

For community colleges, free college has its costs



Early examples of what's become a wildly popular proposal among Democratic presidential hopefuls show students and schools need more support.

By Liz Farmer <https://www.educationdive.com/news/for-community-colleges-free-college-has-its-costs/568903/>
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Free college is a popular policy among the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, even as one in four states already has some type of program in place. But as more state and local governments roll out so-called college promise programs, lessons learned from early offerings suggest the funding should go beyond getting more students in the door.

While free college programs have been around for several years at the local level, statewide versions have taken off in the last five years, particularly for community colleges. The scholarships typically cover two years of tuition and mandatory fees for eligible students, usually after applying all other financial awards — such as Pell grants, state aid and scholarships.

There is a ton of potential here," said Christina Hubbard, senior director of community college strategic research for EAB. "My biggest concern is that promise programs have rolled out without putting all the pieces in place first."

Economic uplift is one of these programs' main goals, but it also means that community colleges are seeing an influx of students who may need more guidance than their higher-income peers. While some colleges and universities are already shifting toward a more holistic approach to advising as a way to help improve completion rates, some higher ed experts say promise programs underscore that need without necessarily providing the additional resources to cover it.

That can affect completion if not addressed. In addition to needing help navigating the college experience, research shows lower-income students are less likely to finish college after enrolling because they typically face more barriers to doing so than higher-income students. For instance, they may have transportation limitations, a child to care for or a job to schedule classes around.

Challenges helping students through college are expected to become more pronounced for community colleges as more states adopt promise programs. Last year, California became the largest state to launch a statewide promise program, and there are now 13 states across the country with one, according to the Campaign for Free College Tuition. Another seven states have some legislative activity, while more localized free college programs are popping up across the country.

With several programs up and running for a handful of years, however, some have reached a point where they "realize they need more support" for things like emergency grants, child care and transportation, said Martha Kanter, executive director of the College Promise Campaign.

According to the campaign's most recent financial sustainability playbook, while 61% of institutions surveyed said there was enough funding available to meet their community's free college goals, 50% indicated in response to a separate question that their program had financial sustainability concerns.

That sentiment is bolstered by findings from a 2018 Education Trust report that analyzed 16 proposed and 15 existing statewide free college programs. The report found equity concerns across the sample because students from low-income families can typically use a Pell Grant to cover tuition and tend to need help affording other aspects of college attendance that these programs don't cover, such as books, housing and transportation.

Help closing that funding gap is more likely to be found locally than at the state level, Kanter said. "There's enough local innovation in this country," she added, "for places to figure out how to fund those wraparound services."

Learning from Tennessee

When it comes to working out those services statewide, however, Tennessee has the most experience to offer. Its College Promise program launched in 2015 and was essentially a scaling up of what had been a privately-funded local program in Knox County, led by two area mayors.

One of them, Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam, became governor in 2011, and three years later revamped it as a statewide program funded at \$34 million per year, mainly through state lottery proceeds. In 2017, the state legislature added another \$10 million to expand the scholarship to adults who wanted to finish college.

The program's average award is about \$1,000 per student to cover the gap between financial aid and tuition. It also includes volunteer mentors, paid coaches to help navigate applying for and entering college, and other services funded primarily through tnAchieves, a nonprofit that has shepherded the scholarship program from its earliest days.

Krissy DeAlejandro, the organization's executive director, said that because Tennessee's promise program started off locally, they were able to work through some of the growing pains and then scale up.

"People often talk about Tennessee Promise as if it was an overnight sensation — we had to take six years of data (in Knox County) to get there," she said. "But now, because we have this foundation, we can begin scaffolding and layering for students who need more."

This year, the state legislature endorsed this idea by adding \$1 million in public funding to the roughly \$2 million tnAchieves raises each year, DeAlejandro said. So far, the supports in place

seem to be making a difference. According to tnAchieves, students in the state's promise program are graduating at a rate 21 percentage points higher than non-promise students.

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Executive director, tnAchieves

Other states are still dealing with growing pains. In Oregon, for example, the state legislature approved \$10 million in funding for 2016-17, the first year and cohort of its promise program. A year later, lawmakers approved \$40 million for years two and three of the program. However, a legislative analysis said this total was still \$8 million short of the projected costs. For a time, the program had to impose income restrictions to limit the number of students receiving money.

For community colleges, this funding gap has had a ripple effect. At the state's largest, Portland Community College, Dean of Enrollment Tammy Billick said they received about \$500,000 in additional state funding for 2016, which was used to bolster advising and support services. "But that funding went away after the first year," she said, "so it hampered being able to sustain any of that."

While the school ultimately had to let go a campuswide advising coordinator and cut back on some of its part-time staff, Billick said they're shifting more advisors to full-time coordinators who help with wraparound services for all students, not just promise ones. The legislature has set aside another \$40 million in promise funding for the next two years, which the state has said is sufficient to remove the income restrictions.

'Tight connections'

Some 300 promise programs exist at the local level, where they are more closely connected to the region's employers and K-12 school districts. The oldest such local program is in Kalamazoo, Michigan, but others now exist across the country from Los Angeles to Detroit to Pittsburgh.

Many of these local programs start working with students before their senior year in high school or connect college students with support services, such as child care.

Texas' Dallas County announced its promise program in 2017, guaranteeing free tuition for students if they pledge to attend a Dallas County Community College or a partner four-year university. This past spring, the program helped 16,200 eligible students from 43 local high schools take the requisite steps to participate, the Dallas Morning News reported. That program, too, uses local coaches who help high school seniors navigate applying to schools and financial aid.

Among those who have pledged support are regional school districts and universities, as well as the regional chamber of commerce and corporate investors.

"We've seen more success at the local level because there are already those tight connections — you have a large employer in the area and you can see that demonstrated impact," said Larisa Hussak, a community college consultant for EAB.

Looking to four-years

Promise programs' success boosting enrollment and improving completion has prompted some states to expand the concept to four-year universities.

In the fall of 2017, New York state became the first to do so for all public two-and four-year schools. More recently, the University of Tennessee System announced it is launching its own free tuition program for students whose families earn under \$50,000 annually. Governors in Maryland and Rhode Island have also said they want their programs to include four-year schools.

Expanding to four-year institutions is also one of the recommendations in a report last year from the Institute for Higher Education Policy looking at last-dollar programs in Tennessee and New York. It recommends funding expenses such as housing and textbooks for low-income students and avoiding restrictive or punitive participation stipulations, such as post-graduation residency requirements.

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Looking ahead, many sources interviewed for this story told Education Dive they would like to see promise programs expand to working adults, as Tennessee has done. In Oregon, Billick said, the number of high school graduates is expected to begin to decline in the next few years while the state has about 400,000 working adults who are underemployed and could contribute to economic growth. "That's a group we have to increasingly pay more attention to," she said.

But before that happens, tnAchieves's DeAlejandro said, governments and colleges should work together to build out wraparound services for students already in promise programs.

"The free-tuition part is the carrot and that's so important, to be able to walk into an auditorium of 500 high school seniors and say, 'For everyone here, college can be tuition-free,'" she said.

"But the real magic is providing them that path with the right supports in place."