

# Which Students to Serve?

## Universal or Targeted Eligibility for Postsecondary Opportunity Programs

By Elizabeth Vaade and Bo McCready

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief provides two recommendations to consider when choosing between universal or targeted eligibility for postsecondary opportunity programs:

1. Make a contextually appropriate choice, but be prepared to adapt.
2. Engage in deliberate dialogue about both the strengths and weaknesses of eligibility options.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Introduction

Over the past 20 years, dramatic changes in the higher education landscape have intensified the challenges students face in postsecondary enrollment and completion. The recession has further complicated these issues, putting educational institutions and governments in the difficult position of trying to spur growth with severely limited resources.

Recently, some states, communities, and institutions have responded by developing *postsecondary opportunity programs (POPs)*. POPs are comprehensive college access and success programs offering a combination of funding and support services.<sup>1</sup> They exist under many names, including promise programs, compacts, covenants, and early college commitments.

POPs have the potential to transform students' educational careers as well as enhance their future success. Therefore, the decision of who will be eligible to access these programs is extremely important and often highly contentious. POPs use two eligibility approaches: 1) *universal eligibility*, which includes all students in a certain service area, and 2) *targeted eligibility*, which most frequently includes students selected on the basis of family income or status as a first-generation college student.

Deliberations over eligibility decisions for POPs echo long-standing debates in public policy literature about the most efficient, equitable, and feasible structure for social programs.

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Universal programs are frequently viewed as having greater feasibility despite their often high costs because of their ability to engender widespread reform, greater administrative simplicity, and higher sustainability. In addition, universal programs may be more likely to reach all segments of the highest-need population while also avoiding stigmatizing participants.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, some researchers argue that targeted programs are more efficient because they directly address particular problems, cost less, and are less likely to allocate scarce resources to individuals who have little or no need. Targeted programs may actually attract more support if the public generally recognizes that the needs of the targeted population are important to the community.<sup>3</sup>

The debate over eligibility has influenced education policies and programs for pre-K, school choice, financial aid, and college admissions. But while public policy literature has much to say about the theoretical implications of universal and targeted eligibility, less research exists on how these classic debates play out in policymaking and practice.

This study examines how the designers of POPs determine eligibility for their programs, focusing on their decision either to employ universal eligibility or target students who are underrepresented

in postsecondary education.<sup>4</sup> We explore the factors that influence the eligibility decision for 10 programs, including how closely the identified aspects align with those cited in the existing literature. To conclude, we offer two lessons for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers and two recommendations for POPs stakeholders moving forward.

### Design and Methods

The purpose of this study is to describe the factors that influenced the eligibility decision for 10 POPs. We deliberately selected a wide range of POPs that varied in several dimensions of interest. This strategy helped us understand how each POP emerged and changed in its unique context and gave us the ability to identify common patterns across cases.<sup>5</sup> We selected geographically and structurally diverse POPs within two subgroups: universal POPs and targeted POPs (see Table 1 on p. 3 and and Figure 1 on p. 4).<sup>6</sup>

Our study includes programs based at the institutional, community, and state levels, five of which offer services to all students within a certain geographic area, and five of which target students based on income, first-generation college student status, or both.

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Table 1

Sample of POPs Selected for Study, Listed by Eligibility Decisions, with Geographic Locations and Websites

POPS with Universal Eligibility	POPs with Targeted Eligibility
<b>Battle Creek Legacy Scholars (Battle Creek)</b> Battle Creek, MI <a href="http://www.legacyscholars.org/">http://www.legacyscholars.org/</a>	<b>Denver Scholarship Foundation (DSF)</b> Denver, CO <a href="http://www.denverscholarship.org/">http://www.denverscholarship.org/</a>
<b>El Dorado Promise (El Dorado)</b> El Dorado, AR <a href="http://www.eldoradopromise.com/">http://www.eldoradopromise.com/</a>	<b>KnoxAchieves (Knox)</b> Knox County, TN <a href="http://www.knoxachieves.org/">http://www.knoxachieves.org/</a>
<b>Jackson Legacy Program (Jackson)</b> Jackson County, MI <a href="http://www.jacksoncf.org/jacksonlegacy.html">http://www.jacksoncf.org/jacksonlegacy.html</a>	<b>Oklahoma's Promise (Oklahoma)</b> State of Oklahoma <a href="http://www.okhighered.org/okpromise/">http://www.okhighered.org/okpromise/</a>
<b>Long Beach College Promise (Long Beach)</b> Long Beach, CA <a href="http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/Main_Offices/Superintendent/Success_Initiative/college_promise.cfm">http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/Main_Offices/Superintendent/Success_Initiative/college_promise.cfm</a>	<b>PathwayOregon (Oregon)</b> University of Oregon, Eugene, OR <a href="http://pathwayoregon.uoregon.edu/">http://pathwayoregon.uoregon.edu/</a>
<b>Say Yes to Education: Syracuse (Syracuse)</b> Syracuse, NY <a href="http://www.sayyessyracuse.org/">http://www.sayyessyracuse.org/</a>	<b>Regents' Scholarship (RSP)</b> Texas A&M University, College Station, TX <a href="https://scholarships.tamu.edu/tamu_scholarships/freshman/regents.aspx">https://scholarships.tamu.edu/tamu_scholarships/freshman/regents.aspx</a>

Several case study research methods proved useful in this analysis. First, we created extensive program profiles using data on context and program characteristics.<sup>7</sup> We then conducted two rounds of semi-structured telephone interviews with more than 40 POPs stakeholders, including program staff, board members, funders, and practitioners. We also collected program data, such as printed materials, promotional videos, and application forms, and media coverage related to the programs. In the final step of our analysis, we compared and contrasted the data to identify overarching themes and conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

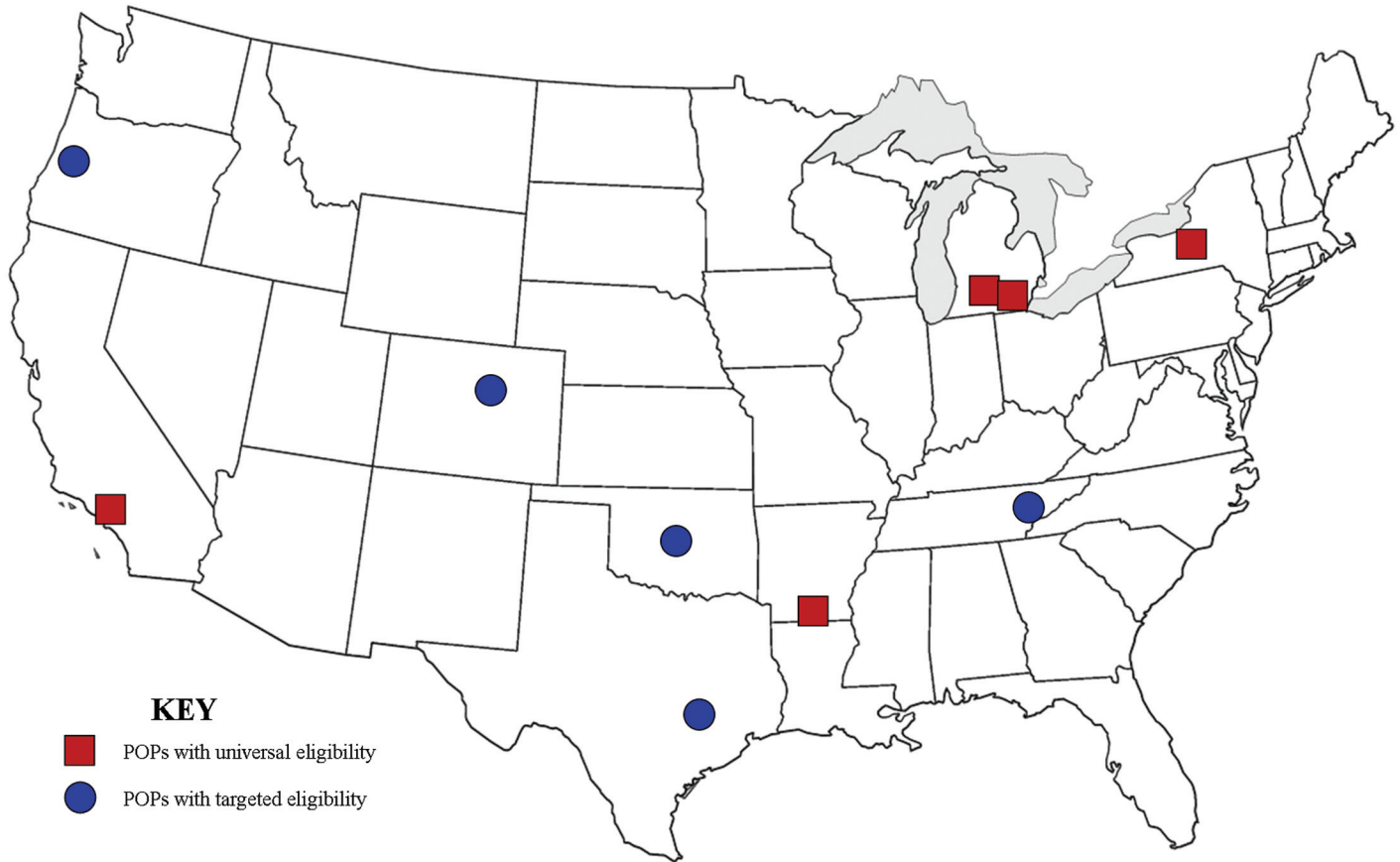
## Findings

Researchers, policymakers, and the public assess a policy's strengths and weaknesses based on its ability to maximize net societal benefits (*efficiency*) and avoid extreme allocations that harm certain individuals disproportionately (*equity*), which both play into the likelihood of adoption and implementation (*feasibility*).<sup>9</sup>

We used these three hallmarks of policy analysis to help identify and classify common patterns in the eligibility decision for POPs.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1  
Geographic Locations of POPs Selected for Study, by Eligibility



### Efficiency

Universal POPs stakeholders argued that universal eligibility was more efficient because it addressed the systemic barriers to increased educational attainment and community development. For example, El Dorado's stagnant public school funding and self-described "white flight" prompted program architects to create a universal POP that would incentivize white parents to stay, attract new residents and businesses, and encourage the community to reinvest public dollars in education. El Dorado

Promise stakeholders reported the desire to transform not just the culture in El Dorado's schools, but the entire region, and fight the "glorification of the redneck South" by including all students in a POP that prioritizes academic performance.

Universal POPs stakeholders also believed that their programs' potential to advance widespread reform made them efficient. Multiple stakeholders cited the desire to send a consistent message and create a "college-going culture" within schools and communities.<sup>11</sup>

Long Beach College Promise (Long Beach) stakeholders argued that the simple message of a universal program trumped any benefits from targeting, while Say Yes to Education: Syracuse (Syracuse) stakeholders described the program as “a movement” with a powerful message about achievement. Some universal POPs stakeholders acknowledged that they may be serving students who would be attending college with or without benefits, but they did not see this possibility as inefficient because they perceived college as “stupidly expensive” for everyone.

PathwayOregon (Oregon) stakeholders also explicitly targeted low-income students to address the disparity in graduation rates between Pell Grant-eligible and ineligible students. Targeted POPs stakeholders spoke of wanting to help students and families make optimal choices with better information. By focusing on individuals, they believed their programs would help create a better community by “growing their own” talent pool through increased educational attainment.

### Equity

Universal POPs stakeholders argued that a universal approach was equitable because it would not stigmatize participants. Battle Creek Legacy Scholars (Battle Creek) initially targeted “at-risk” students, but administrators noticed problems with this approach because it labeled recipients as disadvantaged or abnormal, leading to social harm and decreased participation overall.

Some universal POPs stakeholders also reported that their programs were more likely to change the behavior of the disadvantaged to help them compete with their advantaged peers. Jackson Legacy Program stakeholders viewed universality as a way to “dangle a carrot to moderately motivated kids.”

- ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● Stakeholders from targeted programs, however, argued that their approach allocates resources more efficiently because it primarily serves students who seem least likely to attend and graduate from college. Denver Scholarship Foundation (DSF) stakeholders described marked gaps in attainment between the high- and low-income students in the Denver Public Schools (DPS): only 45% of low-income students, for example, went on to college after high school. These numbers inspired the stakeholders to “focus on what we could really impact” by providing scholarships to low- and middle-income students.
- Universal POPs stakeholders argued that a universal approach was equitable because it would not stigmatize participants.



Targeted POPs stakeholders, on the other hand, saw their programs as equitable because they helped increase college attendance and completion for disadvantaged students, thereby decreasing the attainment gap between student groups. Regents' Scholarship Program (RSP) designers, for example, looked at the poor retention rates for low-income, first-generation students and declared that focusing resources on them was "the right thing to do."

Interestingly, leaders of targeted POPs tended to possess the distinguishing characteristic that their programs target. For example, the KnoxAchieves (Knox) leadership team consisted of former first-generation, low-income college students. Stakeholders cited creators' desire to help "students like them" succeed.

Although some targeted POPs stakeholders acknowledged that the potential weakness of stigmatization was a concern, they believed it could be overcome. The lowest-income families in Oklahoma, for example, enrolled in Oklahoma's Promise (Oklahoma) at a much higher rate after administrators raised the program's income limit to include middle-income families, perhaps because, as one stakeholder put it, "there's something about being part of a larger group that seems to be more acceptable."

### Feasibility

Universal POPs stakeholders argued that universality helped them build necessary political support and coalitions: if these programs were not universal, they would not exist. Syracuse stakeholders reported that "everyone is connected" to the program, which has changed the spirit and strengthened the coherence of the community. Stakeholders also believed that universality enhanced program feasibility because it made administration simpler. Long Beach's postsecondary partners, for example, can automatically flag all Long Beach Unified School District students in their database as recipients of the Promise, making program administration simpler. All five universal programs reported that although universality helped them avoid internal pushback, they still faced criticism from surrounding communities.

Targeted POPs stakeholders, on the other hand, reported that their programs received support because of clear recognition that their targeted populations needed aid. Contrary to research, targeted POPs stakeholders also did not report any difficulty in identifying potential participants.

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Oregon and RSP had no such difficulties because they identified students using existing university datasets. Some targeted programs reported that they did not receive any internal or external pushback.

Surprisingly, multiple universal and targeted POPs stakeholders argued that cost did not impact program feasibility or the eligibility decision. In fact, several stated that program creators made the decision even before the fundraising process began.

Stakeholders with universal programs showed little concern about the increased cost of universality, believing instead that the benefits made the costs worthwhile. A Long Beach stakeholder stated that eligibility is not about money, but “what you believe in.”

Both universal and targeted POPs stakeholders suggested that feasibility concerns led them to take fluid approaches to eligibility. Although this study categorizes POPs as either universal or targeted based on their scholarship criteria, the eligibility decision is not necessarily dichotomous.

Several POPs offered supplemental services using an entirely different eligibility approach. For example, DSF, a program offering a targeted scholarship, also operates Futures Centers that provide college counseling and FAFSA support to *all* students in each DPS high school.

In addition, some POPs modified their eligibility requirements upon implementation or in response to changes in local context. Battle Creek, for example, transitioned from targeted to universal eligibility upon implementation, and Knox has yet to enforce its targeting criteria because it has ample funding for all applicants. Oklahoma increased the income cap for recipients from \$24,000 to \$50,000 to capture middle-income students hit hardest by rising college costs. Stakeholders did not report that the changes had altered the goals or purpose of the program; rather, they saw eligibility changes as a way to achieve the initial goals.

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Only two targeted POPs stakeholders mentioned the often cited benefit of lower cost for targeted programs. Oklahoma stakeholders stated that the comparatively lower costs of targeting enhanced the feasibility of their program, arguing that a higher-cost universal program may never have gotten “out of the starting blocks.”



## Lessons Learned

This study offers two lessons about the eligibility decision for POPs and other educational programs:

### **The Eligibility decision is multifaceted and flexible**

The experiences of POPs in this study suggest that a community's perceptions of its challenges—including educational inequities and economic troubles—and its vision for the future often influence the eligibility choice. If POPs stakeholders see systemic problems, they appear more likely to choose universal eligibility; however, if they believe certain students and families might make better educational choices with additional information and assistance, then they appear more likely to choose targeted eligibility.

The complexity and changing nature of the eligibility decision is also evident. POPs creators can pick different eligibility approaches for scholarships and supplemental services in an effort to help a wider variety of students. They can also choose to modify the eligibility decision after implementation to confront new or unanticipated challenges, such as changing fiscal conditions, increased student enrollment, negative feedback, and implementation difficulties. These changes—whether raising an income limit or moving from targeted to universal eligibility—have helped some POPs survive.

### **Stakeholders identify strengths more readily than weaknesses**

Whether from universal or targeted POPs, stakeholders agreed overwhelmingly with the theoretical benefits and disagreed with the potential drawbacks of their respective approaches. Although stakeholders could recognize the weaknesses of the opposing approach, they seldom acknowledged that their eligibility decision might produce some undesired consequences.

We suggest two possible explanations for this tendency. First, existing research may be useful in determining the potential strengths of each approach, but the most commonly cited disadvantages in the literature may not be truly prevalent in practice for POPs. Second, many POPs stakeholders serve a dual role as administrators and advocates, simultaneously running the day-to-day operations of a program and seeking the funds and political support to ensure its continued existence. Consequently, these POPs designers and stakeholders may be so invested in their programs' success that they do not always observe or express potential weaknesses in their chosen program design.

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## **Recommendations**

As POPs proliferate rapidly nationwide and continue to impact the educational futures of a growing number of students, understanding of these programs and their potential benefits and drawbacks becomes increasingly important. Dozens of communities across the nation are now planning their own POPs, and they frequently seek advice on eligibility because it is one of the most important elements of program design. We offer two recommendations for those deliberating over eligibility issues.

### **Make a contextually appropriate choice, but be prepared to adapt**

Policy decisions are neither simple nor absolute. Instead, they reflect complicated situations that require the flexibility to adapt over time. POPs address myriad issues in a community simultaneously; as such, they should allow for continuous assessment. Although an approach might make sense for one community, in another context or time that eligibility decision may no longer be suitable. Stakeholders must recognize that the initial eligibility decision may prove to be inappropriate upon implementation, and a program can change its approach without losing sight of its central mission and goals.

### **Engage in deliberate dialogue about both the strengths and weaknesses of eligibility options**

Discussions of eligibility for POPs highlight the rift between research and practice. POPs stakeholders must thoroughly investigate both the benefits and the drawbacks of their preferred eligibility criteria (see Appendix). In doing so, they should work internally and, when possible, in partnership with researchers to allow objective assessment of eligibility options and to help researchers better understand the debates and outcomes so that future studies on eligibility can be as accurate and useful for programs as possible. Through this process, they can engage in transparent dialogue that will enhance the quality and sustainability of their program, as well as any future programs that consider using similar eligibility approaches.



## Appendix

### Advantages and Disadvantages of Universal and Targeted Eligibility Cited in Public Policy Research (Modified for POPs)

	Universal Eligibility	Targeted Eligibility
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be more likely to have widespread political support, leading to coalition building</li> <li>▪ May be more sustainable over time because approach requires buy-in from entire community</li> <li>▪ May be more likely to engender widespread reform and transformation within a community</li> <li>▪ May be more likely to reach all students with greatest need because approach does not require a process to identify participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be a more efficient allocation of resources because the program only provides services to students who need them the most</li> <li>▪ May help students least likely to attend and complete college achieve those goals</li> <li>▪ May have lower program costs because not every student is served</li> <li>▪ May be more likely to find political support because of lower cost and recognized student need</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be more expensive due to higher number of participants</li> <li>▪ May be seen as unfair to provide aid to students with little or no need</li> <li>▪ May increase existing attainment and achievement gaps because more advantaged students will benefit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May stigmatize participants</li> <li>▪ May struggle to find political support because not everyone qualifies for the program</li> <li>▪ May incite pushback from students and families not served by the program</li> <li>▪ May be difficult to identify participants, leading to higher administrative costs and students in need going without benefits</li> </ul>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on POPs, see Elizabeth S. Vaade, *College and University Commitments to Student Access and Success: An Overview of Institutional Postsecondary Opportunity Programs*, WISCAPE Policy Brief. (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education, 2010), <http://wiscape.wisc.edu/publications/>, and Elizabeth S. Vaade, *Postsecondary Opportunity Programs: Defining and Improving an Educational Policy Innovation*, WISCAPE Policy Brief. (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education, 2009), <http://wiscape.wisc.edu/publications/>.

<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of the benefits of universal approaches, see Timothy J. Bartik, *Distributional Effects of Early Childhood Programs and Business Incentives and Their Implications for Policy*, Upjohn Institute Staff Working Paper 09-151 (Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, July 2009); W. Steven Barnett, Kristy Brown, and Rima Shore, *The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?*, NIEER Preschool Policy Matters Policy Brief (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, April 2004), <http://nieer.org/publications/>; Theda Skocpol, *Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Nicholas Rowe and Frances Woolley, “The Efficiency Case for Universality,” *Canadian Journal of Economics* 32, no. 3 (1999): 613-29.

<sup>3</sup> For more discussion of the benefits of targeted approaches, see: Kara Hanson, Eve Worrall, and Virginia Wiseman, “Targeting Services Towards the Poor: A Review of Targeting Mechanisms and Their Effectiveness,” in *Health, Economic Development and Household Poverty: From Understanding to Action*, ed. Anne Mills, Sara Bennett, and Lucy Gilson (London: Routledge, 2007); Michael Mumper, “Does Policy Design Matter? Comparing Universal and Targeted Approaches to Encouraging College Participation,” *Educational Policy* 17, no. 1 (2003): 38-59; Robert Greenstein, “Universal and Targeted Approaches to Relieving Poverty: An Alternative View,” in *The Urban Underclass*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> This policy brief summarizes research presented at the Fall 2010 Research Conference for the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM). For more information, see Elizabeth Vaade and Bo McCready, “Universal or Targeted Eligibility for Postsecondary Opportunity Programs: Implications for Efficiency, Equity, and Feasibility” (paper, fall research conference for the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Boston, MA, November 6, 2010), <http://www.wiscape.wisc.edu/research/>.

<sup>5</sup> We used *maximum variation sampling strategy* to sample for heterogeneity. Qualitative research methodology suggests that maximum variation sampling strategy is appropriate for our study because it allows us to turn the weakness of small sample heterogeneity into a strength. The common patterns that emerge can help capture the central, shared aspects or impacts of a program. For more information, see John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007).



<sup>6</sup>We used the program's official scholarship criteria to classify each POP into one of the two subgroups. In the early stages of our analysis, we identified two additional programs to study: the Educate and Grow Scholarship in Tennessee and the CollegeBound Scholarship in Hammond, Indiana. After the first round of interviews, we realized the programs differed from descriptions in published materials and our previous understanding of their eligibility requirements and decisions, making them dissimilar from the group and therefore no longer appropriate for study. We dropped these cases in favor of Battle Creek Legacy Scholars and PathwayOregon.

<sup>7</sup>For abbreviated profiles of each POP, see Vaade and McCready, "Universal or Targeted Eligibility for Postsecondary Opportunity Programs," <http://www.wiscapewisc.edu/research/>.

<sup>8</sup>To do so, we used *cross-case synthesis*, an analysis technique typically used in qualitative research, particularly with case study methodology. To assist in the analysis, we created an analysis grid to help identify patterns in the data. For more information on cross-case synthesis, see Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, and Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).

<sup>9</sup>For more information on policy analysis, see David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005).

<sup>10</sup>The findings section summarizes the most compelling arguments made by POPs stakeholders, both for and against ideas expressed throughout the public policy literature. For a more detailed breakdown of the agreement and disagreement of POPs stakeholder arguments with the literature, see Vaade and McCready, "Universal or Targeted Eligibility for Postsecondary Opportunity Programs," <http://www.wiscapewisc.edu/research/>.

<sup>11</sup>*College-going culture* refers to "the environment, attitudes, and practices in schools and communities that encourage students and their families to obtain the tools, information, and perspective to enhance access to and success in postsecondary education." See College Tools for Schools: Helping California Schools Prepare Students for College and Careers, "Advancing College-Going Culture," University of California, Berkeley, [http://collegetools.berkeley.edu/resources.php?cat\\_id=6](http://collegetools.berkeley.edu/resources.php?cat_id=6).





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## Recommended citation for this publication:

Vaade, E., & McCready, B. (2011). *Which students to serve?: Universal or targeted eligibility for postsecondary opportunity programs* (WISCAPE Policy Brief). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education (WISCAPE).

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