The State of Promise Programs during COVID-19
Results from a Policy Scan

Overview

This brief communicates findings from Phase 1 of "State Responses to COVID-19 – Implications for Outcomes-Based Funding and Promise Programs," a 50-state policy scan to determine how Promise Program policies are shifting in response to COVID-19 related budget fluctuations. Conducted between August and December of 2020, this 50-state scan included the following goals:

1. Explore how COVID-19 and related budget cuts have impacted state Promise Programs.
2. Explore how, if at all, shifts in Promise Programs affected the level or type of support provided to sectors and institutions that serve Black, Latinx and low-income students.

The research team reviewed publicly available websites, including those of state legislatures, higher education agencies, local and state-level media, and systematically recorded data along several key elements. Because the following findings are based off information found on state websites and reflect the information states have chosen to publish online, these findings may not reflect the most current policymaker thinking, but decisions that have been formalized and publicly disseminated.

Changes to Statewide Promise Programs

The following section presents findings from RFA's scan of Promise programs in the wake of COVID-19. Overall, more than half of statewide Promise programs made changes to program components in response to COVID-19. As states faced budget shortfalls, refinements to Promise programs allowed for the continued implementation of statewide free college programs sometimes at the expense of expanded access and affordability for students. More detailed information is below.

Though most programs (15 out of 26) adjusted the details of their Promise policy in response to COVID-19, all 26 statewide Promise programs remain intact. In our review, we did not identify the elimination of any statewide Promise programs due to the economic downturn, even in the face of widespread budget shortfalls and cuts. This tendency to preserve student aid programs is in line with current state trends, where direct operational appropriations to higher education institutions often decrease more than student aid during challenging economic times.[1]

Of the 15 programs that made changes, we found 11 programs adjusted eligibility requirements, with many relaxing requirements to maintain access and others imposing additional eligibility requirements in response to budget cuts. Of the programs that adjusted eligibility requirements, most sought to maintain or expand access for students to account for challenges during the coronavirus pandemic. Several programs extended their application deadlines or extended other deadlines such as those to submit grades or standardized testing. In Florida for the Bright Futures program, high school counselors were given the option to certify that students "had planned for, and intended to complete" community service hours, rather than providing certification of having completed those hours already.

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[1] https://shef.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SHEEO_SHEF_FY19_Report.pdf

Other programs also expanded to include previously ineligible populations, such as the Indiana Workforce Grant, which temporarily has expanded eligibility to include students already holding a degree.

Two Promise programs were forced to restrict access due to budget constraints. In August of 2020, Oregon Promise reimposed an EFC limit of $22,000 in defining eligibility due to budget cuts from the Oregon Legislature. [2] Students previously awarded the Oregon Promise grant, who are above the reinstated threshold, were informed that their awards would be revoked for the coming year. In New York, the Higher Education Services Corporation noted that Excelsior Scholarship funds were "limited" and that fewer students would receive awards. However, no specific benchmarks were released to note who might receive or lose the financial award, saying that those who were "current recipients" would be prioritized in making awards.[3]

Two programs noted publicly that they were adjusting the size of the financial award. In addition to awarding fewer awards, the New York Higher Education Services Corporation also noted that awards would be made smaller, thereby directly impacting higher education affordability for students. However, no guidance was given on what criteria would be used to decide either which students would lose awards, or how much they would lose.

In contrast, the state of Indiana increased the amount of aid students could receive from the Workforce Ready Grant, raising the maximum amounts of funds from $5,500 to $10,000 for eligible participants.[4] Layered into the state's Next Level Jobs program, the state invested $22M of CARES Act funding towards bolstering the state funds available.

Seven (7) out of 26 programs adjusted program requirements, in most cases shifting requirements to ease the burden they may be causing students during the pandemic. Some of these include removing ongoing GPA requirements, eliminating full-time status requirements, and others. For example, Tennessee Reconnect, a program covering tuition and mandatory fees for adults, removed its part-time status as a requirement for fall 2020 enrollment, allowing students taking fewer than 6 credits (i.e., enrolled less than part-time) to maintain their eligibility. Similarly, for the Tennessee Promise, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission announced that the community service requirement would be waived.[5] Changes for programs across the country were much the same, often relaxing program requirements or student commitments. More research is needed to understand how these varied program changes affected students from Black, Latinx, and low-income populations.

Across Promise programs, no evidence of additional supports for Black, Latinx, and the lowest-income students is evident. While the changes noted above-- such as pushing back application deadlines and eliminating community service requirements-- could benefit marginalized students, limited information on specific outreach and assistance to Black, Latinx, and lowest-income student populations is concerning when matriculation drops and enrollment stop-outs are concentrated among these students. Further, given that Black, Latinx, and lowest-income communities have been disproportionally affected by the coronavirus pandemic, more research is needed to understand how students are being supported by Promise programs during and following the pandemic and resulting economic downturn. Table 1 presents our comprehensive analysis of changes to statewide Promise programs that affect eligibility, award format and amount, and participation requirements.

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[2] https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-faq.aspx
[3] https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nys-grants-scholarships-awards/the-excelsior-scholarship.html
[4] https://www.in.gov/gwc/files/Rapid%20Recovery%20NLJ%20Expansion_7.6.20.pdf
[5] https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/local/story/2020/jun/08/class-notes/524851/

Table 1. Temporary and Permanent Changes Across Three Dimensions of Promise Programs

State	Program	Eligibility	Award Format and Amount	Participation Requirements
AR	Arkansas ARFuture Grant	No changes.	No changes.	Mentorship and community service requirement waived.
CA	The California College Promise Grant	No changes.		
DE	Delaware SEED Scholarship Program	A previous expansion for bachelor's degrees has been maintained for AY20-21.	No changes.	Enrolling in 24 credit hours per year is no longer required to maintain eligibility.
FL	Florida Bright Futures (Florida Medallion Scholars and Gold Seal Vocational Scholars Promise)	Community service eligibility requirements relaxed; SAT and ACT qualifying date extended.	No changes.	No changes.
HI	Hawai'i Promise	No changes.		
IN	Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	Two- and four-year degree recipients are temporarily eligible.	Funding cap raised from $5,500 to $10,000.	Fifty new eligible academic pathways available.
IN	Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program	SAT/ACT requirement was waived for the graduating 2020 class but reinstituted for the 2020-2021 graduating class.	No changes.	No changes.
KY	Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	No changes.		
LA	Louisiana Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)	ACT deadline waived; loosened regulations on approved high school programs; JumpStart (career and technical education) credit requirements removed.	No changes.	Program requirements suspended, including continuous enrollment, academic year earned hours, and GPA requirements.
MD	Maryland Community College Promise Scholarship	Eligibility no longer limited to students who graduated from high school or completed their GED less than 2 years before applying.	No changes.	Recipients no longer required to work full-time and pay Maryland income taxes after completing a program. This obligation will be waived for students who had previously committed to it.
MD	Maryland Howard P. Rawlings Guaranteed Access Grant	Application deadline extended.	No changes.	No changes.

State	Program	Eligibility	Award Format and Amount	Participation Requirements
MA	Massachusetts Cash Grant	No changes.		
MN	Minnesota Academic Excellence Scholarship	No changes.		
NV	Nevada Promise Scholarship	No changes.		
NJ	The New Jersey Student Tuition Assistance Reward Scholarship (NJ STARS)	No changes.	No changes.	Previously required spring 2020 grade point average minimum was removed.
NJ	New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant	No changes.		
NY	New York Excelsior Scholarship	Prioritization of awards for current students.	Award size may be reduced.	No changes.
OK	Oklahoma's Promise	No changes.		
OR	Oregon Promise	Expected Family Contribution (EFC) limit of 22,000 imposed for new applicants.	No changes.	No changes.
RI	Rhode Island Promise	No changes.		
TN	Tennessee Promise	No changes.	No changes.	Community service deadline waived.
TN	Tennessee Reconnect	No changes.	No changes.	Enrollment requirements adjusted to allow for students enrolled less than part-time (6 credits).
VA	Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program	No changes.		
WA	Washington College Bound Scholarship	Application deadline extended.	No changes.	No changes.
WA	Washington College Grant	Eligibility expanded to include students of families up to 100% of the state's median family income; program expanded to provide support for apprenticeships.	No changes.	No changes.
WA	WA Opportunity Grant	No changes.		

Our sample of Promise programs included 26 statewide programs from 20 states. Several states, including Indiana, New Jersey, Maryland, and Tennessee had two statewide programs, while Washington has three.

In developing our analytic sample of Promise programs, we drew heavily on the methodology and framework utilized in RFA's prior research on statewide Promise programs.[6] We applied the following steps in defining our sample:

- Step 1. Using the College Promise Campaign 2020 Fall Update, we identified programs that required state residency and were sponsored by a state agency that were active in the 2019-2020 academic year and the 2020-2021 academic year, using the former year as the "benchmark" year of comparison.[7] We also captured any programs that were newly active in the 2020-2021 academic year.
- Step 2. Within this set of programs, we identified programs that applied universally within at least one public higher education sector (e.g., to all 2-year institutions or all 4-year institutions).
- Step 3. We included only programs that covered tuition for at least the minimum length of time or credits required for students to complete their credential.

The statewide college Promise programs (n=26) that meet these three-step criteria in the fall of 2020 are the focus of the analysis presented in this brief.

<u>Limitations</u>**.** Policy research of Promise programs is aided by the student-facing nature of the programs, resulting in a significant amount of information about the programs being made public. However, states are rapidly shifting resources and making new decisions in response to student needs and the availability of funds. Data collection ended in December 2020, so the following findings will not capture changes made since that time.

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[6] https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/affordability-access-success-a-framework-for-examining-statewide-college-promise-programs/

[7] https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e44327a52b88927aaaecabd/t/5f58d3e07e871053b883d14f/1599656934346/CollegePromiseCatalog_Rockefeller_Online_Sept2020+%281%29.pdf