

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

# *The Case of Oregon Promise: An Early Adopter Focused on Broadening Access*



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**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>.

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## Oregon Promise at a Glance:

Created in

**2015**

with an allocation of

**\$10M**

Funds allocated in  
FY19:

**\$40M**

**Middle-dollar  
program**

with a minimum  
grant of

**\$1000**

minus \$50 copay  
per term

Covers community  
college tuition of up to

**90  
college  
credits**

Minimum high school

**GPA  
2.5**

Must

**enroll  
within 6  
months**

of high school  
graduation/GED  
completion

Requires

**Satisfactory  
Academic  
Progress**

to maintain eligibility

Legislative allocation  
revisited

**every  
year**

Program

**eligibility  
can vary**

due to funding  
and demand volatility

Eligibility determined by  
FAFSA or

**alternative  
financial aid  
application**

for undocumented  
students

**Permits  
part-time  
enrollment**

One of five states  
where

**undocumented  
students are  
eligible**

for Promise

# Oregon Promise: Overview and Context

Oregon Promise is a state-funded, student grant program launched by legislation in 2015. The program was championed by several state legislators with input from community college presidents. Those involved with the design and implementation of the program noted that it was inspired by both President Obama’s call for free community college and the Tennessee Promise, which has been providing tuition-free community college statewide to recent high school graduates since 2015.

Oregon Promise grant is a **middle-dollar award**, which means that it provides last dollar coverage, but guarantees a minimum grant award for students whose tuition is fully covered by Federal and/or state aid. It is administered by Oregon’s Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC).<sup>1</sup>

The stated goals of Oregon Promise are to increase enrollment in community colleges, in support of the state’s 40-40-20 completion goal, and to bring additional federal grant aid dollars into the state.<sup>2</sup>

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 Oregon’s postsecondary context.

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

STATE CONTEXT		
Graduation Rate <sup>3</sup> (2013)	Demographics <sup>4</sup> (2018)	Credential Attainment <sup>5</sup> (2017)
16.1% public 2-year colleges 55.5% public 4-year colleges	2.2% Black or African American 1.8% American Indian and Alaskan Native 4.8% Asian 0.5% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander 3.9% Two or More Races 13.3% Hispanic or Latino 75.3% White, not Hispanic or Latino	47.9% Overall 34.7% African-American 61.3% Asian and Pacific Islander 20.2% American Indian 21.1% Hispanic 45.7% White
Higher Education Affordability		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to one analysis from 2016, attending a public 2-year college full-time in Oregon would take 22% of an average family’s income, ranking Oregon as the 42<sup>nd</sup> most affordable state in the country for a 2-year public education.<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• In addition to the Oregon Promise Grant, the state offers the Oregon Opportunity Grant, a large need-based award, among a variety of other specific aid programs.</li> </ul>		

<sup>1</sup> Office of Student Access and Completion. (2019). *Oregon Promise Grant: Frequently Asked Questions*. Higher Education Coordinating Commission. <https://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-faq.aspx>  
<sup>2</sup> Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. Senate Bill 81 (2015): The Oregon Promise – report from Year 3. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Documents/Reports/SB-81-Oregon-Promise-2018.pdf>  
<sup>3</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education. “College Completion.” <https://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/>  
<sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau. “QuickFacts: Oregon; United States.” 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/OR>  
<sup>5</sup> This percentage combines those completing certificates, associate’s degrees, bachelor’s, and graduate or professional degrees. Lumina Foundation. Oregon’s progress toward the goal.” A Stronger Nation Report. 2019. <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#state/OR>  
<sup>6</sup> Institute for Research on Higher Education. (2016). *College Affordability Diagnosis: Oregon*. 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 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 Oregon Promise 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 Oregon Promise Approach to Affordability*

- Middle-dollar program
- Minimum grant of \$1000
- Designed to complement need-based Oregon Opportunity Grant

Oregon Promise is a **middle-dollar/last-dollar-plus** program,<sup>7</sup> which means that all eligible students are guaranteed a minimum award of \$1,000 per academic year. These funds can be used to cover any remaining tuition (up to the average cost of 12 credits of tuition) and other associated costs at any of the 17 public community colleges in the state after other federal and state aid has been applied. Awards range from \$1,000 to \$3,834 per year (in 2019-20) for full-time students, minus a \$50 co-pay per term.

Oregon Promise was designed to make college more affordable for students who are recent high school graduates or GED recipients, and to complement the state's robust need-based aid grant program, the Oregon Opportunity Grant (OOG). As Oregon's largest state-funded financial aid program, the OOG provides need-based funding for students enrolled in both two- and four-year institutions. Many students who fail to qualify for the OOG can receive the Promise, as in most years it has not been means-tested. In the first year of Promise implementation, the OOG provided funding to over 40,000 students across the state, disbursing some \$71 million. In contrast, Oregon Promise disbursed \$10.9 million that year. Some institutional leaders and policymakers who were critical of Oregon Promise suggested that the dollars would have been better spent bolstering need-based aid by directly increasing the state allotment to that program.

<sup>7</sup> Last-dollar programs cover the balance of tuition (and in some cases fees) remaining after all federal and state aid is applied. Middle-dollar or last-dollar-plus program operate like a last dollar program, but guarantee a minimum award to eligible students.

## Effects of Oregon Promise on Affordability

From 2016 through 2019 Oregon Promise awarded over 24 million dollars to pay for community college tuition and lower out-of-pocket college expenses for 18,588 students.<sup>8</sup> The state's \$33.5 million investment in Promise for the 2015-17 biennium and the first half of the 2017-19 biennium was supplemented by \$45 million of federal grant aid for students, and over \$135 million in Oregon Opportunity Grant funds.<sup>9</sup> This represents an increase of approximately \$8 million in federal dollars leveraged by the state through increased FAFSA completion. The number of grants awarded through the Oregon Opportunity Grant have also increased since the implementation of the Promise.

**High school and college administrators report that Oregon Promise has increased college affordability for rural, middle-income, and undocumented families specifically.** Some institutional administrators observed that the program has benefited students from “asset rich but cash poor” families, particularly from rural parts of the state. These families might own large assets (such as farms) that limit their eligibility for need-based aid, however, these assets are not liquid and do not generate the cash flow needed to meet their expected family contribution (EFC). For these students, Oregon Promise can be a critical support for affordability.

**Oregon Promise's middle-dollar program design ensures that students whose tuition expenses are covered by other federal or state aid receive additional funds to offset the costs of attendance.** The minimum Oregon Promise grant is \$1,000. This means that even if the tuition of eligible students is fully covered by federal grant aid and/or Oregon Opportunity Grant dollars, they will receive additional funds that can be applied to other college costs such as books, fees, or transportation.

**Oregon uses an alternative to FAFSA to provide access to Oregon Promise and OOG for undocumented students.** Oregon created the Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA) so that students who lack the documentation to successfully complete a FAFSA would have access to both Oregon Opportunity Grant and Oregon Promise dollars. Oregon is one of five states that currently offer an alternative to the FAFSA in order to provide last-dollar access to Promise dollars for all undocumented 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 Oregon Promise Approach to Access

- Separate program application
- FAFSA or alternative application completion
- Oregon resident
- Recent high school graduate/GED completers
- 2.5 High School GPA
- Variable EFC cap

Program eligibility requirements. Oregon changes whether and to what degree access to its Promise program is limited by Expected Family Contribution (EFC) levels. When the program launched in 2015, students of all income levels had access to Oregon Promise, but limited funding led the state to enact an EFC cap in the second year of implementation. The EFC cap was removed in year 3 of the program. The state continues to adjust the presence and level of an EFC cap as it assesses the availability of funds each year.

<sup>8</sup> Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. Senate Bill 81 (2015): The Oregon Promise – report from Year 3. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Documents/Reports/SB-81-Oregon-Promise-2018.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

As of 2019, students must satisfy the following criteria to qualify for Oregon Promise:

- 1) FAFSA/Alternative financial aid application: Students must complete the Oregon Promise Grant Application as well as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA). The presence of the ORSAA makes undocumented students eligible for the Oregon Promise.
- 2) Residency: Students must be an Oregon resident for at least 12 months prior to college attendance. Dependent students' parents must also live in Oregon.
- 3) Timeframe: Students must enroll in college within six months of their high school graduation or GED completion.
- 4) Prior Credits: Students must have no more than 90 college credits completed or attempted, regardless of the institution which granted those credits.
- 5) Merit: Applicants must have a 2.5 cumulative high school GPA or higher, or a score of 145 on all GED tests.
- 6) Need-based: Students may also be subject to eligibility requirements based on their Expected Family Contribution (EFC).<sup>10</sup>

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. When first implemented, Oregon Promise received wide media coverage and there was a concerted effort by the HECC to push out Promise messaging to high school counselors. Information is currently available on the state's Office of Student Access and Completion [website](#) in [Spanish](#) and [English](#), including [webinars](#), [videos](#), and an [FAQ](#). Information about the Promise is also included in email distributions through the Department of Education, and through the OSAC Oregon Promise listserv.

The Oregon Promise Communications Toolkit provides resources to students renewing or applying for the Oregon Promise grant. The Office of Student Access and Completion has incorporated a "Stay on Track" [webinar](#) and [PowerPoint](#) as part of the toolkit geared towards high school, college, and community partners seeking to educate themselves or spread the word about Oregon Promise.<sup>11</sup>

## *Effects of Oregon Promise on Access*

**Community colleges attributed an increase in the number of students interested in attending college to Oregon Promise.** In interviews, admissions and marketing professionals at community colleges in Oregon noted the flurry of activity in their offices in the early days of the program as a result of Promise. Admissions and recruitment offices reported that Oregon Promise became an effective part of their marketing materials and was compelling to prospective students. In a variety of focus groups in high schools and colleges, students indicated that Oregon Promise had positively impacted their decision to attend community college. Indeed, while overall enrollment rates, as well as enrollment rates at community colleges, have declined slightly since the implementation of Oregon Promise, the share of 18-year-olds enrolling in community college has increased by about 4 percentage points.<sup>12</sup>

**Higher-than-expected demand in the first year led to eligibility restrictions to narrow access in year 2.** The Oregon Promise was not designed as a need-based program and thus was launched without an EFC cap, providing free tuition to all students who met the other eligibility criteria. The unexpectedly high volume of participants in the first year led to cost overruns, and OSAC returned to the legislature to request additional funds. The legislature granted additional funds to meet the demand in the first year but requested program changes to ensure that Promise would stay within budget in subsequent years. In response OSAC added an EFC cap of \$18,000 for Year 2, which

<sup>10</sup> Office of Student Access and Completion. (2019). *Oregon Promise Grant*. Higher Education Coordinating Commission. <https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Office of Student Access and Completion. (2019). *Oregon Promise Communications Toolkit*. Higher Education Coordinating Commission. <https://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-toolkit.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. Senate Bill 81 (2015): The Oregon Promise – report from Year 3. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Documents/Reports/SB-81-Oregon-Promise-2018.pdf>

was increased to \$20,000 mid-year, and then eliminated for the third year of the Promise. Going forward, the EFC cap is reviewed annually to adjust to fluctuation in demand and funds.

**Shifting eligibility criteria are confusing and complicate how the program is described.** High school counselors reported that unstable eligibility criteria and perceptions of funding volatility make it difficult to clearly describe Promise to their students. One counselor reported that “I sometimes call it Oregon Hope, because there are different rounds, and they change... Is there going to be enough funding?... Every year, I'm touting it, but I don't know how long it's really going to last.”

**A misleadingly simple description of Oregon Promise may have had negative impacts on students' access to college.** In much media coverage of the initial launch of the program, Oregon Promise was described as providing “free college.” Officials at the HECC noted that they were careful to market the program from the beginning as “free tuition” instead but believe that the “free college” message was politically popular and hard to contain. As the “free college” message prevailed, many students and counselors reported feeling misled because the full cost of college, including fees, housing, transportation, books, and other expenses were not covered for all students by the program. College administrators suggested that this misunderstanding led some students to decide not to enroll in college after learning about the additional costs for which they would be responsible.

**Third party college guidance providers play a key role in informing students about the opportunity to access affordable college, but access to these providers varies.** While the HECC presumes that guidance counselors will inform students about the Promise program, several counselors reported that they are overwhelmed with social-emotional issues at their schools, leaving little time to assist students in their college planning. To address the additional demands placed on guidance counselors and in response to high counselor-student ratios, many high schools rely on external resources, such as the [ASPIRE](#), [AVID](#), and [ECMC](#) programs, to provide college guidance to students and provide information on the Oregon Promise. Where these programs are in place, students were well informed about the Oregon Promise, but in schools that lacked these resources, students were unaware of the program.

**An appeals process facilitates greater flexibility and access for students with special circumstances.** After the Oregon Promise went into effect, the Oregon Legislature passed SB 1032 (2017), which permitted the HECC to use a waiver process for students with extenuating circumstances, such as those joining the military or with health issues, that would preclude them from enrolling in college directly from high school.<sup>13</sup> The delay in creating this process led to some initial student confusion about eligibility. This confusion has largely cleared as the program has matured.

**Knowledge of the high school GPA requirement comes too late for many students.** High school staff reported that many students do not begin planning for college until late in their junior or senior year. As a result, students may not learn about the GPA requirement until it is too late to raise their GPA. While advocates are pushing to lower the GPA to 2.0, to date it has not been adjusted.

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<sup>13</sup> Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. Fact Sheet: Oregon Promise Legislative Changes for 2017-19. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Documents/Legislative/HECC-ORP-Fact-Sheet-2017-FINAL.pdf>



# 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 Oregon Promise Approach to Success*

- **Maintain continuous enrollment with minimum of 6 credits per semester**
- **Maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress**
- **Pay \$50 co-pay per term**

Program requirements. Program requirements to maintain Oregon Promise eligibility are minimal compared to those of most other statewide Promise programs. To maintain eligibility for Oregon Promise, students must:

1. Be continuously enrolled with a minimum of 6 credits per semester
2. Maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), as determined by their community college<sup>14</sup>

This flexibility to support part-time attendance, as well as the low academic threshold for maintaining eligibility, are distinguishing

features of Oregon Promise. By comparison, many other programs have more stringent program requirements.

3. Pay a \$50 co-pay per term<sup>15</sup>

This element is designed to ensure students have “skin in the game” to incentivize completion. Yet due to the practicalities of implementation and lack of aligned financial aid data systems, HECC simply decreases the grant by \$50 per term. One institutional administrator noted that this unusual structure means the co-pay doesn't increase students' investment in their education because they are largely unaware of it.

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. Legislation developed in concert with the Oregon Promise bill authorized \$1.66M to provide support services for students enrolling in community college within one year of high school graduation, including Oregon Promise recipients. This bill required these services to include a First Year Experience, a student success team, and related professional development at each community college. These grants were used to hire additional staff to support Oregon Promise students, including success coaches.<sup>16</sup> The funding was not renewed in subsequent biennia, but students are still expected to complete a First-Year Experience (FYE) activity at their community college. In at least one case, institutional funds were used to sustain the staff position supporting Oregon Promise students.

<sup>14</sup> Office of Student Access and Completion. (2019). *Oregon Promise Grant: Information for Recipients*. Higher Education Coordinating Commission. <https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-recipients.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> Office of Student Access and Completion. (2019). *Oregon Promise Grant*. Higher Education Coordinating Commission. <https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. Senate Bill 81 Legislative Report: The first term of the Oregon Promise – December 2016. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Documents/Legislative/SB-81-Report-Oregon-Promise-1st-term-2016.pdf>

## *Effects of Oregon Promise Requirements and Supports on Student Success*

**The First Year Experience (FYE) is implemented unevenly across community college campuses, thus its effectiveness as a student success support varies.** While recipients of the Promise are expected to complete a FYE, the state leaves it to institutions to both design and report on students' completion of this program. Many institutional administrators reported that the FYE had little to no impact and that some institutions take it more seriously than others. Students in focus groups were largely unaware that there was a FYE expectation associated with the Promise.

**Oregon Promise was designed to prioritize student access and affordability rather than retention and completion.** Some institutional leaders noted that success should be an important future element of the Promise, and that they would like to see a “success orientation” for the Promise in addition to affordability and access.

## *Takeaways from an Early Adopter Focused on Broadening Access*

Oregon Promise offers a variety of lessons for those seeking to refine or implement a statewide College Promise program.

**Sustainable funding inspires confidence and helps ensure a consistent message.** Promise programs are most easily understood when the message is simple. When eligibility criteria change, communication becomes more complicated and variable. Oregon provides an example of this phenomenon. Shifts in eligibility criteria tied to varying allocation levels caused confusion among families and high school counselors. Sufficient and sustainable funding allows for more stable program criteria and, in turn, more consistent and effective communications.

**A broad communications strategy is an important tool for increasing awareness of a statewide Promise program, but careful coordination with media, high schools, institutions, and community stakeholders is important to ensure that the program is understood.** Oregon Promise received a significant amount of media attention and spurred a rush of activity at community college admissions offices. But the media oversimplified the message and many students misunderstood the specifics of the program, making the application process more stressful and confusing, and leading some students not to enroll. In addition, while materials are available through the website and through OSAC listservs, there are still high school personnel who are not fully informed, and/or inconsistently message the program. If a program relies on school personnel to disseminate information, regular training and ample materials are required so that the message can be consistently delivered.

**Investing extra time to work out logistics may be worth delaying implementation.** While Oregon Promise was created with wide public support, rushed implementation placed a strain on state-level, institutional, and high school administrators who struggled with implementing the details of the program with limited support. Program aspects such as the lack of an appeals process, the logistics of collecting a co-pay, and challenges in aligning institutional financial aid data systems made the roll-out in the first year of implementation difficult.