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Scholarship design: Who should be eligible?

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Which students should be eligible for funding depends on the goals of the Promise program and the community or population the program is designed to serve.

Decisions around student eligibility will shape much of a Promise program's design, implementation, and impact. Eligibility decisions typically take into consideration attributes such as residency, age of students, high school academic performance, postsecondary academic performance, financial need, and occasionally other components such as community service. The set of requirements can result in broad or narrow eligibility and will influence the design of other Promise supports and the ease of messaging.

Policy Considerations

- Be clear about program goals and make design decisions that advance them.
- If the goal is to increase college-going, especially among disadvantaged students, complex requirements should be avoided.
- If the goal is to increase the supply of educated workers, include adults within eligibility requirements.
- Be aware that restrictions on scholarship usage can have unintended consequences.
- Simple eligibility rules and low barriers to access will maximize the reach of a Promise program.

What We Know

The question of who is eligible for a Promise scholarship is one of the most critical decisions facing stakeholders at the design stage. Eligibility rules determine who benefits from such a program and affect a variety of other outcomes, such as potential changes in school culture or a state's overall educational attainment rates.

Eligibility requirements should align with the program's purpose. For example, If the goal is to increase college-going, especially among disadvantaged students, complex requirements should be avoided. Multiple requirements (such as high school GPA and attendance rates, community service, lengthy residency rules, and others) will reduce access; students can't benefit if they don't receive the funds, and this is especially true for the most disadvantaged. If the goal is to

increase the supply of educated workers, include adults within eligibility requirements. Many adults, including those currently working, can benefit from the opportunity to retrain for a higher-paying job. For programs designed to reach adults, allowing part-time attendance and enlisting employers as partners are essential steps.

There also can be unintended consequences. For example, academic requirements such as high school GPA or attendance rates can disproportionately screen out lower-income students who have had more limited access to academic support. Long residency and enrollment requirements are most likely to affect lower-income families who may need to move in or out of a school district because of housing insecurity or job changes. Community service requirements will create new administrative burdens (and costs) for both students and program administrators.

Eligibility decisions cover several attributes.

Residency. The Promise programs covered in this handbook are designed to reach people who live in a particular geographic area, whether that is a state, a community, or a community college district. Thus, residency requirements are almost always a part of Promise programs. State-level Promise programs require beneficiaries to have attended high school or resided within the state, although residency length is generally short. Community college-based programs, similarly, usually require beneficiaries to reside within the relevant community college district. (California's community college programs

are an exception, as most provide tuition-free attendance to state residents without regard to the specific community in which they reside.)

Local Promise programs almost always have multiyear residency or school district enrollment requirements (often a minimum of two to four years). These programs may also have sliding scales that determine the level of benefits, with the greatest benefits going to those students with the longest tenure in the district. The rationale behind such rules is twofold. First, local Promise programs are often conceived of as economic development strategies designed to create long-term attachment between families and a city or school district; residency or enrollment requirements seek to create incentives for this attachment. (Research is mixed on whether they in fact do so.¹) Second, Promise programs can serve as catalysts for change in K-12 districts and communities (through, for example, enhanced tutoring or mentoring, or greater business engagement in internship or pathways programs), which may help engage all students and improve opportunity. Also, there is evidence that Promise programs can spark the creation of a college-going culture among high school students.² Students need to be attached to a school district or community to benefit from these changes.

There is a downside to lengthy residency or enrollment requirements when it comes to the equity impact of Promise programs. Low-income families may have higher mobility in and out of school districts, thereby reducing their children's benefits.³ This is one reason why some communities have opted for shorter residency requirements (the

¹ Bartik, T. J., & Sotheland, N. (2015). *Migration and housing price effects of place-based college scholarships*. (Upjohn Institute Working Paper No. 15-245). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research; Fitzpatrick, M. D. & Jones, D. (2013). *Higher education, merit-based scholarships and post-baccalaureate migration*. (NBER Working Paper No. 18530). National Bureau of Economic Research; Ordway, D. M. (2018, March 30). *Brain drain: Does tying college aid to residency keep graduates in state?* Journalist's Resource.

² Miron, G., Jones, J. N., & Kelaher-Young, A. J. (2011). *The Kalamazoo Promise and perceived changes in school climate*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19(17); Winograd, M., & Miller, H. (2016, March 22). *Promise programs aren't just about the money*. Campaign for Free College Tuition.

³ Phinney, R. (2013). *Exploring residential mobility among low-income families*. *Social Service Review*, 87(4).

Detroit Promise, for example, requires two years of city residency), while others have abandoned the sliding scale idea and now provide the same level of scholarship to all eligible students (for example, in 2018 the Pittsburgh Promise eliminated its sliding scale and established a four-year minimum residency prior to high school graduation). Housing-insecure students may also move in and out of the district, thereby losing eligibility. Some programs include unhoused or housing-insecure students in their eligibility based on school-district attendance.

Age of students. The Promise movement began by serving recent high school graduates, with many programs requiring that students begin their postsecondary education immediately after graduation. But most college students are not, in fact, recent high school graduates, and workforce-oriented Promise programs need to be able to reach adult workers. In recent years, the range of students reached by Promise programs has broadened, as some locales add companion programs to serve adults, and some states and community colleges launch Promise programs with no age restrictions.

Academic eligibility requirements. Some Promise programs include eligibility requirements that go beyond geographic location. The most typical among these are a minimum level of high school academic achievement (often a 2.0 or 2.5 GPA), high school attendance rates, or ACT/SAT scores. The rationale behind such requirements

usually relates to the issue of college success—that is, students who fall below these academic benchmarks may struggle to succeed in a postsecondary setting. Such requirements also embody the idea that, with such an incentive on the table, students will work harder in high school.

The research is mixed on the effectiveness of program rules related to academic performance. Research suggests that high school GPAs are a reliable predictor of college success,⁴ so program stakeholders may turn to them to increase the likelihood that program beneficiaries will complete credentials or degrees. However, most Promise programs seek to expand the college-going pipeline to reach students not already on the postsecondary pathway, and high school GPA and attendance requirements can hinder this. A randomized trial of a Promise-like program in Milwaukee⁵ found that high school GPA requirements did not lead to higher grades in high school, and the main effect⁶ was to limit funds to only one in five students who were otherwise eligible. Since GPA is also correlated with race and income, such requirements can reduce program equity and effectiveness in increasing college-going. Moreover, such requirements are likely to limit the catalyzing effect on high schools' college-going culture. Universal eligibility is more expensive, but also likely to do more to accomplish a variety of program goals.

Postsecondary performance requirements. Even after students meet the initial eligibility requirements, some programs have additional requirements

⁴ UChicagoNews. (n.d.). [Test scores don't stack up to GPAs in predicting college success.](#)

⁵ Harris, D. N., Farmer-Hinton, R., Kim, D., Diamond, J., Blakely Reavis, T., Krupa Rifelj, K., Lustick, H., & Carl, B. (2018). [The promise of free college \(and its potential pitfalls\)](#). Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings.

⁶ Harris, D. N., & Mills, J. (2021). [Optimal college financial aid: Theory and evidence on free college, early commitment, and merit aid from an eight-year randomized trial.](#) (EdWorkingPaper No. 21-393). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

students must fulfill to maintain eligibility once they have entered college. The most common of these performance requirements are taking a minimum number of credit courses per semester and maintaining a minimum college GPA (this is often congruent with colleges' own requirements to remain in good academic standing). There is some research from other financial aid models that these types of incentives are more effective than high school-level merit requirements because they involve the possibility of taking away students' current funding.⁷ In contrast, when academic merit requirements focus on high school, the receipt of college funding is often far in the future, limiting students' incentives to change their behavior.

Financial need. A minority of Promise programs restrict benefits to students with demonstrable financial need (as measured, for example, by Pell Grant eligibility), although many other programs target such students indirectly by focusing their resources on high-poverty school districts or limiting benefits to the two-year public college sector that disproportionately serves low-income students. Merit requirements have the opposite effect and tend to distribute funds to those with less financial need. Some programs combine academic and financial need requirements, while others have imposed income ceilings to ensure that benefits do not go to the wealthy.

Other requirements. Some Promise programs have embedded community service requirements into their eligibility criteria. These create an added administrative burden both for students who need to find qualifying community-service opportunities and program administrators who must track and enforce the rules, although community-service requirements can make a program more attractive to local stakeholders by requiring students to “give back” to their community. A few states, most notably New York, have adopted “stay or pay” rules that require students to remain in the state for a given number of years after degree completion—if the student leaves, their grant aid becomes a loan. These provisions, too, impose high levels of administrative burden and complicate the “free college” message.

The history of social welfare policy in the United States suggests that universal programs enjoy stronger political support and popularity than those targeted toward the poor (think of the difference in public attitudes toward Social Security and SNAP, or Medicare and Medicaid). In the Promise field, polling data suggests that adding GPA requirement increases public support⁸ while adding a financial need requirement reduces perceptions of fairness. Beyond perceptions, though, eligibility rules, along with other program criteria (see Questions 2 and 3), will profoundly affect who benefits from a Promise program.⁹ Eligibility requirements of all kinds also create administrative burdens¹⁰ that keep students from receiving funds even if they are eligible.

⁷ Scott-Clayton, J. (2009). [On money and motivation: A quasi-experimental analysis of financial incentives for college achievement](#). *Journal of Human Resources* 46; Carruthers, C., & Özek, U. (2013). [Losing HOPE: Financial aid and the line between college and work](#). (Working Paper No. 91). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research; Schudde, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). [Pell grants as performance-based scholarships? An examination of satisfactory academic progress requirements in the nation's largest need-based aid program](#). *Research in Higher Education* 57(8), 943–967.

⁸ Bell, E. (2020). [The politics of designing tuition-free college: How socially constructed target populations influence policy support](#). *Journal of Higher Education*, 91(6).

⁹ Judith Scott-Clayton, J., Libassi, C. J., & Sparks, D. (2022). [The fine print on free college: Who benefits from New York's Excelsior Scholarship?](#) (Brief). Urban Institute.

¹⁰ Gandara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022). [Reducing barriers to free college programs](#). (Policy brief). Scholars Strategy Network.

As with other social programs, simple rules around student eligibility¹¹ and low barriers to access¹² will maximize the reach of a Promise program, as research suggests.

Recommended Reading

Campaign for Free College Tuition. (2022, Revised). [Making public colleges Tuition free: A briefing book for state leaders](#). Campaign for Free College Tuition.

A compendium of existing statewide Promise programs and "how to" guide for state leaders covering best practices and steps needed to launch a statewide Promise program.

College Promise Campaign. (2018). [Playbook: How to build a Promise](#). College Promise.

A resource for city and county elected officials to build College Promise programs for their communities. It includes information on the steps needed to create a Promise program and provides planning documents from several existing Promise programs.

Gándara, D., Acevedo, R., & Cervantes, D. (2022, April). [Reducing barriers to free college programs](#). Scholars Strategy Network.

This brief highlights barriers in program design that could impact student access and persistence. Authors advance policy recommendations aimed at ameliorating the barriers that can limit the effectiveness of free college or Promise programs.

Harris, D. N., et al. (2018). [The promise of free college \(and its potential pitfalls\)](#). Brookings Institution.

This report distills lessons for program design from the Degree Project, one of the first randomized control trials of a program similar to many free college and promise scholarship proposals.

Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., & Jackson, V. (2018). [A promise worth keeping](#). Education Trust.

This report reviews statewide Promise programs through an equity lens and sets forth criteria states should adopt if they want their Promise programs to reach those students who struggle the most to pay for college.

Miller-Adams, M. (2021). [The path to free college: In pursuit of access, equity, and prosperity](#). Harvard Education Press.

This book provides a high-level analysis of the free college movement and outlines how the design of free college programs should relate to programmatic goals, whether those are driven by expanding college access, improving equity in college-going and attainment, or promoting a better-educated workforce.

Miller-Adams, M. (2015). [Promise nation: Transforming communities through place-based scholarships](#). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

This free e-book provides a brief overview of the place-based scholarship movement, summarizing key design decisions, the diffusion of the Promise idea from Kalamazoo to other communities and states, and the challenges that stopped some Promise programs before they began.

Perna, L. W., Wright-Kim, J., & Leigh, E. W. (2020). [Is a college promise program an effective use of resources? Understanding the implications of program design and resource investments for equity and efficiency](#). AERA Open, 6(4), 1–15.

This research article examines how program design and resource investments influence equity, efficiency, and outcomes for four last-dollar community college Promise programs.

Willard, J., Vasquez, A., & Lepe, M. (2019). [Designing for success: The early implementation of College Promise programs](#). MDRC.

Includes guidelines for Promise program design derived from technical assistance MDRC provided to several Promise programs in their early stages.

¹¹ Burland, E., Dynarski, S., Micheltore, K., Owen, S., & Raghuraman, S. (2022). [The power of certainty: Experimental evidence on the effective design of free tuition programs](#). (Working Paper No. 29864). National Bureau of Economic Research.

¹² Bettinger, E., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). [The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment](#). *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127(3).

Case Studies

How student eligibility rules reflect stakeholder goals.

While it has always been difficult to know precisely what the [Kalamazoo Promise](#) donors had in mind due to their preference for anonymity, the design of the program, announced in 2005, provides plenty of hints. The Kalamazoo Promise restricts its benefits to graduates of the Kalamazoo Public Schools, the urban school district that serves most of the region's low-income and non-white students. It also pioneered the idea of a sliding scale for benefits, with a minimum residency and enrollment requirement of four years (beginning in ninth grade) and the largest scholarship going to students who are part of the district for 13 years. These program rules, as well as the outcomes of appeals over the years, suggest the donors' commitment to using the Kalamazoo Promise as a tool to attach students and families more securely to the urban core and revitalize the public school district that sits at the center of the region.

Stakeholders in Detroit took a different approach. The [Detroit Promise](#) is available to all high school graduates in the city of Detroit, provided their high school (whether public, private, charter, or parochial) is within city limits. For the larger of the Detroit Promise's two program tracks (that focused on community college attendance), the length of residency is also shorter (two years minimum), and there is no sliding scale promoting long-term attachment to the city or a given school. These program rules suggest that stakeholders were motivated less by revitalizing the Detroit Public Schools (an urban district that has suffered declining enrollment and budgetary challenges for decades due in large part to policies promoting school choice and charter schools) and more by increasing college-going rates for youth across the city.

Broadening eligibility beyond recent high school graduates.

The Promise movement began by serving recent high school graduates. In places like Denver, El Dorado, New Haven, and Pittsburgh, students are required to begin college shortly after high school graduation and face relatively tight time limits for using scholarship funds. Statewide programs began the same way, with the Tennessee Promise, announced in 2014, designed to support students attending college the fall after they graduate from high school.

In some cases, the Promise movement, especially at the state level, has evolved to include adults. In 2017, [Tennessee Reconnect](#) was launched, allowing any adult in the state without a degree to attend a community college or college of applied technology tuition free. [Michigan Reconnect](#), which serves adults, is modeled on Tennessee's program, while some other states have introduced tuition-free college programs with no age restrictions. California's community colleges also serve students of any age with tuition-free access. A few local programs do so as well.

When the introduction of Promise programs is driven by the need to expand the workforce, the logic of restricting benefits to recent high school graduates is faulty. There are workers all along the age continuum who can benefit from obtaining degrees or credentials and contribute to the quality of a state or local workforce. With enthusiastic support from employers seeking access to trained workers, even very conservative states have been able to launch Promise programs to meet emerging workforce needs.