

## What Were the Reach and Impact of the Oregon Promise Financial Aid Program in Its First Two Years?

Promise programs are place-based financial aid awards that seek to promote postsecondary attainment by covering all or nearly all college tuition costs.<sup>1</sup> In 2015 Oregon became the second state in the country to implement a statewide promise program, called Oregon Promise. Representatives from Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission and K–12 state and local education agencies worked with the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest to conduct this study of Oregon Promise's reach and impact in its first two years among 2015/16 and 2016/17 public high school seniors. During this period Oregon Promise awards covered the average cost of community college tuition and were available to students who graduated from high school with a 2.5 or higher cumulative grade point average (GPA). To receive an award, eligible applicants had to enroll in one of Oregon's 17 community colleges within six months of completing high school. The study used student data from K–12 public schools, Oregon Promise applications, and postsecondary records to describe whom the program reached and served from Oregon public high schools. The study also used a rigorous quasi-experimental design with data from districts in Oregon's largest metropolitan area and a statewide exploratory analysis to assess the program's impact on public high school graduates' postsecondary outcomes.

### Key findings

- **Oregon Promise applicants generally reflected the demographic composition of all Oregon public high school seniors in 2015/16 and 2016/17**, although applicants were more likely to be female and less likely to have received special education services.
- **While applicant characteristics were similar in the first and second years of the program, there were fewer eligible applicants and recipients in the second year, when an expected family contribution limit was added, than in the first year, and they were more likely to be from low-income households and to be students of color.** Using GPA data from the Portland metro area, the study found that lowering the GPA requirement would have increased the applicant pool, as well as the number of applicants from low-income households and applicants of color.
- **Just over half of recipients in the first year of the program renewed their Oregon Promise award and received it in their second year at community college.** Recipients who renewed their award had better high school attendance and were more likely to have participated in college-level coursework while in high school than recipients who received an award only in their first year.
- **For 2015/16 public high school graduates in the Portland metro area with GPAs close to 2.5, the offer of an Oregon Promise award had a positive impact on first-year persistence and on persistence or college completion within four years of high school graduation.** Findings from the statewide exploratory analysis also found positive program impacts on first-year persistence and persistence or college completion within three or four years of high school graduation for all 2015/16 and 2016/17 seniors in the state.

Oregon stakeholders can use these findings to better understand the implications of changing the Oregon Promise program requirements for the number and demographic composition of applicants and recipients and to consider the program's future based on its positive impacts.

1. Perna, L. W., & Leigh, E. W. (2018). Understanding the promise: A typology of state and local college promise programs. *Educational Researcher*, 47(3), 155–180. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1174363>.