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A Promise Worth Keeping:

AN UPDATED EQUITY-DRIVEN FRAMEWORK FOR FREE COLLEGE PROGRAMS



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TIFFANY JONES, Senior Director of Higher Education Policy, The Education Trust

JAIME RAMIREZ-MENDOZA, Higher Education Policy Analyst, The Education Trust

VICTORIA JACKSON, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (formerly of The Education Trust)

FREE COLLEGE PROGRAMS have been around for some time, but they have proliferated in recent years, prompted by rising college costs, mounting student debt, and America's urgent need for a more educated workforce. But while these free college, or "promise" programs have the potential to make a higher education more affordable and accessible for more students, many programs are not doing enough to prioritize the students who struggle the most to pay. Few are taking the full costs of college — including books, transportation, room and board, and the like — into account, or doing enough to lessen the enormous cost burden on students with the greatest need and the most to gain from college. In fact, too many free college programs direct more dollars to better-off students — who can afford college — than to students of color and students from low-income households, who are mortgaging their futures to pay for college. The majority of these programs are also locking out countless returning, adult, undocumented, and current and formerly incarcerated students entirely.

Unfortunately, neither those design flaws, nor the affordability crisis, are new. As myriad reports by The Education Trust show, colleges and universities have long been the province of the privileged, and largely remain so, despite the best efforts and intentions of education

equity advocates and proponents of the free college movement. In 2018, Ed Trust examined 15 existing statewide free college programs and 16 proposed programs using our Framework for Equitable Free College Programs and found that almost all of them missed the mark on equity.

This time around we review 23 existing statewide policies using our updated framework, which considers whether program grants:

- cover the full cost of going to college for four or more years;
- help students from low-income backgrounds defray their living expenses;
- are accessible to adult and returning students, as well as all undocumented and incarcerated students;
- attach strings that discourage certain student groups from applying;
- convert to a loan.

To be considered, programs had to cover tuition and fees at either two- or four-year institutions; be entirely state funded; have no minimum 3.0 GPA requirement, and no stipulation that students pursue a particular course of study. They also had to be enacted, funded, and up and running, with at least one cohort of students, by the time of our analysis in July 2020.

Here are some of our findings:

- Most programs help students pay for tuition, but not living costs.
- While all 23 active programs cover tuition at a two-year college, only eight provide four years of tuition and include bachelor's programs at four-year universities.
- Fourteen of 23 active free college programs exclude adult and returning students, while others have age or participation restrictions that effectively do the same thing. Just two states have designed programs with adults and returning students in mind.
- Performance requirements, like minimum high school GPAs or standardized test scores undercut equity and affordability.
- Just 12 of 23 existing free college programs provide benefits to all undocumented students, though that should *not* be taken to mean that *12 states* provide access to undocumented students.
- While 12 of 23 active programs do not have language prohibiting currently and previously incarcerated individuals from participating, many have rigid eligibility requirements that are difficult for justice-impacted students to meet. The remainder have a combination of legislative, programmatic, and practice barriers that exclude all justice-impacted students in their state.

Despite these findings, we continue to believe that free college programs present a promising opportunity to expand higher education access and affordability, provided they are designed with an eye toward equity, and we urge policymakers to invest in higher education, while prioritizing the needs of students who struggle to pay for it.

Below are five steps policymakers can take to ensure they are using free college policies to advance equity in their states.

- 1. Include all students.**
- 2. Go beyond tuition.**
- 3. Make improvements over time.**
- 4. Be transparent.**
- 5. Invest in student success.**

As our nation grapples with a pandemic that's deepening existing racial inequities in America's education, employment, financial, health, housing, policing and political systems, and a faltering economy, the demand for free college programs and the stakes involved are now greater, perhaps, than ever before.

For the 50 million and counting who've become unemployed by the pandemic — a disproportionate share of them Black and Latino people from modest households — and are struggling to keep their heads above water, and for the many young people growing up in the dark shadow of this crisis, having affordable access to a higher education will be critical to their survival. Meanwhile, for the rest of the nation, whose fate is inextricably intertwined with theirs, it just might mean the difference between long-lasting economic stagnation and a bright future.

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2020 HAS BEEN A YEAR OF DISRUPTION

and calls to action. People are rising up and demanding public policies that advance racial and social justice. In the United States and across the world, people have been forced to reckon with two ideas: The first is that our destinies are intertwined, and what affects our neighbors affects us all. The second is that we cannot survive or progress as a nation or as a society if we don't address racial, economic, and social inequality. The global health and economic crises caused by COVID-19 have made it clear that collective cooperation is necessary to reduce the harm caused by the virus. And though everyone is experiencing the pandemic, the [fall-out is far more severe](#) for Black and Latino people, the elderly, and others who lack the option or financial means to work safely from home or forgo working entirely.¹ At the same time, protests in the streets over the killings of unarmed Black people by police, systemic racism, and social inequality have focused attention on America's racial and class divide.

Policymakers and public officials have responded with lofty statements of racial solidarity, but people are demanding bold policies that will bring about systemic change. Organizations like the [Movement for Black Lives](#), which brings together grassroots civil rights groups from across the country, demand "free access and open admissions to public community colleges and universities" for "all Black people (including undocumented and currently and

formerly incarcerated people)" as a part of reparations for the systemic denial of access to high-quality educational opportunities. It's clear that these issues of racial, economic, social, and educational inequality are deeply connected; as Martin Luther King Jr. famously noted, "What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?"

Free college opportunities alone cannot repair racial injustice, but if designed properly, they could help dismantle barriers to higher education, and create economic opportunity for those who have been historically excluded by legal roadblocks and financial constraints. During the last economic recession, [3 million more students enrolled in college](#),² and nearly [all of the new jobs created in its wake](#) went to those with a postsecondary degree or credential.³ For the nearly 50 million (and counting) people who've filed for unemployment this year — [disproportionately Black and Latino people](#)⁴ — having access to a higher education or additional training could be key to their survival, yet it often remains out of reach because of the price. In this moment, public dollars for higher education are urgently needed to make it more affordable. In this struggling economy, states and institutions can't afford to spend precious dollars on students whose families can afford to pay for college without borrowing. Unfortunately, too often, that's exactly what they do.

As states reduced their investments in public higher education, some colleges responded by seeking additional revenue directly by admitting more affluent students and indirectly from engaging in behaviors that would increase their prestige, rankings, and ultimately their resources. One way public universities were able to increase revenue and prestige was investing in more affluent (and often out-of state) students by offering them some sort of “merit”-based financial aid offers to increase their likelihood of enrolling. Between [2001-2017, public colleges doubled](#) the amount they spent on so-called merit aid, which is based on criteria like standardized test scores.⁵ As a result, far more aid went to wealthy students and families than in previous years.

State policymakers have recently begun reversing trends, and are reinvesting in higher education, often through statewide free college programs. However, these additional investments haven’t always translated into increased college affordability for students from low-income backgrounds, and some free college programs spend more on upper-income students. In [Missouri](#), for example, where the median family income was below \$50,000 in 2016, more than one-third of free college recipients in 2017 were upper-income students from families earning over \$100,000, and over half of free-college funding went to students whose families earn more than \$80,000 annually.⁶ Free college policies should be allocated to support students who struggle the most to pay and who stand to benefit most from earning a college degree – i.e., students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. It’s the right and equitable thing to do.

The last time The Education Trust wrote about free college, in 2018, [we suggested](#) that states learn from the history of transformational policies like the GI Bill and the Morrill Land Grant Acts, which opened the doors

of higher education for some, but still excluded many.⁷ We suggested states design their free college programs with equity in mind, particularly since these programs could be transformational if done right. Now we are in another pivotal moment, one that is forcing the nation to reckon with inequality and take action that is best for the collective. Higher education could be a critical part of the path forward on many of these issues, but not if it remains unaffordable.

The aim of this update is to make sure free college programs live up to their name by assessing whether they improve college access and to offer guidance on how to design them in a way that advances equity. When we released our 2018 report, there was concern from some corners that we were overly critical of such policies. Some free college advocates advised us not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. But we believe that transparency and equity are critical to progress. And we aim to shed light on whether policymakers are doing what they purport to do, and to deepen the public’s understanding of the impact of free college programs, so we can take steps toward making college affordable for all.

As the nation and states look to recover from the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic and address racial and economic inequality, there will be no way forward without a more affordable, accessible, equitable, and transformative higher-education system. The prohibitive cost of college remains one of the biggest barriers keeping college from meeting the social and economic needs of the people and broader society. Our goal is to provide an understanding of whether states are living up to their promises by examining who benefits from these programs and how much of the total cost of college is free.

UPDATING OUR EQUITY FRAMEWORK FOR FREE COLLEGE PROGRAMS

The concept of free college seems simple, but the complexity, structure, and access these programs promise vary greatly. That is why, in our 2018 report, we evaluated statewide programs using an equity-driven framework that addressed which costs were covered, who is eligible, and whether or not recipients are expected to repay any of the free college aid.

In this new report, we continue our equity analysis of free college programs and update our 2018 framework. First, we evaluate whether programs help students from low-income backgrounds cover living costs (i.e., non-tuition expenses) by either providing non-tuition restricted aid, waiving tuition regardless of the receipt of other aid, or providing “first dollar” awards that are not reduced by the receipt of another grant aid. We then evaluate whether promise programs, also known as free college programs, cover fees, four or more years of college, and bachelor’s programs at four-year institutions. The framework also considers whether programs are accessible to adult and returning students, impose requirements beyond what is necessary for students to qualify for federal financial aid, and whether the free college grant converts to a loan. We added new criteria to evaluate whether promise programs provide benefits to all undocumented students, in addition to currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Our metrics, rationale, and application of the framework can be found in Table 1.

This time around, we analyze 23 existing statewide policies using our equity framework. To be considered for this report, programs had to meet the following criteria (methodology and active programs that were omitted can be found in the Appendix):

- cover at least the cost of tuition at either two- or four-year institutions;
- be available to students statewide, and not just those from certain districts or counties, those enrolled at a specific university, or programs limited only to certain disciplines/ areas of study;
- do *not* require a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher or an ACT score above 20;
- are entirely state funded;
- be enacted, funded, and implemented for at least one cohort of students by the completion of our analysis in July 2020.

The Education Trust recognizes that meeting our criteria requires a significant financial investment from states that are dealing with the impacts of COVID-19; however, states should recall what happened in the wake of the 2008 recession, when [states slashed higher education funding](#), and institutions, in turn, hiked tuition and fees.⁸ As a result of those tuition increases, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant fell to an [all-time low](#), while need-based aid at the federal and institutional levels [shrank as well](#).⁹ This [shifted the cost burden](#) onto students, leaving many of them — particularly students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, who were already navigating the [racial income gap](#), racial [wealth gap](#), and [systemic racism in the job market](#) — to take massive amounts of loans or forgo a college education entirely.¹⁰ While COVID-19 has highlighted the economic fragility of higher education, much of the college affordability crisis and the \$1.6 trillion student debt crisis can be attributed to [past missteps](#) by policymakers and a lack of [race- and wealth-conscious](#) policies.¹¹

States might avoid the same mistakes by creating a base for equitable statewide free college and investing in the infrastructure over time. For example, states could establish promise programs with initial income caps with the goal of eventually building out a federal-state partnership that would make nationwide debt-free college possible at public institutions. Given that getting a college education is more expensive and important than ever, equity-driven free college programs could be an important first step in forging a new future in which students — especially students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and nontraditional students — are no longer forced to shoulder crushing debt to pursue their college dreams, and U.S. businesses get the highly educated workforce that they and our economy will need to recover and thrive.



Table 1: An Updated Framework for Equity-Driven Free College Policy

Metric	Rationale	Explanation/Application
1. Helps low-income students cover living costs (i.e., non-tuition).	<p>Non-tuition (i.e., books, transportation, child care) and living expenses are the most expensive parts of college, and programs should help students cover these expenses to make college truly affordable. A “last dollar” program is offset by the receipt of other aid and frequently has no benefit for low-income students. On the other hand, states that provide non-tuition restricted aid, waive tuition regardless of the receipt of other aid, or ensure award levels are not reduced by the receipt of other grant aid (i.e., “first dollar” program) allow non-tuition restricted grants in excess of the cost of tuition to be used to cover living expenses.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet this metric if the aid can only be used for tuition and is reduced by the receipt of non-tuition restricted aid. Programs that are offset by the receipt of federal Pell Grants do not meet this metric regardless of their interactions with state, institutional, or private aid programs. Providing minimum awards or covering specific expenses such as books, transportation, and supplies is not sufficient to satisfy this metric.</p> <p>Programs meet this standard if they provide aid that 1) can be used for living costs when tuition is paid through other sources, 2) waive tuition, regardless of the receipt of other aid, or 3) provide aid that is not offset by the receipt of non-tuition restricted assistance (i.e., “first dollar” program).</p>
2. Covers fees (in addition to tuition).	<p>The cost and variation of fees at public institutions can be a confusing, substantial, and unexpected expense that deters low-income students from going to college. To truly eliminate financial barriers and reduce postsecondary costs, programs should help all participating students to cover these hidden costs.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet this metric if they fail to cover any fees whatsoever.</p> <p>Programs satisfy this metric if they cover all fees, only mandatory fees, or other specified fees.</p>
3. Covers at least four years of college tuition.	<p>Students should be able to enroll in the degree programs that best meet their needs and be given enough time to complete their degree. When states limit coverage to two years of tuition, they risk tracking low-income students into programs that have less funding, graduate fewer students, and provide smaller economic payoffs, which further exacerbates the student debt crisis, enrollment stratification, and inhibits social mobility.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet this metric if they impose an eligibility cap of less than four years, eight semesters, or 120 credit hours, or if program eligibility ends after a bachelor’s degree-seeking recipient receives an associate degree or certificate.</p> <p><i>Note: Programs that limit enrollment to “high demand workforce” areas were not evaluated.</i></p>

Continued Table 1: An Updated Framework for Equity-Driven Free College Policy

Metric	Rationale	Explanation/Application
<p>4. Covers cost of tuition for a bachelor's program at a four-year institution.</p>	<p>Covering four years of college in the third metric could still involve requirements that limit students to attending two-year colleges for all or a portion of their education. For the fourth metric, the expectation is that a student's entire bachelor's degree is covered, even if they attend a four-year institution for the entirety of their undergraduate education. That matters because students should be able to enroll in the degree programs that best meet their needs. When states limit free college programs to two-year colleges or associate degree programs, they risk tracking low-income students into programs that have less funding, graduate fewer students, and provide smaller economic payoffs, which further exacerbates the student debt crisis, enrollment stratification, and inhibits social mobility.</p>	<p>Programs do not satisfy this metric unless they provide aid that is usable at four-year institutions and covers at least the cost of tuition for a bachelor's degree program.</p> <p><i>Note: Programs that limit enrollment to "high demand workforce" areas were not evaluated.</i></p>
<p>5. Provides benefits for adult and returning students.</p>	<p>Students from low-income families face a number of financial pressures that may require them to delay or leave college. Limiting eligibility to recent high school graduates or first-time college students denies benefits to a large population of students in need of support and greatly limits the ability of such programs to move the needle on overall postsecondary attainment.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet this metric if they limit eligibility based on age, year of high school graduation, or prior college experience. Programs can, however, meet the standard if they exclude adults who have already earned a college degree or have completed the number of credits necessary to earn a degree.</p>
<p>6. Does not impose GPA requirements beyond what is needed to maintain eligibility for federal financial aid.</p>	<p>Institutions are already required to establish minimum GPA requirements that students must meet to demonstrate "satisfactory academic progress" (SAP) and maintain eligibility for federal financial aid. Programs that require students to maintain a GPA higher than a 2.0 (the general SAP minimum) may shut out those students who stand to benefit most from free college programs. Such restrictions limit the impact of promise programs and are more characteristic of merit-based programs.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet this metric if they require recipients to earn a college GPA higher than a 2.0 to become or stay eligible, although they may defer to the college's SAP GPA cutoff, if that cutoff is higher than a 2.0, and still meet this metric.</p> <p><i>Programs requiring a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher or an ACT score above 20 were considered to be merit-based and thus not included in our evaluation.</i></p>

Continued Table 1: An Updated Framework for Equity-Driven Free College Policy

Metric	Rationale	Explanation/Application
<p>7. Does not impose enrollment intensity or credit accumulation requirements beyond what is needed to maintain eligibility for federal financial aid.</p>	<p>The cost of college and competing family and work obligations may make it impossible for some students to enroll full time. If programs require students to maintain more than half-time enrollment or earn a certain number of credits per semester or year, they may shut out the students who stand to benefit the most from free college programs, especially older students and those working while in school. Such restrictions limit the impact of promise programs and are more characteristic of merit-based or specialized scholarships for certain majors or programs.</p>	<p>Programs cannot satisfy this metric if they limit eligibility based on the number of units a student enrolls or earns per semester, beyond the federal financial aid requirements (i.e., half-time enrollment and credit accumulation sufficient to demonstrate satisfactory academic progress).</p>
<p>8. Does not require the repayment of aid.</p>	<p>Programs should not place requirements on beneficiaries related to their residency, employment, or activities after they leave or graduate from college and cease receiving aid. Under no circumstances should aid distributed through free college programs be converted to loans, and states should not impose financial penalties on recipients for failing to maintain eligibility or for moving out of state after leaving college. Such requirements could be problematic in states where low-income students and students of color face more challenges entering the workforce and may need to move to find a job that pays a living wage or take care of family members.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet the metric if grants can be converted to loans or if aid ever has to be repaid.</p>
<p>9. Provides benefits to undocumented students.</p>	<p>Undocumented students — including those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) — do not qualify for any federal aid and their access to in-state tuition and aid varies by state. By providing all undocumented students access to free college programs, states would help a large population of students who stand to benefit the most and move the needle on overall postsecondary attainment while addressing socioeconomic inequities in education and employment.</p>	<p>Programs do not meet the metric if they deny access to any undocumented student. Providing access only to certain undocumented students, such as those with DACA or TPS, is not enough to satisfy this metric.</p> <p>Programs that provide a pathway for any undocumented student to become eligible (i.e., alternatives to FAFSA, state residency, high school requirements) meet our standard.</p>

Continued Table 1: An Updated Framework for Equity-Driven Free College Policy

Metric	Rationale	Explanation/Application
<p>10. Provides benefits to previously and currently incarcerated students.</p>	<p>According to a report by the Vera Institute of Justice, “among incarcerated people in federal and state prisons, 64 percent are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary education program, meaning that at the time of incarceration their highest level of educational attainment was a GED or high school diploma.”¹² Unfortunately, many of these individuals do not have access to financial aid to pay for college. In addition, formerly incarcerated workers tend to have lower levels of education and formal work experience. The criminal legal system disproportionately impacts millions of Black and Latino people who will eventually be released without the necessary job skills to be a competitive applicant.¹³ Providing them access to free college programs would allow previously and currently incarcerated students to access an education that will increase their employment options and earnings potential, reduce recidivism, and move the needle on overall postsecondary attainment while addressing socioeconomic inequities in education and employment.¹⁴</p>	<p>Programs do not meet this standard if they have any statutory, regulatory, or practice barriers that explicitly prohibit previously and currently incarcerated students from being eligible for the free college program.</p>

“Given that getting a college education is more expensive and important than ever, equity-driven free college programs could be an important first step in forging a new future in which students — especially students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and nontraditional students — are no longer forced to shoulder crushing debt to pursue their college dreams, and U.S. businesses get the highly educated workforce that they and our economy will need to recover and thrive.”



EQUITY ANALYSIS GRAPHIC:

Graphic showing which states meet which metric with a “Y” for yes and “N” for no, plus numerical total. An asterisk next to a check mark means there are unique conditions for certain student populations. An asterisk next to an X means the program only partially satisfies the metric in question.

PROGRAM	STATUS	WHAT DOES IT COVER?				WHOM DOES IT COVER?						TOTAL
		Living Costs	Fees	At Least 4 Years of Tuition	Tuition for a Bachelor's at a 4-Year College	Adult/ Returning Students	Students With a 2.0 GPA	Half-Time Enrollment	Undocumented Students	Justice-Impacted Students	Stays a Grant	
CA Promise	Active	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓*	✓	6
CA Promise Grant	Active	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓	8
CT PACT	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗*	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	3
DE SEED	Active	✗	✗	✗	✗*	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	2
HI Promise	Active	✗*	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗*	✓	✓	7
IN 21 st Century Scholars	Active	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	6
LA TOPS	Active	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	4
MD Guaranteed Access	Active	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓	✗	✓	✓*	✓	9
MD Community College Promise	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓*	✓	5
MS HELP Grant	Active	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	5
MO A+ Scholarship	Active	✗*	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	2
NV Promise Grant	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓*	✓	5
NJ Community College Grant	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7
NY Excelsior Scholarship	Active	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗*	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	4
OK Promise	Active	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	6
Oregon Promise	Active	✗*	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓	5
RI Promise	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓*	✓	4
South Carolina WINS Scholarship	Active	✗*	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	6
TN Promise	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗*	✓	3
TN Reconnect	Active	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓*	✗	✗*	✓	5
Access UT Promise	Active	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✗	✓*	✓	7
WA College Bound	Active	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	8
WA College Grant	Active	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10
Total Number of Programs That Cover This Metric	23	9	17	10	9	9	17	10	12	12	22	
Percentage of States Passing		39%	74%	43%	39%	39%	74%	43%	52%	52%	96%	



DEFINITIONS OF “FREE” AND “COLLEGE” VARY BY STATE PROGRAM

Most Programs Help Students Pay for Tuition, but Not Living Costs

The full cost of attending college has drastically increased over the last several decades and includes tuition, fees, books, transportation, and living expenses. In 1980, the full cost of a public four-year college, including tuition, fees, and room and board, was \$9,803 in 2017 dollars. In 2016-17, the [full cost](#) was \$26,593.¹⁵ This sharp increase has coincided with a decline in the purchasing power of the Pell Grant, the nation’s most important financial aid program. In 1980s, the Pell Grant covered over 50% of the cost of attendance at a public four-year college or university. In the 2019-20 academic year, the Pell Grant [covered just 28%](#).¹⁶ At community colleges, which are typically less expensive, tuition accounts for only [20% of the cost of attendance](#).¹⁷ If free college programs are going to remedy the college affordability crisis and increase college attainment, it will be critical to design them in a way that makes college (and all the attendant costs) affordable for students from low-income backgrounds.

In “[How Affordable Are Public Colleges in Your State?](#),” Ed Trust calculated the number of hours a student would need to work at a minimum-wage job to cover the gap between net price and total cost of attendance. We reported that, on average, a low-income student at a public four-year institution would have to work 26 hours per week to cover the gap, while a low-income student at a community college would need to work 16 hours per week.¹⁸ The report also found that, even in states with free college programs, students from families with household incomes of \$30,000 or less had to work more than 10 hours per week — the maximum amount recommended by experts, so students’ grades won’t suffer — to afford college, while in 8 out of 9¹⁹ states that had free college programs in 2017, a community college student would have had to work over 10 hours:²⁰

Delaware (19 hours), Indiana (19 hours), Louisiana (24 hours), Mississippi (13 hours), Missouri (15 hours), Oklahoma (20 hours), Oregon (13 hours), and Tennessee (16 hours). Only in Washington and California would a low-income student at a public community college need to work less than 10 hours a week after receiving federal and state aid.²¹

To make college affordable for low-income students, the full cost of attendance must be covered. Yet, what is clear from our analysis is that few states’ free college plans actually account for costs beyond tuition. In fact, only 9 of 23 active programs cover living expenses. Indiana and Washington allow students to use federal and state financial aid to pay for non-tuition expenses. In Oklahoma and Louisiana, aid is not limited to tuition, and students can apply it toward expenses like books, transportation, and room and board. The Maryland Guaranteed Access Grant, meanwhile, takes a debt-free approach by covering low-income students’ entire unmet need.

The best and most progressive approach to making college affordable is a debt-free promise, which would make college debt-free up to the full the cost of attendance, thereby ensuring that college is debt free for low-income students and affordable for everyone else. This approach has supporters at the federal level. Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI) introduced a bill last year — the [Debt-Free College Act](#) — which would do all of the above. The bill was backed by 45 members of Congress (10 senators and 35 representatives) and would have established a state-federal partnership to provide dollar-for-dollar matching grants for states to fund public higher education in exchange for a commitment to help students pay for the full cost of attendance without taking on debt.²² The presidential platforms of Sens. [Elizabeth Warren](#)

(D-MA) and [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-VT) also featured similar debt-free college policies.²³ But until a debt-free college policy is implemented at the federal level, state policymakers should continue to implement free college promise programs with a focus on making college debt-free for all students from low-income backgrounds.

Limited Degree Pathways

Our analysis found that all 23 active programs cover tuition at a two-year college, while only eight provide four years of tuition **and** include bachelor's programs at four-year universities. At first glance, programs that solely focus on two-year colleges might seem like an affordable option for students from low-income backgrounds — especially for [Black](#) and [Latino](#) students, who are more likely to attend community colleges than their more affluent (White) counterparts, who are more likely to attend four-year colleges.²⁴ However, many so-called free college programs are last dollar, meaning they will only pay for tuition that is left over after federal aid and other grants have been applied. As a result, many students who receive the Pell Grant usually have a large

enough award to cover community college tuition and fees, and are left with no grant aid for books, room and board, transportation, and other non-tuition expenses that make up [80% of the total cost of college](#).²⁵ In fact, [studies have found](#) that last dollar programs in some states — like Missouri and Tennessee — actually benefit middle- and upper-income residents more than low-income residents.²⁶

But that's not the only flaw.

Many free college programs do not cover bachelor's degrees at four-year institutions; only eight provide this benefit with four years of tuition. Consequently, many low-income [Black](#) and [Latino](#) students, who are already severely underrepresented at four-year institutions and among bachelor's degree earners, may be priced out of pursuing a bachelor's degree, which [has larger and more reliable payoffs](#) than an associate degree, or be forced to borrow heavily to obtain one.²⁷ Thus, by designing free college programs that do not fund four years of tuition at four-year universities, states risk tracking low-income students into programs with lower economic payoffs and perpetuating enrollment stratification and income inequality.



ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS AS BARRIERS

Adult and Returning Students Are Left Out

There are 36 million people in the United States with [some college and no degree](#).²⁸ Of adults aged 25 to 64, [16.1%](#) have some college education but no degree.²⁹ Many of them also have student debt, but lack the wage boost that comes from receiving a degree, making it harder for them to repay their loans.³⁰ Re-engaging them in higher education and encouraging them to complete their degree could help them professionally and financially. It could also help states meet their workforce and economic goals. Over the past decade, [44 states have implemented college attainment goals](#), but most of those states are a long way from achieving those goals.³¹ The Lumina Foundation has set its own goal of increasing the percentage of Americans holding a postsecondary degree or credential to 60% by 2025.³² But currently, American adults aged 25-64 have a [national college attainment rate of 51.3%](#).³³ Boosting that percentage, and the chances of hitting Lumina's and states' goals, could hinge, in part, on the ability to get working-age adults with some college back on the road to completion.

It's troubling, then, that 14 of 23 active free college programs exclude adult and returning students, though other programs that have age restrictions or limit participation to recent high school graduates or full-time students effectively do the same thing. In fact, just two states have existing or proposed free college programs designed specifically and exclusively with adults and returning students in mind: Tennessee (Tennessee Reconnect) and Michigan (Michigan Reconnect).

Performance Requirements Undercut Equity and Affordability

Free college programs that require students to have a certain GPA to participate or maintain their funding create

barriers for the students who are least likely to be able to afford college. What's more, merit requirements like minimum high school GPAs or standardized test score cut offs undermine racial equity and access for low-income students. Research has consistently shown that students who receive merit aid are [more likely to be White and wealthy](#).³⁴ Because this is such a significant barrier, we omitted programs that have high merit requirements.

Furthermore, GPA or credit accumulation requirements, beyond the satisfactory academic progress (SAP) standards set by institutions, should not be required for recipients to maintain funding. Financial aid eligibility is based on meeting SAP, so having different requirements to maintain funding may be confusing for students and add additional administrative complexity. Of the active programs we evaluated, 17 out of 23 use SAP as the criterion for maintaining eligibility.

Access Challenges for Undocumented Students

Every year, approximately [100,000 undocumented high school graduates](#) come up against financial aid policies that can make college unaffordable.³⁵ Sadly, many free college programs are no better on that count. For context, undocumented students — including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program participants and those with Temporary Protected Status — [do not qualify for any federal aid](#) for college, making them ineligible for the Pell Grant and federal student loans.³⁶ In addition, undocumented students have varied access to in-state [tuition](#) and [aid](#), with only 12 states granting both benefits.³⁷ This limited access to financial aid poses a significant barrier for undocumented individuals, especially since their average hourly wages are [42% lower](#) than those of their U.S.-born or documented

counterparts.³⁸ A recent [Ed Trust article](#) highlighted the unaffordable public higher education landscape for undocumented students, noting that, on average, they would have to work 29 hours to afford a public community or technical college and 48 hours to attend a public four-year university and live off campus.³⁹

According to our analysis, only 12 of 23 existing programs provide benefits to all undocumented students, but that should *not* be taken to mean that 12 *states* provide access to those students. For example, two of the active programs open to eligible undocumented students are in California and provide access to two-year institutions; Maryland also has two active programs covering two- and four-year institutions that allow undocumented students to participate. Free college programs have also implemented various tools to extend free college programs to undocumented students. Some states, like Washington, have created a state alternative to the FAFSA, giving institutions the necessary information to calculate the financial need of undocumented students and distribute aid to them. The two promise programs in California also have a state financial aid application, in addition to [flexible residency requirements](#) that let students count time enrolled in a community college toward establishing residency for in-state tuition and aid purposes.⁴⁰

One active free college program requires applicants to submit the FAFSA, but does not explicitly require them to have citizenship or qualify for federal aid. This

means eligible undocumented students can access the program, but only if they have DACA status. Yet while nearly [700,000](#) people currently benefit from the DACA program, there are an estimated [1 million undocumented students](#) in the K-12 system and an [estimated 11 million](#) undocumented people in the U.S., many of whom lack affordable options to attend college.⁴¹ Unfortunately, nearly half of the active free college programs have various rigid provisions regarding citizenship, qualification for federal aid, or state statutes that prohibit all undocumented students from accessing their free college programs.

Researchers at the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy estimate that the nation's undocumented population paid nearly [\\$12 billion annually](#) in state and local taxes in 2014, while individuals without Social Security numbers, many of them undocumented workers, paid another [\\$23.6 billion](#) in federal income taxes.⁴² Despite contributing billions in taxes that go toward many benefits, services, and institutions they may not be able to access, only about [450,000 undocumented](#) individuals are currently enrolled in higher education.⁴³ A [recent study](#) showed that awarding scholarships to undocumented students is well worth the investment, as they have higher three-year persistence rates than the national average and an average GPA of 3.2.⁴⁴ As policymakers consider ways to make federal aid more widely available to undocumented students in the future, they should view state free college programs as opportunities to provide those students with an affordable pathway to a postsecondary education.

“If free college programs are going to remedy the college affordability crisis and increase college attainment, it will be critical to design them in a way that makes college (and all the attendant costs) affordable for students from low-income backgrounds.”

An Inequitable Playing Field for Justice-Impacted Students

The main appeal of free college programs is their potential to provide affordable higher education access to all. Unfortunately, many programs have erected barriers for previously and currently incarcerated individuals. This disproportionately impacts those who are [Black, Latino, and low-income](#), who — due to systemic factors such as housing segregation, exposure to crime and violence, under-resourced schools, overcriminalization, implicit bias in the legal system, and harsh school discipline and sentencing policies — make up the majority of the justice-impacted population.⁴⁵ Although 64% of those incarcerated in federal and state prisons are eligible to enroll in a postsecondary education program, access is limited, and [fewer than 10%](#) of incarcerated people receive certificates or degrees.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the formerly incarcerated are restricted by the stigma of a criminal record and the arbitrary rules that often accompany it. For example, formerly incarcerated individuals tend to have a [harder time](#) finding housing and employment, and they [may be disqualified](#) from receiving the Pell Grant if they had a drug conviction while previously enrolled.⁴⁷

Our investigation found that while 12 of 23 active programs do not have language prohibiting currently and previously incarcerated individuals from participating, many of these programs have rigid eligibility requirements that are difficult for justice-impacted students to meet. In California and Oregon, for example, there are eligibility questions about whether a student's time in custody would count as years of residency. Both of Maryland's programs require students to enroll full time in a class setting, and thereby restrict access to incarcerated individuals who are close to being released and residing in a halfway house. The remaining 11 active programs have a combination of legislative, programmatic, and practice barriers that explicitly

prohibit all justice-impacted students from free college programs in their state, leaving out the nearly [1 in 3 Americans](#) with a criminal record and about [2.3 million incarcerated](#) individuals, many of whom are otherwise eligible to participate in postsecondary programs.⁴⁸

Research shows that correctional education programs [reduce the rate of recidivism by 28%](#) and are associated with [fewer violent incidents](#) in participating prisons.⁴⁹ In addition, nearly [95% of incarcerated](#) individuals will eventually be released, including approximately 700,000 people every year.⁵⁰ Providing affordable access to education is also [a more cost-efficient option than incarceration](#) and can lead to net savings for taxpayers.⁵¹ By including previously and currently incarcerated students in free college programs, states can invest in their employment and successful reentry into society, rather than allowing systemic injustice to re-involve them in the criminal legal system.

Some Penalties/Requirements May Do More Harm Than Good

Some states exclude students who are in default on federal or state-issued student loans or who owe money to public institutions. The [New York Excelsior Scholarship](#) requires recipients to be in a non-default status on a student loan made under any New York state or federal education loan program or on the repayment of any New York award.⁵² The [Nevada Promise Scholarship](#) bars applicants who are in default on a federal student loan or owe a refund to any federal student aid program.⁵³

Such requirements can have a racially disparate impact on who has access to free college programs. Black student loan borrowers have significantly higher default rates than their non-Black peers. Over half of Black

borrowers who started school in 2003-04 [defaulted on their loans within 12 years](#).⁵⁴ Black borrowers from the highest income families who are first-time, full-time students have default rates [seven times higher](#) than their high-income White peers.⁵⁵

Currently incarcerated students are also more likely to be harmed by these types of exclusions. Of the FAFSAs submitted in the first year of the Second Chance Pell pilot, 10% were submitted by applicants with an existing federal loan in default. In comparison, [only 2%](#) of FAFSAs in the overall population were submitted by applicants with an existing federal student loan in default.⁵⁶

Some state free college programs impose penalties on award recipients if they fail to meet employment, residency, or completion requirements. For example, the New York Excelsior program has a loan conversion feature, as do four proposed programs: Florida Sunshine Scholarship, Illinois College Promise, Vermont Promise, and Wisconsin Promise. The federal Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education Grant program (or TEACH Grant) — which gives aspiring teachers pursuing a bachelor’s or master’s degree money for their education if they agree to spend four years teaching a high-need subject at a school serving students from low-income backgrounds — converts to a loan (with interest) if recipients don’t meet certain employment requirements. It also made headlines for [mistakenly penalizing numerous recipients](#) over minor paperwork errors and should be a lesson to states on why loan conversion is bad policy that harms students and undermines college affordability.⁵⁷

Modeling Equity: The Washington College Bound Scholarship and the Washington College Grant Program

The state of Washington has two free college programs: the Washington College Bound Scholarship and the Washington College Grant. The Washington College Bound Scholarship was established in 2007 and is a free college promise for students who meet income requirements and who apply in seventh or eighth grade and attend college right after high school. The scholarship meets 8 out of 10 of our criteria.

The Washington College Grant — formerly known as the State Need Grant — is a more universal and equity-focused free college program that earned the highest mark in our analysis. [Funded by a new tax](#) on businesses that mostly employ those with postsecondary degrees, the program has an income cap on a sliding scale based on Washington’s median family income, and all students who qualify are guaranteed funding.⁵⁸ For example, a family of four making \$50,500 or less would [receive a full award](#) that covers tuition and fees, with partial grants available for families making up to the state’s median income of \$97,000.⁵⁹ Unlike many others, this grant is not awarded on a last-dollar basis, meaning low-income students who qualify for Pell Grants could [use their Pell award toward living costs](#).⁶⁰ And while it covers the full cost of tuition of a certificate, associate degree, or bachelor’s degree at a state college or university on a first-dollar basis, the grant may be used at private colleges too. The Washington College Grant is open to a wide swath of students — including adult and returning students, part-time enrollees, and all undocumented and justice-impacted students who meet the eligibility criteria. By giving students in need more guaranteed funding and the flexibility to select various degree pathways, the Washington College Grant is a model for other statewide promise programs.

DO FREE COLLEGE PROGRAMS SERVE LOW-INCOME, BLACK, AND LATINO STUDENTS?

Public colleges and universities are meant to serve state residents; however, they cannot fulfill this mission if their student bodies do not reflect the racial and ethnic demographics of their states.










Unfortunately, The Education Trust's [Broken Mirrors I](#) and [Broken Mirrors II](#) reports, which examined Black and Latino student college access and attainment respectively, found that Black and Latino students are vastly underrepresented at public colleges and among their graduates in most states.⁶¹ State policy must play a role in closing these gaps. Because [income is not a sufficient proxy for race](#), policies that simply seek to make college more affordable may not, by themselves, boost enrollment and degree completion among Black and Latino students.⁶² However, better income targeting may help.

It is important that states gather data on grant recipients' race and ethnicity to better understand who is being served by these programs and whether they are helping to shrink or expand racial equity gaps. Table 2 includes data on the percentage of Black and Latino award recipients versus the percentage of Black and Latino state residents. But thanks to the variation in the data states collect on free-college program participation, as well as differences in when programs were adopted, data was not available for all states with free college programs.

That said, the available data suggest that having an income cap in free college programs could improve racial equity in the enrollment of those programs. The Washington College Bound Scholarship, which has an income limit of 65% of the state's median family income, is open to students whose families receive SNAP or TANF benefits, as well as those who are in foster care or dependents of the state. The share of Black scholarship recipients is nearly twice the share of the Black state residents, while the percentage of Latino recipients is nearly three times as high their share of the state population. Strong income targeting might help explain why this program serves higher percentages of Black and Latino students. Other programs with income caps have not achieved the same levels of racial equity, but income targeting does seem to make free college program recipients more reflective of state demographics. The share of students of color in Rhode Island's cohort of first-time, full-time direct-from-high-school students was 181% higher in fall 2019 than it was in fall 2016, prior to the existence of the promise program.⁶³

“By including previously and currently incarcerated students in free college programs, states can invest in their employment and successful reentry into society, rather than allowing systemic injustice to re-involve them in the criminal justice system.”

Table 2: Race and College Enrollment

PROGRAM	% OF FREE COLLEGE PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	Percentage of State Residents (18-49 With No College Degree) Who Are Black	% OF FREE COLLEGE PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE HISPANIC/LATINO	Percentage of State Residents (18-49 With No College Degree) Who Are Latino	INCOME CAP DETAILS
Delaware SEED	13%	26.5%	15%	14.1%	
Hawaii (2018-19)	1.8%	3.1%	1.8%	13.9%	
Mississippi HELP	41%	44.5%	3%	4%	
Oklahoma's Promise	9%	8.9%	15%	14.0%	
Oregon Promise	2.1%	2.4%	22.7%	19.6%	
South Carolina WINS	27.3%	33.1%	3.9%	8.2%	
Tennessee Promise (Cohort 5)	19.7%	20.4%	6.6%	7.3%	
Access Utah Promise Scholarship	2.9%	1.4%	14.3%	19.6%	
Washington College Bound Scholarship	8.4%	4.8%	35.2%	19%	

Source: State departments of higher education and U.S. Census Bureau

MAKING EQUITY-DRIVEN FREE COLLEGE POLICIES A REALITY

The design of some recently proposed, but not yet adopted, free college programs may give some indication of the future of these programs. The increase in proposed free college programs from 16 in 2017 to 20 in 2020 suggests a growing interest. Yet despite there being more proposals in the pipeline, the number of bills covering non-tuition costs actually declined in 2020. Our analysis also found that there were fewer proposals covering four or more years of tuition than there were in 2018, while many failed to extend their programs to cover bachelor's degree programs at four-year institutions.

In addition, more proposed promise programs have a minimum GPA requirement of 2.0 or above, and only six of the 20 proposed bills were open to undocumented students or located in states that offer in-state aid to this population. While this signals that at least some recent programs have intentions of being more inclusive, barriers remain as many states still require students to complete the FAFSA application, making undocumented students ineligible. In addition, most proposed programs were also closed to justice-impacted students or lacked language explicitly stating whether or not they qualify. Meanwhile, states like Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas, Vermont, and Wisconsin,

which proposed legislation in 2018, are still fighting to enact free college programs. While none of the proposed programs we analyzed met all of our criteria, there were some bright spots, including a [proposal in Pennsylvania](#) that meets 9 of our 10 criteria.⁶⁴

Since we issued our 2018 report on free college, the number of free college programs has grown: There are eight more active programs and four more proposed programs. The recently authorized but not yet implemented [Michigan Reconnect](#) program specifically and exclusively targets adult and returning students.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, in early February 2020, the New Jersey Garden State Promise [pledged to expand](#) its scope from community colleges to four-year college (this proposal was withdrawn in May 2020 due to budget constraints.)⁶⁶ However, most active programs still don't cover living expenses for any college or tuition at four-year colleges and nearly half of programs continue to exclude adult and returning students, part-time students, undocumented students, and justice-impacted individuals. In other words, free college programs still have a long way to go to make college affordable for all students from low-income backgrounds. Below are five steps policymakers can take to ensure they are using free college policies to advance equity in their states.

“Making college free means providing at least some resources for non-tuition expenses, especially for students from low-income backgrounds, who already struggle to pay.”

1. Include all students. One of the strengths of free college programs is their ability to signal to students and families that a college education is within reach, since price will be less of a barrier. Yet states that tout their programs as “universal,” while actively excluding large groups of students on the basis of their identity, enrollment and/or citizenship status, or when they graduated from high school belie this message of inclusivity. They also may be exacerbating inequality, since so many undocumented students, justice-impacted students, part-time students, and returning students are already barred from using many other forms of financial aid. Equity-driven free college programs cannot exclude students, especially those already facing so many obstacles.

2. Go beyond tuition. Expenses beyond tuition, such as student fees, housing, food, books, and transportation, have always been central to student survival and well-being. These expenses make up an estimated 80% of the cost of attending a community college and are a major driver of student debt. These costs are especially challenging for the [1 in 5](#) college students who are also parents.⁶⁷ Student parents are more likely to have additional non-tuition expenses, such as childcare, and end up borrowing more student debt as result, more than [two-and-a-half times](#) higher than their peers.⁶⁸ The burden of covering non-tuition expenses can impact students’ academic performance and ability to earn a degree. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, the stakes are even higher, as families increasingly struggle to meet basic needs and pay for new academic expenses such as laptops and broadband internet access, which are necessary for remote learning. Making college free means providing at least some resources for non-tuition expenses, especially for students from low-income backgrounds, who already struggle to pay.

3. Make improvements over time. In some states, the push for free college programs was starting to generate new resources for public higher education systems and a renewed awareness of the sector’s economic role after years of decreased investment and neglect. Unfortunately, COVID-19, and the economic crisis brought on by it, are causing state budgets (and investments in higher education) to contract again. This means that many states will find it harder to implement and sustain free college programs, much less equity-driven programs that provide greater benefits and are more expensive. Policymakers should, therefore, commit to improving these programs over time, as access to affordable higher education will always be critical to students’, families’, and states’ survival and economic recovery. Tennessee’s free college policy, for example, doesn’t meet all our criteria, but it has improved since its [launch in 2015](#) by adding Tennessee Reconnect in [2018](#) and expanding access to students returning to college. The state could make its policy even more inclusive by approving a bill, introduced in [2019](#), that would make incarcerated students eligible.⁶⁹ States must aspire to adopt equity-driven approaches to free college, and make improvements as resources are available.

4. Be transparent. States should share data on who participates in free college programs, their impact of programs on college access and success, and how free college dollars are distributed. More important, this data should be disaggregated by race and income wherever possible and made easily available to the public. The state of Delaware, which actively tracks data such as race/ethnicity, Pell Grant status, persistence, transfer rates, and graduation for each cohort, might serve as a model for others on which data to track. Few states, including Delaware, make their data readily available for the public. Tennessee is an exception, having made the [most recent free college program data](#) available on the higher education governing board's website.⁷⁰ Tennessee's data could be strengthened by making more explicit the participation and outcomes of recipients who receive monetary benefits versus other participation benefits, such as mentorship, but otherwise, the state serves as a model on providing timely and accessible data to the public. Without such data, it will be difficult for the public and policymakers to determine whether free college programs are advancing equity and how to improve policies to better serve students.

5. Invest in student success. Bachelor's degree holders [earn a million dollars](#) more over their lifetime than those with a high school diploma,⁷¹ and [students who start college but don't finish](#) are more likely to struggle to repay their student loans than those who complete their degrees.⁷² Leaving college without a degree can be financially devastating for students, so as states invest in free college programs, they must also invest in student success and completion. States must also reverse the historical trend of giving fewer dollars to colleges serving disproportionately more low-income students and students of color (i.e., community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, regional public four-year colleges), who get [\\$1,000 less per student annually](#), on average, than their more affluent White counterparts at predominantly White colleges.⁷³ These funding gaps make it harder for campuses to pay for effective programs like CUNY ASAP, which provides additional advising, resources, and supports and [doubled completion rates](#) as a result.⁷⁴ Equity should drive how states invest in colleges and students, and equitable free college programs must ensure that college is free and high quality for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.

"We mustn't lose sight of the fact that while our nation's colleges are, undoubtedly, contributing to the problem of inequality in the U.S., they're also the key to ending it and to expanding economic opportunity for all."

Some readers might rightly be wondering whether free college programs, much less many cash-strapped colleges, will survive the pandemic and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The truth is, some might not. Meanwhile, in the midst of all this, there is a racial justice reckoning occurring in the U.S., as the public, organizers, and advocates — outraged by the deaths of so many Black Americans at the hands of White police and a public health crisis that's disproportionately impacting people of color — fight for a fairer and more equitable society and to ensure that we seize this opportunity to address the pervasive inequities permeating every facet of our country. We mustn't lose sight of them or the fact that while our nation's colleges are, undoubtedly, contributing to the problem of inequality in the U.S., they're also a key to ending it and to expanding economic opportunity for all. That's why ensuring that a higher education is affordable for students is now more pressing than ever and why free college is an idea that's here to stay.

Proposals like Sen. Brian Schatz's and Rep. Mark Pocan's Debt Free College Act, are built on partnerships

between states and the federal government, are more equity driven than most state policies (most likely because states have fewer resources at their disposal). Democratic presidential nominee and former Vice President Joe Biden has also been fine-tuning his approach to free college by expanding it to include tuition at public four-year colleges and minority-serving institutions, as opposed to just community colleges. Either plan would need the support of Congress and our next president to move forward, which might seem like wishful thinking at this moment in time. Yet either initiative might also go a long way toward addressing the inequities and divisions that plague America and be just what Americans need to start rebuilding their lives.

Regardless of federal support, state policymakers must advance approaches to free college that prioritize equity, especially as the economic crisis results in tightened budgets. Budgets continue to be a statement of values, and we ask that policymakers prioritize those who struggle the most as they aim to make college free for all. These decisions could mean the difference between students surviving and thriving in this historical crisis and beyond.



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ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust is a national nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families. Through our research and advocacy, Ed Trust supports efforts that expand excellence and equity in education from preschool through college; increase college access and completion, particularly for historically underserved students; engage diverse communities dedicated to education equity; and increase political and public will to act on equity issues.



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1501 K STREET, NW, SUITE 200, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005
P 202-293-1217 F 202-293-2605 WWW.EDTRUST.ORG