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## How do Promise programs benefit students? **Messaging**

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*Promise programs deliver a message, early and often, that college tuition is affordable.*

**Promise programs benefit students by making it easier to understand the application and financial aid process while adding a measure of certainty around cost. This is especially important for students who are the first in their families to go to college. Promise programs deliver a consistent message during a student's K-12 years that college tuition is affordable, and when it comes time to apply for college, they sometimes provide resources and support to make the process easier to understand and navigate.**

### Policy Considerations

- A messaging campaign that is clear and easy to understand by students, families, and school-based staff can help raise awareness and usage of a Promise scholarship.
- Students and families should be able to find answers to their program questions quickly and easily, whether through school staff, previous Promise recipients, or a well-designed website.
- Stakeholders should weigh the costs and benefits of targeting eligibility based on academic merit or financial need, as additional requirements complicate messaging and make it more difficult to reach students not already on a college-going path.

### What We Know

Paying for college may be the first substantial financial decision that a traditional-aged college student makes in their adult life. Research has consistently demonstrated that students and families confront a lack of clear information when it comes to paying for higher education. Students who are the first in their families to attend college often lack the cultural and social capital needed to navigate the financial aid process and other application hurdles. Some students choose not to apply for college for fear of taking on debt, especially in light of rising institutional sticker prices.

Promise programs are one solution to these barriers to college.

A recent study using a large, nationally representative survey of high school students found that the introduction of a local Promise program increased the likelihood that students expected to

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<sup>1</sup>Odle, T. K. (2022). [The power of "free" college: Reducing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in college expectations](#) (EdWorking Paper No. 22-565). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

earn a college degree by 9–15 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of Promise programs had a particularly strong impact for low-income and racially minoritized students. Other researchers found that effects on actual college enrollment are similar whether Promise programs cover full or partial tuition. They concluded that the “free college” messaging can be as important in inducing students to attend postsecondary institutions as the actual amount of the grant award.<sup>2</sup> (Nonetheless, evidence shows that larger grant amounts lead to greater student impacts on persistence and completion outcomes.

While “free college” messaging is important, it is not enough on its own to increase enrollment, persistence, and eventual degree completion. Fewer administrative hurdles and less uncertainty in the aid process are also important. A University of Michigan study, for example, randomly selected low-income students in the state of Michigan to receive letters detailing a student’s eligibility for free tuition at the university. One arm of the treatment guaranteed students would receive free tuition for four years while another arm was guaranteed free tuition for one year contingent on demonstrating financial need in a yearly application. The application rate among students guaranteed free tuition for four years was 63%, compared to 44% in the yearly application arm, and 35% in the control (or “business as usual”) group.<sup>3</sup> Other studies have

confirmed that scholarship or grant programs based on demonstrating financial need (like the Pell grant) have smaller effects on enrollment than simpler financial aid programs. Any additional paperwork is another hurdle, especially for underrepresented college students.

Research on financial aid outreach and college applications has consistently shown the importance of clear and explicit messaging, as well as the reduction of administrative burden (the added hassle of filing paperwork required of students to prove their income status) on college access. These lessons are critical for policymakers and other stakeholders to consider when designing Promise programs. If stakeholders are intent on providing aid to students with financial need, great care must be taken in designing an application process that does not create an administrative burden for low-income students. The “cost of complexity” in financial aid applications may deter low-income and first-generation students from even applying for aid and attending college.<sup>4</sup> Simple applications and eligibility rules are key in the design of new Promise programs.

When it comes to messaging, Promise programs will want to be explicit about the application process, the amount of money students will receive in scholarship dollars, and the institutions to which students can take those dollars. Eligibility criteria that are complex or

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<sup>2</sup> Li, A. Y., & Gándara, D. (2020). [The promise of “free” tuition and program design features: Impacts on first-time college enrollment](#). In Perna, L. W. & Smith, E. J. (Eds.), *Improving research-based knowledge of college promise programs* (pp. 219–240). American Education Research Association.

<sup>3</sup> Burland, E., Dynarski, S., Michelmore, K., Owen, S., & Raghuraman, S. (2022). [The power of certainty: Experimental evidence on the effective design of free tuition programs](#) (No. w29864). National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>4</sup> Dynarski, S. M., & Scott-Clayton, J. E. (2006). [The cost of complexity in federal student aid: Lessons from optimal tax theory and behavioral economics](#). *National Tax Journal*, 59(2), 319–356.

“Free college” messaging can be as important in inducing students to attend postsecondary institutions as the actual amount of the grant award.

hard to calculate can hinder the ease of messaging, as well as create an administrative burden for students and staff.

Attention to how messages are shared is also important. Students often learn about Promise funding and eligibility criteria by word-of-mouth from trusted sources, such as friends or school-based staff, so staff members who work directly with students need to be knowledgeable about program details. Stakeholders might also consider an “ambassador”-type program that enlists the help of Promise recipients in educating their near peers. A well-designed website with all pertinent information regarding the Promise program—such as eligibility criteria, application procedures, and dollars received—will be an important resource for providing information to students and families about college affordability.

### Recommended Reading

Burd, S. et al. (2018). *[Decoding the cost of college: The case for transparent financial aid award letters](#)*. New America.

*This report details an analysis of over 11,000 financial aid award letters. The researchers found that award letters were overly complex and did not offer clear next steps to students. The authors provide recommendations to improve financial aid messaging.*

Lieber, R. (2021, September 17). *[FAFSA's expected family contribution is going away. Good riddance](#)*. *New York Times*.

*This article provides a breakdown of the complexity of the financial aid process and how it is overly burdensome on low-income families.*

Lowry, D. (2018). *[Nudging: Is a text messaging campaign right for your program?](#)* National College Attainment Network.

*This brief article offers a sensible summary of text message “nudging” campaigns to improve student financial aid applications and college enrollment. These campaigns are most effective when students are aware of who/what is sending the texts.*