

AFFORDABILITY, ACCESS, AND STUDENT SUCCESS  
IN STATEWIDE COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS

*The Case of Delaware's SEED Scholarship:  
A Well-Established but Lesser-Known  
Promise Program*

**DECEMBER 2019**

Kri Burkander, Ph.D., Victoria Ballerini, Ph.D., Daniel C. Kent, and M. Kate Callahan, Ph.D.



RESEARCH  
for ACTION



## *About this Research*

Research for Action has studied statewide Promise programs since 2017, with in-depth analysis in four states—Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee. Our research in these states includes an extensive review of legislative and policy documents; 146 interviews with policymakers, institutional leaders, and high school staff; site visits to 8 postsecondary institutions; site visits to 12 high schools; 12 high school student focus groups; and 16 college student focus groups. We also conducted quantitative analysis on student-level data from three of the four states involved in the study. This work is part of a larger study led by RFA that also includes a policy scan of 21 current statewide programs and case studies by Penn AHEAD of local Promise programs in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. We summarize additional results of our analysis of state-level Promise programs at [www.researchforaction.org/collegepromise](http://www.researchforaction.org/collegepromise). To explore Penn AHEAD's past and forthcoming research on College Promise, visit <https://ahead-penn.org/creating-knowledge/college-promise/publications-media>.

## *Acknowledgments*

The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful feedback during the development of this report from Research for Action's Executive Director, **Dr. Kate Shaw**. Thank you to the rest of the RFA research team who worked on this study: **Shanell Hagood** and **Kasey Meehan**, as well as graduate assistants **Visha Patel** and **Gabriel Gutierrez-Aragon**. The authors also want to thank **Dr. Laura Perna**, GSE Centennial Presidential Professor of Education and Executive Director of Penn AHEAD at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, and her research team for their thought partnership in this research. In addition, we appreciate RFA's Communications team, **Alison Murawski** and **Samantha Slade** for their efforts designing this report.

This research would not have been possible without the participation of the students, staff, and administrators in our Delaware case study high schools and **Delaware Technical Community College**, as well as staff and administrators at the **Delaware Higher Education Office**. We are thankful for their time and interest in our research.

Finally, this report and the research study examining college Promise programs across the United States which informed it were funded by a grant from the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**. Findings and opinions expressed through this research are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation

## Delaware's SEED Scholarship at a Glance:



## Delaware’s SEED Scholarship: Overview and Context

The Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) Scholarship is a state grant created via legislation in 2005 and launched in 2006.<sup>1</sup> SEED was introduced by Senator Harris B. McDowell and Representative Nancy Wagner, inspired by the Taylor Opportunity Program in Louisiana. The legislation was supported by a bipartisan group of 27 lawmakers,<sup>2</sup> and was later championed and signed into law by Governor Ruth Ann Minner, a graduate of Delaware Technical Community College (Delaware Tech).

The SEED scholarship is a **last-dollar award** that covers tuition for recent high school graduates seeking to obtain associate degrees from either Delaware Tech or the University of Delaware.<sup>3</sup> The scholarship is portable between Delaware Tech and University of Delaware. As of the 2018-2019 academic year, the scholarship covered up to three years (including summers) of tuition. The law places no funding limit on the program’s allocation; eligible students’ tuition is covered. The state has appropriated enough dollars to fully fund all eligible students each year since the program’s inception, reflecting sustained political support. Proponents have framed the scholarship as a legal guarantee made to students and families, an argument that serves to protect funding for the program in lean budget times. Administered by the Delaware Department of Education, SEED is the primary state-funded financial aid program in Delaware, working in conjunction with federal grants, other state support, and institutional aid.<sup>4</sup>

The stated goals of the SEED Scholarship are to motivate students to “stay in school, excel academically, and have access to a higher education regardless of a family’s financial circumstances.”

Statewide Promise programs do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they are situated within a state’s overall postsecondary landscape and demographic composition. Table 1 below summarizes important elements of Delaware’s postsecondary context.

**Table 1. Delaware’s Postsecondary Landscape and Demographic Composition**

STATE CONTEXT		
Graduation Rate <sup>5</sup> (2013)	Demographics <sup>6</sup> (2018)	Credential Attainment <sup>7</sup> (2019)
14.4% public 2-year colleges 73.6% public 4-year colleges	23% Black or African American 0.7% American Indian and Alaskan Native 4.1% Asian 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander 2.7% Two or More Races 9.5% Hispanic or Latino 61.9% White, not Hispanic or Latino	42.4% Overall 29.3% African-American 76.7% Asian and Pacific Islander 34.1% American Indian 18% Hispanic 45.3% White
Higher Education Affordability		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>According to an analysis from 2016, attending a public 2-year college full-time would take 17% of an average family’s income, ranking Delaware as 20th in the nation for affordability of a 2-year public education.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>SEED is by far the largest scholarship program in the state, representing 2/3 of the state scholarship budget. SEED supports students at any of Delaware Tech’s four campuses, which serve urban and rural students across the state. In addition to the SEED scholarship, the state offers the merit- and need-based Scholarship Incentive Program for students attending public 4-year institutions in the state, the merit- and need-based INSPIRE scholarship for students attending Delaware State University, and several merit-based scholarships (requiring a minimum GPA of 3.0 and 1000 on the SAT).</li> </ul>		

<sup>1</sup> SB 30. Reg. Sess. (2005-2006). (DE. 2005)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> University of Delaware Associate of Arts degrees are eligible for SEED scholarships.

<sup>4</sup> Delaware State Code. Department of Education. Title 14. Retrieved from: <https://delcode.delaware.gov/title14/c034/sc14/>

<sup>5</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education. “College Completion.” <https://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/>

<sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau. “QuickFacts: Delaware; United States.” 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/DE.US/PST045218>

<sup>7</sup> Lumina Foundation. Delaware’s progress toward the goal.” A Stronger Nation Report. 2018. <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#state/DE>

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Research on Higher Education. (2016). College Affordability Diagnosis: Delaware. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. <http://www2.gse.upenn.edu/irhe/affordability-diagnosis>

## AFFORDABILITY, ACCESS AND SUCCESS



Though generally perceived as a tool to ensure college affordability, in reality statewide college Promise programs vary significantly and reflect complex tradeoffs among three important elements of the college pipeline: affordability, access and student success. For a more detailed review of the tradeoffs across these elements please see [Statewide College Promise Programs: Balancing Affordability, Access and Student Success](#).

In this case study we outline the program design, successes, and challenges of Delaware’s SEED Scholarship as it balances higher education affordability, access, and success.

### Affordability

Financial Resources

By design, statewide Promise programs aim to decrease the cost of higher education. Generally, these programs offer **financial resources** for eligible students to cover at least the cost of tuition for a two-year college degree. Yet the degree to which statewide Promise programs cover the full cost of college varies considerably and is an important measure of their effectiveness.

### *The SEED Approach to Affordability*

- Last-dollar award
- Covers tuition only
- Available for three years<sup>9</sup>

The SEED scholarship is a **last-dollar** scholarship that can be used to cover the remaining cost of tuition for an associate degree from Delaware Tech or the University of Delaware’s Associate in Arts program after other aid has been applied. Students must enroll full-time and the scholarship covers the

cost of tuition for up to three years of study. Developmental education courses are covered but students may run out of time to complete credit-heavy degrees (e.g. aviation maintenance, diagnostic medical sonography, etc.).

### *Effects of SEED on Affordability*

**SEED improves college affordability for students who do not qualify for need-based aid programs.** Several institutional and high school administrators noted that the SEED scholarship was particularly beneficial for middle income students, whose families make too much to qualify for the federal Pell Grant but would still struggle to pay tuition. Roughly half of SEED students receive no federal grant dollars. One student described the value of SEED for such students in this way:

*I think it’s very helpful... Especially for the people who make just a bit too much but not enough to pay for their scholarship or pay for four-year college... I’m glad that the program is available because I know that its either that or nothing because they can’t pay for it and they refuse to be in that debt coming out of college.*

**Delaware Tech utilizes institutional resources to further bolster affordability by partially covering non-tuition expenses.** As a last-dollar program, SEED funds are available to cover only the cost of tuition. Delaware Tech administrators estimate that the SEED scholarship covers only 29% of the total cost of attendance, which includes room, board, books, transportation, and other non-tuition expenses. Delaware Tech has raised institutional funds to make college more affordable for all students. Administrators reported their pride in the

<sup>9</sup> In 2019, the scholarship was expanded to cover an additional year of tuition for the junior year of a bachelor’s degree at Delaware Tech or University of Delaware.

fact that between leveraged federal grant dollars, SEED funds, and institutional scholarships, “67 to 70% of [all] our students [are] walking across that stage debt-free.”

**Administrative delays in processing awards at times has resulted in erroneous billing and confusion among students about how much they owe in tuition and fees.** Several current SEED recipients complained that the financial aid processing can often be slow, and that they sometimes first receive a bill for tuition and then later a lower bill after the scholarship was processed. This confusion can impact students’ perceptions of college affordability and the value of the scholarship. Delaware Tech administrators reported that they were aware of this issue, and recently stated that they are working to improve the timeliness of awarding and communication to students.

## Access

### Eligibility & Messaging

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

**Program Eligibility** determines who is eligible to participate. All statewide Promise programs include some eligibility criteria, but the types and stringency of these criteria vary widely.

**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 make students and their families aware.

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

### *The SEED Approach to Access*

- **FAFSA Completion**
- **Delaware high school graduation**
- **Direct from high school**
- **High School GPA Requirement**
- **No felony record**

**Program Eligibility requirements.** SEED contains a merit component as well as the expectation of no felony charges. The latter is unique to Delaware. To access the SEED scholarship, students must satisfy the following criteria:

- 1) **FAFSA/Alternate financial aid application:** Students must complete the FAFSA or have their income verified alternatively.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that completing the FAFSA can be difficult for many families, Delaware partners with [\\$tand by Me](#), a financial planning nonprofit, to hold statewide FAFSA drives.
- 2) **Residency:** SEED is limited to students who enroll in the fall semester following their graduation from an eligible in-state high school.<sup>11</sup>
- 3) **Timeframe:** Students are encouraged to apply to Delaware Tech or University of Delaware by April 1 for priority consideration for SEED in the subsequent Fall semester.
- 4) **Merit:** Student must have a minimum cumulative high school GPA of 2.5.
- 5) **Criminal Record:** Students must have a criminal record free of felony convictions.

For more information on common types of eligibility criteria included by statewide promise programs and how criteria vary across programs, visit [RFA’s Statewide College Promise Framework](#).

**Messaging.** Per language in the bill, the goal of SEED is to motivate students to “stay in school, have no felony charges, excel academically, and have access to a higher education regardless of a family’s financial

<sup>10</sup> Undocumented students who are state residents can submit an affidavit in place of a FAFSA.

<sup>11</sup> Students who were in foster care between the ages of 16 and 18 do not have to graduate from a Delaware high school and do not have to enroll immediately upon graduation. Foster care students must start at the College before the age of 25 and make steady progress toward an associate degree within five years.

circumstances”. The program has been fully funded since its inception and program components have largely remained the same, allowing for consistent messaging and a broadly shared, accurate understanding of SEED. The law requires that each institution shall “develop, promote, and coordinate a public awareness program to inform students and parents of the SEED program,”<sup>12</sup> and that each high school have at least one designated program contact person.

While there was initially a concerted statewide marketing effort to announce the program when it launched in 2006, there is no longer widespread messaging. A representative from the state office noted that they did not have billboards or other large-scale marketing efforts because the target population for the scholarship is direct-from-high school students and they do not wish to mislead the public. As a result, unless students have friends or family who have taken advantage of the program, they must rely on their school personnel to inform them about the program. Delaware Tech staff also send out mailings to high school students and have revised them over the years to be more concise and engaging. Students are also referred directly to the [website](#).

## *Effects of SEED on Access*

**Undocumented students are eligible for SEED.** Delaware’s provision of a financial aid application process that is an alternative to FAFSA has opened eligibility to undocumented students. This makes Delaware one of only five statewide last-dollar Promise programs nationally that serve these students. In focus groups, DACA students described how SEED provided them with the opportunity to continue their education beyond high school. One student noted:

*Because I'm a DACA recipient...I can actually continue [to college], because I don't get [any other] financial aid, so that's a really good thing.*

**Although SEED’s high school GPA eligibility requirement is relatively low, the requirement does restrict access to the program for some students.** High school counselors and students reported that many students do not begin college planning until late in junior or senior year. This means that some students learn about the 2.5 GPA minimum too late for them to raise their GPA to qualify. Some counselors suggested that student achievement is correlated with student financial need; therefore, disqualifying students based on GPA potentially forecloses college as an option for some low-income students.

**Counselors may target information about SEED to stronger students.** Some students reported that because their GPAs were lower than 2.5, they had not been informed about the program at all. Counselors corroborated this impression. As one said, “If they have a 3.0 GPA, they’re a quality student; we’ll encourage them, ‘you can go for free, there’s really no reason you shouldn’t pursue higher education.’”

**Requiring students to enroll in college the semester following high school graduation may limit access for students who need more time to decide on a career path or become college-ready.** High school counselors expressed mixed feelings about this requirement. While some felt that it motivates students who might otherwise not choose to attend college, others noted that some students benefit from some time after high school to clarify their career goals, attend to family or work responsibilities, or become more college-ready.

**Students and their families learn about SEED primarily through high schools. Yet inconsistent buy-in across school districts limits messaging to students and program access.** In places with strong connections to Delaware Tech such as vocational high schools, knowledge of the program is more widespread, information is accurate, and students are supported more effectively in their application process. In high schools that lack strong relationships with the college or counsel their students towards more prestigious institutions, counselors may not promote the program at all.

**Students and counselors noted a range of problems with how SEED is marketed and described.** They suggested that messaging should start when students are younger and parents are more involved in their education. Students also expressed frustration that counselors described the program as a backup, rather than promoting the program as “a great opportunity”.

---

<sup>12</sup> Delaware State Code. Department of Education. Title 14. Retrieved from: <https://delcode.delaware.gov/title14/c034/sc14/>

# Success

## Program Requirements & Student Support

Two components of statewide Promise programs have direct implications for students' success in college 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.

## *The SEED Approach to Success*

- **Complete 24 credit hours each academic year**
- **Maintain a 2.5 GPA in college**

Program requirements. Program requirements to maintain SEED participation are somewhat onerous. To maintain SEED eligibility, students must:

1. Maintain a 2.5 GPA in their college coursework
2. Maintain continuous enrollment, completing 24 credits each academic year including summers

Requiring 24 credit per year rather than 12 credits per term is intended to grant additional flexibility for students to earn credits during the summer. There is also an appeals process for students who cannot maintain continuous enrollment due

to military service or a serious medical condition.

For more information on common types of program requirements included by statewide promise programs and how requirements vary across programs, visit [RFA's Statewide College Promise Framework](#).

Student Supports. As is the case for most statewide Promise programs, SEED does not devote any additional resources or non-financial student supports in the program.<sup>13</sup>

## *Effects of SEED Requirements on Student Success*

**SEED students demonstrate stronger credential outcomes than non-SEED students.** Compared to SEED-eligible students who did not receive the grant, SEED recipients have better first-year retention rates, higher rates of credit accumulation, and higher completion rates of associate degrees.<sup>14</sup>

**Delaware Tech's decision to provide more supports to SEED students allowed it to expand supports to all students.** Delaware Tech administrators reported that they had implemented several student supports specifically for SEED students which they later expanded to all students. One example was the use of a Strategic Enrollment Management framework to employ predictive analytics to target at-risk students with supports, which is used for all students now.

**SEED students benefit from additional supports at Delaware Tech.** Several high school administrators noted their perception that Delaware Tech does a good job of supporting students, especially those with disabilities. SEED recipients in our sample reported utilizing academic services more frequently than SEED non-recipients. Other high school administrators shared their concern that without additional support such as a mentor, students may find the transition to college too difficult, and fail out or voluntarily drop out. Indeed, Delaware Tech students reported that maintaining the 2.5 GPA was a source of stress.

**SEED's full-time, continuous enrollment requirement is a barrier for many students.** Students and counselors expressed desire for more flexibility with regard to continuous enrollment. Noting that the credit requirement is

<sup>13</sup> RFA's Statewide College Promise Framework highlights four states that provide supports to students through their Promise programs: Tennessee, Oregon, Arkansas, and Nevada.

<sup>14</sup> RFA analysis of institutional data provided by Delaware Technical and Community College, AY 2018-2019.

difficult for students balancing work, family, childcare, and other commitments, Delaware Tech administrators reported that they use the appeals process to provide flexibility where possible.

## *Takeaways from a Well-Established but Lesser-Known Promise Program Designed to Increase Affordability*

The experience of implementing the SEED scholarship offers a variety of lessons for policymakers, philanthropies, and other stakeholders looking to refine or implement a College Promise program.

**Framing Promise programs as an entitlement can protect the program in lean budget times.** The funding for the program has been maintained since its inception. Administrators credit the legislative champion of the program, who reminds policymakers “if you make a promise to somebody in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade that if you graduate you were going to college and they get to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and they can’t get it, you broke a promise there.” Proponents frame the scholarship as a legal guarantee to families: “it’s not a Promise, it’s the law.”

**Even in established statewide college Promise programs with consistent funding and eligibility criteria, messaging accurate information to students can be a challenge.** SEED’s strong partnership Delaware Tech and many school districts in the state provided program administrators with access to high school staff and faculty that are key to messaging to students. However, even despite this success and the program’s relatively long tenure in the state, many students in Delaware still do not know about the program. Of students that had heard of the program, some reported that information they had been told was inaccurate. Personnel turnover at schools and migration into the state compound the challenges of creating and implementing an effective SEED communications campaign. These challenges reinforce the need for a multi-pronged communications strategy to ensure students receive the correct information about a program.

**Engage school districts before launching the program.** Institutional leaders and practitioners recognized the importance of engaging school superintendents and school counselors before launching the program. When the program launched, college practitioners relied on school districts that they had previous relationships with, but engagement across districts continues to be a challenge. Given the unequal buy-in across school districts, messaging does not reach all students in the same way, impacting program take up.

**Providing more than two years of support helps ensure that students can get a degree.** The SEED scholarship has provided three years of funding since its inception, which students noted provides an extra level of security for them as they explore and identify a degree program that fits. As of 2019, the scholarship now provides an additional year for students to pursue a junior year of a bachelor’s degree at Delaware Tech or the University of Delaware.