Affordability, Access, and Success:

A Framework for Examining Statewide College Promise Programs

NOVEMBER 2019

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Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization. We seek to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. Our work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public at the local, state, and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education.

Acknowledgements

I. *Overview*

As an increasing number of states recognize the importance of higher education for both individual and collective well-being, more than half have considered some form of "free college" legislation in the last five years.[1] However, the parameters of each policy are markedly different.Wide variation in program design, goals, and state context makes it difficult to generalize about statewide Promise programs. Moreover, there are no tools available to policymakers interested in comparing across models or state contexts to determine whether and how a statewide Promise program may be beneficial in their state.

This brief begins to address these challenges by:

1.) identifying the characteristics that differentiate statewide college Promise programs from other state financial aid programs;

2.) providing a Statewide College Promise Framework that identifies five programmatic elements that have implications for college affordability, access, and success; and

3.) assessing how statewide college Promise programs vary along the dimensions of the Framework.

The Statewide College Promise Framework can be used in subsequent research to more carefully explore how variation in program components may influence their effectiveness.

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1 Pingel, S. (2019). *Emerging iterations on state free college policy in the 2019 legislative sessions.* Retrieved from https://ednote.ecs.org/emerging-iterations-on-state-free-college-policy-in-the-2019-legislative-sessions/

II. Defining State-Level Promise Programs and Their Variants

This brief examines 21 statewide Promise programs that were operating in 19 states during the 2018-2019 academic year.[2] Our analysis is based on two years of research (2017-2019) that included extensive review of publicly available documentation, media and legislation about existing statewide college Promise programs, as well as in-depth case studies[3] of statewide Promise programs in Oregon, Nevada, Tennessee, and Delaware.

The field lacks a clear and explicit framework that can be used to identify and compare statewide college Promise programs. This is a critical shortcoming, since these programs need to be distinguished from a vast array of other state-sponsored student financial aid programs, as well as citywide and institution-based initiatives that carry the "Promise" moniker. To fill this void, RFA used the following three-step process to identify statewide college Promise programs that were being implemented during the 2018-19 academic year:

Step 1. Using the Penn AHEAD Promise Program Database[4], we identified 154 programs that required state residency and were sponsored by a state agency.

Step 2. Within this set of programs, we identified 133 programs[5] that applied universally within at least one sector (i.e. 2-year or 4-year).

Step 3. In addition, we imposed criteria that at minimum ensure participating students could pursue a college credential tuition-free for at least the minimum length of time/ credits required for completion. The 21 statewide college Promise programs that meet these three-step criteria in the fall of 2018 are the focus of the analysis presented in this brief.

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2 There may be additional statewide programs that are not captured here that have been newly implemented since AY 18-19 or are replacing older versions.

3 From 2018-2019 we conducted in-depth cases studies in four states with statewide Promise programs (Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee). Our case studies consisted of multi-day site visits to each state that included interviews with state policymakers, college and university leaders and counseling staff, college students, high school counselors, and high school students.

4 The Promise Program Data Base is an online, comprehensive searchable database that identifies key components of College Promise programs operating nationwide, compiled and maintained by the research team at PennAHEAD. Retrieved from https://ahead-penn.org/creating-knowledge/college-promise/search

5 The programs that were found using Penn's database reflect only those programs that were included in the database, and the filtering options available as of fall 2018. The Penn Database is regularly updated and the number of programs included in the database and the information provided have changed since fall 2018.

III. Statewide College Promise Framework: Affordability, Access and Success

As statewide college Promise programs become more common, policymakers and researchers need tools to meaningfully distinguish between them, and to begin to examine which elements are most feasible and effective in different contexts. To that end, RFA has developed a framework that can be used to capture important variation in the breadth and scope of Promise programs.

Based on our analysis of the variation across 21 statewide college Promise program designs, the Statewide College Promise Framework identifies five fundamental program components that can influence the degree to which statewide college Promise programs function as a higher education pipeline by increasing **affordability**, **access,** and **success** for students across the state. While scholars have defined Promise programs using different criteria[6], we focus on the extent to which statewide Promise policies affect students across these three dimensions.

Figure 1 shows how the five components of statewide Promise programs address different dimensions of the college promise pipeline. While all Promise programs target affordability by providing **financial resources**, the degree to which they do so varies significantly. In addition, how a state defines Promise **program eligibility** and **how it messages** the program influences the breadth of college access it provides. Finally, once students are enrolled in a Promise program, they must satisfy **program requirements** to maintain eligibility and persist to graduation. Some Promise programs also provide supplementary academic and social **student supports**. The number and type of these program requirements and the degree to which states provide supports to students have direct implications for whether participants succeed to degree and/or transfer to a four-year program.

Figure 1. The Statewide College Promise Framework: Five Program Components Addressing Affordability, Access and Success

Below we provide an overview of how statewide Promise program components can influence affordability, access, and success.

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6 Miller-Adams, Michelle. 2015. Promise Nation: Transforming Communities through Place-Based Scholarships. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
Perna, L. W., & Leigh, E. W. (2018). Understanding the promise: A typology of state and local college promise programs. Educational Researcher, 47(3), 155-180.

A. Affordability: *Mapping Financial Supports*

Increasing the affordability of a postsecondary degree is the cornerstone of statewide college Promise programs.[7] As noted above, to fit within our definition of a statewide Promise program, a program must offer **financial resources** which at minimum cover the full cost of tuition (i.e., provide "free" tuition) after other aid has been expended, for the minimum length of time/credits required to complete a college degree. Most statewide financial aid programs do not meet this criterion. The provision of some type of "free" college education to all eligible state residents differentiates Promise programs from traditional financial aid and other types of supports, and best represents the current wave of statewide Promise programs emerging across the country.

By our definition, all statewide Promise programs minimally "promise" free tuition; however, they vary in how they calculate awards. Currently, all statewide Promise programs use one of the following three award types:

- **Last-dollar:** Cover any remaining tuition cost *after* all other financial aid and scholarships are applied.

- **First-dollar:** Award tuition at the outset and can be stacked on top of other financial aid and scholarships.

- **Middle-dollar/last-dollar-plus:** Guarantee a minimum award to all participants regardless of other aid and scholarships.

Twenty-one statewide Promise programs offer financial support to cover at least tuition. Many statewide Promise programs cover more than tuition and include other direct expenses such as fees and books. Most statewide programs (n=17) provide awards to cover **last-dollar** tuition expenses, but there are a few **first-dollar programs**, and one **middle-dollar/last-dollar-plus** program. Both last-dollar and middle-dollar/last-dollar-plus programs leverage all other federal and state financial aid resources available to a student before awarding Promise scholarship dollars. As such both types of programs require students to annually submit a FAFSA or an alternative application for state financial aid to identify available aid. The implications of Promise program eligibility criteria, such as FAFSA completion, for student access are discussed in the following section.

Table 1 details the variation in the scope of financial awards across 21 statewide Promise programs.

Table 1. Statewide College Promise Programs as of AY 2018-19 (N=21) Offering Different Levels of Financial Supports

Programs Covering Tuition Only	Programs Covering Tuition and Fees	Programs Covering Tuition and Fees-Plus
Delaware SEED Scholarship Program	Arkansas ARFuture Grant	Florida Bright Futures*
New Jersey Stars	Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program*	Hawai'i Promise
New York Excelsior Scholarship	Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	Louisiana Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)*
Oklahoma's Promise	Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program
Oregon Promise+	Maryland Howard P. Rawlings Guaranteed Access Grant	Washington College Bound Scholarship
	Massachusetts Cash Grant	
	Minnesota Academic Excellence Scholarship	
	Nevada Promise	
	Rhode Island Promise	
	Tennessee Promise	
	Tennessee Reconnect	
n=5	**n=11**	**n=5**

Last-dollar programs *First-dollar programs +Middle-dollar/last-dollar-plus program

More than half of statewide college Promise programs offer financial supports that cover more than just full tuition. Sixteen programs offer financial supports covering fees as well as tuition costs.

Of these programs, five cover full tuition and fees as well as additional costs of college, such as housing and food. A description of the additional financial resources provided by Promise programs that cover costs beyond tuition and fees is included in Table A1 in the Appendix.

None of the five tuition-only programs are first-dollar programs. However, the only middle-dollar/last-dollar-plus program (Oregon Promise) provides tuition-only coverage.

B. Access: Promise Eligibility and Messaging

While the broad goals of Promise programs are to increase college-going and reduce costs, who has access to Promise programs varies significantly. All states constrain eligibility in some way, but some are far more restrictive than others. Access is also affected by the degree to which state residents are aware of a Promise program. Therefore, the content and method of communicating the program's existence can also affect access to college.

Eligibility

Program eligibility refers to the set of criteria that define the population who can participate in statewide Promise programs. Our in-depth case studies of statewide Promise programs in four states identified the effects that both broad statewide messaging and localized approaches have on college access. Across the four states we found that the less stringent the eligibility requirements, the greater the potential for broad participation.

The most common eligibility requirements involve residency, restrictions around time of application, merit-based criteria, need-based criteria, and completion of FAFSA or a state-designed alternative application for financial aid. Across the 21 statewide programs we found substantial variation in the types of criteria states used to define program eligibility as well as how criteria within each type were defined. Table 2 displays the types of eligibility criteria required by each program.

Table 2. Statewide College Promise Programs: Five Common Types of Eligibility Criteria

Statewide Program	Residency[a]	Time of Application Restriction[b]	Merit[c]	Financial Need[d]	FAFSA[e]
Arkansas ARFuture Grant	●				●
Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	●				●
Hawai'i Promise	●				●
Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	●				●
Nevada Promise	●	●			●✶
Rhode Island Promise	●	●			●
Tennessee Promise	●	●			●
Tennessee Reconnect	●	●			●
New Jersey Stars	●		●		●
Massachusetts Cash Grant	●			●	●
New York Excelsior Scholarship	●			●	●✶
Delaware SEED Scholarship Program	●	●	●		●✶
Florida Bright Futures	●	●	●		✶
Louisiana TOPS	●	●	●		●✶
Oregon Promise	●	●	●		●✶
Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program	●		●	●	●
Washington College Bound Scholarship	●	●		●	●✶
Minnesota Academic Excellence Scholarship	●	●	●	●	
Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program	●	●	●	●	●
Maryland Howard P. Rawlings Guaranteed Access Grant	●	●	●	●	●
Oklahoma's Promise	●	●	●	●	●
Total Programs (n=21)	**n=21**	**n=13**	**n=10**	**n=8**	**n=20**

✶indicates programs that offer a state-designed financial aid application alternative to FAFSA

a Programs that include a residency eligibility restriction designate that applicants must have established residency in the state (or neighboring locales in border states for which there is a reciprocal agreement) prior to application, in some cases for an extended period of time (i.e., years in advance).

b Programs that include a time of application eligibility restriction limit the timeframe (e.g., within one year of HS graduation, etc.) when a student can enroll in the program.

c Programs identified as having a merit restriction are those that require high school academic performance that exceeds a high school diploma with a 2.0 GPA. Programs that require specific coursework, testing, or other requirements beyond basic eligibility to enroll in a community college would be included in this category.

d Programs with financial need eligibility restrictions have a stated prioritization of financial need as part of the award-making process, and those programs which have an expected family contribution or family income cap.

e Programs that require students to file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or a state-designed alternative application for financial aid to be eligible for participation in Promise.

All 21 statewide college Promise programs limit eligibility based on residency. Yet each state defines residency differently. For example, in New York, residency for three years prior to applying for the Excelsior Scholarship is required. In Maryland, the residency requirement for the Guaranteed Access Grant stipulates that prospective students be deemed eligible for in-state tuition. In Nevada, residency also applies to students who have a high school diploma from a public high school in a county of another state that borders Nevada and enrolls Nevada residents.

Most of the statewide Promise programs restrict eligibility to students who apply within a given time frame. These time frames vary widely. For example, to be eligible for Oklahoma's Promise and Washington's College Bound Scholarship, students must apply when they are in middle school. However, Nevada Promise and Tennessee Promise both define the period for application as the fall of the academic year during which students will complete their high school diploma or GED. Notably, more than a third of programs (n=8) did not tie eligibility to an application timeframe.

About half of statewide Promise programs use merit criteria to determine eligibility. Specific criteria vary, but GPA and ACT/SAT scores are common metrics. For example, to be eligible for Oregon Promise students need a minimum high school GPA of 2.5. The Louisiana TOPS base financial award requires a minimum 2.5 GPA and an ACT score of 20, but students with higher GPAs and ACT scores are eligible for larger financial awards.

Nearly all statewide Promise programs require students to file a FAFSA or alternative financial aid application to be eligible for Promise. While only eight programs link eligibility to financial need, twenty programs require students to fill out a FAFSA or state financial aid application. These requirements ensure that students draw down all available federal and state financial aid. While maximizing affordability, programs that require FAFSA completion may be restricting access for students who have difficulty fulfilling this requirement.

More than a third of statewide Promise programs use program eligibility to target students with demonstrated financial need, a strategy widely endorsed by those concerned about increasing college access for low-income students.[8] For example, the New York Excelsior Scholarship is limited to those families who make under $125,000 yearly. To be eligible for Maryland's Guaranteed Access Grant a student's family income may not exceed 130% of the poverty level, which for 2019-20 was $37,414 for a family of five.

Only four of 21 statewide Promise programs place no restrictions on eligibility based on timeframe, financial need or merit. These programs are the least restrictive and the most broadly accessible. Even among these programs, eligibility is still narrowed in some ways. For example, of Indiana's two Promise programs, the Workforce Ready Grant is much less restrictive in terms of eligibility than is the 21st Century Scholars Program. However, the Workforce Ready Program provides a lower financial award than does the 21st Century Scholars Program, which is a first-dollar program targeted at students enrolling directly from high school that awards up to four years of tuition at a public college or university.

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8 Dynarski, S. and J. Scott-Clayton (2013). Financial aid policy: Lessons from research. *Future of Children, 23*(1), 67–91.;
Bettinger, E. P., B. T. Long, P. Oreopoulos, and L. Sanbonmatsu (2012). The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R block FAFSA experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *127*(3), 1205–42.;
Goldrick-Rab, S., R. Kelchen, D. N. Harris, and J. Benson (2016). Reducing income inequality in educational attainment: Experimental evidence on the impact of financial aid on college completion. *American Journal of Sociology, 121*(6), 1762–1817;
Wardrip, K., Divringi, E., DeMaria, K. (2018). How does last-dollar financial aid affect first-year student outcomes: Evidence from the bridging the gap study. Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

Messaging

Approaches to messaging statewide Promise programs include both the **content** of a state's communication about the Promise program as well as its **dissemination strategy**. In general, the more broadly and consistently a program is messaged across the state, the more likely it is to gain wide recognition and increase college access. However, localized/customized messaging campaigns may be more effective in reaching students from communities with historically low college-going rates.

Messaging strategies vary across statewide Promise programs. Some states invest heavily in a broad statewide Promise messaging campaign using a range of media from billboards and commercials to websites and brochures. Other states rely on postsecondary institutions and high school counselors to build awareness. There are also states that do not advertise their program at all, except to include it on the list of state financial aid programs posted on a state's website.

The specific content of messaging also has college access implications.[9] Some statewide Promise program communications campaigns utilize a simple "free college" message to publicize the existence of the program and encourage a statewide college-going culture. This strategy can increase the likelihood of enrollment among students who might not previously have applied or enrolled.[10] However, if the simplicity of the message obscures its reality (e.g., a "free college" message for a program that does not cover fees or other college costs), those interested in the program may feel cheated and decide not to participate or persist when the complexity and caveats are revealed.

RFA conducted a systematic online search for information regarding "free college" in each of the 21 study states and analyzed it to determine how states describe their Promise programs. Based on this search we found that 12 of 21 programs advertised the program as "free" (i.e., going to college as "free," "tuition-free", or some slight variation thereof).

Table 3 displays how the language used to message "free college" varies.

9 Dynarski, S., Michelmore, K, Libassi, CJ, & Owen, S. (2018). *Closing the gap: The effect of a targeted, Tuition-free promise on college choices of high-achieving, low-income students.* NBER Working Paper.
10 ibid

Table 3. Variation in "Free College" Messaging across 12 Statewide Promise Programs[a]

Statewide Program	Messaging Example
Arkansas ARFuture Grant	"Will cover tuition and fees"[11]
Delaware SEED Scholarship Program	"Go to college for free"[12]
Florida Bright Futures	"an award to cover 100% of tuition and applicable fees and $300 for both fall and spring semesters."[13]
Hawaii Promise	"Attend community colleges at no cost for tuition, fees, books, supplies and transportation"[14]
Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	"Free training"[15]
Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program	"provides students up to four years of undergraduate tuition at any participating public college or university in Indiana." [16]
Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	"tuition free"[17]
New Jersey Stars	"Free tuition is in the stars"[18]
New York Excelsior Scholarship	"We've made college tuition-free for middle class New Yorkers."[19]
Rhode Island Promise	"Regardless of your family income, you won't pay tuition at CCRI."[20]
Tennessee Promise	"two years of tuition-free attendance at a community or technical college"[21]
Tennessee Reconnect	"tuition-free"[22]

a Mirroring the information gathering process for students and families, we conducted a systematic online search for "free college" in each of the 21 study states and analyzed search results to determine how states describe their Promise programs. The 12/21 programs that advertised going to college as "free," "tuition-free", or some slight variation thereof, are included in Table 3.

Across all 12 programs, the affordability message is broadly consistent – statewide Promise programs will pay for college. However, while the national conversation often centers on the phrase "free college," only Delaware's SEED program publicized materials describing college as completely "free." Most programs have more narrow messages focused on the specific costs of attendance that are fully covered (e.g., "tuition-free") rather than making a broad promise for completely free higher education.

Most messages do not specify who is eligible for the program. While most programs emphasize affordability, few programs identify what types of students are eligible. For example, Indiana's 21st Century Scholars is one of the more restrictive programs in terms of access including all four types of eligibility criteria (see Table 2 above). While the above messaging for Indiana's 21st Century Scholars includes relatively narrow information about the financial award, it does not detail which students are eligible. Although a general message that does not mention eligibility restrictions might increase college-going in a state by changing perceptions about college affordability, it can also be misleading for students who do not qualify.

11 Arkansas Department of Higher Education. *Arkansas future grant (ArFuture)*. Retrieved from https://scholarships.adhe.edu/scholarships/detail/arf utures
12 Delaware SEED Scholarship Program Marketing Materials.
13 Office of Student Financial Assistance, Florida Department of Education (2018). Bright Futures Student Handbook 2018-19 Chapter 2: What You need to Know Now that You are Eligible.
14 University of Hawai'i Community Colleges. (2017). *What is Hawaii's promise? Removing 'cost' as a barrier to higher education.* Retrieved from https://www.hawaii.edu/govrel/docs/2017_hawaii-promise_lb.pdf
15 Indiana Commission for Higher Education. *Workforce ready grant.* Retrieved from https://www.in.gov/che/4773.htm
16 Indiana 21st Century Scholars. Retrieved from https://scholars.in.gov/
17 Kentucky Community & Technical College System. Retrieved from https://workreadykentucky.com/
18 NJ Stars. *NJ stars.* Retrieved from http://www.njstars.net/
19 New York State. *Tuition-free degree program: The excelsior scholarship.* Retrieved from https://www.ny.gov/programs/tuition-free-degree-program-excelsior-scholarship
20 Community College of Rhode Island. *Rhode Island promise.* Retrieved from http://www.ccri.edu/ripromise/
21 Tennessee Promise. *About.* Retrieved from http://tnpromise.gov/about.shtml
22 Drive to 55 Alliance. *Tennessee reconnect.* Retrieved from http://driveto55.org/initiatives/tennessee-reconnect/

Two programs target messages to families that are often ineligible for need-based aid. While Promise programs are designed to expand access to college, the target populations for Promise may vary based on the state's other financial aid programs. For example, New York's Excelsior program was designed to make college more affordable for middle-class families given the existence of other state financial aid programs that address affordability for low-income students. As a result, program messaging directly targets "middle class New Yorkers."

C. Success: Program Requirements and Student Support Services

Two components of statewide Promise programs have direct implications for student success once students are enrolled in college. **Program requirements** place conditions upon continued enrollment and are common in statewide Promise programs. **Student supports** are distinct in that they are often voluntary, designed to address student needs, may be targeted to specific Promise students, and are much less common among statewide Promise programs. We describe how statewide Promise programs vary along these two dimensions below.

Program Requirements are the set of expectations that are mandated for all accepted students to maintain their eligibility in the Promise program through program completion. They vary considerably across statewide Promise programs and are intended to serve different purposes. For example, program requirements to maintain full-time enrollment or satisfactory academic standing, participate in mentoring, or complete within a specified timeframe are aligned with research on student success and may be intended to keep students on-track and help ensure a return on the state's investment. Other requirements such as student co-pays, community service hours, and required post-program residency are sometimes added to garner student commitment or "skin in the game." Some states also restrict enrollment to institutions or fields of study that serve the workforce demands of a state.

There are three broad types of Promise program requirements: 1.) those aligned to academic success; 2.) those that demonstrate student commitment; and 3.) those that limit use of the financial award to certain types of institutions, degree programs, or number of credit hours. Program requirements are often a political necessity, yet they may well affect students differently. For example, those whose life circumstances allow them to remain enrolled full-time may benefit from this requirement, while those who cannot maintain full-time enrollment will be dropped from the program.

Table 4a shows the extent to which statewide Promise programs include success-focused requirements and student commitment requirements. Program requirements that limit use of financial reward are displayed in Table 4b.

Table 4a. Statewide Promise Programs by Types of Program Requirements: Success-focused and Student Commitment

Statewide Program	Success-Focused Requirements		Student Commitment[c]	
	Full-Time Status Required	Maintain a College GPA > 2.0[a]	Mentoring[b] or Informational Meeting Attendance	Co-pay/ Community Service Hours/ Post-program residency
Arkansas ARFuture Grant			●	●
Delaware SEED Scholarship Program	●	●		
Florida Bright Futures		●		
Hawai'i Promise		●		
Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program	●			
Indiana Workforce Ready Grant				
Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program				
Louisiana TOPS	●	●		
Maryland Howard P. Rawlings Guaranteed Access Grant	●			
Massachusetts Cash Grant				
Minnesota Academic Excellence Scholarship	●			
Nevada Promise	●	●	●	●
New Jersey Stars	●	●		
New York Excelsior Scholarship	●			●
Oklahoma's Promise				
Oregon Promise		●		●
Rhode Island Promise	●	●		
Tennessee Promise	●		●	●
Tennessee Reconnect				
Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program	●			
Washington College Bound Scholarship				
Total Programs (N=21)	**n=11**	**n=8**	**n=3**	**n=5**

a These programs range in what GPA they require students to maintain in college. They range from as low as a 2.3 GPA to a 3.0 GPA. All other programs require students to maintain standard academic progress (a 2.0 GPA) or do not specify a GPA requirement.

b Promise program limits university enrollment to a two-year program at a set of eligible four-year institutions that offer Associate Degree programs.

c Program-required student contributions vary by program and include tuition co-pays, required community service hours during college, and residency requirements after college.

More than half of statewide Promise programs require students to be enrolled full-time. Research indicates that continuous full-time enrollment is strongly associated with persistence and graduation. However, including full-time enrollment as a requirement of a statewide Promise program can exclude students whose life circumstances require them to stop out or enroll part-time even if they are otherwise in good academic standing.

More than a third of programs require students to maintain a GPA *above* a 2.0. All Promise programs require students to remain in good academic standing as determined by their institution; students no longer enrolled in college cannot draw down Promise dollars. However, some Promise programs set a higher GPA requirement. This decision is typically framed as a requirement that supports student success, but it can exclude students who could otherwise persist and graduate.

Five programs require some level of student commitment. Requirements typically serve as a "giving back" mechanism designed to ensure that those receiving Promise funds contribute something to the state or to the larger good. Specific types of commitment requirements vary. Tennessee Promise and Nevada Promise require students to complete community service hours; Oregon Promise requires a $50 co-pay; and New York Excelsior Scholarship and ARFutureGrant require recipients to live and work in-state for a designated period after completing the program. Advocates of commitment requirements suggest they increase student buy-in to the program. However, these requirements can also be a barrier to success for students whose life circumstances make it difficult for them to comply.

There are also parameters around how statewide college Promise program awards can be used. Some limit the award to specific certificates/degrees, cap enrollment periods, and limit the types of institutions Promise students can attend. Table 4b captures variation in how the 21 statewide Promise Programs define eligible degrees/credentials, time to completion, and eligible institutions. Although these requirements are often intended to reduce program costs and align the state's investment to workforce demands, they can also limit the number of students who can or wish to participate.

Table 4b. Statewide Promise Programs by types of Program Requirements: Limits to Use of Financial Award

State Program	Eligible Degree/ Credential	Credits/Semesters/ Years[a]	Tech.	2yr	4yr
		Enrollment Period	Eligible Institutions		
Florida Bright Futures	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	120 Semester Hours		●	●
Oregon Promise	Certificates; Associate	90 Credits		●	
Oklahoma's Promise	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	5 Years		●	●
Washington College Bound Scholarship	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	4 Years	●	●	●
Maryland Howard P. Rawlings Guaranteed Access Grant	Associate; Bachelor's	4 Years		●	●
Minnesota Academic Excellence Scholarship	Bachelor's	4 Years			●
Nevada Promise	Certificates; Associate	3 Years		●	
Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	Certificates	2 Years		●	●
Rhode Island Promise	Associate	2 Years		●	
Tennessee Promise	Certificates; Associate	5 Semesters	●	●	●b
New York Excelsior Scholarship	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	2 Years for Associate Degree; 4 for Bachelor's Degree		●	●
Louisiana TOPS	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	8 Semesters or 12 Quarters	●	●	●
Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	8 Semesters		●	●
Delaware SEED Scholarship Program	Associate	6 Semesters		●	●b
Arkansas ARFuture Grant	Certificates; Associate	5 Semesters	●	●	●b
New Jersey Stars	Associate	5 Semesters		●	
Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program	Associate; Bachelor's	4 Academic Years		●	●
Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	Certificates; Associate	4 Semesters or 60 credits	●	●	●b
Hawai'i Promise	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	Not specified		●	
Massachusetts Cash Grant	Certificates; Associate; Bachelor's	Not specified	●	●	●
Tennessee Reconnect	Certificates; Associate	Not specified		●	●b
Total Programs (N=21)			**n=6**	**n=20**	**n=16**

a Language defining enrollment period (credits/semesters/years) is pulled directly from advertisements put out by the programs.

b Promise program limits university enrollment to a set of eligible four-year institutions that offer Associate Degree programs.

Associate degrees are covered by most statewide Promise programs (n=20). Fifteen cover the cost of a certificate, and about half (n=11) allow the award to be used for a bachelor's degree. Tennessee Promise advises students who are interested in pursuing a four-year degree to enroll in an approved transfer pathway program at their community college. However, incentivizing four-year degree seekers to first enroll at a community college could reduce their chances of obtaining such a degree, since students are more likely to get a bachelor's degree when they begin college in a four-year institution.

Slightly over half (n=11) allow students to choose between at least two types of credentials. Eight programs restrict use to only one type of credential. For example, Minnesota's Academic Excellence Scholarship can only be used for a bachelor's degree; Delaware's SEED scholarship only applies to associate degrees, and Indiana's Workforce Ready grant can only be used for a certificate. In contrast, three Promise programs can be applied to three types of credentials: certificates, associate and bachelor's degrees. Programs that offer more expansive degree options may result in higher rates of persistence because they allow students to select the degree path that aligns with their postsecondary goals.

Completion timeline requirements vary widely. Of the 18 programs with such specifications, the minimum timeframe is four semesters or the equivalent of 60 credits. Half of these programs with timeline requirements (n=9) define program length in years. However, many programs use semesters; two use credits; and one uses semester hours. In addition, some programs count dual enrollment credits received in high school against the total credits covered by the Promise award. How states set and communicate program length and credit caps has direct implications for the likelihood that students complete a degree before they run out of funding.

Most statewide Promise programs permit students to enroll in either two- or four-year institutions. However, five programs restrict Promise to community colleges only, and one program, Minnesota Academic Excellence Scholarship, requires enrollment at a four-year institution. Some programs that cover tuition only for associate degrees or certificates such as Tennessee Promise allow students to use the scholarship at a four-year institution, but only if they are enrolled in an associate degree program. In addition, the TN Promise scholarship amount is based on average costs at a community college and so it may not fully cover all tuition and mandatory fees at a four-year institution.

Many statewide Promise programs (n=9) include time limits that require students to enroll full-time and complete a degree in the minimum number of semesters or years typically required for the credential (e.g., four semesters or two years for an associate degree). Although federal financial aid guidelines define full-time enrollment as a minimum of 12 credits per semester, the time limits set by many Promise programs may require students to enroll in at least 15 credits per semester to finish in time. Since many Promise programs are last-dollar programs that fill in gaps left by other student aid, the misalignment between federal requirements for full-time status and Promise requirements could have implications for persistence and completion.

Statewide Promise programs can scaffold the persistence and success of participating students through the provision of both **academic and socio-emotional supports**. Most statewide Promise programs provide few if any student supports—a fact that may reduce retention and completion. Because such supports require significant financial commitments, states must consider the tradeoff between utilizing Promise dollars for supports versus direct financial need. Some states have addressed this tradeoff by targeting supports to a sub-sample of Promise students who are the most at risk of not persisting or by partnering with colleges or external organizations to administer supports to Promise students.

States that include supports in their Promise programs take several different approaches. Some issue supplementary grants to institutions receiving Promise students to support programs or provide resources for these students. Other state programs include direct student support services—supplementary academic

and social services provided exclusively for Promise students such as summer bridge, mentoring, first-year experience, and completion coaching. When present, student support services may increase the likelihood that Promise programs will result in postsecondary attainment gains. For example, research has found that student support services, such as coaching or mentoring, can improve retention and graduation.[23]

Of 21 statewide Promise programs, only four include student supports. Table 5 depicts variation across three features of student support services in these states: type of support, targeted student populations, and the provider or coordinator of those supports.

Table 5. Non-Financial Student Success-Focused Supports Provided by Statewide Promise Programs

Statewide Program	Type of Support[a]	All Promise Students or Sub-Population	Provider/Coordinator of Supports
Nevada Promise	Meetings with Community Mentor	All	Postsecondary Institution
Arkansas ARFuture Grant	Meetings with Community Mentor	All	State
Tennessee Promise	Meetings with Community Mentor	All	State
	Institutional Grants	Sub-population	State
	Completion Coaches for Low-Income Students	Sub-population	State Partner
Oregon Promise	First-Year Experience	All	Postsecondary Institution
	Institutional Grants	All	State

a For the purposes of this study we count meetings with a community mentor required by ARFuture Ready, TN Promise and NV Promise as both a program requirement and a non-financial student support. The degree to which students perceive mentoring as a transactional program requirement or a personalized support varies widely and is related to the quality of the mentoring provided.

Three statewide Promise programs provide mentoring to all Promise students. In these programs, mentors are volunteers from students' local communities who advise students on issues ranging from academics to personal time management. Oregon offers mentoring via a first-year experience program delivered by participating colleges. Each college campus takes a different approach ranging from required introductory courses to on-campus orientation activities.

Tennessee provides grants to institutions serving Tennessee Promise students for the development or expansion of innovative student success and retention programs. In 2017-18 grants administered through this program (Tennessee Promise Forward) amounted to nearly $800,000 and included grants to five community colleges ranging from $92,000 to $200,000. Colleges used these funds to implement a variety of support programs from success coaching to early alert systems and parent portals to enhance parent engagement.

Tennessee offers completion coaches for low-income students at institutions. Tennessee also partnered with an external nonprofit (tnAchieves) to provide completion coaches across community colleges. Completion coaches are community volunteers who advise students on academics and personal matters to foster their success. In Tennessee, these coaches are exclusively provided to Tennessee Promise recipients.

Participation in mentoring/first-year experience is required for continued funding under all four statewide Promise programs offering this service. Nevada Promise, ARFuture Grant, and Tennessee Promise all require students to engage with a mentor. In Tennessee this requirement is met by attending

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23 Bettinger, E. P., & Baker, R. B. (2014). The effects of student coaching: An evaluation of a randomized experiment in student advising. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 36*(1), 3-19.

a mandatory meeting on Tennessee Promise. At the meeting, students and mentors identify the student's college and career goals. In Oregon, all students must attend a first-year experience program provided by their community college.

The degree to which student services are consistent or coordinated varies by state. In Oregon and Nevada, student supports are implemented and tracked at the institutional level and reported to the state. For example, in Oregon, the first-year experience is defined and offered by each campus and varies significantly as a result. In Arkansas and Tennessee, the state is more active in implementing student supports as a component of their statewide Promise program. In Tennessee, tnAchieves serves as a statewide partner overseeing the mentoring and community service requirements of Tennessee Promise. As a result, implementation of student supports is consistent across campuses since services are facilitated and monitored by one leading entity.

IV. Implications and Next Steps

Twenty-one statewide college Promise programs are currently in operation, and more are under consideration. As detailed above, these programs vary in the degree to which they support college affordability, access, and success. This brief provides a Statewide College Promise Framework that can be used to identify and compare these variations. It also notes a range of tradeoffs, challenges, and potential benefits of various programmatic elements.

There is currently no research base that systematically examines which program designs are most effective in different contexts, or how states can best navigate the tradeoffs inherent in Promise program design to reduce equity gaps or ensure the most robust return on investment. As the prevalence of statewide college Promise programs continues to grow—and indeed as debate about establishing a national Promise program enters the 2020 presidential election season—there is a growing need for more robust analysis of the effectiveness and feasibility of different Promise models. The Statewide College Promise Framework delineated in this document provides a strong basis for such analysis.

Appendix A

Table A1. Financial Supports Provided by Statewide Promise Programs Outside of Tuition and Fees

PROGRAM	ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL SUPPORTS
Florida Bright Futures	$300 for both fall and spring semesters for additional educational expenses.[24]
Hawai'i Promise	The Promise covers for those eligible total cost of tuition, fees, books, supplies and a standard transportation allowance.[25]
Louisiana TOPS	Tuition; fees; on campus room and board (or a housing and food allowance off campus); and allowances for books, supplies, transportation, child care, costs related to a disability, and miscellaneous expenses.[26]
Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program	The maximum amount is tuition, fees, and a book allowance.[27]
Washington College Bound Scholarship	The award covers tuition, some fees, and gives a small book allowance.[28]

24 Office of Student Financial Assistance, Florida Department of Education (2018). Bright Futures Student Handbook 2018-19 Chapter 2: What You need to Know Now that You are Eligible.

25 University of Hawai'i Community Colleges. *Hawaii promise.* Retrieved from http://uhcc.hawaii.edu/comeback/about.php

26 Louisiana Next (2018). *What you need to know about TOPS.* Retrieved from https://lanext.com/articles/what-you-need-to-know-about-tops

27 State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. *Virginia guaranteed assistance program.* Retrieved from http://www.schev.edu/index/tuition-aid/financialaid/state-student-aid/virginia-guaranteed-assistance-program

28 Washington Student Achievement Council. *College bound.* Retrieved from https://www.wsac.wa.gov/college-bound