

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

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

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In 2015 Oregon became the second state in the country to implement a statewide promise program. Its program, Oregon Promise, seeks to promote students' postsecondary attainment by covering nearly all community college tuition. This study used student data from K–12 public schools, Oregon Promise applications, and postsecondary records to examine which public high school seniors the program reached and served and to assess the program's impact on high school graduates' postsecondary outcomes in its first two years. The study found that 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, 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 grade point average (GPA) data from the Portland metropolitan area, the study also found that lowering the GPA requirement would have increased the overall 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 award and received it in their second year at a community college. These recipients had better high school attendance and were more likely to have participated in college-level coursework during high school than recipients who received an award only in their first year. Finally, among high school graduates in the Portland metropolitan area with a GPA close to the eligibility cutoff (2.5), the offer of an 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 the findings to better understand the reach and impact of the Oregon Promise program, implications of program requirements on the number and composition of applicants and recipients, and the high school experiences of recipients who renewed their award.

Why this study?

Postsecondary education attainment offers many benefits for individuals and society, including increased lifetime earnings and improved health outcomes, job satisfaction, and social mobility (Ma et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2014). Although college enrollment and completion rates have increased substantially in recent decades, gaps in enrollment and completion based on family income have widened, resulting in greater inequality in educational attainment (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Financial aid is essential for expanding college access among students from low- and middle-income households (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013), and rigorous research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of federal and state financial aid programs on postsecondary outcomes (Bettinger, 2004; Bettinger et al., 2019; Castleman & Long, 2016; Dennings et al., 2019; DesJardins et al., 2002; Dynarski, 2003, 2008; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Kane, 2003; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

Promise programs are relatively new financial aid models that cover all or nearly all college tuition costs for eligible students (Lepe & Weissman, 2020; Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Unlike traditional forms of financial aid, in which eligibility is based primarily on merit or need, promise programs use residency in a district, city, or state as a key eligibility criterion (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna

For additional information, including background on the Oregon Promise program, technical methods, and supporting analysis, access the report appendixes at <https://go.usa.gov/xecvvh>.

& Leigh, 2018). Evaluations have found that students who enroll in promise programs are more likely to enroll in and, for some programs, to persist in and complete college (Bartik et al., 2017; Bifulco et al., 2019; Bucceri, 2013; Daugherty & Gonzalez, 2016; Miller-Adams, 2015).

Oregon was the second state in the country to implement a statewide promise program: Oregon Promise (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2018). Oregon Promise was established by the Oregon legislature in 2015, and students entering community college in fall 2016 were the first to receive the program's awards (see box 1 for details on the program). Oregon Promise has many distinct features from other promise programs, such as differences in application processes, eligibility criteria, residency requirements, types of institutions included, and how funding is disbursed (see Perna & Leigh, 2018). Thus, despite the growing body of evidence on promise programs, continued evaluation of specific programs is valuable because program models vary widely and findings for one program might not generalize to others. This study examined Oregon Promise to describe the program's reach and impact on 2015/16 and 2016/17 public high school seniors.

Prior research on Oregon Promise suggests that the program might be associated with positive outcomes. Research by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) showed initial increases in enrollment at Oregon's community colleges, in completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and in Pell Grant funding for students in Oregon in the first year of the program (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2018). A study comparing postsecondary enrollment patterns in Oregon and states that did not have a promise program also found that Oregon Promise appears to have increased statewide postsecondary enrollment in the second year of the program (Gurantz, 2019). However, HECC's most recent research shows no difference over time in college enrollment rates between the high school graduating class of 2015/16 and prior high school graduating classes when Oregon Promise was not available (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2020). Oregon Promise might have increased immediate college enrollment because of the requirement that students enroll within six months of completing high school to receive the award; however, those initial increases have not been sustained. Further, HECC's recent research found slightly higher four-year college completion rates for the high school graduating class of 2015/16 than for prior high school graduating classes when Oregon Promise was not available.

Box 1. Description of Oregon Promise during the study time period

Oregon Promise is open to individuals with a high school diploma or GED test credential, including Oregon students who complete high school in public school, private school, home school, a correctional facility, or a foster care placement outside of the state (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2021a; S.B. 1605). This study focused on public school students only, and this box describes the program during the study time period, when 2015/16 and 2016/17 public school seniors could apply. The program is similar as of 2021.

Oregon public high school seniors in 2015/16 and 2016/17 applied for Oregon Promise by completing the Oregon Promise grant application and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA).¹ Students had to list on their FAFSA or ORSAA at least one Oregon community college they expected to attend. Oregon Promise applications were due at the end of students' senior year.

To be eligible for an Oregon Promise award, high school students must have resided in Oregon for at least 12 months prior to college enrollment, earned a high school unweighted cumulative grade point average of 2.5 or higher, completed high school, and earned or attempted no more than 90 college credits through dual-credit programs in high school (Higher Education Coordinating Commission [HECC], 2016, 2018). Oregon Promise awards were administered by the Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC) at HECC, and OSAC staff reviewed high school transcripts and FAFSA/ORSAA applications to verify that applicants met eligibility requirements before offering an award. In the second year of the program, because of a state budget shortfall, the state introduced an expected family contribution limit after the application deadline that applied to new applicants entering college in 2017/18: only applicants with an expected family contribution below \$20,000 were eligible for an award.²

To receive the award, applicants had to enroll in one of Oregon's 17 community colleges within six months of completing high school. The minimum award was \$1,000, and the maximum award was the average tuition cost for 12 credits per term at an Oregon community college (\$3,248 for a full-time student in the first year of the program; Higher Education Coordinating

Commission, 2016, 2018). Award amounts were determined after federal Pell Grant and state Oregon Opportunity Grant³ aid had been applied. Thus, the award amount a student received depended on several factors: Pell Grant and Oregon Opportunity Grant aid amounts, number of credits taken per term, and tuition cost at the student's community college. Students whose tuition cost was covered by a Pell Grant or Oregon Opportunity Grant received the minimum award of \$1,000; this approach helps alleviate the burden that nontuition college costs place on students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

The award covered up to 90 attempted community college credits (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2018). Recipients could renew their award in subsequent years if they enrolled in at least six credits per term in the fall, winter, and spring terms each year; maintained satisfactory academic progress; completed a first-year experience at their community college, which could be a new student orientation, short online course for Oregon Promise students, or the standard college success course; and filed a valid FAFSA or ORSAA by June 1 (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2021a). See appendix A for additional information about the program.

Notes

1. The ORSAA is for Oregon students with undocumented status, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status, or Temporary Protected Status (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2018).

2. Oregon law allows HECC to add the expected family contribution limit to control program costs when needed. After the second year of the program, HECC removed the expected family contribution limit and funded all eligible applicants for several years. The expected family contribution limit was implemented again for applicants entering college in 2020/21 in response to state budget cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. The Oregon Opportunity Grant is the state's largest need-based grant program and provides funding to Oregon residents who attend a public higher education institution and have an expected family contribution below the expected family contribution limit for that year (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2021b).

Representatives from HECC, as well as Oregon education stakeholders from K–12 state and local education agencies, worked with the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest to plan the current study and provide data for it. This study extends existing research on Oregon Promise in two ways.

First, the study used descriptive methods to explore which public high school seniors the program reached and served in its first two years. It examined the extent to which applicants reflected the characteristics of all seniors in 2015/16 and 2016/17 to assess program reach. It also examined differences in applicants, eligible applicants, and recipients in the first year compared with the second year, when an expected family contribution limit was added. Additionally, using grade point average (GPA) data from districts in the Portland metropolitan (metro) area, this study is the first to explore how the number and characteristics of potential applicants might change if the GPA requirement were lowered. (The Oregon legislature was considering lowering the GPA requirement to 2.0 in the 2021 legislative session [H.B. 2093, Or., 2021].) Taken together, these descriptive findings offer HECC and other Oregon stakeholders insights on the number and composition of students that Oregon Promise reached and served and on how the program's requirements changed its reach. Finally, the study examined the high school outcomes (academic and nonacademic performance and participation in college credit opportunities) of recipients who renewed their award and of those who did not. These findings highlight which high school experiences might be related to college persistence and award renewal.

Second, this study used a rigorous quasi-experimental method to estimate the program's causal impacts on high school graduates' postsecondary outcomes. It is the first study to examine the program's longer-term impacts on college persistence and completion. In the case of Oregon Promise, a natural comparison group is high school graduates with GPAs just below the 2.5 eligibility cutoff: students with GPAs just below and just above 2.5 might be very similar, so any differences in these students' outcomes might be explained by the treatment group's eligibility for Oregon Promise (Lee & Lemieux, 2010). Thus, the main causal approach for this study examined outcomes among a sample of students with GPAs close to 2.5. Program impacts for students with GPAs close to 2.5 provide useful information for policymakers about whether they should consider making more students eligible by lowering the GPA requirement. For example, if Oregon Promise had positive impacts for students with GPAs equal to or just above 2.5, policymakers might want to lower the GPA requirement so that students with lower GPAs could benefit from the program. This study also used an exploratory approach with a larger population of

students to confirm whether there were impacts for all students, regardless of GPA. Both approaches examined impacts on college enrollment, persistence, and completion at any postsecondary institution in the country. In addition to providing funding specifically to attend an Oregon community college, the program might also have been associated with strengthening high schools' college-going culture, encouraging seniors who might not otherwise have done so to apply for and enroll in any college (Hodara, Petrokubi, et al., 2017; Miller-Adams, 2015; Rauner et al., 2018). Overall, the findings offer policy-relevant information about the program's effectiveness in achieving its intended goal of increasing college-going rates among recent high school graduates and promoting college success.

This study is also responsive to Oregon's Equity Lens, a set of questions that Oregon agencies consider when allocating resources to ensure that decisions promote a more equitable education system, close opportunity gaps, and advance education outcomes for all Oregonians (Oregon Education Investment Board, n.d.). Oregon's Equity Lens focuses primarily on racial/ethnic equity, but it also emphasizes equitable outcomes for underserved students, including students of color, students from low-income households, English learner students, students in rural areas, migrant students, and students with disabilities. Thus, the study team analyzed these student characteristics when evaluating whom Oregon Promise reached and served. The study also used a new measure of persistently disadvantaged (see box 2 for definitions of key terms used in the report), which is based on research by Micheltore and Dynarski (2017), who found meaningful differences in the characteristics and outcomes of children who are persistently disadvantaged, transitorily disadvantaged, and never disadvantaged.

Box 2. Key terms

First year of the program. The first year of the program includes students who were seniors in the 2015/16 school year who applied for Oregon Promise in 2015/16. Recipients in the first year of the program received the award in 2016/17 (their first year at community college). Some renewed their award and received it in 2017/18 (their second year at community college).

Second year of the program. The second year of the program includes students who were seniors in the 2016/17 school year who applied for Oregon Promise in 2016/17. Recipients in the second year of the program received the award in 2017/18 (their first year at community college). Some renewed their award and received it in 2018/19 (their second year at community college).

Indicators that a student is from a low-income household:

- **Ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program.** Students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free or reduced-price lunch, for at least one year during their Oregon public school K–12 enrollment. To be eligible for free lunch, families must have incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level, and to be eligible for reduced-price lunch, families must have incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty level (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017).
- **Persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program.** Students eligible for the National School Lunch Program for at least three school years in a row during their Oregon public school K–12 enrollment.

Oregon Promise application status:

- **Applicants.** Students who applied to Oregon Promise, submitted a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA), and listed on their FAFSA or ORSAA at least one community college they planned to attend. This group includes applicants who did not meet all eligibility requirements and applicants who met all eligibility requirements and were offered an award (see “eligible applicant” below).
- **Eligible applicants.** Applicants who met eligibility requirements and were therefore offered an Oregon Promise award. This group includes eligible applicants who were offered an award but did not use it and eligible applicants who were offered an award and used it (see “recipient” below).
- **Recipients.** Eligible applicants who were offered an award and used it to attend an Oregon community college within six months of high school completion. This group includes recipients who received an award only in their first term at community college, recipients who received an award in multiple terms in their first year at community college, and recipients who met all criteria to renew their award and received it in their second year at community college (see box 1 for renewal requirements).

Postsecondary outcomes in the study based on National Student Clearinghouse¹ data:

- **College enrollment.**
 - Student has a record of enrolling in any college within six months of high school graduation.
 - Student has a record of enrolling in any college within two years of high school graduation.
- **First-year persistence.** Student was still enrolled in any college during the spring term of the first year in college.
- **Longer-term persistence or completion.** Student enrolled in college within two years and was still enrolled in 2019/20 or completed college (that is, earned a certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree) by the 2019/20 academic year, which is within four years of high school graduation for 2015/16 seniors and within three years of graduation for 2016/17 seniors.

Note

1. The National Student Clearinghouse collects student-level data on enrollment and completions by term from 3,700 postsecondary institutions, representing 97 percent of all postsecondary institutions in the United States.

Research questions

This study addressed the following questions about the first two years of Oregon Promise:

1. Which public high school seniors in 2015/16 and 2016/17 did Oregon Promise reach and serve?
 - a. How were the demographic characteristics and school locale of applicants similar to or different from the characteristics of all Oregon public high school seniors?
 - b. How did the number, percentage, and characteristics of applicants, eligible applicants, and recipients vary in the first and second years of the program?
 - c. How might the number and characteristics of potential applicants in the Portland metro area have changed if the GPA requirement had been lowered?
 - d. What percentage of recipients in the first year of the program renewed their award and received it in their second year at community college, and how did their high school outcomes compare with those of recipients who received an award only in their first year?
2. What were the impacts of the offer of an Oregon Promise award on public high school graduates' college enrollment, first-year persistence, and longer-term persistence or completion?
 - a. What were the impacts among seniors from public high schools in the Portland metro area who graduated in 2015/16 with a GPA close to 2.5?
 - b. What were the impacts among all seniors from public high schools in the Portland metro area who graduated in 2015/16 or 2016/17?
 - c. What were the impacts among all seniors from all Oregon public high schools who graduated in 2015/16 or 2016/17?

Research question 1 used descriptive analyses, and research question 2 used two different quasi-experimental designs.

Limitations

The method used to answer research question 2a (regression discontinuity) required GPA data to examine very similar students with a GPA close to 2.5, the program requirement. However, GPA data are not collected at the state level, so the study team collected GPA data from districts in the Portland metro area, which has large and diverse school districts. Thus, research question 2a included only students who graduated from public schools in the Portland metro area in 2015/16 with a GPA close to 2.5. The results might not generalize to other students. See appendix B for further information on the rationale for this sample.

To support the findings from research question 2a, the study team conducted exploratory analyses using a matched comparison group design that is less rigorous than regression discontinuity but has greater generalizability. Because GPA data were not available for all students in the state, three analyses were conducted: one including GPA and two excluding it. To examine the extent to which including GPA might change the results, question 2b was limited to students from Portland metro area high schools, all of whom had GPA data, and analyses were conducted with and without GPA. The analysis for question 2c included students from both years of the program from across the state and thus does not include GPA. This statewide analysis could not account for differences in GPA when identifying a matched comparison group to Oregon Promise students. Thus, these findings pertain to all high school graduates in the state but are less rigorous.

The data sources, sample, and analytic methods used for this study are summarized in box 3. Additional information about the study methods is in appendix B.

Box 3. Data sources, sample, and methods

Data sources. The study drew on statewide K–12 records from the Oregon Department of Education on Oregon public high school students who were in grade 12 in 2015/16 or 2016/17; postsecondary records from the National Student Clearinghouse for these students through spring of the 2019/20 academic year; Oregon Promise application data from the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) from the first two years of the program; and unweighted cumulative high school grade point average (GPA) data from six school districts in the Portland metro area. The GPA data were from the three largest districts in the Portland metro area—Portland Public Schools, Beaverton School District, and Hillsboro School District, which together educate nearly one-fifth of Oregon public school students—as well as three smaller districts—Forest Grove School District, Gresham-Barlow School District, and Parkrose School District.

Sample. The study included all Oregon public high school seniors in the 2015/16 and 2016/17 academic years ($n = 95,579$). Across these two senior classes, there were 24,217 Oregon Promise applicants, 18,341 eligible applicants, and 11,455 recipients. The study focused on public high school seniors and did not include home-schooled students (unless they registered with a public school district), private school students, or GED recipients who applied for the program. GED recipients accounted for 2 percent of Oregon Promise applicants in the first two years of the program (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2018). Overall, the study sample size of eligible applicants and recipients included 93 percent of all eligible applicants and 91 percent of all recipients in the first two years of the program (see table A2 in appendix A for a comparison of the study sample size and the total number of applicants, eligible applicants, and recipients in the first two years of the program).

Methodology. To answer research question 1a, the study team examined student demographic characteristics and high school locale of all Oregon public high school seniors and Oregon Promise applicants.¹ To answer research question 1b, the study team compared the demographic characteristics and school locale of applicants, eligible applicants, and recipients in the first and second years of the program. The study team also examined characteristics of recipients in the first and second years of the program by award amount (that is, receiving a full Pell Grant and thus the maximum Oregon Promise award or receiving no Pell Grant and thus the minimum Oregon Promise award). To answer research question 1c, the study team compared the demographic characteristics of high school graduates with a GPA of 2.0–2.49 and Oregon Promise applicants from the six Portland metro area districts. To answer research question 1d, the study team examined high school performance and participation in college credit opportunities of recipients in the first year of the program who received an award only in their first term at community college, who received an award in multiple terms in their first year at community college but none in their second year, and who renewed their award and received it in their second year at community college. This analysis was restricted to first-year recipients because the study team had Oregon Promise application data from only the first two years of the program. Data from the second year of the program included information on renewal awards for the first-year recipients. Differences of 5 percentage points or more between groups are classified as large, differences of 2–4 percentage points are classified as moderate, and differences of less than 2 percentage points are classified as negligible.

To answer research question 2a, the study team used a fuzzy regression discontinuity design. The analysis restricted the sample to high school graduates with a final GPA close to the 2.5 cutoff and then identified whether the offer of an award had an impact on

their postsecondary outcomes, after student characteristics and district were accounted for.² This design took advantage of the fact that students with a GPA close to the 2.5 cutoff are very similar (see table B4 in appendix B for characteristics of students with a GPA below and at or above 2.5). A key difference is that the group with a 2.5 or higher GPA was much more likely to apply for and be offered an award than the group with a GPA below 2.5. Thus, any differences in their outcomes could be attributed to the offer of an award.

To answer research questions 2b and 2c, the study team used a matched comparison group design to compare the outcomes of high school graduates who were eligible applicants (the treatment group) to similar peers who did not apply (the comparison group). The sample for research question 2b included public high school seniors in the Portland metro area only, and the analysis was run twice: once including GPA and once excluding GPA. The sample for research question 2c included all public high school seniors in Oregon. To construct the matched comparison group, the study team identified students in the comparison group who were likely to be eligible for an award based on student characteristics (see tables B6–B8 in appendix B for similarities between the treatment and comparison groups). The study team then used a regression model that weighted individuals with a similar likelihood of being an eligible applicant more heavily than students with a low likelihood of being an eligible applicant to estimate the relationship between award offer and postsecondary outcomes, after all characteristics, as well as students' senior year cohort and senior year high school, were accounted for.

Notes

1. The variables examined in research question 1 were gender, race/ethnicity, ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program, persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program, ever received special education services, ever received special education services in high school, ever in a migrant education program, English learner status (never an English learner student in grades K–12, a former English learner student, or current English learner student in grades 9–12), ever suspended or expelled in high school, indicator that average high school attendance rate was above 90 percent, indicators of meeting state standards on Smarter Balanced math and reading assessments, took dual-credit courses, took direct-enrollment courses, took Advanced Placement courses, took International Baccalaureate courses, and senior year high school locale (city, suburb, town, rural).

2. The variables examined in research question 2 were gender, race/ethnicity, ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program, ever received special education services, ever in a migrant education program, English learner status (never an English learner student in grades K–12, a former English learner student, or current English learner student in grades 9–12), attended a charter high school, attended more than one high school, average high school attendance rate, ever suspended or expelled in high school, scaled Smarter Balanced math and reading assessment scores, took dual-credit courses, took direct-enrollment courses, took Advanced Placement courses, took International Baccalaureate courses, and senior year high school locale (city, suburb, town, rural).

Findings

This section presents findings addressing the study research questions.

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

Oregon Promise applicants were demographically similar to all Oregon public high school seniors in 2015/16 and 2016/17, with negligible differences. Across 2015/16 and 2016/17 about 37 percent of applicants and 38 percent of all seniors were students of color (see table C1 in appendix C).¹ About 69 percent of applicants and 68 percent of all seniors were ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program, and 54 percent of applicants and seniors were persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program. About 5 percent of applicants and all seniors were ever in a migrant education program in grades K–12. About 19 percent of applicants and 18 percent of all seniors were ever English learner students, although there were moderate differences between applicants and seniors based on whether they were current or former English learner students. Specifically, applicants were more likely than all seniors to be former English learner students who were reclassified before high school (17 percent compared with 14 percent).

The distribution of applicants' high school locale was also similar to that of all seniors' high school locale, with some moderate differences. Applicants were more likely than all seniors to have attended high school in towns

1. Students of color include all students who did not identify as White, including American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Latinx, Multiracial, and Pacific Islander students.

(29 percent compared with 26 percent) and rural areas (14 percent compared with 12 percent; see table C1 in appendix C). Applicants and all seniors were equally likely to have attended high schools in cities (about 32 percent each) and suburbs (about 25 percent each).

The only large demographic differences between applicants and seniors occurred by gender and special education status. Applicants were more likely to be female than male (56 percent compared with 44 percent), whereas there was a more even split between female students and male students in the senior classes (48 percent compared with 52 percent; see table C1 in appendix C). Applicants were much less likely than all seniors to have received special education services in high school (9 percent compared with 16 percent) or ever in grades K–12 (18 percent compared with 24 percent).

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 than in the first year, and they were more likely to be from low-income households and to be students of color

About 24 percent of Oregon public high school seniors applied for Oregon Promise in each of the program's first two years (12,480 students in the first year and 11,737 students in the second; see table C2 in appendix C). Applicant demographic characteristics and the distribution of school locale were also very similar in the first and second years.

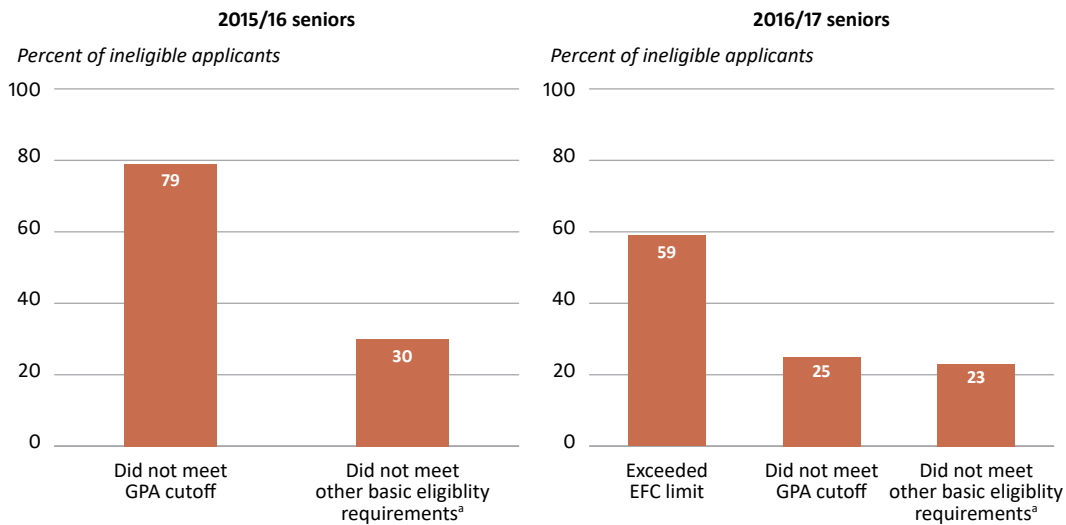
In the second year of the program, when the expected family contribution limit was introduced, smaller numbers and percentages of students were offered and received an award. The percentage of eligible applicants decreased from 19 percent of seniors in the first year of the program to 17 percent in the second year (from 10,016 students to 8,325; see table C2 in appendix C). The percentage of recipients decreased from 12 percent of seniors in the first year to 10 percent in the second year (from 6,365 students to 5,090).

Applicants were deemed ineligible for awards for two main reasons. Not meeting the GPA requirement was the most frequent reason in the first year of the program, and exceeding the expected family contribution limit was the most frequent reason in the second year. In the first year of the program, 79 percent of ineligible applicants were not offered an award because they did not meet the GPA requirement (figure 1). In the second year of the program, 59 percent of ineligible applicants were not offered an award because they exceeded the expected family contribution income limit. (These findings suggest that ineligible applicants are quite different from eligible applicants in academic performance or family income. Thus, the exploratory approach addressing research questions 2b and 2c does not include ineligible applicants and instead compares eligible applicants with similar nonapplicants.)

While there were negligible differences in the characteristics of applicants between the first and second years of the program, the percentages of eligible applicants and recipients who were from low-income households and who were students of color were higher in the second year of the program than in the first year. In the second year 76 percent of eligible applicants were ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program compared with 66 percent in the first year, 61 percent of eligible applicants were persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program compared with 50 percent in the first year, and 39 percent of eligible applicants were students of color compared with 34 percent in the first year (figure 2). There were also large differences in these characteristics between recipients in the first and second years of the program (see table C2 in appendix C).

The difference in the percentage of former English learner students reclassified before high school was moderate. In the second year of the program, 19 percent of eligible applicants and recipients were former English learner students, whereas 16 percent of eligible applicants and 15 percent of recipients were former English learner students in the first year (see figure 2 and table C2 in appendix C). All other differences among eligible applicants and recipients between the first and second years were negligible.

Figure 1. Not meeting the grade point average requirement was the most frequent reason that Oregon Promise applicants were not eligible for an award in the first year of the program, and exceeding the expected family contribution limit was the most frequent reason they were not eligible in the second year



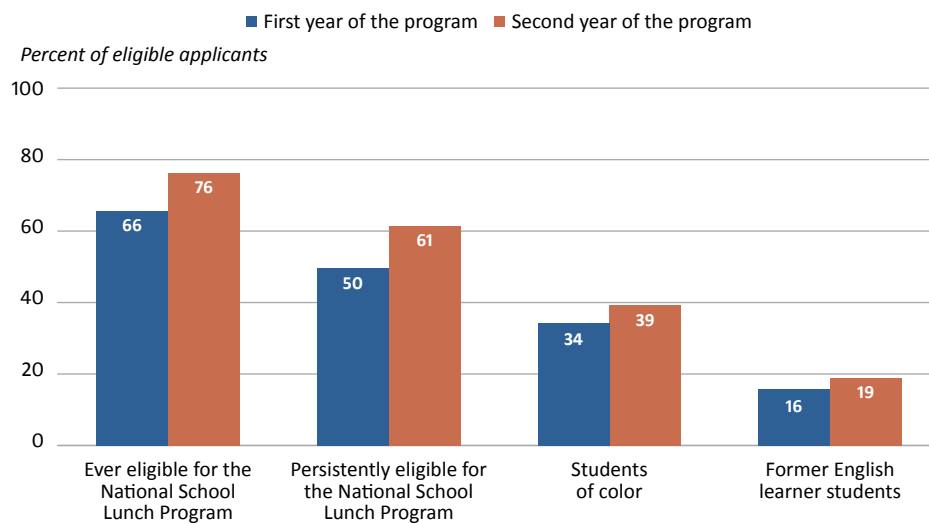
EFC is expected family contribution. GPA is grade point average.

Note: In the first year of the program, 2,464 applicants were not eligible for an Oregon Promise award, and in the second year 3,412 applicants were not eligible. Percentages sum to more than 100 percent because applicants could have multiple reasons for not being eligible.

a. Means that the applicant was selected for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) verification process but did not complete it or the Oregon Promise application was missing basic information (for example, student name, high school name, GPA), or both; Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC) staff confirmed, based on FAFSA, that the applicant was not an Oregon resident at least 12 months prior to expected college enrollment; OSAC staff confirmed, based on FAFSA, that the applicant was not a first-time college student and had been awarded Oregon Opportunity Grant in prior years; or OSAC staff confirmed, based on FAFSA, that the student was a graduate student.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

Figure 2. The percentages of eligible Oregon Promise applicants who were from low-income households, who were students of color, and who were former English learner students were higher in the second year of the program (when the expected family contribution limit was added) than in the first year



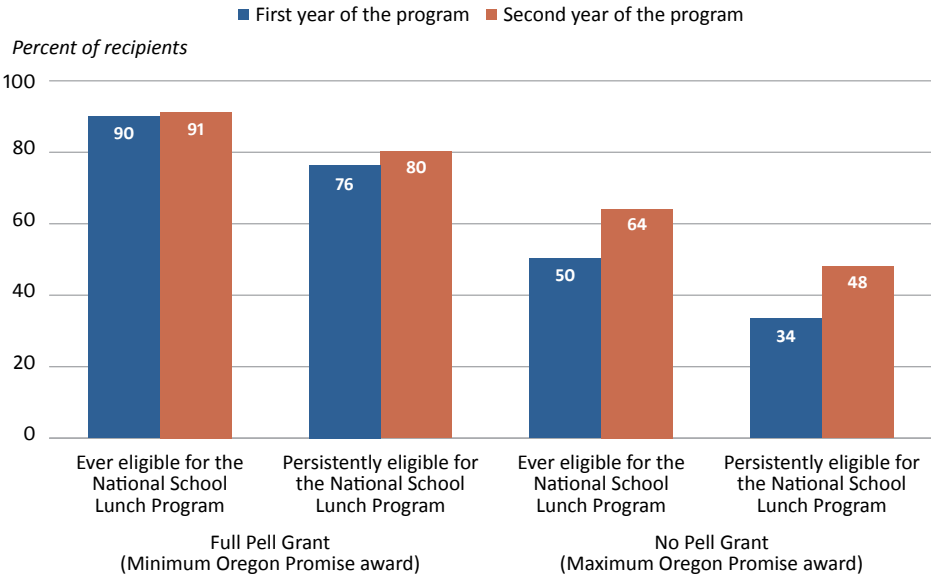
Note: For detailed results, see table C2 in appendix C.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

The majority of recipients in the first and second years of the program were from a low-income household at some point during their K–12 enrollment, regardless of whether they received a full Pell Grant (and the minimum Oregon Promise award), a partial Pell Grant, or no Pell Grant (and the maximum Oregon Promise award). As of 2021, most Oregon Promise aid is awarded to students who do not receive federal Pell Grants or Oregon Opportunity Grants, which are designed to meet the financial needs of students from low-income households (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2016, 2018). About 69 percent of recipients in the first year of the program and 63 percent in the second year were students from higher-income households whose families were ineligible for a Pell Grant or Oregon Opportunity Grant (see table C3 in appendix C). These recipients received the maximum Oregon Promise award, which covered their community college tuition based on their credit load. About 20 percent of recipients in the first year of the program and 23 percent in the second year were students from low-income households who received a full Pell Grant and Oregon Opportunity Grant (which covered their community college tuition) and who thus received the minimum Oregon Promise award (\$333 per term minus a \$50 copay). See table A1 in appendix A for an example of different award amounts for a full-time student in the first year of the program.

While there were some differences among Oregon Promise recipients between the first and second years of the program, most recipients in both years were eligible for the National School Lunch Program during K–12 enrollment, regardless of award amount. In the first and second years of the program, about 90 percent of recipients who received the minimum award were ever eligible for the National School Lunch Program (figure 3; see also table C3 in appendix C). In the first year 50 percent of recipients who received the maximum award were eligible for the National School Lunch Program, and this percentage increased to 64 percent in the second year. The second year of the program served a higher proportion of students who were persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program among both minimum and maximum Oregon Promise awardees. In the first year 76 percent of recipients who received the minimum award were persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program, and this percentage increased to 80 percent in the second year. In the first year 34 percent of recipients who received the maximum award were persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program,

Figure 3. In the first and second years of the Oregon Promise program, about 90 percent of recipients who received a full Pell Grant and the minimum Oregon Promise award amount and at least 50 percent of recipients who received no Pell Grant and the maximum Oregon Promise award amount were from low-income households at some point during K–12 enrollment



Note: For detailed results, see table C3 in appendix C.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

and this percentage increased to 48 percent in the second year. Overall, in both the first and second years of the Oregon Promise program, the state provided the maximum Oregon Promise award to students who might have had financial need that was not met by Pell Grants or Oregon Opportunity Grants.

In the Portland metro area lowering the grade point average requirement would have increased the applicant pool and resulted in more male students, students of color, students from low-income households, and students who received special education services being eligible for an Oregon Promise award

Data from the Portland metro area suggest that lowering the GPA requirement would have increased the Oregon Promise applicant pool. Nearly one-third of graduates in the Portland metro area in 2015/16 and 2016/17 with a 2.5 or higher GPA (3,735 students across both years) applied for an award. In the same two graduating classes 2,504 high school graduates in the Portland metro area earned a cumulative GPA of 2.0–2.49—just below the Oregon Promise requirement. If the GPA requirement had been lowered to 2.0 and one-third of these 2,504 students had applied (the same proportion of students with a 2.5 or higher GPA that applied), the applicant pool would have increased by about 835 students, bringing the total number of applicants in the Portland metro area from 4,439 to 5,274—a 19 percent increase.

Lowering the GPA requirement to 2.0 would have also changed the composition of the Oregon Promise applicant pool, increasing the percentage of male students, students of color, students from low-income households, and students who received special education services who might have been eligible if they had applied.² Again, if one-third of these students had applied for the program (the same portion of all students with a 2.5 or higher GPA that applied), the applicant pool would have increased by about 500 male students, a 24 percent increase in male applicants; by 649 students from low-income households, a 22 percent increase in applicants from low-income households; and by 250 students who ever received special education services, a 29 percent increase in applicants who ever received special education services. Lowering the GPA requirement to 2.0 also would have increased the percentage of students who were ever in a migrant education program, former English learner students, and current English learner students, although by a smaller amount.³

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

Oregon Promise recipients varied by the number of terms in which they received the award and persisted in college. About 11 percent of recipients in the first year of the program received an award only in their first term at community college, primarily because they stopped attending college. According to National Student Clearinghouse data, only 29 percent of these students were still enrolled at any college two years later (see table C5 in appendix C). About 35 percent of recipients in the first year of the program received an award in multiple terms in their first year at community college but no terms in their second year because they did not renew their award,

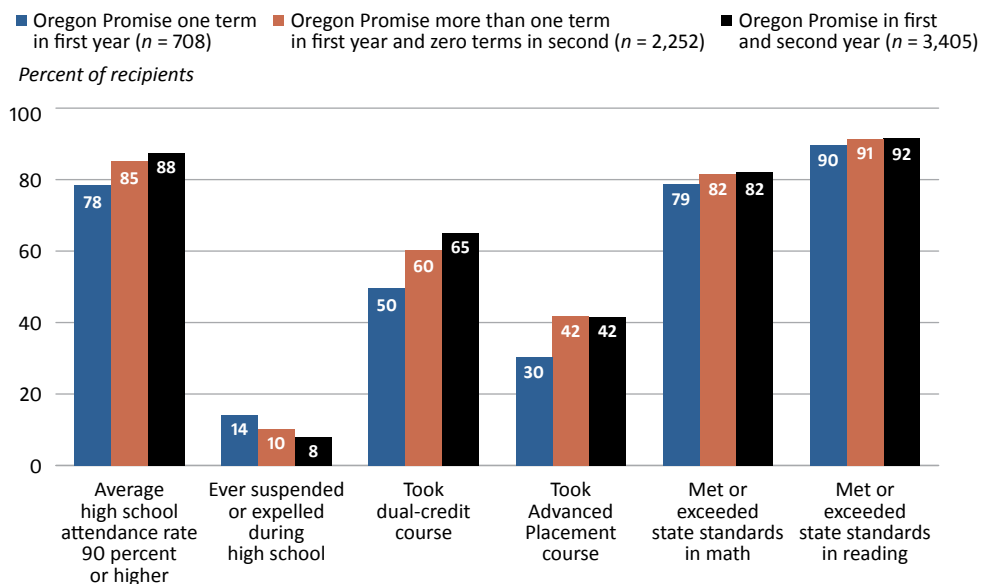
2. In 2015/16 and 2016/17 there were large differences between the proportion of high school graduates with a cumulative GPA of 2.0–2.49 with these characteristics and the proportion of applicants with these characteristics. Compared with applicants, high school graduates with a GPA of 2.0–2.49 were more likely to be male (60 percent compared with 47 percent), be students of color (58 percent compared with 51 percent), have ever been eligible for the National School Lunch Program (78 percent compared with 67 percent), have been persistently eligible for the National School Lunch Program (66 percent compared with 54 percent), have ever received special education services (30 percent compared with 19 percent), or have received special education services in high school (22 percent compared with 11 percent; see table C4 in appendix C).

3. In 2015/16 and 2016/17 there were moderate differences between the proportion of high school graduates with a cumulative GPA of 2.0–2.49 with these characteristics and the proportion of applicants with these characteristics. Compared with applicants, high school graduates with a GPA of 2.0–2.49 were more likely to have ever been in migrant education (7 percent compared with 4 percent), be a former English learner student (26 percent compared with 24 percent), or be a current English learner student (8 percent compared with 6 percent; see table C4 in appendix C).

attempted to renew it but did not meet the requirements, left an Oregon community college for another college, or stopped attending college. About 56 percent of these students were still enrolled at any college two years later. And about 54 percent of recipients in the first year of the program applied to renew their award, met all the renewal requirements, and thus received an award in both their first and second years at community college. Over 90 percent of these students were still enrolled in college at the end of their second year.

Recipients who received an Oregon Promise award in both their first and second years had better attendance, fewer suspensions or expulsions, and greater participation in college credit opportunities during high school than recipients who received an award only in their first year at community college, but both groups had similar test scores. In the first year of the program, recipients who received an Oregon Promise award in both their first and second years at community college had better high school nonacademic performance (measured by attendance and suspension or expulsion) but similar academic performance (measured by test scores) compared with recipients who received an award only in their first year at community college. Specifically, recipients who received an award in both their first and second years had better high school attendance than other recipients: 88 percent had at least a 90 percent high school attendance rate compared with 85 percent of recipients who received an award in multiple terms in their first year but none in their second year and 78 percent of recipients who received an award only in their first term (figure 4; see also table C5 in appendix C). Additionally, recipients who received an Oregon Promise award in both their first and second years had lower rates of discipline incidents than other recipients: 8 percent ever had a suspension or expulsion in high school compared with 10 percent of recipients who received an award for multiple terms in their first year but none in their second year and 14 percent of recipients who received an award only in their first term. (Attendance and discipline could be related because removal from the classroom through suspension or expulsion might result in lower engagement in school and chronic absenteeism; Nishioka et al., 2020.) On the other hand, regardless of award duration (first term only, first year only, or first and second years), test scores were similar: 79–82 percent of recipients met state standards in math, and 90–92 percent of recipients met state standards in reading.

Figure 4. Oregon Promise recipients in the first year of the program who received an award in both their first and second years at community college had better attendance and participation in dual credit during high school than recipients who received an award in only their first year



Note: For detailed results, see table C5 in appendix C.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

Recipients who received an Oregon Promise award in both their first and second years were also more likely to have taken a dual-credit course in high school than other recipients: 65 percent took dual-credit courses compared with 60 percent of recipients who received an award in multiple terms in their first year but none in their second year and 50 percent of recipients who received an award only in their first term (see figure 4 and table C5 in appendix C). Results for students who took Advanced Placement courses differed in that recipients who received an award for multiple terms in their first year but none in their second year and recipients who received an award in both their first and second years were more likely to have taken Advanced Placement courses than recipients who received an award only in their first term (42 percent compared with 30 percent).

For 2015/16 public high school graduates in the Portland metro area with grade point averages close to 2.5, the offer of an Oregon Promise award had a positive impact on first-year persistence and on longer-term persistence or completion but not on college enrollment

Using the main approach that compared students just above and below the GPA eligibility requirement, the study found that the offer of an Oregon Promise award had a positive impact on some postsecondary outcomes among a small subset of high school graduates in the Portland metro area with GPAs close to 2.5. However, the estimated impacts are imprecise because they fall within a large range of values. For high school graduates with a GPA just above the 2.5 cutoff, there is 95 percent confidence that an award offer increases the likelihood of persisting to the end of their first year in college by 2–93 percentage points. The mean estimated impact on the likelihood of first-year persistence is 48 percentage points (see column 1 in table 1, and table C8 in appendix C). There is 95 percent confidence that an award offer increases the likelihood of still being enrolled in college in 2019/20 or having completed college by 2019/20 by 2–89 percentage points. The mean estimated impact on the likelihood of longer-term persistence or completion is 46 percentage points. While an award offer likely had positive impacts on students' postsecondary outcomes, the exact size of the impacts is unclear, perhaps because of the relatively small sample of students in the analysis and the method used.⁴

Impacts on first-year persistence and longer-term persistence or completion within four years of high school graduation are somewhat consistent, although not always statistically significant, across a slightly larger sample of students with GPAs further from the 2.5 cutoff (2.23–2.77 and 2.2–2.8; see table C8 in appendix C). However, there were no effects on immediate college enrollment or college enrollment within two years (see column 1 in table 1, and table C8 in appendix C).

The exploratory analysis of program effects in the Portland metro area and statewide found that Oregon Promise positively affected college enrollment, first-year persistence, and longer-term persistence or completion. Using an exploratory approach that compared high school graduates who applied for Oregon Promise and were offered an award with similar high school graduates who did not apply for Oregon Promise, the study found that eligible applicants were more likely to enroll in college, persist in their first year, and persist in or complete college by 2019/20. In the Portland metro area, students who were offered an award were 21 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within six months, 18 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within two years, 11 percentage points more likely to persist to the end of their first year in college, and 7 percentage points more likely to still be enrolled in college in 2019/20 or to have completed college by 2019/20 compared with a matched group of peers with similar GPAs who did not apply (see column 2 in table 1).

4. The estimated impacts might be imprecise because of the statistical method used (Martens et al., 2006). The method has two stages. In the first stage the model estimates the relationship between an instrument (in this case, students' grade point average) and a treatment (in this case, the offer of an Oregon Promise award). In the second stage the model predicts the impact of the treatment on outcomes. This instrumental variable approach can produce imprecise estimates when the sample size is relatively small and the first stage is not strong because there is a weak relationship between the instrument and treatment (Martens et al., 2006). In this study the sample is relatively small, and the first stage is only moderately strong.

Table 1. Estimated mean impact of Oregon Promise on public high school graduates’ postsecondary outcomes, by approach

| Outcome | Main approach ^a | | Exploratory approach ^b | |
|---|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| | 2015/16 seniors | | 2015/16 and 2016/17 seniors | |
| | GPA close to 2.5 | | Any GPA | No GPA in model |
| | Portland metro | Portland metro | Portland metro | Oregon |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Percentage point increase in likelihood of: | | | | |
| College enrollment within six months | 30 | 21*** | 25*** | 27*** |
| College enrollment within two years | 5 | 18*** | 21*** | 24*** |
| First-year persistence | 48* | 11*** | 15*** | 13*** |
| Longer-term persistence or completion | 46* | 7*** | 9*** | 10*** |
| Number of students | 1,383 | 14,040 | 14,033 | 68,713 |

* Significant at $p < .05$; *** significant at $p < .001$.

GPA is grade point average.

a. Results are from a fuzzy regression discontinuity design. This design compared postsecondary outcomes for students with a 2.5 or higher GPA and students with a GPA just below the 2.5 cutoff. The sample of students had GPAs between 2.26 and 2.74. See table C8 in appendix C for full results.

b. Results are from a matched comparison group design. This design compared postsecondary outcomes of eligible applicants with those of similar nonapplicants in the Portland metro area and statewide. See tables C9–C11 in appendix C for full results.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education, Higher Education Coordinating Commission, and Portland metro area districts.

The findings are similar when GPA is excluded from the analysis, although the impacts are larger. In the Portland metro area, students who were offered an award were 25 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within six months, 21 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within two years, 15 percentage points more likely to persist to the end of their first year in college, and 9 percentage points more likely to still be enrolled in college in 2019/20 or to have completed college by 2019/20 compared with a matched group of peers who did not apply (see column 3 in table 1). Results based on this analysis that excludes GPA might be overstated because of potential differences in the GPAs of eligible applicants and the comparison group.

Finally, the statewide results are similar to the findings from the Portland metro area that exclude GPA in the analysis. Statewide, students who were offered an award were 27 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within six months of high school graduation, 24 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within two years, 13 percentage points more likely to persist to the end of their first year in college, and 10 percentage points more likely to still be enrolled in college in 2019/20 or have completed college by 2019/20 compared with a matched group of peers who did not apply (see column 4 in table 1). These findings could be overstated because of potential differences in the GPAs of eligible applicants and the comparison group.

Overall, findings across the main and exploratory approach are somewhat consistent. The impacts on the likelihood of first-year persistence and of longer-term persistence or completion are positive and significant across approaches. While the impact estimates on the likelihood of college enrollment within six months are similar across the main approach and exploratory approach (see table 1), the main approach estimate is not significant, meaning the study team cannot be confident in this result.

Implications

The study findings have the three main implications.

Oregon Promise's positive impacts on recipients with GPAs just above the 2.5 eligibility cutoff provide policymakers with evidence that supports continuing to invest in the program and potentially reducing the GPA eligibility requirement

The study findings provide evidence that Oregon Promise improved postsecondary persistence and completion among 2015/16 high school graduates in the Portland metro area with GPAs just above 2.5. The exploratory approach led to somewhat consistent results, providing further confidence in the findings about the program's positive impacts. Further, these causal findings are aligned with recent descriptive research from HECC that found higher persistence and completion of Oregon Promise recipients from the first year of the program compared with high school graduates in prior years (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2020). Together, the findings suggest that Oregon Promise achieved one of its intended goals: promoting college success in the program's first two years. The study findings also suggest that if the program's GPA eligibility cutoff were lowered, newly eligible students with GPAs below 2.5 might still benefit from the program. If the cutoff is lowered, future research could be conducted to confirm whether the program has positive impacts for newly eligible students.

Changing program requirements and conducting additional outreach could increase the reach of Oregon Promise to underserved students

While Oregon Promise reached a diverse group of students in its first two years, changing program requirements and conducting additional outreach might broaden its reach. Evidence from the Portland metro area suggests that lowering the GPA requirement might increase the number of students served and the percentages of students from low-income households, students of color, students who were ever in a migrant education program, and English learner students who would be eligible if they applied. Evidence from the second year of the program suggests that adding an expected family contribution limit might reduce the number of eligible applicants and recipients but might increase the percentages of students from low-income households, students of color, and former English learner students who are offered an award and receive an award, particularly among students who receive the maximum award.

High school counselors and other stakeholders might want to consider how to increase application rates among male students and students who received special education services, since those groups were underrepresented among applicants in the first two years relative to their high school classes. These groups might also need more college access outreach generally since in Oregon male students and students who received special education services are less likely to attend college than their peers (Riggs et al., 2021). In addition to additional outreach to these groups, evidence from the Portland metro area suggests that lowering the GPA requirement might increase the percentages of male students and students who received special education services who would be eligible if they applied.

More research is needed to understand how to support Oregon Promise recipients, and this study suggests two areas of investigation

The low renewal rate of Oregon Promise awards suggests that additional research is needed to understand how to better support recipients' persistence in college. In the first year of the program, 54 percent of recipients renewed their award, and 46 percent did not. Many of the students who did not renew were not enrolled in college two years later.

The high school experiences of recipients who renewed their award provide two potential areas of investigation for stakeholders who support prospective and current recipients. First, stakeholders could explore how and whether college coursework in high school can support recipients' renewal and college persistence. The current study found that recipients who renewed their award were more likely to have taken dual-credit courses in high school than recipients who did not renew. Similarly, an earlier study in Oregon found that participating in accelerated learning coursework in high school is related to postsecondary enrollment and persistence (Hodara & Pierson, 2018). A second area that stakeholders could explore is the role of nonacademic skills and experiences. The current study found that recipients who renewed their award had better high school attendance but similar academic achievement compared with recipients who did not renew. Increasing evidence shows financial aid programs that also focus on nonacademic skills might have a larger impact than financial aid alone (Anderson & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2017; Clotfelter et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Hodara, Gandhi, & Yoon, 2017; Page et al., 2019; Scrivener et al., 2015). Oregon Promise recipients are required to participate in a first-year experience provided by their community college, and some have access to additional services that work to support nonacademic skills and build a sense of belonging (Gulbrandsen et al., 2017; Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2017). Further research could examine how these services support recipients' renewal of their Oregon Promise award and college persistence.

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