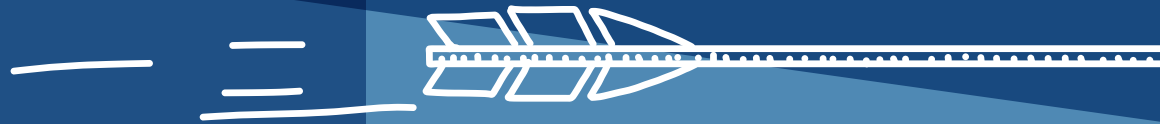
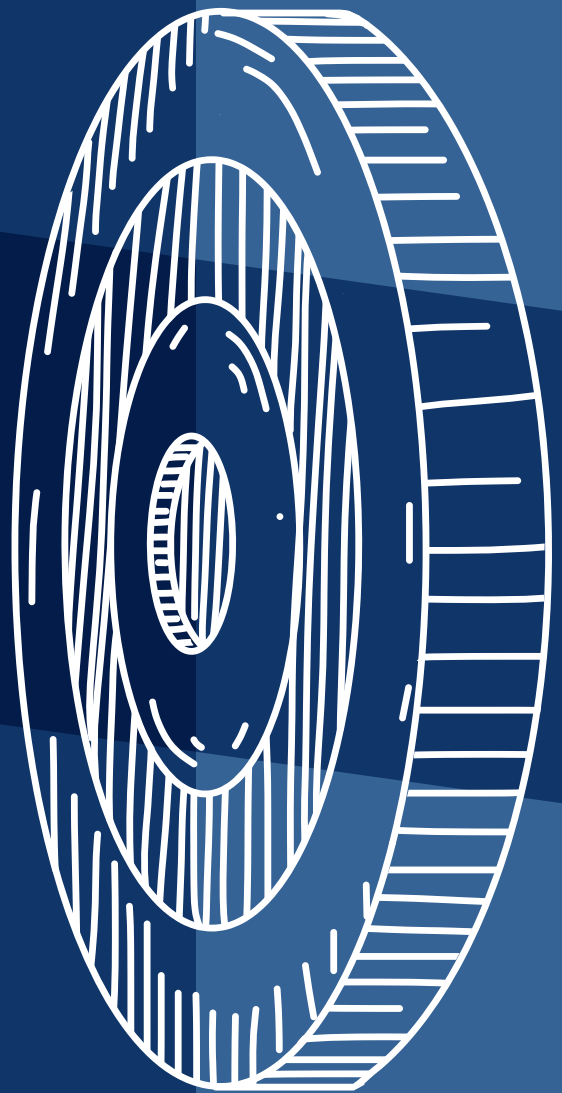




approaching the target



Free college initiatives, which have been part of the national political conversation for years and which some feared might now lose favor in Washington, DC, actually have quietly been inching forward in a variety of forms throughout the country. And some experts say we're now at the point where we just need to fine-tune these programs and let them go to work.



By Jim Paterson

Like everything at the intersection of education and public policy, this mechanism for supporting new college students has riled up debate and been carefully studied and critiqued, but these programs—typically offering two years of community college for free—are often thriving, advocates say, and have given students a leg up, particularly those who need it most.

“Free college is not a new idea—it’s been around for almost 100 years and has been beneficial to a number of times in a number of ways,” said Martha Kanter, former US undersecretary of education and current executive director of College Promise, a national initiative to support state and local free college programs. “The GI Bill gave our servicemen free college and has worked incredibly well. It’s time for it again, and we have to carry it out correctly, support it, and commit to it fully.”

Efforts to provide at least two years of free college nationally got a boost from former President Obama, who called for it in his final State of the Union address. And it became a main talking point for US Sen. Bernie Sanders in the last presidential election primary. But much of the activity now is at the state level.

New York, Rhode Island, Montana, Arkansas, Indiana, Hawaii, Idaho, Maryland, Nevada, and Minnesota have initiated some form of the College Promise program in the last two years, growing the number of states participating to 17.

“Free college... has been beneficial a number of times in a number of ways.”

The features of these state programs vary. They cover different expenses for various schools, and some just pay last dollar costs (after other sources have been exhausted), while some pay just tuition, and some pay other costs. Certain programs may only support students whose families are under prescribed income levels, and some require a certain GPA and full-time attendance or even residency after graduation.

Apart from the state programs, cities and even rural regions are now frequently offering similar programs, along with some school districts (see sidebar). The Dallas County Promise program was just launched in Texas, joining 200 regional and city programs offering free postsecondary education or additional financial support.

“This will not just be good for our students, it will be great for Seattle,” said Mayor Jenny Durkan as she signed the executive order establishing the program in her city in November. “It will help channel the prosperity of our

EVEN MORE SUPPORT

While no national free college initiative has taken shape, local school districts, cities, and regional groups have joined states in offering new programs to help pay for college often making it free.

In Stockton, California, a \$20 million private donation has helped local schools offer students \$500 a year to attend a two-year school and \$1,000 for a four-year college.

“As long as a kid graduates from a Stockton Unified school they get the money to use for any legitimate college expense,” said Lange Luntao, executive director for the Reinvent Stockton Foundation, the sponsor of the program.

He notes that like state College Promise programs, district and local efforts offer a wide variety of supports for students and are growing in popularity.

Kalamazoo Promise, he notes, is the oldest such program provided by a municipality. Dating back to 2005, it just reached the 5,000-student mark for participation.

That program requires students to have been in the district since they started school (smaller stipends are available if they came later) and requires them to maintain a 3.0 GPA and be in school full-time. But it pays the way for any student in the district to attend any public or private state school and has more liberal requirements than some similar programs about how its funds and other scholarships are combined and used.

Research has shown the program has contributed to an enrollment increase of about 25 percent in the Kalamazoo public schools, reversing

steady decline, and increased the number of a high school graduates who earned a college degree by 12 percent.

- Long Beach (CA) has offered free tuition at the local community college since 2008 to every local student and then, if they meet the eligibility requirements, guaranteed admission to California State University at Long Beach.
- Free college is now available to residents at the City College of San Francisco, regardless of income. The initiative is funded by a tax on properties selling for more than \$5 million. Similar programs have been developed in Los Angeles and West Sacramento, where a comprehensive program called Home Run promotes college and career readiness.
- In Wabash County (IN) officials focus on elementary and middle school students who hit academic benchmarks and participate in college readiness activities. If their families meet college savings goals, their funds are matched by philanthropic and business partners.
- In four rural Wisconsin counties, students can attend community college for free if they graduate on time, maintain good grades, and participate in job readiness and career planning sessions, as well as community service programs.
- Students in a four-county region in South Carolina have the opportunity for free community college if they meet certain income and other requirements and maintain a 2.5 grade point average.

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thriving economy back into our community, and let us start filling thousands of job openings with our home-grown talent.” Graduates of Seattle schools all will be eligible for 90 credits of free coursework starting next fall through a structure now being developed by the K-12 school system and local colleges.

Two experts have recently noted, however, that these programs should be developed with care.

Early this spring, Jennifer Mishory, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, released a detailed evaluation of state College Promise programs, where she describes the various ways they take shape and how they could be improved.

She notes that the programs are designed to help get more students into postsecondary education by providing financial support and, importantly, by using the “positive effect that a clear affordability message can have.”

“There is evidence to show that understanding aid available and the actual cost of college makes it more likely low-income students will apply. Research also shows that a more easily navigable aid process will increase enrollment,” Mishory said.

But she said two factors are key in the success of College Promise programs.

“The specific policy design choices, combined with the level of funding allocated, will ultimately impact how well they meet core goals.”

She said they shouldn’t have merit cutoffs or residency requirements, but should cover a wide array of costs without the limitations that states sometimes put on them. Students should receive good, accurate information about their features and non-traditional or undocumented students should be allowed to participate.

In addition, they should embrace “a large-scale public outreach campaign,” Mishory said.

Laura Perna, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania and executive director of the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, which supports the free college concept, also said she believes programs must be developed with care.

“To achieve their promise of making college more affordable and increasing college attainment they should have certain features and be financially sustainable,” she said.

She favors the Kalamazoo (MI) Promise program, which for more than a decade has helped the region’s schools build “a college-going culture” starting in kindergarten and has provided support that can be used in two- and four-year private and public schools statewide.

“Programs that have a dedicated financial source, such as Tennessee Promise’s endowment, also may be more financially stable than programs that rely on philanthropic donations or annual appropriations,” she said. “Six years after it was created in 2009, a ‘promise zone’ in Jackson, Michigan, was dissolved because the city could not raise the \$2.1 million needed.”

Tennessee was the first state to provide free community college to any resident, and has found around 60 percent of participants are the first in their families to attend college and 70 percent are low-income. The state is using funds from its lottery, businesses, and foundations.

“By using lottery reserve funds rather than annual state appropriations we remove the burden of budgeting for scholarship costs on an annual basis within our legislature,” said James Snider, director of the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

ELIGIBILITY

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Experts say free college and other programs that provide new streams of financial aid are a good resource, but students using them should know the details about how the money can be used and eligibility criteria.

Some programs pay a last dollar amount after other sources of aid have been exhausted, and some pay just tuition while others are more flexible. Participation may require a certain GPA, residency of various lengths before and after college, citizenship and even community service, according to Jennifer Mishory, a researcher with The Century Foundation who has studied the initiatives.

“Students and families living in a state with a promise program should pay attention to the details—who is eligible, what does a student have to do to retain eligibility while enrolled in college, and are there requirements that a student has to follow after graduation,” she said.

She also hopes as state and local officials initiate and adjust these programs they will make it easier for students to participate and that they’ll consider the ramifications of certain requirements.

“While research on the effectiveness of College Promise programs is still in its early stages, we have identified at least one emerging theme: ‘The simpler the better,’” she said. “Eligibility requirements, such as confusing GPA standards, detract from their success.”

He said the initial \$350 million from private donations was not sufficient for full program independence, but it provided a nest egg from which the program could grow. The fund should reach \$500 million this year, and Snider said planners hope the trust will “fully fund its scholarships going forward without any other infusion of money.”

Community college or technical education is paid for any high school graduate who focuses on a STEM career in Arkansas. The state is using \$8.2 million to provide for whatever a student’s financial aid doesn’t cover.

In New York, students with family incomes up to \$125,000 now can attend any state college or university for two or four years for free, as long as they commit to work in the state for that same period. State officials say 200,000 students are likely use the system.

In Hawaii, the legislature passed a budget that includes \$1.8 million to fund two years of the Hawaii Promise, which will cover tuition, fees, books, supplies, and transportation for students with financial need to attend any community college within the University of Hawaii system.

Legislators in California have passed an initiative paying tuition and fees for all residents at the state’s 114 community colleges for one year. Experts say the state’s portion of its \$15 million cost has not yet been funded.

The Nevada Promise Scholarship was passed into law recently, following unanimous bipartisan support and backing from educators, workforce development groups, and industry. It is modeled after Tennessee Promise and covers free tuition and fees for graduating high school seniors to attend community college. It also requires that students complete community service hours and maintain a 2.5 GPA. [↗](#)

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