusted gross incomes (AGIs) between \$0 and \$65,000. Due to the program’s success and resounding support across the state, CCOG was codified into law in February 2021. [4]

New Jersey’s fiscal year 2022 budget builds on this initial community college promise program through the new Garden State Guarantee (GSG). GSG will align with CCOG to offer tuition- and fee-free college for students with AGIs between \$0 and \$65,000 during years three and four of their academic programs at public four-year institutions. Together, the CCOG and GSG will create a tuition-free, four-year pathway to a bachelor’s degree for qualified students. The state’s investment in affordable and transparent net pricing comes at a time when students need even more support due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

GSG Overview

New Jersey’s College Promise is one of the first programs in the nation to combine statewide free tuition initiatives at two- and four-year postsecondary institutions. In addition to providing free tuition to students with AGIs between \$0 and \$65,000, the GSG also includes other affordability and transparency components: a sliding scale of tuition discounts for many students with AGIs above \$65,000 and a predictable pricing structure so students know their four-year costs at the beginning of their academic journey. Senior public institutions of higher education will receive \$50 million more this fiscal year through the state’s outcome-based funding allocation, which prioritizes degree completions of underrepresented and low-income students. Tying the outcomes-based funding source to the implementation of the GSG will incentivize institutions to curb rising tuition costs and work collaboratively with the state to make higher education more affordable for priority populations.

Building Support for a First-of-its-Kind-Program

Stakeholder working groups were convened throughout 2019 after the State Plan release, and the college affordability group examined options for reasonable and measurable affordability benchmarks for all students and how to align institutional pricing with such benchmarks. The group considered examples such as New Jersey City University’s Debt-Free Promise Program, [5] Rutgers University-Newark’s RU-N to the TOP, [6] and Rutgers University-Camden’s Bridging the Gap initiative, [7] among others. Based on these models, the working group published an affordability benchmark template that illustrated how a college promise program could be implemented statewide. [8]

New Jersey has taken care to align CCOG at the county college level and GSG at the senior public level, to minimize competition between sectors for funding and students. The state is committed to both programs and is continuing robust stakeholder engagement to ensure collaborative policy decision-making. The structure of the CCOG and GSG programs will create a seamless pathway for eligible students to choose which



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Mr. Socolow was appointed Executive Director of the New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority by Governor Philip Murphy in February 2018. Throughout his career he has worked to advance the success of students and working families. Immediately prior to joining HESAA, Mr. Socolow was the director of the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success at CLASP where he led initiatives to help low-income individuals attain the credentials they need to secure high-quality jobs by developing comprehensive career pathways and improving access and affordability of postsecondary education and workforce training.

He served as Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development from 2006-2010, and previously served as director of New Jersey's Unemployment Insurance Division and as senior advisor to the deputy secretary in the U.S. Department of Labor. From Harvard University and his master's degree in public administration from Rutgers University.

postsecondary route works best for them while promoting student success and degree completion. The state is also committed to continually evaluating each program to root out and resolve unintended consequences.

Because the GSG has "Guarantee" in its name, sustainability is essential so New Jersey can keep its promise to college students. By providing upfront funding a year before the GSG's implementation, the state has demonstrated a long-term commitment to working with all stakeholders to build a program that transforms the lives of students for years to come.

In our efforts to build this New Jersey Promise Program, we've learned the following lessons that should be heeded by other states considering a similar effort:

- **Ensure policy proposals are student-centric.**

In all our conversations about GSG policy options, we have emphasized student impacts and the need to serve diverse student needs. New Jersey sought to incorporate students' lived experiences by hosting meetings and roundtables to hear their concerns and ideas for how the program could make a positive difference in their lives. Through these discussions, we met dozens of remarkable students and learned about the transformation that college made possible for them. Direct student input is essential to ensure statewide higher education policies reflect the diverse perspectives of our students, many of whom are working hard to overcome adversity. No one should be shut out from higher education based on their zip code, background, or economic status. That is why the state is intentional about ensuring that affordable postsecondary credentials are attainable for every student and that they have a seat at the table as these policy decisions are being made.

- **Connect proposals to enhance their success.**

At a time when institutions' capacities are stretched, it's important to ensure policy initiatives are aligned and enhance one another. In New Jersey, we have coordinated the GSG and CCOG by aligning the income eligibility criteria for both programs, secured a historic increase in TAG award amounts that will offset GSG costs by further reducing tuition for the neediest eligible students, and enacted a law requiring institutions to provide a financial aid shopping sheet that clearly explains each student's net costs so families can make informed choices about the postsecondary institution that best meets their needs.

- **Involve stakeholders in design and implementation.**

Implementing CCOG informed our GSG design, as well as the experiences of several public universities that had previously implemented their own tuition- or debt-free promise programs. We also consulted a diverse group of stakeholders to seek input, which included college and university presidents, institutional research and enrollment management professionals, and students. Through regular stakeholder engagement, the state began working through potential barriers and 'what if' scenarios to help shape implementation.

- **Make data-driven decisions.**

For the first time, senior public institutions will provide student unit-level financial aid information to the state to comply with a language provision in the fiscal year 2022 Appropriations Act (P.L. 2021, c.133). These data will enable the state and institutions to model the costs of GSG implementation and make policy choices that best serve students.

- **Communicate clearly to ensure the success of a complex proposal.**

One of the benefits of state promise programs is that they provide a clear message to students that they can afford to go to college. [9] As New Jersey's college promise program scales up, clear and consistent communication will be an essential element of success in increasing enrollment and improving students' persistence and graduation.

Conclusion

As Congress considers a federal-state college promise partnership, New Jersey continues blazing its own path forward to ensure that an equitable and affordable postsecondary education is within reach of anyone willing to work hard. To successfully launch the GSG program in fall 2022, much work remains to address transition pain points and ensure simple and accessible information-sharing. Together with the statutorily-codified CCOG, the GSG will make New Jersey's College Promise a national model for a tuition-free college program that is inclusive, equity-driven, and effective in increasing attainment. The state will continue working with stakeholders to monitor the program's success and ensure the guarantee remains for years to come – that any New Jersey resident can earn a high-quality credential in the state, regardless of their life circumstances.



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