

Statewide College Promise Programs: Balancing Affordability, Access, and Student Success

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About this Brief

In this brief we utilize RFA's [Statewide College Promise Framework](#) to identify the tradeoffs that states make across affordability, access and student success when crafting their Promise programs. Our analysis draws upon nearly two years of empirical research on statewide College Promise programs conducted between 2017 and 2019. We also provide additional detail or examples of various promising practices, challenges, or student/counselor experience drawn from in-depth studies of statewide College Promise Programs in Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee. In each case study state we carefully analyzed Promise policy, interviewed a broad range of state policymakers, and conducted site visits to high schools and postsecondary institutions that included interviews and focus groups with faculty, administrators, and students.

State-level postsecondary policymaking is daunting. Policymakers navigate through myriad fiscal, political, and ideological constraints and opportunities as they strive to address pressing state concerns or goals. While researchers and advocates may point to “perfect” policy models, in reality perfect policy does not exist. All policymaking involves tradeoffs between what is optimal and what is possible. The job of state policymakers, therefore, is to design and implement policy that can best advance the interests of a state and its residents given the constraints under which they operate.

Policy Tradeoffs in Statewide College Promise Programs

Nearly all states now embrace the need to increase their education attainment levels. College Promise programs have emerged as pathways to a college credential as costs continue to rise. Though generally perceived as a tool to ensure affordability, statewide Promise programs vary significantly and reflect complex tradeoffs among three important elements of the college pipeline: affordability, access, and student success.

- **Affordability.** By definition, statewide Promise programs are designed to increase the perception and/or reality of affordability for wide swaths of a state’s population. However, the degree to which a program can increase affordability will vary based on the state’s investment. Given funding constraints, policymakers must decide on the award structure (first-dollar, last-dollar, middle-dollar) and which specific costs will be covered (tuition-only, fees, etc.).
- **Access.** Statewide Promise programs have the potential to broaden access to college, especially for those who have been deterred by cost. Yet no program is truly universal; all states restrict Promise program eligibility in some ways. The degree to which they do so varies, as do the groups of students who are most affected by eligibility requirements.
- **Student Success.** Promise programs are best known for broadening the postsecondary pipeline at the front end. Yet policymakers can affect student persistence and completion by including a range of program components that either serve as program requirements or as voluntary supports.

RFA’s [Statewide College Promise Framework](#) is based on extensive analysis of 21 state-level Promise Programs. It identifies five program components (i.e. financial resources, eligibility requirements, messaging, program requirements and student supports) that correspond to decision points for state policymakers about the degree to which they will emphasize affordability, accessibility and student success in their College Promise policies as illustrated in Figure 1.

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



Equity Tradeoffs in Statewide College Promise Programs

Decisions about each of the five components in our Statewide College Promise Framework have implications for a program's potential to address equity gaps in affordability, access, and success. For example, a last-dollar program designed to fund those students who have a tuition balance after other federal and state financial aid are expended is not likely to increase *affordability* for students from low-income households. Yet because such programs spend relatively fewer dollars per student and thus may reach more students overall, last-dollar programs may increase *access* by creating a statewide college-going culture. In another example, programs that tie eligibility to FAFSA completion may restrict *access* for undocumented students. And a program that devotes no resources to supporting Promise students once enrolled may have increased affordability and access but may not improve the *success* of vulnerable students who need such support. As we identify the tradeoffs for each component of the Framework, we also highlight how these decisions can advance or limit equity for a wide range of traditionally underserved students.

I. AFFORDABILITY TRADEOFFS

Several fundamental program design decisions can affect the degree to which Promise programs make college affordable. Because these programs exist within the context of federal financial aid and each state's particular financial aid programs, policymakers must consider how to best utilize Promise to affect college affordability overall and for specific groups of students. The most fundamental affordability tradeoff is between providing some financial resources to more students versus more resources to fewer students. This tradeoff and others that policymakers face when considering their programs' **financial resources** are described below.

1. Source of Funding

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

The most fundamental element of a statewide Promise program is its funding structure. In most cases, states allocate a certain amount per year for Promise in the budget, which is revisited at regular intervals. While using public dollars helps to communicate the value and importance of these programs, relying exclusively on public money necessarily politicizes these programs. As a result, compromises are typically made when working out details of the program and the future of the program is not guaranteed. Public/private partnerships, common among local Promise programs but rare in statewide programs, can provide greater financial stability and sustainability.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Oregon**, program demand exceeded capacity in the first year. As a result, program administrators had to appeal to the legislature for additional funds. In the second year of implementation eligibility criteria were made more restrictive, but formerly eligible students were grandfathered in. In addition, students who had applied for the Promise but were deemed ineligible in the first year were reconsidered for the second year as long as they were still enrolled in a community college.

In **Tennessee**, an endowment, supported through annual overflow lottery funds, provides ample and stable funding for Promise scholarships.

In **Delaware**, funding for the state's SEED program has been guaranteed for all SEED eligible students since the program's inception in 2006.

2. Award Structure

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

States must decide whether to require that all available federal, state and institutional financial aid resources are drawn down before Promise dollars are spent. This decision determines a) which types of students receive Promise dollars; and b) how many students in the state will attend college tuition-free through Promise. A major equity consideration for award structure is that last-dollar programs will drive more scholarship dollars to students from middle-income households, since students from low-income households are typically eligible for Federal grant aid and state need-based financial aid.

The three types of Promise scholarship awards structures are as follows:

First-Dollar Programs:

- Award scholarships to students first, allowing students to add on any other grants or awarded funding to cover more costs of college;
- More directly benefit students from low-income households; and
- Are most expensive per student, and therefore, can benefit fewer students

Last-Dollar Programs:

- Only award scholarships to students whose costs are not covered by other public financial aid;
- Disproportionately drive scholarship dollars to students from middle-income homes; and
- Are less expensive per student, and therefore, can benefit more students.

Last-Dollar-Plus or Middle-Dollar Programs:

- Provide last-dollar coverage but guarantee a minimum award to all students regardless of need;
- Can offset the cost of indirect educational expenses because students can apply award to any educational expense; and
- Are more expensive per student than last-dollar programs and may require states to limit the pool of eligible students to be sustainable.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Oregon Promise is a last-dollar plus/middle-dollar program. It covers tuition for eligible students whose tuition is not paid for by federal and state aid. It also provides a minimum grant (up to \$1,000 minus a \$50 co-pay per term) to all eligible students which can be used to offset other expenses such as books and transportation.

Tennessee Promise is a last-dollar program that covers tuition and mandatory fees. Tennessee allows all eligible applicants to participate in the program regardless of whether they receive a Promise scholarship. In this way students from low-income households still have access to TN Promise supports such as mentoring, completion coaching and summer bridge.

Delaware's SEED and the **Nevada Promise** are last-dollar programs. **Delaware** covers tuition only and **Nevada** covers tuition and mandatory fees. In **Nevada**, students must receive Promise dollars to be counted as participants and have access to program resources/ perks like mentoring (provided statewide) and early registration (provided by some community colleges administering the program).

3. Maximum Award/Coverage of College Costs

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

States must decide the size of maximum award and the expenses to which it can be applied. Smaller awards allow dollars to reach more students; larger awards spread dollars to fewer students but cover a greater proportion of the total cost of college.

For students from low-income households and those not eligible for federal or state aid such as undocumented students, awards that do not ensure that the full costs of college are covered make college unaffordable. As detailed in our [Statewide College Promise Framework](#), most states only provide tuition. A smaller number include tuition plus fees, and fewer still cover other costs such as books and transportation.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Tennessee covers tuition and mandatory fees at any public community or technical college.

Delaware covers the cost of tuition for up to three years of study toward an associate degree at Delaware Technical Community College or the University of Delaware. In 2019, the scholarship was expanded to cover an additional year of tuition for the junior year of a bachelor's degree at either Delaware Tech or the University of Delaware.

Nevada covers in-state tuition and mandatory fees.

Oregon awards average cost of tuition only at community colleges with a max grant of \$2,984/ year in AY 19-20

As a last-dollar-plus/ middle-dollar program, **Oregon Promise** disburses a minimum grant to every participant whose tuition is fully covered by other scholarship/ grant aid.

II. ACCESS TRADEOFFS

Statewide college Promise programs can affect college access through two mechanisms:

- A. Program Eligibility** determines who is eligible to participate. All statewide Promise programs limit eligibility, but the types and stringency of eligibility criteria vary widely.
- B. Messaging** strategies determine the degree to which students and families are aware of the program. States may mount comprehensive communications' strategies or leave it to high school and college counselors to inform students and their families.

When taken together, decisions about program eligibility and messaging strategies can dramatically affect access to college overall, and for different populations.

Considerations for each type of Access decision are described below.

A. PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

The extent and type of eligibility requirements in statewide Promise programs vary significantly. Most are aimed at recent high school graduates, and most require full-time enrollment. But other restrictions abound. Sometimes states tie eligibility to indicators of “deserving” students to gain the support of specific policymakers or other important stakeholders. They may also be used to funnel Promise dollars towards populations that would most contribute to a state’s attainment goals or labor force needs. Eligibility requirements have important equity implications because many eligibility restrictions disproportionately affect communities of color and low-income students. From our analysis of 21 statewide Promise programs, we found that all states include some eligibility criteria. Below, we discuss a range of **eligibility requirements** that are common to many statewide Promise programs and discuss the tradeoffs that state policy makers face when deciding whether to include each in their Promise programs.

1. Income Threshold

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Income thresholds may funnel Promise dollars to students with the greatest financial need, but they may also limit the reach of the program and determine whether it functions as a universal benefit. When states choose to use income thresholds in their Promise programs, verification of income eligibility may be one-time-only or may be revisited annually.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Oregon implemented an EFC limit in the 2nd year of its Promise program, which was increased a few months later. Each year a determination is made about whether or not to implement an EFC cap, based on available funds and program demand.

2. FAFSA OR EFC Requirement

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

FAFSA completion requirements will render ineligible those students and families who are either not eligible or not capable of completing it. This limitation must be balanced against the fact that FAFSA completion can draw down Federal grant aid, increase the overall pool of tuition dollars, and therefore allow state Promise dollars to go further.

When states also tie eligibility to an Expected Family Contribution (EFC), students must be deemed eligible for federal aid. Because FAFSA cannot be processed for students without appropriate documentation, an EFC requirement renders undocumented students ineligible.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Statewide Promise programs in **Delaware, Oregon, Nevada** and **Tennessee** require applicants to file a FAFSA, or where available, an alternative financial aid application.

Tennessee and **Nevada** impose early FAFSA deadlines. Early deadlines can ensure that there is enough time to complete verification and process last-dollar awards.

Delaware and **Oregon** have no early deadline but encourage students to complete the FAFSA as early as possible.

Tennessee and **Delaware** hold statewide FAFSA drives to support students to complete the FAFSA. **Delaware** partners with \$tand By Me for this initiative.

Oregon leveraged an existing alternative state financial aid application (ORSAA) so that undocumented students can apply for the Promise grant.

Delaware Technical Community College has an affidavit process so that undocumented students can apply for its Promise program.

Nevada originally required an EFC. But because this requirement invalidated undocumented students, the state amended this requirement to include FAFSA or an alternative application, which is currently being developed.

3. Minimum High School GPA

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Minimum high school GPA requirements can limit the eligibility of underprepared students who may be quite capable of succeeding in college. However, they can also be perceived as an indication of merit or college readiness, which can be politically necessary in some states.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Delaware and **Oregon** require a minimum cumulative high school GPA of 2.5.

Tennessee and **Nevada** require students to have graduated from high school or have a minimum cumulative high school GPA of 2.0 (all students who graduate from high school should also meet this criterion).

Oregon requires that students either submit transcripts or have their high school GPA verified by the school through an online portal.

In **Delaware**, high school counselors and students perceive the minimum GPA as a barrier to access for otherwise eligible students.

In **Delaware** and **Oregon**, students reported that they didn't become aware of the GPA requirement until applying to program, which was too late for them to ensure they met the minimum GPA.

4. Citizen/State Resident Status

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

State policymakers must determine whether Promise eligibility is tied to citizenship or residency status. For undocumented students who do not qualify for federal aid, a statewide Promise program might be their only opportunity to access scholarship dollars. Of 18 last- or middle-dollar statewide Promise programs operating in 2018-19, only 5 extend eligibility to undocumented students.

5. Timeframe to Enroll/Age Limitations

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Most statewide Promise programs limit access to those who recently graduated from high school or completed a GED and also include an age limit. Yet several states have included adult students or created parallel Promise programs focused on returning adult students.

6. SAT/ACT Score Requirement

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Requiring students to take the SAT or ACT to qualify for a Promise program may increase college-going culture in high schools, especially since four-year institutions typically require them. Of the 21 statewide Promise programs operating in 2018-2019, four required students to achieve a minimum SAT/ACT score. Like a minimum high school GPA requirement, this requirement can serve as an indicator of “merit.” Yet it may exclude some students who either cannot afford these tests or are unable to navigate the test-taking system. It also creates an unnecessary barrier for students bound for open-access institutions.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Undocumented students who are state residents are eligible to participate in Promise in **Oregon**, **Delaware**, and **Nevada**.

Tennessee does not include undocumented students in Promise or in any other state-funded financial aid.

Nevada closely modeled Tennessee’s legislation and program design. In doing so it unintentionally disqualified undocumented students. Legislation was later modified to include them.

When states provide a FAFSA alternative for undocumented students, clear and consistent messaging of this process is important given its added complexity. In **Oregon**, a community college admissions administrator noted that the complexity of the FAFSA alternative led to ineffective guidance from high school counselors and delays in grant disbursement.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Tennessee, **Delaware**, **Nevada**, and **Oregon** limit eligibility to recent high school graduates.

In **Oregon** there is no age limit for GED students.

Tennessee limits eligibility to students with a GED who are <19 years of age. In **Nevada** GED students must be <20.

In **Delaware**, GED recipients are not eligible for its Promise program.

Tennessee implemented an adult version of Promise (TN Reconnect) after recognizing that the state would not meet completion goals without including adults.

In **Tennessee** and **Delaware**, both counselors and traditionally-aged non-Promise college students said that the timeframe to enroll is a barrier because it restricts availability to students who cannot enroll in college right after high school graduation or those who begin at a four-year institution but need to transfer into community college.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Tennessee, **Delaware**, **Nevada**, and **Oregon** do not require SAT/ACT completion.

7. High School Curriculum Requirement

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some statewide Promise programs require certain course-taking patterns to help ensure students are college-ready. Yet these requirements may exclude students who attend high schools that do not offer requisite courses or those who choose a college path that does not require such preparation to be successful.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee do not require specific high school coursework.

Counselors and students in **Delaware, Nevada, Oregon** and **Tennessee** reported that students did not change their course-taking behavior in response to the availability of Promise.

8. Informational Meeting/Orientation Attendance Requirement

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some statewide Promise programs require students to attend informational or orientation meetings.

While this requirement can ensure that students have a full understanding of the parameters of a Promise program, it can also reduce eligibility for students who cannot attend such meetings.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Nevada requires two pre-enrollment/college orientation meetings for students. Originally in-person attendance was required but this created a barrier to access due to transportation. Nevada now provides online meetings to address this requirement.

Tennessee requires in-person attendance at one mandatory orientation per year. Students and high school administrators cited examples of transportation barriers for students.

9. Drug Testing/Background Checks

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some states require students to pass a drug test or demonstrate a clear criminal history to be eligible for Promise. These requirements can create the perception of worthiness. However, given the

extent of substance abuse and related criminal offenses in states with a tight labor market, they can also reduce the capacity of Promise programs to increase college attainment and strengthen the labor pool.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee do not include drug testing or background checks as part of program eligibility

Delaware does not require drug testing but does restrict eligibility to students with no felony convictions. This is both an eligibility and program requirement as students must maintain this status while in college. Administrators of the program described the purpose as “an incentive to stay out of trouble.”

10. Years of In-State Residency

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Residency requirements are typically designed to ensure that the economic benefits of a statewide Promise program accrue to the state that is offering it. Residency requirements can be pre- and/or post-Promise participation. Promise programs have the potential to reduce out-migration, particularly among households with

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

To be eligible for **Oregon Promise** applicants must be a state resident for at least 12 months prior to college attendance. Parents of dependent students must also live in Oregon.

Delaware and **Tennessee** both require in-state residency and attendance and graduation from an eligible in-state high school.¹

Nevada has a residency requirement but extends eligibility 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.

¹ Tennessee allows two out of state high schools to participate in Tennessee Promise. These high schools have unique circumstances as they sit right across state lines in Alabama and Virginia.

children, and increase in-migration. States should consider the implications of migration trends on labor and housing markets when considering these types of eligibility requirements.

11. Process for Granting Exceptions

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Regardless of their individual Promise program requirements, many states have developed appeals processes so that exceptions can be granted on a case-by-case basis.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Nevada allows students to request a leave of absence to the Board of Regents due to extreme financial hardship, or other extenuating circumstances such as religious or medical reasons, or military service.

In **Delaware**, students may appeal the direct-from-high school enrollment criteria due to extenuating circumstances such as military service or a medical condition.

Oregon has an appeal process for students who miss the application deadline. The appeal must be submitted by the student to Oregon Promise staff within two weeks after the application deadline to be considered for review.

Tennessee allows appeals for three conditions: 1.) change of enrollment from full-time to part-time; 2.) extended time needed for FAFSA verification; and 3.) Leave of absence for allowable medical (i.e. illness of student or family member) or personal reasons (i.e. extreme financial hardship or death in family).

B. MESSAGING

Messaging is an important component of statewide Promise program access and can be used as a tool to create a statewide college-going culture. States vary significantly in how they describe and disseminate information about their Promise Programs. These variations can affect the degree to which state residents are aware of the Promise program, the degree to which their understanding is accurate, and the degree to which the message is customized to address the concerns and needs of particular sub-populations and geographical locales. Communications campaigns can be expensive and require significant communications expertise, so states must decide if these expenses are a good use of their resources. Through our analysis of statewide Promise programs, we identified several elements of program messaging that have implications for access. Below, we describe each of these **messaging** elements and discuss tradeoffs and decision points for each.

1. Degree of Message Complexity

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

A simple message (e.g., “Free College”) is clear and consistent, and can be used effectively to create a statewide college-going culture by changing the perceptions of even very young students and their families about the accessibility of a college education. However, states must decide how to balance simplicity with accuracy. Most Promise programs do not cover the full cost of college, and students and their families can become disillusioned when they discover that college is not truly “free.”

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Tennessee originally described Promise as the opportunity to go to college for “free”, which created unrealistic expectations among students. Similarly, when **Oregon’s** program was launched, it was portrayed in the media as “Free College,” leaving many students and families confused when they were expected to pay some costs.

Tennessee’s message has since been refined to “free tuition and mandatory fees” at technical or community college.

2. Degree of Message Customization

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

When states develop a statewide messaging campaign, it is typically based on a single message and a common set of advertisements or graphics. Yet these generalized messages may not resonate with important sub-populations or particular geographic locales within a state. Lessons from local Promise programs suggest that messaging campaigns customized to specific populations and labor markets may be more effective. States must decide whether to create a single statewide message, or to allow for customization to ensure effectiveness for all populations.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Tennessee**, community colleges have begun to customize the Promise and Reconnect message to reach students in their communities

3. State vs. Local Messengers

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some states rely on high school counselors and colleges to be the primary communicators of Promise programs. Other states employ a more centralized communications strategy. Local messengers provide more personalized communication, but this strategy can lead to variation in the accuracy of the message as well as the degree to which all students are reached. Centralized state messaging campaigns may reach more students and provide more accurate information but may lack the customization needed to reach important student sub-groups. An additional equity consideration is that the capacity to message and support Promise programs varies across high schools and colleges, which may create equity gaps in states that rely on these institutions to spread the Promise message.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Nevada**, institutions are required to message the program. When the program launched, the lack of a common message resulted in inconsistent messaging across institutions. Later during implementation, a common message was developed to reduce inconsistencies.

Local messengers do not always have accurate information about statewide Promise programs. In **Oregon**, some high school counselors reported that they were not informing students eligible for Federal grant aid about the program because they believed Promise was only available to those whose college costs were not covered by Federal grants. However, all Promise students receive a minimum grant in Oregon.

In **Delaware**, some students with GPAs below 2.5 reported that they were not informed about the program.

4. Paid Advertising Campaign vs. No Advertising

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some states spend little to no dollars on a statewide messaging campaign, and instead presume that the message will spread by word of mouth. While less expensive, this decision can have a significant impact on access, since students cannot apply to a Promise program that they are not aware of. Others invest heavily in communications to encourage a clear, simple, and consistent message.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Nevada**, system and institutional leaders were cautious about advertising the program in the first year, given the uncertainty about sustained funds for program continuation. Some advertising materials included a note indicating that award renewal was subject to additional funding appropriation by the legislature.

In **Oregon**, advertising is limited to a series of videos and webinars available on the state agency website, and fliers that can be printed out and posted in high schools. Information and reminders about Promise deadlines are published in e-newsletters through the Department of Education as well as the state office which coordinates the Promise.

Tennessee contracted with a professional marketing and public relations agency to build a brand for both Promise and Reconnect. The marketing partner has helped Tennessee message Promise and Reconnect broadly by conducting research and creating various materials for statewide mailings, TV and radio commercials, and billboard advertising.

For dissemination, **Tennessee's** higher education agency leveraged partners across systems and sectors, including the community and technical college's oversight agency and tnAchieves, a local non-profit partner to Tennessee Promise to message the program.

III. STUDENT SUCCESS TRADEOFFS

Two components of statewide Promise programs have direct implications for student persistence and graduation once they are enrolled.

Program requirements place conditions upon continued enrollment and are common in statewide programs. While often designed to bolster retention and graduation via research-based practices, some requirements can also create barriers to persistence for some students.

Student supports are less common, yet some Promise programs scaffold students as they navigate social and academic challenges that may threaten their persistence.

A. PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Program requirements may be intended to increase the quality or level of student engagement in college; to narrow participation by weeding out students who cannot meet them; or a combination of both. States must weigh the relative benefits of these requirements against the potentially negative effects they can have on retention and graduation—particularly for students with competing responsibilities such as work and family. Below, we describe a range of **program requirements** that are common to statewide Promise programs and discuss the tradeoffs and decision points that policy makers face when determining whether to include each in their Promise programs.

1. Years of College/Credits Covered

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Statewide Promise programs vary in terms of the number of credits they cover; at which types of institutions students must accumulate these credits; and for what degrees or credentials the award applies. States must also decide whether to include developmental education and consider whether and how they will recognize dual enrollment credits.

2. Full-Time vs. Part-Time Enrollment

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Research is clear that full-time enrollment is associated with retention and completion. However, competing obligations in the lives of many talented students prevent them from maintaining full-time enrollment. States must decide how to balance these competing realities as they determine whether and how to include this eligibility requirement.

3. Enrollment in Specific Institutions/Programs

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some statewide Promise programs limit the institutions or programs that students can enroll in with Promise funds. Such decisions can funnel students towards the most economical institutions (community colleges) or to programs aligned with state workforce needs. But they can also reduce retention and completion, given that student aspirations and their geographical location can change over time. Also, limiting Promise dollars to two-year institutions can reduce attainment or increase time to degree for four-year degree seekers, given relative lack of resources at community colleges and documented difficulties in transfer.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Delaware SEED Scholarship covers 3 years (including summers) leading to an associate degree at Delaware Technical Community College or University of Delaware. Developmental education courses are covered but students may run out of time to complete credit-heavy degrees. Students completing an associate degree with SEED receive an additional year of funding to be applied toward a bachelor's degree at Delaware Technical Community College or University of Delaware.

Nevada Promise covers 3 years at a 2-year institution. Students are permitted to use the scholarship for developmental education courses but receive no additional time for completion beyond the three years.

Oregon Promise covers a maximum of 90 college credits at a 2-year institution, which includes any dual enrollment credits that students transfer in from high school or a postsecondary institution.

Tennessee Promise covers 2.5 years (five semesters) at a technical, 2-, or 4-year institution. Tennessee has a co-requisite remediation model to help underprepared students accumulate college credits and stay on track to complete an associate degree within five

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Oregon allows for both part- and full-time enrollment, thus providing more flexibility for students.

In **Delaware**, the program requires students to complete 24 credits per year, including summers. Del Tech administrators reported that they use their appeals process to provide flexibility where possible.

In **Tennessee**, community college administrators noted that some Promise students would benefit from the option of part-time enrollment due to personal and work responsibilities, or due to academic preparedness.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Oregon**, students may use Promise to attend any Oregon community college

In **Tennessee**, students can use the Promise scholarship to attend community colleges, technical colleges, or four-year institutions offering associate degrees.

In **Delaware**, students can enroll in an associate degree program at Delaware Technical Community College or in the associate of arts program at the University of Delaware.

In **Delaware** and **Oregon**, some high school counselors were concerned that at-risk students would not get enough support at a community college, compared to a four-year institution.

4. Annual Application

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some state Promise programs require students to re-apply to the program each year. This type of requirement can confirm that students are still aware of and committed to program requirements. However, students who do not comply but are otherwise in good academic standing will be dropped from the program. Annual applications can also serve as an income verification in some cases.

5. Mentorship Requirement

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Mentorship can be an effective student support, especially for first-generation college students. But if required it can lead to program attrition, since logistical and time requirements may make it impossible for some students to obtain and meet with a mentor.

6. Student Accountability Requirements

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Community service requirements are designed to serve as a “giving back” mechanism to ensure that those receiving Promise funds support the larger good. Some states require co-pays to ensure that participants have some ‘skin in the game.’ Yet these requirements can reduce eligibility for students whose life circumstances makes it difficult for them to comply.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee require a one-time application to the program.

Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee require that students complete FAFSA annually. Nevada, Delaware, and Oregon each offer alternative financial aid processes for undocumented students.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Nevada** and **Tennessee**, the demand for mentors exceeded supply.

In **Tennessee**, college-based mentors said that the program was more of a ‘checklist’ rather than a meaningful support for students. Mentors reported that students rarely responded to their messages outside of mandatory meetings.

Nevada’s implementation of the mentoring program proved to be challenging, since some school districts required mentors to pass screening requirements. As a result, many students met with their mentors in a public space or at the community colleges, and some had difficulty doing so due to transportation barriers.

In **Nevada**, community colleges were expected to recruit mentors and pay for mentors’ background checks, putting a strain on institutional resources. Policymakers suggested that a way to reduce the demand for mentors would be to only match Promise students with mentors upon enrollment in college rather than at the time of application to Promise, since many students who apply do not ultimately use the program.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Nevada** and **Tennessee**, students who work reported that community service requirements compete with their job responsibilities.

In **Tennessee**, some rural areas did not provide enough opportunities for community service. As a result, Tennessee expanded its definition of community service to include job shadowing and service-learning opportunities.

In **Nevada**, high school and colleges administrators perceived the required 20 hours of community service as cumbersome. In addition, there were not many opportunities available for minors or during the weekends. In year 2, **Nevada** reduced the required number of community service hours from 20 to 8.

Oregon requires a \$50 co-pay per semester. Co-pays are deducted from the student accounts, thus reducing the grant that students get. For this reason, most students are unaware of their co-pay.

7. Required Meeting Attendance

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some statewide Promise programs require students to attend a certain number of meetings per semester. While these meetings may help guide students as they progress through college, they can also be a barrier for students with competing life priorities, such as work and family responsibilities.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Nevada Promise requires two mandatory meetings/trainings, which are now offered online because meeting attendance can be a barrier for some students.

A rural high school in **Tennessee** scheduled required meetings immediately following the school day to address the transportation barriers created by scheduling such meetings in the evening.

8. Continuous Enrollment

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Research indicates that continuous enrollment is strongly related to persistence and graduation. However, including it as a requirement of a statewide Promise program can exclude students whose life circumstances require them to stop out, even if they are otherwise in good academic standing.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee**, students are required to maintain continuous enrollment.

Delaware, Oregon, and Nevada offer waiver/appeals processes/leave of absences for students who cannot meet this requirement. In **Nevada** and **Oregon** waivers are reviewed on a case-by-case basis and can be considered for situations such as extreme financial hardship, medical issues, family emergencies, and military training or deployment.

In **Tennessee**, regulations allow a student to delay initial enrollment or take a leave from continued enrollment to fulfill military training.

9. Minimum College GPA

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

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 statewide Promise programs set a higher GPA requirement. This decision is typically framed as a “merit” requirement, but it can exclude students who could otherwise persist and graduate.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Delaware's SEED program requires that students maintain a 2.5 college GPA. SEED students reported that this requirement was stressful. High school administrators and counselors reported that former students had dropped out of college because they had struggled to maintain their GPA and had lost their SEED scholarship.

In **Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee**, students are required to make Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), which is the same criteria that is used to determine eligibility for Federal grant aid. Aligned performance criteria are easier for students to understand and can make processing more efficient.

Nevada's original legislation required students to maintain a 2.5 college GPA but the state revised the requirement to SAP as defined by each institution in response to complaints from students and institutions.

10. Process for Granting Exceptions

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Many states have developed appeal processes so that institutions can grant exceptions to program requirements for students on a case-by-case basis. States must balance flexibility with consistency in order to maintain equity.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Tennessee**, college administrators reported that eligibility rules became less flexible as the program scaled from a local to a state-wide program.

11. Defining and Tracking Promise Students

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

States must determine how they will track Promise student participation, progress, and outcomes. Emerging research indicates that Promise programs increase college-going statewide, even among students who do not receive Promise dollars. If states only track program effects for students who receive Promise dollars, they may miss the opportunity to fully assess the impact of the program.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

Tennessee defines Promise students as those who receive Promise dollars and those whose college costs are fully covered by other grant aid but receive Promise supports.

Nevada and **Delaware** do not consider students fully covered by grant aid as Promise students. However, institutions track outcomes for any student eligible for Promise, regardless of whether they receive Promise dollars.

B. STUDENT SUPPORTS

Student supports are aspects of statewide Promise programs that are available to students once they are enrolled in Promise programs. Unlike eligibility or program participation requirements, most student supports are voluntary, and all are designed to increase the likelihood of persistence and graduation. Because these supports are expensive, most statewide Promise programs provide few if any student supports. In addition, most supports are academic, although students and administrators report that social services and health-related supports are also needed for students to be successful. Below, we identify three types of **student supports** that a few statewide Promise programs have incorporated and discuss the tradeoffs and decision points for each.

1. Capacity-Building Grants to Institutions

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

Some statewide Promise programs require or encourage institutions to provide student supports to Promise students. But this is not a revenue-neutral proposition, particularly if enrollment increases as a result of a Promise program. In addition, institutions vary in their capacity and resources to support students, creating equity gaps. States must determine whether they can draw down resources from alternative funding streams to assist institutional efforts to support students; or whether to divert scholarship dollars to help ensure that Promise students persist and graduate.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Tennessee**, the governing office provides grants to participating institutions to support the expansion or creation of student supports. Institutions reported that these grants were useful in developing or expanding innovative student success and retention programs. To date, the system office has administered three years of grants (2015-2017) with amounts ranging from \$90,000 to \$200,000 to institutions.

In the absence of institutional grants, institutions in **Nevada** commit existing resources to support Promise students. Variation in leadership, size, and fiscal capacity leads to different levels of student supports, creating inequitable student experiences.

2. Targeted vs. Universal Student Supports

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

When providing supports, states must decide whether they are targeted or universal. Targeted supports are likely to be a more effective use of state dollars, yet identifying which students are at risk can be onerous. In contrast, universal supports are more expensive to deliver, yet less expensive and complicated to administer.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Tennessee** and **Nevada**, mentoring is offered to all Promise students. Yet student experience varies by the quality of mentor and the institution that they attend.

In **Nevada**, one institution created a Promise coordinator who referred Promise students with questions to the relevant departments. Promise students noted the advantage of having one office that addresses all their questions and helps them navigate the college.

Partners in **Tennessee** such as system offices and non-profit providers provide additional supports to Tennessee Promise students. One partner targets Promise students in need of academic remediation, as determined by their ACT score, for a summer bridge program. Another partner recently made completion coaches available to students with an EFC of zero.

Although not mandated through statute, some institutions in **Nevada** provide Promise students with priority registration and special days to meet with academic advisors. Students considered these services to be greatly beneficial.

3. Voluntary vs. Required Student Supports

Tradeoffs and Decision Points

While most student supports are voluntary, some states require students to partake of them. While this may increase the likelihood of completion, requiring supports will increase participation and therefore, will become more expensive to deliver. Also, for students who have barriers to participation or do not perceive need for support, requiring supports can create an additional burden.

EXAMPLES FROM CASE STUDY STATES

In **Oregon**, students are required to complete a First-Year Experience. However, community colleges have great latitude in determining how this requirement will be met. As a result, information provided to students and quality of the programs vary widely which has led to inequitable student experiences. In addition, students were largely unaware of this requirement.

In **Tennessee**, participation in a summer bridge program is not required.

In **Nevada**, the two largest community colleges offer summer bridge programs at no cost to Promise students.

SUMMING IT UP

How can policymakers best navigate the tradeoffs inherent in Promise program design to arrive at the best possible policy for their states? And which decisions about program design will best address existing equity gaps? There are no easy answers to these questions. Policymakers in each state must clearly establish the goals for their state's College Promise program and navigate through their state's complex fiscal, political and ideological landscape to arrive at the best policy possible.

This document is designed to assist states in that process by providing concrete examples of important tradeoffs inherent in the design of statewide Promise programs. As the prevalence of statewide Promise programs continues to grow—and indeed as debate about establishing a national Promise program enters the 2020 presidential election season—policymakers need a framework to guide their decision-making, as well as examples of how other states have done so. This brief—in addition to our Statewide College Promise Framework and case studies of statewide Promise programs in Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee—is intended to scaffold this work.