College Promise for Equity and Advancement

Practitioner-Informed Policy Design Commitments and Principles

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Call To Action:
The cost of college has increased 12-fold over the past 30 years.[1]

Meanwhile, state disinvestment in higher education has deepened. Today, learners are forced to make a tough choice: either forgo college at a time when getting a postsecondary credential matters more than ever, or join the ranks of 45 million Americans with student loan debt, who today collectively owe $1.5 trillion.[2]

As they craft policies supporting college promise programs, policymakers should draw on lessons from early adopters and heed the insights of practitioners charged with implementation of such programs.

Efforts to make college tuition-free have become an increasingly popular response to this college affordability crisis and skills development mandate. The number of "free" college or promise programs at state and local levels has increased from 53 in 2015 to more than 300 programs across 44 states. This includes 23 statewide programs.[3]

Early evidence suggests promise programs can make a difference in enrollment, persistence, and completions. Yet, in this era of exponential expansion and widely diverging program designs, there is no guarantee that all promise programs will have positive effects.

It is therefore essential for policymakers to take great care as they craft policies supporting or expanding college promise programs. They should draw on lessons from early adopters and heed the insights of practitioners charged with implementation of such programs.

JFF's Policy Leadership Trust

JFF's Policy Leadership Trust has culled the expertise and experiences of practitioners in 16 states to offer policy design recommendations for those that are new to the college promise concept, or are looking to expand these programs to transform postsecondary systems, increase attainment of credentials with value and grow a skilled workforce. This group has developed five key principles to guide postsecondary policy decisions. The principles highlight the need for Promise programs to advance student success, keep program design simple, ensure sustainable and stable funding, allow for flexibility and share accountability. The Policy Leadership Trust also offers examples of potential policy levers that policymakers may consider in order to fulfill the intent of each principle.
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Key Commitments For Policy Design

Why it's important to take equity, talent development, and economic advancement into account when designing a college promise program.

Attention to Equity

A college promise program, whether conceived at the state or local level, should exist to increase education, skills, and job attainment for *all* types of learners, regardless of their socioeconomic status, age, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and residing areas (rural and urban). The benefits of a "free" promise program go beyond money. It can serve to universally encourage a college-going and civically engaged culture at the institution or in the region, and create a mindset shift that college is accessible to anyone, regardless of background. As such, a college promise program should be intentional in its design and implementation to reduce—not reinforce—gaps in equity in access and completion of postsecondary credentials of value.

The future of work is altering the way we work and will affect how and what we need to learn. The new economy will create more growth and new jobs, but only for individuals with the right skills. To address these workforce and equity concerns, it is imperative that a college promise program help greater numbers of disadvantaged, underserved, and underprepared learners—whether they are school-age youth or working-age adults—attain the skills and credentials they need to compete in the new economy.

Talent Development and Economic Advancement

A college promise program should have a clear, universal purpose with the intent to move beyond simply increasing access and affordability. Rather, the purpose of a promise program should be to support the state's talent pipeline, address the skills gap, and drive economic advancement for all learners and their communities. Each student who participates in and completes a certificate or degree with the support of a promise scholarship should have a seamless pathway to a marketable, in-demand, and family-supporting job or career. Promise programs should serve as a proof point to increase talent and improve America's competitiveness.

Policy Design Principles for College Promise

1. Advance Student Success:

A college promise program should feed into a comprehensive approach to increasing college completion. A promise program should be developed only when the state and educational institutions have committed to student success by undertaking comprehensive transformational reforms, such as guided pathways. Guided pathways redesign campus structures and cultures to help more students make well-informed educational and career decisions; support students along their paths to completion; and often include meaningful reforms to developmental education, advising, and transfer. A promise program should also align and integrate into student success reforms and support services, which may include the use of scholarship dollars and/or wraparound supports for underserved and low-income students who may otherwise not enroll in or complete

college; or it may include investments in holistic supports, such as expanded access to academic or career counseling, mentorship, and public benefits.

Moreover, promise scholarships should incorporate or complement the broad ecosystem of student support services and resources by curtailing financial barriers to completion and addressing economic insecurities beyond tuition and fees. Promise programs are intended to help all students attend and complete college; therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the gap between tuition cost and the full cost of attendance. This includes the acknowledgment that the federal Pell Grant no longer covers a sufficient amount of a student's cost of attendance. Other approaches, apart from covering costs beyond tuition and fees, include encouraging full-time enrollment by providing sufficient resources to cover living expenses liberating the student from

holding a part- or full-time job while in school, and encouraging alignment with federal Ability to Benefit rules to ensure opportunities for those without a high school diploma or equivalency.

2. Keep It Simple:

The design of a college promise program should remain simple. Promise programs should make it easier for students from all backgrounds to access and complete college. Each restriction, requirement, or directive included in the design and intent of a promise program brings an additional degree of complication that may make it less accessible or effective. Promise programs should, therefore, not set requirements or expectations on the student that may unintentionally have disproportionate effects, particularly on underserved populations. State and local areas should not attach burdensome requirements for entry and persistence, such as drug testing, a GPA minimum, and/ or a residency requirement. Additionally, promise program students should have the same expectations for academic performance as all other students (i.e., satisfactory academic progress [SAP] should be required for maintaining program participation; however, promise students need not perform above the

SAP level). Similarly, the program should exist with minimal bureaucracy for the institution (e.g., streamlined processes), such as alignment with institutional or system financial aid criteria and processes to avoid undue administrative burden.

3. Ensure Sustainable and Stable Funding:

A college promise program should ensure the "promise" will not be broken. A long-term or permanent, sustainable, and stable funding source should be identified prior to the implementation of a promise program. As a key investment to support talent development and increase access to a talented workforce, this source should not pull from funds that currently serve educational institutions or their students because such funding displacement could detract from the program's intention. Students entering a promise program expect that funding will carry them through college; it is detrimental to the student to curtail promise resources midway through their pathway to a credential or a degree. Moreover, funding cutbacks or all-out elimination of promise programs also hurt the image and value proposition of postsecondary institutions, which are likely to shoulder the blame from students and communities for

broken promises. It is also essential that states anticipate and support institutions in responding to the needs of a potential influx of more students drawn to college by promise programs. Colleges may face challenges in absorbing the upfront costs of hiring more faculty and student support staff to aid promise students in enrolling in and completing their programs of study.

4. Allow for Flexibility:

As states and the federal government invest in college promise to bring the program to scale, they should leave program design and implementation decisions largely up to local areas. The design and intention of a promise program may vary by location and context. For example, the primary goals for a promise program may exist to encourage more youth to go to college or to reconnect adults. It may seek to increase attainment of industry-recognized credentials, to accelerate completion of two-year degrees, or to encourage more students to pursue a bachelor's degree. By considering local context, the design of the program acknowledges that each institution, college system, or region of the state may have its distinct short- and long-term goals and objectives (e.g., access or talent driven). Flexibility in local

design allows for differences in student population (e.g., determining eligibility criteria), workforce needs, and demands (e.g., determining which programs and credential types to cover with scholarship dollars; encouraging diverse funding models like the addition of private funding; and accounting for political dynamics and the local policy landscape). States and the federal government should fiscally support and incentivize promise programs to take hold in local areas by supporting the growth of the local partnerships, providing accountability and reporting structures, developing statewide aims for the regions and institutions to strive toward, and creating a permeable framework for implementation that accommodates local context and acknowledges local and regional needs.

5. Share Accountability:

A college promise program should be positioned as part of a larger statewide talent-development strategy involving communities, two- and four-year institutions of higher education, along with workforce and industry partners. **As such, college promise should ensure shared and evolving accountability by all parties involved (government, institution, student, and community / local industry).**

To ensure impact and continuous improvement, all parties should be held accountable to certain responsibilities.

▸ **State and federal government:** As core funders of college promise, government at the state and federal level should ensure that the funding is long term or permanent, sustainable, and stable. Ideally, this funding should cover college-related expenses beyond tuition and fees for postsecondary students. For a continuation of funds to the institution, a state may determine specific indicators of success and hold the institutions accountable to these success metrics. For example, this may include completion rate, among other indicators.

▸ **Institution:** Institutions should demonstrate a commitment to student success. In engaging in promise programs, they should develop goals and expectations for improving student success, with special effort and attention to closing equity gaps of students of color among other underserved and low-income populations. Additionally, before implementing a promise program, institutions should consider their program offerings to maximize pathways that encourage greater economic mobility of students and

workers, especially underserved populations. Postsecondary institutions must avoid creating separate tracks— ones that funnel low-skill, underserved populations into dead-end fields and others that create pathways for opportunity.

▸ **Student:** Students should arrive at college invested in their education, committed to learning, and with the aim of timely completion. Given the opportunity to attend college with tuition and fees covered, including additional support structures for success, the program may include commitments for students to complete throughout their academic journey, which can be determined locally.

▸ **Community and local industry:** The local community and business and industry should commit to supporting and engaging with promise students and colleges (e.g., through program funding, delivering wraparound support services, work-based learning, registered apprenticeships, internships, and/or a commitment to hire graduates from local colleges).

Proposed Policy Levers To Support Policy Design

This section provides a list of potential policy levers that policymakers can use to fulfill each of the five principles discussed above. This is not an exhaustive list. Other policy levers and strategies should be explored.

The policy levers are grouped around a core set of policy functions that are listed and defined here:

Enabling policies: Incentives to encourage innovation and foster stronger collaboration across systems to accelerate implementation of evidence-based approaches.

Funding mechanisms: Financial resources, incentives, and tax policy changes that inject much-needed investments into the implementation of evidence-based approaches.

Implementation guidelines: Guidance from policymakers on how practitioners or institutions should consider implementing proven policy-based approaches.

Governance reforms: Measures and incentives that catalyze transformational changes in the structure and operations of institutions and systems.

Directives: High-level mandates that set clear expectations and deadlines for the courses of action that practitioners and partners should take.

Capacity-building supports: Professional development opportunities and technical assistance to help practitioners improve their work.

1. Advance Student Success:

Policy can ensure that promise programs feed into a comprehensive approach for increasing college completion through enabling policies and funding.

Enabling policies and incentives:

▸ Support community colleges in screening students to determine need and eligibility for school supports and public benefits that will improve their financial stability and reduce other barriers (e.g., child care, transportation, and housing, among others).

▸ Support regional partnerships among community colleges, local nonprofit organizations, and human service agencies that connect students to resources to help them persist and complete.

▸ Invest in institutional capacity to implement evidence-based reforms by defraying upfront costs of implementing guided pathway practices, enhancing professional development of faculty and staff in support of student success efforts, and strengthening institutional capacity for data analysis and use of technology.

Funding:

▸ Use flexibility in federal policy and leverage federal funding to increase support for community college students (e.g., work study, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).

▸ Provide adequate and sustained funding to support counselors and advisors to effectively assist students throughout their academic pathway.

2. Keep It Simple:

Policy can support simple program design through governance and systems alignment.

Governance and systems alignment:

▸ Reduce barriers to applying for promise scholarships and other forms of financial aid: enhance support of and build simplified processes for the completion of FAFSA and state-level aid applications.

3. Ensure Sustainable and Stable Funding:

Policy can ensure that promises are not broken through capacity building, funding, and governance and systems alignment.

Capacity building:

▸ Establish a public-private partnership that invites long-term private, philanthropic funds.

Funding:

▸ Institute a tax credit that incentivizes employers to hire promise student interns and/or graduates

▸ Institute a tax credit for making contributions to community college endowments in order to spur increased donations that support student success.

- ▸ Seek long-term state appropriations (e.g., line items) directed specially to fund the scholarship, and for institutions to curtail dependency on high tuition rates (e.g., a trust fund that moves beyond the yearly appropriations process; a pay-for-performance/success model).

Governance and systems alignment:

- ▸ Secure state authorization (e.g., in-state statute or constitutional amendment) that establishes longevity of the scholarship (in intent and funding).

4. Allow for Flexibility:

Policy can encourage flexibility in program design and implementation through capacity building and funding.

Capacity building:

- ▸ Grant the system or institution access to a planning grant and/or partnership with a technical assistance provider to assist with capacity and guidance for planning and implementation, and/or in identifying regional and local in-demand careers that will align with programs of study and academic pathways.

Funding:

- ▸ Provide seed or matching funds to the system or institution(s) designing and implementing the program to assist with aligning local workforce and degree attainment goals.

5. Share Accountability:

Policy can ensure shared and evolving accountability by all parties involved through capacity building, directives, enabling policies and funding.

Capacity building:

- ▸ Invest in data infrastructure, capacity, and analysis by the state and system/institution(s) to demonstrate an upfront commitment to data and continuous improvement, and link the state's economic development strategy to local and statewide attainment goals.

Directive:

- ▸ Require the strategic use of data to identify the unmet need of students—disaggregated by demographics, household configuration, and geographic regions—to target promise scholarship dollars appropriately and to stimulate broader policy conversations and actions on college affordability and talent development.

Enabling policy and incentives:

- ▸ Support the growth of paid, high-quality work-based learning opportunities for promise students.

Funding:

- ▸ Provide financial incentives to employers to offer paid, high-quality work-based learning opportunities for promise students.

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Disclaimer

Policy positions of the Policy Leadership Trust represent the prevailing viewpoints of its membership and do not necessarily reflect perspectives of all individual members.

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

1. Michelle Jamrisko and Ilan Kolet, "Cost of College Degree in U.S. Soars 12 Fold: Chart of the Day," *Bloomberg*, August 15, 2012, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-08-15/cost-of-college-degree-in-u-s-soars-12-fold-chart-of-the-day.

2. Zack Friedman, "Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2019: A $1.5 Trillion Crisis," *Forbes*, February 25, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/02/25/student-loan-debt-statistics-2019/.

3. Martha Kanter, "The Current State of Promise: The National Landscape" (PowerPoint presentation, The College Promise Campaign, March 2, 2019), https://educationdocbox.com/College_Life/119652784-The-current-state-of-promise-the-national-landscape.html.