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How do Promise programs evolve over time?

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On occasion, a Promise program may need to change its rules or benefits; such changes should be communicated clearly to avoid confusion on the part of the beneficiaries.

Promise programs may evolve over time, whether due to changes in available funding or lessons learned through implementation. Sometimes these changes narrow or restrict program parameters, and sometimes they expand them. Frequent changes in program rules and procedures can be confusing to potential users, and a reduction in benefits can undermine confidence in a program's staying power. Stakeholders should be sure not to over-promise when launching their program and should take care to clearly communicate any program changes.

Policy Considerations

- Promise programs may need to evolve in response to fluctuating funding levels, the need for improvement revealed by data and evaluation, and changes in political climate and leadership.
- Strategic use of data and short-term measures of student and program success have been important for Promise program growth, day-to-day operations, and evolution.
- Several Promise programs have found enhanced stability by using detailed fiscal analysis and program design prior to implementation.

What We Know

Whether and how a Promise program evolves has largely been dictated by funding and in some cases by shifting program goals. Many programs have tightened benefits or eligibility over time in light of insufficient funding or budget cuts, while a few have been able to make their terms more generous.

Careful planning before designing and implementing a Promise program can prevent the need for future cost-saving adjustments. Say Yes to Education deploys a careful cost and expenditure study at prospective host cities. Other programs and states contracted the services of the Upjohn Institute to prepare 10-year cost estimates to inform design and monitor costs over time. In Tennessee, spending and take-up data from local nonprofit programs were used to project the cost of a statewide Promise. In Oregon and Pittsburgh, early Promise costs exceeded sustainable revenues, which led to tightened eligibility and benefits within a short time from program launch.

Planning can also help to map out systems for operations and evaluation. Say Yes to Education builds student-level data systems to measure individual progress and connect students to wraparound services. This helps the program track community-wide measures of program success ranging from third grade reading proficiency to college completion. Tennessee issues an annual Tennessee Promise report itemizing program take-up, cost, and participating student outcomes.

Even after following a rigorous plan, however, unforeseen circumstances can force programs to adapt. Philanthropically funded programs are

vulnerable to shifting donor priorities or declining endowment earnings, and publicly funded programs are at risk for cuts if they rely on annual appropriations. Nevertheless, many Promise programs have expanded in various ways; these include implementing adaptations that cover more students; adding new eligible institutions; providing financial benefits beyond last-dollar aid; or trying to improve take-up rates, equitable access to higher education, college and community coordination, student support wraparound services, integrated continuous improvement, and/or evaluation. Below are a few examples of program contractions, expansions, and other evolutions.

- At the same time that Tennessee introduced the Tennessee Promise, a last-dollar program for new high school graduates, the state implemented Tennessee Reconnect for students 25 and older who were attending Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. Reconnect take-up was lower than expected, and Reconnect expenditures were under budget. In response, the state expanded Reconnect eligibility to include students ages 25 and up who attend a community college. Legislation in 2022 lowered the Reconnect age minimum to 23, thereby encompassing more students.
- In 2021, Lake Michigan College announced that all degree-seeking students could attend the college tuition-free for up to 30 credits during the 2021–22 academic year. This last-dollar promise was made possible through a combination of Michigan Reconnect, federal coronavirus emergency relief funds, and private donors. Enrollment was 13%–18% higher in 2021–22 than the year prior, bucking the nationwide trend of falling enrollment in two-year schools.¹ Based on the success of this pilot phase, the college announced the LMC Promise in February 2022. Eligibility for the [LMC Promise](#) was more limited than for the pilot, however, with the later program targeting students under age 25 without a college degree, and with family incomes under \$75,000. (Michigan Reconnect pays tuition for students without degrees who are over the age of 25.)
- The Oregon Promise launched with the graduating high school class of 2016. Initially a middle-dollar scholarship for new high school graduates attending community college, the program provided last-dollar aid or \$1,000 if a student's tuition was already covered. Funding for the Oregon Promise is subject to annual appropriations from the state legislature, and this has led to fluctuations in Promise eligibility over time. The program added an income cap for the 2017 entering class (a maximum expected family contribution [EFC] of \$20,000), removed the income limit for the 2018 class, and then imposed a \$22,000 maximum EFC for the 2020 class. The 2020 eligibility update came so late that about 1,000 Oregon Promise students had their awards revoked.² The income cap was raised to \$42,000 EFC in 2021, and removed altogether for 2022. The 2022 update also lowered the GPA eligibility requirement from 2.5 to 2.0, and eliminated student copayments.

¹ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2022). *Fall 2021 enrollment estimates*.

² St. Amour, M. (2020, October 8). *College Promise programs wrestle with pandemic realities*. Inside Higher Ed.

- Say Yes to Education was founded in 1987 by wealthy philanthropist George Weiss. Through Say Yes, Weiss and other donors promised college scholarships and provided additional support, such as legal aid and health care, to cohorts ranging from third to sixth grade in disadvantaged schools in four Northeastern cities. In the mid-2000s, Say Yes leaders broadened the organization’s strategy from supporting isolated cohorts at specific schools and “entered the business of improving entire school districts and communities.”³ There are now comprehensive Say Yes programs in Buffalo, Cleveland, Syracuse, and Guilford County (NC).
- The Pittsburgh Promise was established in 2008 as a last-dollar scholarship of up to \$5,000 per year that could be used at two-year, four-year, public, and private institutions in Pennsylvania. The maximum scholarship grew to \$10,000 in 2012 and shifted to a first-dollar structure, but contracted to \$7,500 per year in tuition-only support in 2015, when forecasted revenues fell short of expenses. Despite an uncertain financial future, the program sought to simplify eligibility criteria and reach more students. The maximum scholarship fell again to \$5,000 in 2018, but at the same time, the program loosened K-12 residency requirements and allowed students to apply Promise aid once again toward college expenses other than tuition. High school attendance and GPA criteria were suspended in 2021, in light of coronavirus disruptions. Pittsburgh Promise is not guaranteeing scholarships beyond the class of 2028 because funding is uncertain.
- Michigan Promise Zones are localities designated through state law as places where college scholarships are available to all students. They rely on a unique public-private partnership structure made up of local resources, Pell grants, and a tax capture from growth in state education tax revenue that flows back to communities. Fifteen Promise Zones have been authorized, and 13 are granting scholarships. At a minimum, Michigan Promise Zones must provide a tuition- and fee-free path to at least an associate degree at one Michigan institution, usually a local community college. But communities can elect to provide more options, up to and including a bachelor’s degree. As additional funding has become available through the tax capture mechanism, several Promise Zones have added four-year and even private options to their students’ postsecondary choices.

Recommended Reading

Carruthers, C. K. (2019, May). [*5 things to know about the Tennessee Promise*](#). Brookings Institution.

This article describes the relationship between statewide, publicly funded Tennessee Promise and earlier nonprofit initiatives.

Reeves, R. V., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). [*Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education*](#). Brookings Institution.

An in-depth report on the history and essential elements of the Say Yes to Education model of community-wide social change (including a college Promise and other student and community supports), as well as the evolution and effects of Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo, NY, Guilford County, NC, and Syracuse, NY.

³ Reeves, R.V., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018). [*Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education*](#). Brookings Institution.