

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

The Case of Nevada Promise: Promise Replication in a Different State Context

DECEMBER 2019

Victoria Ballerini, Ph.D., Shanell Hagood, Kasey Meehan, 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. 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: **Kri Burkander, Ph.D. and Daniel C. Kent**, 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 Nevada case study high schools and community colleges. We are thankful for their time and interest in our research. We also acknowledge the vital support from individuals from the **Nevada System of Higher Education** who have provided RFA with invaluable access and information throughout our research of Nevada Promise.

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.

Nevada Promise at a Glance:

Created in

2017

Biannual expenditures from

\$3.5 million in 2017-2019 to \$6.4 million in 2019-2021

Implemented in a state where the **majority of the population is comprised of racial and ethnic minorities**

Last-dollar award covering

tuition and mandatory fees at community colleges for three years

Modeled after

Tennessee Promise

Must

be less than 20 years of age

Eligibility determined by FAFSA or

alternative financial aid application

for undocumented students

Requires full-time enrollment

Designed to **complement existing state-funded financial aid**

Requires Satisfactory Academic Progress

to maintain eligibility

One of four statewide Promise programs that have a

success component (mentoring)

One of five states where

undocumented students are eligible for Promise

The Nevada Promise: Overview and Context

Nevada Promise is a last-dollar statewide Promise program that was adopted in 2017 through legislation advocated for by Michael Richards, former President of the College of Southern Nevada (Nevada's largest community college) and Nevada State Senator, Mo Denis, a champion of education initiatives in the state. Modelled after Tennessee Promise, the Nevada Promise offers a last-dollar award covering the remainder of tuition and fees at public community colleges after all other gift aid has been applied. In addition, the program requires students to meet with a mentor and complete community service. The first cohort of Nevada Promise students enrolled in college in the Fall of 2018. In 2019, the program was amended to address the unintended exclusion of undocumented students, as well as the barriers to access created by some of the program requirements.

In line with Tennessee Promise, the program was framed as a response to the workforce needs of a growing state economy. Over the last decade, Nevada's leadership has sought to diversify the economy and has attracted new industries such as Tesla and Panasonic, as the state recovered from the Recession. With the advent of new employers, the state has increased need for skilled human resources, which the Promise aims to deliver.

The program also responded to the need to improve higher education affordability, as state-provided financial aid was limited at the time of its inception. By 2015, Nevada had implemented two financial aid programs to support students pursuing higher education, but both the *Silver State Opportunity Grant* (SSOG) and the *Governor Guinn Millennium Scholarship* are first-dollar awards designed for college-ready and high-performing students, respectively.¹ Nevada Promise, introduced in 2017, fills a gap in Nevada's financial aid landscape by providing a last-dollar award, after other federal and state financial aid has been expended, without need- or merit-based restrictions.

Nevada's college population is remarkably diverse. The state has a minority-majority public higher education system with approximately 100,000 students. Two of its four community colleges are Hispanic Serving Institutions, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas is ranked as the most diverse university in the nation.

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 Nevada's postsecondary context.

The stated goals of Nevada Promise are to respond to the labor needs of a growing state economy, and to improve affordability, as state-provided financial aid was limited at the time of its inception.

¹ Eligible students must have a 3.25 GPA or 990 (reading math score)/1070 (reading, writing, math) SAT Score or 21 ACT score and completed 4 units of English and Math and 3 units of Science and Social Studies/History while in high school.

Table 1. Nevada’s Postsecondary Landscape and Demographic Composition

STATE CONTEXT		
Graduation Rate ² (2013)	Demographics ³ (2018)	Credential Attainment ⁴ (2019)
21% public 2-year colleges 45.8% public 4-year colleges	10.1% Black or African American 1.7% American Indian and Alaskan Native 8.7% Asian 0.8% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander 4.5% Two or More Races 29% Hispanic or Latino 48.7% White, not Hispanic or Latino	37.9% Overall 25.8% African-American 46.6% Asian and Pacific Islander 21% American Indian 14.8% Hispanic 39% White
Higher Education Affordability		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to one analysis from 2016, attending a public 2-year college full-time in Nevada would take 19% of an average family’s income, ranking Nevada as 14th in the nation for affordability of a 2-year public education.⁵ In addition to the Nevada Promise, the state offers two significant financial aid programs. The <i>Silver State Opportunity Grant</i> (SSOG), a need-based, first-dollar award for <i>college-ready</i> students enrolling full-time (15 credits) at Nevada State College, or at any of the four state community colleges.⁶ The <i>Governor Guinn Millennium Scholarship</i> is a merit-based award for high-performing students which provides funding per credit hour at public two-year and four-year institutions, as well as other eligible institutions.⁷ Nearly all (90%) Millennium scholars attend four-year institutions. 		

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 Nevada Promise as it balances higher education affordability, access, and success.

² The Chronicle of Higher Education. “College Completion.” https://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/state/#state=nv§or=public_four
³ United States Census Bureau. “QuickFacts: Nevada; United States.” 2018 <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/NV>
⁴ Lumina Foundation. Nevada’s progress toward the goal. A Stronger Nation Report. 2018. <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#state/NV>
⁵ 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>
⁶ The maximum award is \$5,500. This award does not cover developmental courses.
⁷ Eligible students must have a 3.25 GPA or 990 (reading math score)/1070 (reading, writing, math) SAT Score or 21 ACT score and completed 4 units of English and Math and 3 units of Science and Social Studies/History while in high school. Students can receive \$40 per credit at community colleges, \$60 per credit at state colleges, and \$80 at other eligible institutions. The maximum award is \$10,000.

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 Nevada Promise Approach to Affordability

- **Last-dollar award**
- **Provides tuition and mandatory fees**
- **Covers up to three years at community colleges**

Nevada Promise is a **last-dollar** award covering the cost of tuition and mandatory fees after federal grant aid, the Silver State Opportunity Grant and Governor Guinn Millennium Scholarship, have been applied. Eligible institutions for the award include the four public community colleges in the state.

Effects of Nevada Promise on Affordability

Nevada Promise was created to fill a gap left by state and federal financial aid. A number of factors affect college affordability in Nevada. First, Nevada has ranked as one of the lowest FAFSA filing states in the nation, and therefore, was missing the opportunity to improve college affordability by leveraging federal dollars. Second, prior to Promise, Nevada already sponsored two financial aid programs (i.e., a merit scholarship for high achievers and a first-dollar, need-based grant for college-ready students), but the merit and college-ready requirements attached to these awards restrict the number of students who can access them. In addition, the merit-based scholarship mostly serves students attending four-year institutions, and the need-based grant has not been widely advertised. As the state economy increasingly demanded skilled labor, policymakers recognized that the two existing state financial aid programs were not enough to improve affordability and college-going in the state. With Promise, Nevada improves affordability in three ways: 1) by increasing FAFSA filing and improving affordability through federal financial aid, 2) by providing state-funded last-dollar awards to students with unmet need regardless of income and merit, and 3) by increasing the number of students receiving the state-funded, need-based grant. While students are not required to apply for the state's need-based grant (a first-dollar grant), those students who fill out the FAFSA and qualify will get it. Policymakers noted that as more students are filling out the FAFSA because of the new and better-known last-dollar Promise grant, more students are becoming eligible for the state's longer-standing, first-dollar, need-based grant.

High school and college students reported that Nevada Promise encouraged them to attend college and reconsider their college pathway. Students credited Nevada Promise for impacting their postsecondary decision-making in two ways. Some students reported that Nevada Promise made college an option. By ensuring that they paid no tuition and mandatory fees, the program allowed students to use any available additional resources to cover other college costs. Other students reported that Nevada Promise provided more college options. For example, Nevada Promise was perceived as a more affordable pathway to a four-year degree for students that plan to transfer after attending two years of community college. Overall, both high school and college students perceive Nevada Promise as making college more affordable.

Nevada has extended Promise eligibility to include all undocumented students, regardless of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, thus expanding college affordability for that student population. Along with Delaware, New York, Oregon, and Washington, Nevada Promise extends eligibility to all undocumented students who are currently ineligible for federal financial aid. While all undocumented students are eligible for Nevada's state merit scholarship, only DACA students are eligible for the state need-based scholarship, as it currently requires FAFSA. By allowing students to fill out an alternative financial aid application, Nevada Promise expands affordability for all undocumented students in the state, regardless of DACA status. Undocumented students will have access to Promise dollars only after students who can fill out the FAFSA are fully funded first.

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 Nevada Promise Approach to Access

- **FAFSA/Alternative financial aid application completion**
- **Nevada residency**
- **Less than 20 year of age with high school diploma or GED**
- **Decentralized messaging by institutions and high schools**

Program eligibility requirements. To access college through the Nevada Promise students must satisfy the following criteria:

1. FAFSA/Alternative financial aid application: Students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or an alternative financial aid application if they do not qualify for federal aid.
2. Residency: Students must be classified as a Nevada resident for tuition purposes by the institution where they plan to receive the Nevada Promise. Undocumented students who live in Nevada are considered residents and are therefore eligible for the Nevada Promise.
3. Age/No previous postsecondary degrees: To be eligible for Nevada Promise, students must have completed a GED or a HS diploma and be less than 20 years of age. They must not have an associate or bachelor's degree already.

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. Nevada did not implement a statewide communications campaign for Promise. Instead, community colleges and high schools were required to advertise the program. Community colleges integrated Promise messaging into their marketing materials, building awareness of Nevada Promise and using the program as a recruitment tool.

Effects of Nevada Promise on Access

Following implementation of Nevada Promise, changes in enrollment of Promise-eligible students varied by region. RFA analyzed institutional data from two Nevada community colleges enrolling the majority of students in that sector. By examining enrollment of Promise eligible students, we found regional variation in the first year of Promise implementation (AY 2018-2019).⁸ Whereas one institution saw increases in enrollment of Promise eligible students, the other saw decreases in line with the institution's year-over-year trends. In addition, one institution experienced an increase in the share of Black and Hispanic students among Promise-eligible students, while the

⁸ Given the recent adoption of Nevada Promise, RFA only had access to one year of data after Promise implementation. Access to further years of data post Nevada Promise can further clarify current descriptive findings and identify trends.

other saw a decrease. Regional differences in enrollment of Promise-eligible students evidence the need to further examine contextual factors that may affect enrollment trends and program take up.

The Nevada Promise message changed students' perceptions about college affordability and influenced college-going behavior for some. A high school counselor explained the power of assuring students and families that they can attend college tuition-free under the Nevada Promise:

It provides that assurance for families who really still don't understand what's happening [with financial aid]. You can explain the Pell grant 150 times, and if you've never gotten one, you still don't really understand what's happening. [With the Nevada Promise we are] just saying, "Hey, you get this stuff [requirements] done, you will not pay for tuition".

Some Nevada college students described how Promise messaging removed a mental barrier to college-going and changed their behavior accordingly. One community college student noted that they were not considering college until they became aware of Promise. This student's experience is representative of many students, particularly students who were already eligible for aid to cover their full tuition. As described by this student:

Senior year [of high school], I wasn't really planning on coming to college, but then I heard Promise. You know, it's like "Oh, you won't worry about a money situation. Just apply for this, do your FAFSA thing and you're going to be covered." I didn't receive money from Promise, just because everything was covered through FAFSA and all my other grants. (Community college student).

When received, Nevada Promise's messaging was impactful. However, a reliance on local actors to message the program limited the breadth of the messaging. Compared to states such as Tennessee, with a statewide messaging campaign that includes radio ads, social media platforms, highway billboards and other media, Nevada relied on institutions to promote the program. A staff member from a community college summarized this strategy as follows:

We don't have a set budget for Promise promotion. A lot of the work was done going to community organizations, making presentations, announcing it, going to the schools, talking to the students. The school district has been an amazing partner. They've basically invited us to principals' meetings, to counselors' meetings, parents' meetings. We've been able to be in the schools a lot. It's been more word of mouth than that mega advertising that people may think of.

By replicating the Tennessee Promise design, program developers did not foresee the implications on all undocumented students. Given the sociodemographic profile of the state, sponsors of the Nevada Promise intended to make undocumented students eligible for the program. However, the original legislation—modeled after Tennessee Promise—required students to file FAFSA and obtain an EFC, which made undocumented students ineligible. Institutions with more resources were able to support these students with institutional aid, but not all institutions had the capacity to do so. In 2019, the bill was amended to allow all undocumented students, regardless of DACA status, to apply for Promise using an alternative financial aid application. This change in program design expanded access for a student population in Nevada previously excluded from state financial aid.

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 Nevada Promise Approach to Success

- Mandatory online training
- Maintain SAP
- Full-time enrollment
- Continuous enrollment with possibility of LOA
- 8 hours of community service per term
- Mentor meetings

Program requirements. Following the first year of Nevada Promise, the legislature adjusted program requirements as institutions provided evidence that some requirements were barriers for students. Table 2 shows the differences in requirements between the first and second year of program implementation. Except for the mentoring meetings and full-time enrollment, all the other requirements changed as follows:

Table 2. Changes In Program Requirements Between Year One and Two of the Nevada Promise Implementation

2018 Requirements to Maintain Eligibility	2019 Requirements to Maintain Eligibility
Complete two <i>in person</i> mandatory trainings	Complete one mandatory training, in-person or online.
Maintain a 2.5 GPA	Maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) as defined by federal regulations
Maintain continuous enrollment	Students can request a leave of absence due to extreme financial hardship, or other extenuating circumstances such as religious or medical reasons, or military service
20 hours of community service per term	8 hours of community service per term
Meet with mentor at least once each semester	Meet with mentor at least once each semester
Full-time enrollment	Full-time enrollment

Students who are fully funded by other aid and do not receive Promise dollars are not considered Promise students. As a result, they are not required to meet with a mentor or complete community service. Only students who receive a Promise award are expected to fulfill all program requirements.⁹

Student supports. Of the 21 statewide Promise programs operating in 2018-19, Nevada Promise was one of four to include student supports within their program. All Nevada Promise award recipients are provided with a mentor, who is a local volunteer who helps students navigate the transition from high school to college, ensures students complete Nevada Promise requirements, and helps students stay on track while in college. Each participating community college coordinates the mentoring, which involves mentor recruitment—including background checks—training, matching students with mentors, and communications with mentors.

⁹ For an example of how one state defines promise students more broadly, please see [The Case of Tennessee Promise: A Uniquely Comprehensive Promise Program](#).

Effects of Nevada Promise on Success

Original program requirements presented barriers for students and institutions but were quickly adjusted to minimize negative consequences. Although program requirements were designed to provide structure to students in their transition from high school to college and support their success, some of the requirements acted as barriers as students faced transportation challenges and competing work and family commitments. Institutions also faced barriers because Promise requirements lacked alignment with federal financial aid regulations. Institutional leaders and policymakers addressed these challenges by adjusting some of these requirements for the second year of implementation.

Students experienced uneven mentoring and students supports. All Promise students are assigned a mentor, but the quality of their experiences varied. While some students noted very positive relationships with their mentors, others reported high mentor turnover, which affected their engagement with this success component of the program. Some community colleges offered additional services to Promise students such as priority registration, special days to meet with academic advisors, community service opportunities on campus, or onsite Promise coordinators to help students navigate through college. Students found these supports to be greatly beneficial. Unfortunately, not all institutions have the resources to offer these additional supports to Promise students.

Takeaways from a Promise Replication in a Different State Context

Nevada provides an example of how one state customized its Promise program to fit state-specific context. Nevada's replication of the Tennessee Promise unintentionally disqualified the state's relatively large population of undocumented students. Institutional involvement in decision-making and strong leadership in the system office and the legislature allowed the state to quickly refine the program to address this shortcoming.

Replicating Tennessee Promise in a different state context requires institutional funding for program administration. The Tennessee Promise served as a model for many statewide Promise programs.¹⁰ However, Tennessee Promise implementation relies on a public-private partnership, where a non-profit organization administers many of the access and success components of the program. In absence of a similar organization in Nevada, all aspects of Nevada Promise implementation must be administered by the community colleges, including coordination of mentoring and community service, advertising, and program oversight. This situation puts a strain on community colleges' financial and human resources.

The Nevada Promise distinguishes itself from most other statewide Promise programs as an avenue to increase affordability and access for all undocumented students who are ineligible for federal financial aid. Undocumented students, regardless of DACA status, face numerous barriers to postsecondary education, including lack of access to federal financial aid, social capital and public benefits, as well as psychological and social burdens related to immigration. The case of Nevada shows that states have an opportunity to improve affordability and access for these students by making them eligible for Promise programs.

¹⁰ The College Promise Campaign (2019). *Promises to Keep. A Playbook for Achieving College Promise Financial Sustainability*. Washington, DC.