

1 What is the Free College Handbook?

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Are you a state legislator considering a free college program to meet your state's workforce needs? A civic leader exploring how to make your community more attractive? A community college administrator seeking to better serve your student body? A philanthropist looking for a high-impact, equity-oriented investment? An activist committed to the fight against generational poverty?

Translating more than a decade of research into actionable strategies, the Free College Handbook is designed to help you understand how reducing college costs can simultaneously help students and the places they live.

We focus here on place-based scholarships, using the terms “free college” or “Promise” to encompass a range of programs carried out by cities, states, and community colleges that broaden access to higher education and make it more affordable—in many cases, tuition free.

We define “college” broadly to include not just traditional academic degrees like bachelor's or associate degrees, but also short-term credentials and certifications that require some kind of postsecondary training or apprenticeship, and that translate into better opportunities for individuals.

The handbook represents the collective effort of a dozen researchers and was funded by the Kresge Foundation through its CoPro 2.0 initiative. It is structured around 25 questions, with brief summaries of the answers appearing on each page.

The entire handbook can be downloaded [here](#) or browsed at this [link](#). Check out our “explainer” videos [here](#).

Background

The modern free college movement can trace its origins to the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2005, although at least one small-scale precursor has been identified.¹ In the contemporary landscape of student financial aid, a commitment to award scholarships to all graduates of a given school district, to last in perpetuity, was something new. This place-based

¹ Stern, S. (2022), *Bernard Daly's Promise: The Enduring Legacy of a Place-based Scholarship*, Oregon State University Press.

model has since been replicated widely, spreading to more than 200 communities and community colleges, and in more than half the states..

This has been a grassroots movement across the United States, built from local assets in response to local needs, with some programs found in cities, others at the state level, and still others initiated by colleges themselves. Stakeholders have sought to use such programs to address shortages of skilled workers, expand access to higher education for groups historically excluded from it, and stem declining population and public school enrollment trends.

The free college movement is large and diverse, and precise definitions are elusive. We focus on place-based initiatives that have a scholarship component and reach a high proportion of residents; these are often referred to as Promise programs. Critical to our work is the notion of place—most of these programs are geographically bounded—and the provision of grant aid rather than loans. Such programs are part of a larger movement that includes other efforts to lower the cost of higher education, including national advocacy efforts and legislative initiatives.

The Promise model differs from traditional financial aid awarded based primarily on financial need (most notably through federal Pell grants) or academic merit (as in previous statewide scholarship programs like Georgia Hope, or much of the aid granted by colleges themselves). Instead, the key to unlocking a Promise scholarship is residing in a specified place, sometimes a city or school district, sometimes a state, sometimes a community college district. Because scholarships are granted at scale (they are not restricted in number and do not involve a competitive application process), they hold the potential not just to send more students to college, but also to create larger, systemwide effects. These might include the development of school and community cultures that support postsecondary aspirations or conditions that make a place more attractive. In this sense, Promise programs hold both a “private” or individual value (by reducing the cost

of higher education for students and families) and a “public” or collective value for the communities and states that create them. These programs may be diverse in their stakeholders and structure, but they share the basic idea of expanding postsecondary access at a large scale to simultaneously help individuals and transform places.

The handbook addresses three categories of programs: 1) community-based programs that emanate from a group of stakeholders in a given city or school district; 2) statewide programs that are enacted by state legislatures, often with leadership by a governor; and 3) institution-based programs created by community colleges.² The factors driving these diverse stakeholders to offer scholarships based on residency also vary, but they usually involve a combination of providing more opportunities for residents to benefit from earning degrees and credentials, reducing inequitable patterns of college access, and strengthening local economies and institutions. A strategy that seeks to accomplish these multiple goals is especially appealing for places facing economic challenges or distress.

For all these efforts, including the place-based initiatives described here, it is important to note that the free college label is a misnomer. Such programs generally cover only the cost of tuition and fees, not the associated costs of housing, food, books, transportation, or the “opportunity cost” of college attendance—income foregone through a reduction in working hours. Often the nontuition costs of attendance are higher than tuition and fees themselves.

The growth in local and state programs has intersected with a national dialogue around the cost of college and various free-college proposals from national leaders that, to date, have failed to progress. While attention to national policy has waxed and waned, innovation among states and communities around creating tuition-free college paths continues at a rapid pace.

² Not addressed here are financial aid programs, such as Pell grants or state-level merit scholarships, directed toward individual students who qualify for them based on either family financial need or academic achievement; colleges that are already tuition free; or initiatives undertaken by four-year public and private colleges and universities to support specific groups of students.