



## *Designing Equitable Promise Programs*

### *Research-based Considerations for State Policymakers*

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## *Overview*

College Promise programs have become quite common. While most Promise programs are local, over 20 statewide Promise programs have taken the concept to scale. Promise programs have the potential to increase college affordability as well as broaden access to college, and can support students as they enroll, progress, and complete a postsecondary degree. However, all Promise programs, and perhaps statewide Promise programs in particular, reflect a range of tradeoffs. Fiscal, political, and ideological factors can constrain program design so that inequities in affordability, access and success among students persist or are exacerbated.

### **Much of the debate surrounding statewide Promise programs is centered on issues of equity.**

The significant variation in these programs reflects constraints and tradeoffs that can disproportionately affect students of color, students from low-income households, undocumented students, and other underserved populations as well as the postsecondary institutions that they attend. Based on a comprehensive policy scan of all statewide Promise programs as well as in-depth research of four statewide Promise programs, this document spotlights equity concerns. It also provides considerations for state policymakers as they design and implement Promise programs that advance equity.

## **EQUITY CONCERNS AT THE STUDENT AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVELS**

RFA has developed a Statewide College Promise Framework that can be used to assess specific program design components and tradeoffs across three major elements of the higher education pipeline: Affordability, Access, and Success. Depending upon their design, statewide Promise programs can ameliorate or contribute to inequities at both the student and institution levels.

At the student level, components of program design such as the type of award, eligibility and program requirements, and the presence of student supports can disproportionately affect affordability, access, and success.

At the institution level, inequities in financial and human resources for both high schools and colleges are substantial. These can hamper the capacity of under-resourced institutions—those most likely to enroll traditionally disadvantaged students—to fully support Promise students.

Below, we highlight Affordability, Access, and Success equity concerns for both students and institutions, and provide a range of suggestions for state policymakers to consider.

All Promise programs are constrained by some combination of fiscal, political, and ideological factors. Similarly, postsecondary institutions are constrained by limited resources and multiple missions. As policymakers decide how to craft Promise programs, they must make a series of programmatic decisions and tradeoffs that will affect affordability, access, and student success. They must also decide the degree to which they will focus their efforts on addressing and reducing gaps in college-going and attainment among students of color, low-income students, and other underserved populations.

# Statewide College Promise Program Equity Concerns

While all Promise Programs target affordability by providing financial resources, the degree to which they make college more affordable for all students varies.



## Affordability

<b>PROMISE DESIGN COMPONENT</b>	<b>AWARD STRUCTURE:</b> Most statewide Promise programs provide last-dollar, tuition-only financial awards, which primarily fill financial gaps for students from middle-income households.
<b>EQUITY CONCERNS</b>	<p><b>STUDENT:</b> Last-dollar, tuition-only Promise designs prevent students whose tuition costs are fully covered by Pell to receive Promise dollars for other costs (e.g., non-mandatory fees, room and board, books, transportation, and childcare).</p> <p><b>STUDENT:</b> Many statewide programs do not include students in the program if they do not receive Promise dollars. For last-dollar Promise programs, this means that students from low-income households whose tuition is fully covered by the Pell grant are excluded from any additional program-related supports (e.g., coaching, early registration, summer bridge).</p> <p><b>STUDENT:</b> Most statewide Promise programs exclude undocumented students, regardless of DACA status—even though Promise may provide the only state aid available to these students.</p> <p><b>INSTITUTION:</b> Institutions vary in their capacity to fill unmet financial need. Typically, institutions serving students with the highest level of need have the least amount of institutional aid.</p>
<b>POLICYMAKER CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<p><b>AWARD STRUCTURE:</b> Consider a middle-dollar/ last-dollar plus Promise model that would provide all students with at least some financial award. Although more costly per student, such programs distribute dollars more evenly, and help low-income students offset the costs of indirect educational expenses that are not covered by any other kind of aid.</p> <p>For last-dollar programs, consider including students who don't receive Promise scholarship funds in the program so that 1.) students can still benefit from any non-financial Promise-related supports (e.g., mentoring, summer bridge, early registration, etc.), and 2.) students can be tracked to monitor effects of non-financial program elements on student success.</p>

## Access

How a state determines Promise program eligibility and how it communicates about the program influence the breadth of college access it provides.

<b>PROMISE DESIGN COMPONENTS</b>	<p><b>PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY:</b> No statewide Promise program is truly universal. All programs include at least some eligibility criteria, such as enrollment status, residency requirements, restrictions around time of application, merit-based criteria, need-based criteria, and completion of FAFSA or a state-designed alternative application for financial aid. The more restrictive and voluminous the eligibility criteria, the less likely a program will increase access among underserved students.</p> <p><b>MESSAGING:</b> States take different approaches to describing and communicating about their Promise programs. How a Promise program is messaged can determine whether students and communities understand that college is accessible; and whether, or not, the program is designed to meet their needs.</p>
<b>EQUITY CONCERNS</b>	<p><b>STUDENT:</b> Tying FAFSA completion to program eligibility presents barriers for underserved students (e.g., lack of support from their high schools to fill out the form, reluctance from family members to share tax information) and disqualifies all undocumented students.</p> <p><b>STUDENT:</b> K-12 students and their families may have unequal exposure to the ‘free college’ message and therefore, many may be unaware of whether the program exists. Descriptions of eligibility may be vague or incomplete, making it difficult for students and families to know if they are eligible.</p> <p><b>INSTITUTION:</b> Under-resourced high schools provide relatively few guidance counselors. Yet many statewide Promise programs rely on high schools to alert students to these programs and guide them through the application process. Students who attend under-resourced schools therefore face additional barriers to accessing statewide Promise programs.</p>
<b>POLICYMAKER CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<p><b>ELIGIBILITY:</b> Consider limiting eligibility criteria that create barriers for underserved students. Seek to determine which criteria will be least impactful for equity populations.</p> <p><b>MESSAGING:</b> Consider investing in a robust communications strategy that includes outreach and additional supports for districts that enroll high numbers of underserved students to ensure buy-in and full understanding of the program.</p>

Effective Promise programs include elements to increase retention and graduation. The program requirements and student supports embedded in statewide Promise programs can differently affect traditionally underserved students once enrolled in college.

<p><b>PROMISE DESIGN COMPONENTS</b></p>	<p><b>PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS:</b> Most Promise programs include requirements that students must meet to remain in the program. States include program requirements to serve varied purposes such as promoting completion (e.g. requiring full-time enrollment), demonstrating student commitment (e.g. requiring community service), or to limit the use of Promise to certain types of institutions or degree programs. Program requirements may be included to address important fiscal, ideological, and political interests. Yet they can pose unrealistic barriers to success for some students.</p> <p><b>SUPPORTS:</b> Some statewide Promise programs provide student success supports such as coaching and summer bridge programs, but <i>most</i> statewide Promise programs provide few if any student supports—a fact that may reduce retention and completion in these programs.</p>
<p><b>EQUITY CONCERNS</b></p>	<p><b>STUDENTS:</b> The number and type of program requirements can affect student capacity to remain enrolled in Promise programs. Effects will be concentrated among students whose life circumstances prevent them from meeting such requirements (e.g., work responsibilities, lack of transportation, family responsibilities).</p> <p><b>INSTITUTION:</b> The availability and quality of supports (i.e. mentors; first-year experience courses; counseling services) are directly affected by overall institutional capacity and fiscal resources. Institutions that enroll students who most need additional supports typically have the fewest resources to provide them. As a result, their absence may reduce the success of these students.</p>
<p><b>POLICYMAKER CONSIDERATIONS</b></p>	<p><b>PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS:</b> Consider limiting the number of program requirements, and seek to determine which will be least detrimental for equity populations. If political and fiscal realities dictate the existence of such requirements, consider providing a menu of choices so that students can choose how best to meet them.</p> <p><b>SUPPORTS:</b> Consider utilizing federal or state dollars to bolster the availability and quality of supports, particularly for equity populations, through institutional grants or other mechanisms.</p>