



## EDUCATION

# Unlocking Access

Free tuition programs are opening doors for some students—  
but are they making the grade?

BY BENNETT G. BOGGS AND LESLEY KENNEDY

Sandra Timberlake's life hadn't quite turned out as she'd imagined.

With the crumbling of her first marriage, the newly single mother of four had been forced to move to the projects in her hometown of Nashville, Tenn. Then one night, while lying in bed listening to music from a family gathering outside, she thought about what she heard one of her new neighbors tell her 17-year-old pregnant daughter. "Baby, when you turn 18, you can have your own project."

"I got up, walked into my children's room and kissed each one," she says. "It

was at that moment I decided that, with God, nothing is impossible, and I have to break this generational cycle."

Timberlake, now 55, graduated in 2016 from Tennessee College of Applied Technology with two honor degrees in accounting and medical coding and just recently received a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership from the Lipscomb University College of Professional Studies. It took her a while, but Tennessee Reconnect, an initiative to help adults return to higher education—along with a grant and some smart savings—helped her not only earn her degree but also finish with no student debt.

### High and Higher

Skyrocketing college tuition rates have made the affordability of higher education a priority for states. College tuition increased by nearly 260% from 1980 to 2014, while the consumer price index grew by only 120%. The annual average cost of tuition and fees is currently \$48,510 for private institutions, \$37,430 for out-of-state residents at four-year public colleges, \$21,370 for in-state students at state schools, and \$12,310 at community colleges, according to the College Board, the nonprofit private organization that administers the SATs and a scholarship

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Education Trust

service. Those numbers are beyond many parents' reach.

Tiffany Jones, director of higher education at Education Trust, a national nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps, says this dilemma has led leaders across the political spectrum to search for new ways to deal with the high costs. Ideas include forgiving loans, freezing tuition rates, giving credits for certain high school courses or for life and work experiences, and offering free tuition.

### Popular, Though Not 'Free'

"Free college" has caught the attention of many. Seventeen states and more than 350 localities in 44 states have enacted free college policies, and 23 states considered or are still debating legislation this year. Widely known as promise programs, they are popular, diverse and, generally, seek to:

- Address concerns about spiraling college costs and student debt.
- Invest in workforce development to support a vital and sustainable economic climate attractive to new business ventures.
- Send a straightforward message that pursuing a postsecondary degree, credential or license is affordable, especially to those who might not think such a possibility is within reach.

The simple fact, however, is that nothing is free—expenses must be paid somehow, by someone—and legislatures must wres-



Some promise programs cover tuition only; others include living expenses. And several states require students to live and work in the state for as long as they attended college.



Jones



Shirkey

tle with how to increase access to postsecondary education in a fair, financially responsible way.

Critics question the value of spending taxpayers' money this way. They cite data from the National Center for Education Statistics showing that only 35% of students who enroll in community college go on to earn a degree or certificate. Some say these are really entitlement programs and question whether more college degrees will benefit the economy.

"We don't do a good enough job measuring value," Michigan's Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey (R) told reporters in response to a plan from Governor Gretchen Whitmer (D) to offer free com-

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munity college in the state beginning in 2021, according to Pew's Stateline. Whitmer's goal of increasing the number of residents with college credentials is "pretty much meaningless," Shirkey said. "What if all those achievements were in underwater basket weaving?"

Others point out that many jobs don't need four-year degrees. And some prominent business executives, like Apple CEO Tim Cook, are publicly questioning whether college prepares workers with the skills businesses need for today's jobs. Free community college doesn't have to



lead to a four-year degree, of course; it offers opportunities to build the middle-skills workforce through postsecondary credentials, some of which can be earned in two years or less.

Earning a degree, however, clearly benefits the person. Current statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the more education a worker has, the more he or she earns.

“Nearly all of the new jobs created after the recession require some sort of postsecondary degree or credential, so it’s increasingly the ticket to participate in our economy,” Jones says. “For students and families, a lot is at stake in terms of their ability to access higher education. But at

the same time, it’s increasingly hard to access.”

And it’s not just low-income students feeling the burden, Jones says, noting that middle- and upper-income students are also having trouble affording college “because the prices are so astronomical.”

### The Kalamazoo Experiment

Although most promise programs are statewide efforts, they originated at the local level. One of the first was Kalamazoo Promise, created in Kalamazoo, Mich., in 2005 by anonymous benefactors concerned about declining economic development in the community.

The program’s simple premise: Grad-

uates of Kalamazoo’s public high schools will have their college tuition and fees paid for four years. Attracted by the program, new families and businesses moved into the community and development grew. As enrollments increased, so did the number of teachers applying to work in the schools. Even the overall school climate improved. And, with greater community support, new schools were built for the first time in nearly 30 years.

By almost all accounts, this early promise program benefited the community.

But did the number of Kalamazoo students going to college increase? Yes. A 2017 study by the Upjohn Institute for Employment Research showed the chance

## Earning Credit for Work, Life Experience

To promote attending and completing college, lawmakers are granting students credit for previous learning experiences.

Since 2016, at least 19 states have expanded and simplified the process, sometimes called a “prior-learning assessment,” of giving college credits to students who can demonstrate the skills and knowledge they’ve gained in corporate or military training programs or through professional certifications.

At least 13 states help veterans earn credit for learning acquired in the military. And so far this year, 12 states have considered bills to expand prior-learning programs. The programs have been shown to increase the number of students, especially adult learners, who earn degrees or certificates, according to the American Council on Education.

The bills have taken various approaches. Illinois lawmakers required the state’s public universities to submit their policies on prior-learning credits to the Board of Higher Education for approval. Bills in Idaho and Washington addressed the transfer of academic credits between postsecondary



Many states grant students credit for prior learning experiences. At least 13 states allow veterans to earn credit for knowledge gained in the military.

institutions. Indiana allowed students to use scholarships and grants to pay for the assessments they must take to earn credit. And, to monitor the effectiveness of its programs, Oregon directed its Higher Education Coordinating Commission to

track student progress and participation. The commission used the reports to identify challenges and guide revisions of state standards in 2017.

—Andrew Smalley

A combination of analyses by Education Trust, the Institute for Higher Education Policy and the Century Foundation offers six criteria successful promise programs should pursue:

**2 Cover fees and tuition.** Fees often are hidden costs that form real barriers to participation.

**4 Keep eligibility requirements to a minimum.** This lets those who stand to benefit the most—adult, part-time and working students—participate. Keep the focus on need-based, not merit-based, aid.

**6 Invest in student support systems and completion programs.** These help students enter and successfully complete their programs.

Twenty-four states have enacted legislation to offer some form of statewide promise program.




## Promises Vary

Unlike Kalamazoo's, most programs help high school graduates from low- or middle-income families attend community college. States and localities, however, tailor their approaches to meet their individual needs and priorities. Some cover tuition only; others include textbooks, transportation costs and living expenses such as food and housing.

Program requirements vary as well. Arkansas, for example, requires recipients to remain in the state for at least three years after completing their studies. Students in New York's Excelsior Scholarship program must live and work in the state for as many years as they received the scholarship.

To receive a Nevada Promise Scholarship, students must meet with a mentor and complete 20 hours of community service, but the program covers tuition, registration and other fees. Here's a look at three programs in greater depth.

■ **Indiana.** For 30-plus years, Indiana has offered the 21st Century Scholars program to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Students apply in seventh or eighth grade for awards that cover four years of tuition and some fees at participating two- and four-year institutions, public or private. The pro-



Dr. Robert Behning

program offers critical support at nearly every step of the process. While in high school, these students must meet 12 requirements, such as maintaining a B average, visiting a college campus, taking a career interest inventory and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

Participants must be recent high school graduates enrolled full time in college. In 2018, the income cap was \$45,510 for a family of four. The annual cost to the state is approximately \$160 million.

"Some are often unaware of the finan-

cial aid opportunities and resources available to help with applications or to adjust to college,” says Indiana Representative Bob Behning (R). The 21st Century Scholars, however, are “more prepared to enter college and hit the ground running, and typically perform better than their peers,” he says. He believes “education is a good equalizer, and with more educated individuals choosing to remain in the state, Indiana will have a talent pool to attract businesses and provide services to our local communities.”

“The success of these students,” Behning says, “speaks for itself and allows the program to continue growing.”

■ **Oregon.** The Oregon Promise program took a different path. Established in 2015, it is available to all recent high school graduates regardless of family income. Students must have at least a 2.5 GPA and intend to pursue a degree, cre-



Roblan

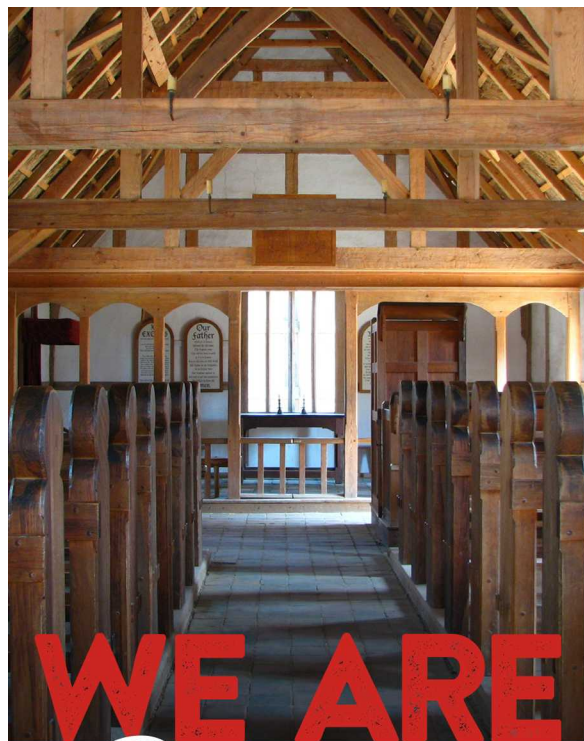
dential or license at a state community college. Awards are calculated based on several factors and cover two academic years or a maximum of 90 academic credit hours. The student must maintain satisfactory progress and may enroll part time. The total annual cost to the state is between \$20 million and \$25 million, substantially less than Indiana’s.

With college more affordable, Oregon Promise students “fulfilled program requirements at a high rate, and continued into the second year of college at a high rate,” says Oregon Senator Arnie Roblan (D). The program is too new to know its effect on completion rates; nevertheless, it already faces hurdles. Current budget

recommendations from Governor Kate Brown (D) contain cuts for community colleges, including the elimination of Oregon Promise.

■ **Tennessee.** A recent development worth noting is Tennessee Reconnect. Established in 2018, the program focuses on nontraditional adult students who previously began but did not complete a degree or credential. This is what helped Sandra Timberlake, the single mom, go on and finish her degree. Building on Tennessee Promise, the Reconnect initiative offers an online network to enter transcript information and explore options and institutions for obtaining a credential or degree.

Kenyatta Lovett, executive director of Complete Tennessee, an independent nonprofit advocacy organization created to improve college completion rates, says the state has benefited from the support



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Lovett

of two governors—one Democrat, one Republican—and lawmakers who have passed legislation that has inspired other states.

In addition to covering tuition,

Lovett says, Tennessee's Promise and Reconnect programs raise awareness for families and students who may feel like college is out of reach. "With the term 'free' and with the supports that are provided," he says, "I think it's given a lot more families and students that belief, that confidence, that college is for them."

### 'The Other Costs'

Most state-level promise programs focus on community colleges, which are

much cheaper than four-year institutions. "That being said, community college students still really struggle to afford college because of all the other costs," says Jones, with the Education Trust. "And some have estimated that those—housing, books, food, transportation, child care, etc.—add up to about 80% of the total cost of attendance." These additional costs can be met by other grants, but often require loans.

Further, Education Trust research from 2018 found free college programs, in many states, ended up offering more aid to upper-middle-class students than to low-income students. "A lot of the design of existing free college policies at the state level is about helping students pay for tuition at community colleges after all of their other financial aid has been applied," Jones says. This is because low-income students who qualify for the maximum Pell Grant do not then qualify for more money from

the state's free college policy. Middle- or upper-income students, however, whose families make too much to qualify for the full Pell Grant may still qualify for the free college policy.

"States like Missouri found that over a third of their recipients of that particular program were from families who were earning over \$100,000 a year," Jones says. (Missouri's median family income is around \$67,000.) "We're not opposed to middle- and upper-income students getting support with the cost of college since it's gotten so out of control. We just want to be thoughtful about how we prioritize low-income students and their abilities to cover the full cost of attendance."

### A Bipartisan Issue

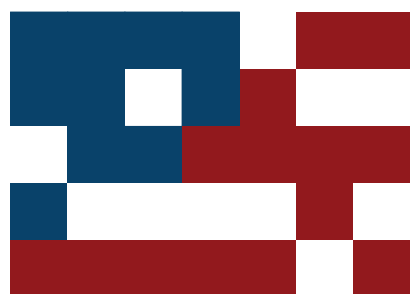
The student debt crisis and the increasing expectation that workers have a post-secondary degree to succeed long term in the job market will keep lawmakers focused on ways to make college more affordable.

One thing Republicans and Democrats can agree on, Lovett says, is that the cost of higher education today is "outrageous."

"On both sides of the aisle, the fact that student debt is growing and the fact that so many households now can't participate in higher education because of cost, links both parties to do something about it," he says. Whether officials look at it from an economic perspective or a social justice or moral view, he says, they're coming to the same conclusion: Costs are too high and we need solutions that make sense.

For Sandra Timberlake, Tennessee Reconnect changed the trajectory of her family's future—inspiring her to help others do what she did. "The program has impacted my personal mission in life to help underexposed people break generational cycles," she says. "One thing I always said about going back to school is that I can be that role model for that mom out there with four children. She sees me and thinks, If she can make it, so can I."

*Ben Boggs is a program principal in education and Lesley Kennedy is manager of digital communications at NCSL.*



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