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The Higher Education Funding Revolution: An Exploration of Statewide Community College "Free Tuition" Programs

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the current literature and state legislation of statewide *free tuition* promise programs. The purpose of this paper was to analyze state free community college programs, legislation, scholarly literature, and state websites to understand program structures, funding sources, and student-eligibility requirements. The following classifications of state programs emerged: community and technical college programs, workforce development programs, and programs for both 2- and 4-year degrees and certificates. Additionally, this article examines the similarities and differences between programs to inform future research and accompanying outcomes.

Across the United States, there has been a renewed focus on preparing citizens to engage in meaningful employment through the attainment of a postsecondary credential at both the state and federal levels. Many state leaders have set goals to increase education attainment for the population of their state. In Tennessee, Governor Bill Haslam signed the Tennessee Promise Act of 2014 as a part of the Drive to 55 initiatives. Haslam set the goal for 55% of adults in Tennessee to have obtained a postsecondary credential by 2025 (Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018). Hawaii's policymakers set the same goal in their 2018 *free college* legislation. They outlined a plan to increase the number of adults with a postsecondary credential to 55% by 2025 (Haw. Rev. Stat. § 304A-A, 2018). Previously, rhetoric surrounding colleges and universities focused on college affordability and student debt at 4-year institutions; these new state initiatives show a shifting focus to community college and technical education by proposing programs that would allow students to get a postsecondary credential for free.

In 2015, the Obama administration promoted the idea of free college initiatives through the America's College Promise program, with the goal of making the first 2 years of college free and accessible to all students (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018). At the time, President Obama promoted the Tennessee Promise Scholarship as the standard for other states to emulate (Tamburin, 2015). As of July 2018, 13 states have officially implemented some form of a free college program, with other states submitting proposals. Many of these statewide plans emerged from local or institution-specific programs (Pierce, 2015). While local programs provided access for students in a particular location, statewide implementation has a stronger ability to increase access for students because it provides the freedom to enroll at an eligible in-state institution of the student's choice. The purpose of this paper was to analyze free college programs and the pertinent scholarly literature, legislation, and state websites to understand program structures, funding sources, and student-eligibility requirements. We will also provide a case study review of the Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect programs. The goal of this scholarly review is to understand similarities and differences between programs and to inform future research and accompanying outcomes.

College promise programs

Community college enrollments have increased steadily over the past 40 years (Dowd & Shieh, 2013; Romano, 2012). Originally designed to democratize and equalize higher education, community colleges opened the door for low-income and underrepresented Students of Color in larger numbers while keeping costs relatively low (Dowd & Shieh, 2013). During the proliferation of community colleges and increased enrollments, state appropriations for higher education have decreased across all sectors, especially during the Great Recession of 2008 (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017a; Dowd & Shieh, 2013; Romano, 2012). This decrease in appropriations, along with many community college students paying out of pocket to avoid debt (Dowd & Shieh, 2013), has led to the need to ensure that community college students still have adequate access to postsecondary education. Financing college can be a challenge especially for community college students due to the demographics of who typically enrolls in these institutions; however, with the implementation of these programs, there is an opportunity to increase a student's confidence in their ability to attend and afford a postsecondary education (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017b).

State policymakers establish free college programs in one of two ways. The first way is a first-dollar program that does not consider gift-aid, aid that does not have to be repaid, when making awards. The second type is a last-dollar program, in which funding is only provided for the remaining amount of tuition and/or mandatory fees after all other gift-aid has been applied (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017b). While the proliferation of free college programs is a relatively new development in higher education, some scholarly literature has begun to emerge. The literature focuses on: (a) classification of programs, (b) effects of institution-specific programs, and (c) concerns about these programs.

Types of promise programs

Perna and Leigh (2018) examined 289 promise programs and discovered three distinct clusters using quantitative methods. Perna and Leigh's (2018) models revealed three distinct groups of promise programs: (a) state-sponsored programs, (b) programs that provided funding to attend community colleges, and (c) programs that had universal eligibility. In the first cluster, state-sponsored programs, each program is funded by the state. In the second cluster, community college programs, each program required students to enroll at a 2-year institution to receive the award. The last cluster, universal eligibility programs, does not restrict those who can receive the award based on need or merit. Perna and Leigh (2018) also noted that it is too early to know if the programs will be successful; however, they discuss that further research is needed to understand program effectiveness.

Miller-Adams (2015) reviewed approximately 50 promise programs and placed them into four groups: (a) expansive and universal; (b) expansive and limited; (c) restrictive and universal; and (d) restrictive and limited. Expansive programs allowed students to enroll at various institutions. Restrictive programs limited the recipient to a specific institution or group of institutions. Universal programs did not restrict eligibility based on need or merit. Limited programs had a need- or merit-based restriction for eligibility. In her analysis, Miller-Adams (2015) noted that the understanding of these programs is limited at best and cautioned against analyzing programs quantitatively since even the oldest programs have not produced definitive data.

Effectiveness of institution specific promise programs

Some researchers have investigated the effectiveness of institution-specific promise programs (Andrews, DesJardins, & Ranchhod, 2010; Bartik & Lachowska, 2013; Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Pluhta & Penny, 2013). For example, Taylor and Lepper (2018) found that students in the Salt Lake Community College promise program had significantly higher fall semester grade point

averages (GPAs) and were enrolled in a significantly higher number of credit hours than their peers who did not receive the award. They also found a decrease in the number of students who received refunds from their Pell grants and indicated that there is a need for a continued understanding of free college and promise programs in community colleges, of program designs, and of the effects on student outcomes (Taylor & Lepper, 2018).

Concerns with promise programs

Researchers have also shared and investigated concerns about these programs. Perna, Leigh, and Carroll (2018) found that last-dollar programs will not have a substantial effect for low-income students because these students generally have other types of gift-aid, like Pell Grants, that cover tuition and mandatory fees; however, they suggested that such programs may raise awareness and use of other available aid programs.

Researchers have also discussed the importance of conducting more research to determine what effect these programs have on access to postsecondary institutions and student success, including persistence and retention. Researchers should also determine if these programs are providing opportunities for more students to attend college, or simply redistributing students who would have enrolled at 4-year institutions to community colleges (Perna et al., 2018). Other issues to consider for researchers include the need for developmental education, the methods of how to support these students effectively, and the ongoing needs of students in promise programs (Holland, 2015; Littlepage, Clark, Wilson, & Stout, 2018).

Method

The data from this study stemmed from a qualitative document analysis of legislation and websites for states that currently have some type of free college or promise programs. We did not include programs that programmatically function as merit-based aid programs (e.g., HOPE or LIFE scholarship programs). These programs were found by using an exhaustive search of state websites. Once we identified the states, we analyzed the legislation, executive orders, other state documents, and state higher education commission websites using the constant comparative method to form categories of programs (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2005; Creswell, 2013) and using cross-case analysis to examine program components (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

As we read each article, we deductively coded the documents looking for initial eligibility requirements, continuing eligibility requirements, and any co-curricular or miscellaneous requirements. These data were compiled and maintained in a Microsoft Excel table. We included eligibility requirements along the top row and the case or program name in the first column (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). We systematically examined the documents and codes and copied them into the appropriate cell of the table. To complete the cross-case analysis, we systematically examined the data by moving vertically and horizontally across cases looking for similarities, differences, and patterns in the data. Additionally, because Tennessee has been touted as a model program we chose to present it as an instrumental case (Stake, 1995).

Delimitations

In our study, two delimitations emerged based on specific decisions we made as the research team. First, we only addressed statewide programs. Scholars have established that there are over 280 promise programs across the United States at the state, local, and institutional levels (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018), but we only included statewide programs. City- and institution-specific programs are an important mechanism for many students to access postsecondary education; however, researchers have yet to examine statewide programs specifically. As an increasing number of states consider free college legislation, a classification of statewide programs for future researchers is important as they

investigate the effect promise programs have on student success outcomes like academic achievement, retention, and completion.

The second delimitation is that we did not include programs that provided students with free tuition that have high merit-based eligibility requirements, such as GPA or standardized test score requirements that would deem students to be high achieving. The focus of promise programs is to increase college access for students who may not otherwise enroll at a postsecondary institution. Programs that require students to be academically high-achieving address a different goal, so they were excluded.

Findings

After an exhaustive web search, we found that 13 states have some type of statewide free tuition or promise program. The states were Arkansas, California, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Montana, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Tennessee. After using the constant comparative method and analyzing program requirements through cross-case analysis, we found five common components across every program: (a) requires a high school diploma or GED, (b) requires a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), (c) is a last-dollar program, (d) uses primarily state appropriations and funds, and (e) requires satisfactory academic progress. The requirement of the FAFSA determines the amount needed for the last-dollar program, except in California and New York, meaning the funds were only dispersed after all other gift-aid was applied to the student's charges. State policymakers funded these programs primarily through state appropriations or a mix of appropriations, other state funds, and private funds. All programs required that students make satisfactory academic progress toward their degree or certificate, which includes a minimum GPA and number of completed credit hours or units per year. In addition to these commonalities, state programs fell into three overarching types of programs based on their purpose. These types are: (a) community and technical college programs, (b) workforce development programs, and (c) programs for both 2- and 4-year degrees and certificates. Figure 1 provides a map showing the types of programs by state.
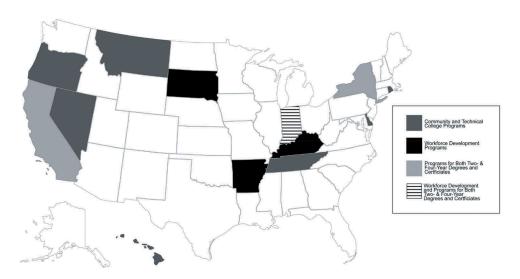

Figure 1. Map Showing Types of Program by State.

Community and technical college programs

The largest category of programs focused on community or technical college programs that offer degrees and certificates. States with these programs include Delaware (Delaware Technical and Community College, 2018; The Delaware Student Excellence Equals Degree Act, 2017), Hawaii (Haw. Rev. Stat. § 304A-A, 2018; University of Hawai'i Hawai'i Community College, n.d.), Montana (Montana Promise Act, 2017), Nevada (Nev. Rev. Stat. § 396,Nev. Rev. Stat. § 396, 2017; Nevada System of Higher Education, n.d.), Oregon (Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, n.d.; Oregon Promise Program, 2015), Rhode Island (Rhode Island Office of Postsecondary Commissioner, n.d.; Rhode Island Promise Scholarship Act, 2017), and Tennessee (Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018; Tennessee Promise Scholarship Act of 2014, Tennessee Promise Scholarship Act of 2014, 2016; Tennessee Reconnect Act, 2017). While we are providing an in-depth case study of Tennessee's programs, Table 1 provides an overview of each of these programs as it relates to initial eligibility requirements, academic renewal requirements, and any co-curricular or miscellaneous requirements.

The case of Tennessee and the Drive to 55

In 2013, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam challenged the state with the Drive to 55. The Drive to 55 is about improving the future of the state's workforce and economic development through education. The goal was simple: prepare 55% of Tennesseans "with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025" (Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018, para. 1). The signature program to meet this goal was the Tennessee Promise scholarship, which would later be recognized by President Barack Obama as inspiration for his America's College Promise Proposal (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

Tennessee promise

The Tennessee Promise Scholarship was modeled after Knox Achieves, a last-dollar aid program launched in 2008 by then Knox County Mayor Mike Ragsdale, former Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam, and a small group of local business leaders to aid students in Knox County, Tennessee to attend any of the three local community colleges using exclusively private funds. The purpose of the program was "to enhance the local workforce and to pique local students' interest both in graduating high school and in attending college" (Mayshark, 2009, para. 2).

Eligibility criteria. The Tennessee Promise Scholarship Act of 2014 states to be eligible students must:

- graduate from a Tennessee high school or earn a GED or HiSET diploma before reaching age 19;
- complete the Tennessee Promise application and the FAFSA;
- maintain satisfactory academic progress, 2.0 GPA;
- complete the mandatory mentoring and the 8-hour community service requirement; and
- maintain continuous enrollment through the program, unless approved for medical or personal leave of absence for a maximum of 6 months.

Award terms. The amount of the scholarship is equal to the amount of tuition and program fees minus all other sources of gift-aid. Students cannot receive a scholarship more than the average cost of tuition and fees at Tennessee's public 2-year institutions. Recipients can continue to receive funding for up to but not exceeding five semesters after their initial enrollment or until the student has earned a certificate, diploma, or associate degree, whichever occurs first (Tennessee Promise Scholarship Act of 2014).

Table 1. Overview of state program requirements for community and technical colleges.

State	Program name	Year implemented	Max time frame	Eligible students	Initial requirement	FT/PT	Continuing GPA	Continuing credit hours	Cocurricular or MISC requirements
Delaware	Student Excellence Equals Degree Scholarship	2007	6 Continuous Semesters	1st time FT	2.5 HS GPA; SAT 1350/ACT 19, No Felonies	FT	2.5	24/year	Mentoring, attend meeting
Hawaii	Hawaii'si Promise Scholarship	2017	8 semesters	1st time FT/Adult	Financial need	FT/PT	2.0 (SAP)	Earn 67% of hours attempted (SAP requirements)	
Montana	Montana Promise Grant	Announced	2 years	1st time FT/Adult	Montana resident 12 months before applying; HS Diploma/GED 2.5 HS GPA No more than 60 h in Postsecondary Ed	FT	2.7		Community service
Nevada	Nevada Promise Scholarship	2018	3 Years	1st Time FT	Nevada Resident HS Diploma/GED Less than age 20 No degree No default on federal loans Not owe refund for federal student aid Meet Program Deadlines (Mentor, Community Service, Training Meeting)	FT	2.5***	24/year***	Mentoring, community service, attend meeting
Oregon	Oregon Promise Grant	2015	90 credit hours	1st time FT/Adult	Oregon HS Diploma/GED 2.5 HS GPA Enroll within 6 months of grad Oregon resident 12 month prior to college attendance No more than 90 credits completed/attempted		SAP Requirements	Maintain at least half-time (6 h) continuous enrollment; must receive the grant each fall	First Year Experience
Rhode Island	Rhode Island Promise Scholarship	2015	2 years	1st Time FT	RI Residents 2018 HS Graduates/GED	FT	2.5	30/Year	
Tennessee	Tennessee Promise Scholarship	2015	5 semesters	1st time FT	HS Diploma/GED Enroll post-Graduation	FT	2.0	SAP Requirements	Mentoring, community service, attend meeting

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

State	Program name	Year implemented	Max time frame	Eligible students	Initial requirement	FT/ PT	Continuing GPA	Continuing credit hours	Cocurricular or MISC requirements
Tennessee	Tennessee Reconnect Grant	2018	Earn an Associates Complete the number of hours to complete degree Fail to maintain Enrollment or 2.0 GPA	Adult	Tennessee resident for one (1) year prior to date of application Independent via FAFSA No Bachelors or associate enroll in and attend at least 6 h at an eligible institution	Both	2.0	Min 6 h fall and spring SAP Requirement	Participate in a college success program, as determined by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission

Note: ***Pending approval.

Funding mechanism. The Tennessee Promise Act of 2014 outlines three mechanisms to finance the program with the establishment of an endowment and state funds. The first endowment funds the scholarship through program revenue generated by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) and invested in three different funds. The second endowment consists of funds, transferred quarterly, in the state lottery for education account in excess of $10,000,000 and after payment of all required expenditures. The general assembly may also provide matching funds and other appropriations that will be placed in an endowment created for the program. Interest income on the endowment will be used to provide scholarships.

Outcomes. Since the implementation of the program in 2014, the number of students receiving the award has increased each year while the state led the nation in FAFSA filings from 2015 to early 2018 (at the time THEC/TSAC submitted the Tennessee Promise Annual Report). The college-going rate for Tennessee has climbed and remained steady, near 64%, with both community colleges and technical institutions seeing an increase in first-time freshmen enrollment. The fallfall 2015 cohort of students had a success rate of 65.8%, with 60.7% returning fallfall 2016 and 5.1% receiving a credential. The fallfall 2016 cohort's success rate climbed to 76.9%, with 72.1% of students returning fallfall 2017 and 4.8% completing a credential before the fall semester (Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, 2018). As Governor Haslam and policymakers began to see the successes of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program, they realized that to meet the goal of the Drive to 55 would require more than high school graduates. The solution was to create a program for adult learners and passing and signing Tennessee Reconnect Act (2017).

Tennessee reconnect

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant program's origins are found in the Community College Reconnect Grant that began in fallfall 2016 as a pilot last-dollar program for returning adult learners or those that do not already have an associate or bachelor degree (Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, n.d.). In fallfall 2017, Pellissippi State Community College piloted a program called Reconnect Now that required independent students to enroll in six credits and to maintain at 2.0 GPA (Pellissippi State Community College, 2017). In 2017, Governor Haslam proposed the first program in the nation that allowed adults without a postsecondary credential to be able to obtain one for free (Tennessee Office of the Governor, 2017).

Eligibility criteria. The Tennessee Reconnect Act (2017) states to be eligible students must:

- not have earned an associate or bachelor's degree;
- be a Tennessee resident for 1 year prior to the date of application;
- be considered an independent student via the FAFSA;
- enroll in and continuously attend at least six credit hours at an eligible institution each semester;
- participate in a college success program through the Tennessee Reconnect Community Initiative; and
- maintain satisfactory academic progress, 2.0 GPA.

Award terms. The amount of the grant may not exceed the amount of tuition and mandatory fees minus all other sources of gift-aid awarded to the student. Recipients can continue to receive funding until the student has (a) attained a degree or certificate, (b) attempted the total number of semester hours to complete an eligible program under federal Title IV satisfactory academic progress standards, or (c) exceeded 5 years from the date of initial enrollment. A student may continue to receive the Tennessee

Reconnect Grant for an associate's degree following the completion of a certificate that directly leads to the associate's degree program (The Tennessee Reconnect Act, 2017).

Funding mechanism.   The program is funded through the lottery for education account and is estimated to cost approximately $10,000,000 once fully implemented (Tennessee State Government, n.d.).

Outcomes.   The program fully launches in fallfall 2018, and more than 10,000 people have applied to the program as of April 2018, 2 months after the application became available (Associated Press, 2018). Further outcome measures will be examined in several years according to the Tennessee Reconnect Act (2017). While most of the statewide programs focus on community and technical education programs, some states chose to focus specifically on workforce development programs.

Workforce development program

The programs implemented in Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, and South Dakota all fit into the category for workforce development programs. Programs in this category focus on increasing the number of students with credentials in specific technical programs so that students gain specific industry skills. These programs match the in-demand jobs for each respective state. While these programs were last-dollar and have many similar academic standards, there was one key difference. These programs restrict the type of credential a student may enroll in or the institution they may attend in order to receive the award.

Arkansas

To be eligible for the Future Grant in Arkansas, students must enroll in an associate's degree program in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM), computer science, or other program deemed to be in high demand. Students receive funding until they obtain a degree or certificate or complete five semesters, whichever comes first. To maintain eligibility, students must participate in a mentoring program and complete community service. Arkansas requires recipients to work in the state of Arkansas for three consecutive years upon graduation. If they do not meet all of the requirements, their award is converted to loans requiring repayment (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2017; Arkansas Future Grant Program, 2017).

Indiana

The first of two programs in Indiana focuses on workforce development. To be eligible, students must enroll at one of two institutions: Ivy Tech Community College or Vincennes University. The program primarily focuses on adult learners or those students who are designated as independent by the FAFSA. Students are eligible for this award as long as they enroll at least half-time. Dependent students, as determined by the FAFSA, must enroll full-time to be eligible for the award. If the state does not have the funding to provide awards to every student that applies, priority will be given to independent, adult students (Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2018; Workforce Ready Grant, 2017).

Kentucky

The Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program funds students to attend state public community and technical colleges. Participating students use this scholarship to pursue a certificate or diploma in specific areas of study for in-demand jobs in the state and complete the program within 4 months. The in-demand job areas include healthcare, advanced manufacturing, construction, IT/business, and logistics. To be eligible, students must enroll as full-time students, cannot have previously attended an institution of higher education or received a degree, and must not be in default on Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority loans. The award can be renewed for up to four

semesters as long as students maintain a 2.0 or higher GPA and do not attempt more than 32 credits ("Executive Order No: 2016-0912," 2016; Kentucky Community and Technical College System, n.d.).

South Dakota

The workforce development program in South Dakota has unique program aspects compared to other workforce and free college programs. The Build Dakota program requires students to enroll in a technical program that is deemed high need for the state economy, like other workforce development programs; however, the program allows both in- and out-of-state residents to apply for the award. Unlike with programs in other states, students are only required to be a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident to apply. The South Dakota program only provides a limited number of awards each year, while most other programs focus on providing access to postsecondary education for as many students as possible. Each institution determines who receives the scholarship based on a variety of selection criteria. Criteria is determined by each institution's administrators based on availability of academic programs, students, GPA, industry partnerships, work experience, high school career and technical education experience, awards and certifications, financial need, and program availability. Upon graduation, recipients must work in South Dakota for 3-years upon graduation (South Dakota Board of Technical Education, n.d.).

Programs for both 2- and 4-year degrees and certificates

Each of the programs previously described limit free college to those obtaining an associate degree or certificate. Programs in New York, California, and the Indiana 21st Century Scholars program support students at both community college and bachelor degree-granting institutions. Table 2 provides an overview of each of these programs as it relates to initial eligibility requirements, academic renewal requirements, and any co-curricular or miscellaneous requirements as well as the funding source.

New York

As seen in Table 2, there are many similar requirements among these three states; however, there are some distinct differences. To be eligible in New York, students must attend a State University of New York (SUNY) or City University of New York (CUNY) institution and must meet initial and ongoing income eligibility requirements. The program also requires that students work in the state of New York for the same number of years equal to the number of years the student received the award. If students fail to meet this requirement, the award is converted into a student loan. This requirement may be deferred while the student completes an undergraduate or graduate study on at least a half-time basis (Excelsior scholarship, 2017; New York State, n.d.).

California

California has had a long progressive history of higher education and is unique compared to all other states as it relates to free tuition programs. In California, the California State University (CSU) system may not charge tuition legally (Labaree, 2016). Students do pay fees, and waiving student fees is one option given to eligible institutions when administrators determine how state funds may be dispersed (California College Promise, 2017). Legislatively, California lawmakers have implemented three specific programs. The first is California Promise Program at the CSU system where fees are waived when students meet certain income requirements and agree to graduate with a bachelor's degree in 4 years. This is not a specific scholarship program; it is a *pledge* program (The California State University, n.d.). The California College Promise Grant (formerly the Board of Governors Fee Waiver program) is a first-dollar program allowing other financial aid programs to help students pay for other expenses. Again, this program has income requirements and is only available at the California Community Colleges (California Community Colleges, 2018). The last program, the California Promise Grant, funds first-year, full-time students at California Community Colleges for the first year only; however,

Table 2. Overview of state program requirements for programs for both 2- and 4-year degrees and certificates.

State	Program name	Year implemented	Max time frame	Eligible students	Initial requirement	FT/PT	Continuing GPA	Continuing credit hours	Cocurricular or MISC requirements
California	California Promise Program	2017	2 years/4 years	1st time FT	CA residents/eligible non-resident Qualify for Cal Grant/Pell Grant	FT	2.0	30 h/years	Pledge Agreement Meet with Advisors Enrollment Plan Campuses may make specific stipulations
California	California College Promise Grant (formerly the Board of Governors Fee Waiver program)	2017	Unclear	1st time FT	CA resident or eligible non-resident fees under AB 540; Have financial need, based on (FAFSA), or; are receiving TANF, SSI/SSP or General Assistance, or; Meet Income cutoffs based on family size	FT	2.0	Complete more than 50% of coursework	
California	California Promise Grant	2018	1st year only	1st time FT	12 Credits/semester	FT			
Indiana	21st Century Scholars	1990	Up to 4 years of UG	1st time FT	7th or 8th Grade at Indiana School; Income Requirements; Take the 21st Century Pledge; Graduate HS with 2.5	FT	SAP requirements	30/year	Scholar Success Program in High School
New York	Excelsior Scholarship	2017	Associate/2 years Bachelor/4 years	1st time FT	Less than $125 K/year	FT	NA	30/year	

lawmakers made no state appropriations for this program, leaving community colleges to determine how to implement this program (California College Promise, 2017).

Indiana

The second of two programs in Indiana is the 21st Century Scholars program: a last-dollar program available to students at public, private, and for-profit institutions and for both 2-year and 4-year degrees. The major difference in this program is that it begins in the seventh or eighth grade for students that meet certain income requirements and take the 21st Century Pledge that consists of eight components. This pledge includes: (a) graduating with a minimum of a Core 40 diploma from a state-accredited Indiana high school; (b) complete the Scholar Success Program, a program designed to help students with college and career success; (c) graduate with a 2.5 GPA; (d) not use illegal drugs, alcohol, or commit a crime or delinquent act; (e) apply to an eligible Indiana college during their senior year; (f) complete a FAFSA; (g) complete 30 credit hours each year during college to ensure they earn their degree on time; and (h) maintain satisfactory academic progress as outlined by the student's institution (Indiana Commission for Higher Education, n.d.; Twenty-first Century Scholars Program; tuition grants, 2011).

Considerations for the findings

Findings from our study add to the growing literature about free tuition or promise programs by focusing on statewide programs. Previous studies focused on either institution-specific programs (Andrews et al., 2010; Bartik & Lachowska, 2013; Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Pluhta & Penny, 2013; Taylor & Lepper, 2018) or used a different grouping method or methodology than our study (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018).

Similarities emerged from our study as compared to Miller-Adams (2015), and Perna and Leigh (2018). We categorized our programs by the following types: (a) community college and technical programs, (b) workforce development programs, and (c) programs for both 2- and 4-year degrees and certificates. Programs in our community and technical college category were expansive and allowed those eligible for the award to use it at any in-state community or technical college. The workforce development programs were restrictive in nature and required students to enroll at a specific institution or in specified eligible program. Our study did not lead to a specific category that included only universal or limited programs; however, a number of the programs reviewed in our study could be classified in this way based on their eligibility requirements such as New York, California, and Indiana's various programs (Miller-Adams, 2015).

Every program reviewed in our study would fall into Perna and Leigh's (2018) state-sponsored program group because we limited our study to programs that were implemented by their respective state agencies. While Perna and Leigh (2018) identified a distinct community college group, our findings suggest that it is important to look beyond just where students can enroll and to examine if there are specific limitations on the type of program in which students can enroll. Many of the programs we placed in the workforce-ready group fund students to attend community colleges; however, the purpose of these programs is not focused on increasing access to higher education. Rather, their goal is to produce graduates that have skills deemed as high demand in their state. This difference in program purpose leads us to create a distinct group for them and this characteristic should be considered in future research on the outcomes and effect of promise programs.

Promise programs and concerns for access

Scholars who have studied college promise programs share the concern that last-dollar programs, like the majority of the statewide programs in our study, may not be supporting community colleges' goals to increase access to postsecondary education (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017b; Perna et al., 2018). Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) explained that one goal for community colleges was to increase

access to postsecondary education; however, these institutions have failed to do so in an equitable manner. While these institutions provide an additional route to obtaining a postsecondary credential, community colleges have not closed the gap in degree attainment among racial and socio-economic status groups (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). A reasonable assumption could be made that if last-dollar programs are not increasing access and if community colleges are not closing the degree-attainment gap, then these programs contribute to the ongoing issue of degree attainment especially for marginalized populations.

By providing these programs as a way to increase the number of students who enroll at community colleges, these marginalized populations (e.g., low-income and Students of Color) may not actually be benefiting from these programs. Since many of these students have the most financial need (Perna et al., 2018) as determined by the information from the FAFSA, their gift-aid (like Pell Grant and other need-based aid) may cover their tuition and fees in full, leaving no eligibility for last-dollar program funds. If this is the case, students may have to seek out other sources of financial aid or assistance, including student loans, for expenses such as housing, food, utilities, transportation, books, and supplies. By seeking out additional aid that requires repayment, policymakers may unintentionally create more barriers for students these programs were designed to serve. As promise programs continue to grow and develop in number and scope, we concur with Schudde and Goldrick-Rab's (2015) call that researchers and policymakers should consider the social context of community college student experiences when developing these programs.

Increasing opportunities for non-traditional learners

Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee policymakers have taken a unique approach to increase the number of postsecondary degrees and credentials in each state. Lawmakers strategically created or explicitly stated that nontraditional, students 24 years old and older, and returning adult students were eligible for these programs. One important factor for these students is that these programs allow for students to attend their institution on a part-time basis as long as they enroll at least half-time: six credit hours (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2017; Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018; Kentucky Community and Technical College System, n.d.). While we highlight these four states as serving adult students, others state programs may allow nontraditional students to be eligible; however, program information online does not explicitly state this eligibility or purpose.

Future research

Through this study, we found three related areas for future research. Our analysis focused on statewide promise programs that provide funding for students to obtain a postsecondary degree or credential. A limited amount of research exists with a focus on statewide promise programs. With the emergence of these types of programs, future research should focus on policy analysis and program effectiveness of statewide programs in meeting statewide goals outlined by individual states. This research should include student education outcomes like retention, academic achievement, program completion rates, graduation rates, and transfer rates; a cost and benefit analysis; and impact on state economic and workforce development.

There appears to be little-to-no literature focused on workforce-development programs as we defined them. Future research should focus on these programs, the students who participate in them, and program effectiveness. A limitation of these programs is that they guide students into a field of study or institution the student would not have pursued if the award was not available to them. Research should examine student completion of these programs, examine if students enter and remain in the workforce in these high-demand industry sectors, and how these programs are affecting these industries.

Free tuition and college promise programs were designed to increase access to higher education and promote completion of a degree or credential for many states that want to increase the education levels of the population (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018). The literature and our findings do not make it clear if students are using college promise programs to fund community college as a stepping stone to a 4-year institution. We are unable to determine if these programs truly provide access to students who would not have enrolled otherwise. There is also no information about participants entering the workforce after earning their desired credential. There is also no apparent discussion on how this increase in students has affected community college human and facility resources, costs, and benefits. With all of these questions, additional research is needed to understand trends and possible student redistribution from 4-year to 2-year institutions, the students using these programs and their experiences, and the role and effect of these programs for institutions and states.

Conclusion

The idea and implementation of free college and promise programs continue to grow. State legislators' in Massachusetts (Tuoti, 2017), Connecticut (Lambeck, 2018), and West Virginia (Quinn, 2018) have all drafted or passed legislation within the last year to implement these programs. The goal of these programs is to address issues of access and affordability to college while building the educated workforce of tomorrow. At their core, free college programs strive to move postsecondary education forward to benefit the public as an economic driver. With limited research, and as free college programs develop and mature, researchers need to continue to investigate the effectiveness of these programs and to determine if it is worth the state taxpayers' continued investment.

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