Reducing Barriers to Free College Programs

Denisa Gandara, University of Texas Austin
Rosa Acevedo, University of Texas Austin
Diana Cervantes, University of Texas Austin

With the costs of a college education skyrocketing and the national student debt continuing to reach new records, it is little surprise that many families are questioning how feasible a university degree is. While higher education is still an important pathway to greater financial stability and offers singular access to certain careers, many students, particularly those from low-income families and historically marginalized communities, are finding themselves either saddled with large amounts of debt, or shut out from college entirely.

In an effort to make college more affordable and accessible, states and localities across the US have created free-college programs, also known as Promise programs, which typically offer college scholarships that cover up to 100 percent of tuition and fees at colleges near the community in which it is based. These programs have spread rapidly and proved popular, yet the implementation of such programs has varied widely. With vastly different eligibility standards and designs, accessing scholarships can be challenging and can severely limit the effectiveness of the programs.

Barriers to Promise Programs

Promise programs have been enacted in approximately twenty states, primarily within the past five years. While some are state-wide, Promise programs are typically run at the city, district, or county level, and provide the scholarships for nearby colleges with the intention of spurring local economic development. However, although Promise programs can increase college completion and fulfill workforce demands, they are not always easy to access. Many programs have barriers that make it difficult for those who are eligible to access their benefits.

Promise programs can be burdensome to access in the following ways:

- **Learning costs**: Students navigate hurdles in learning about Promise program requirements and benefits. Programs often have complicated eligibility criteria that make it difficult for students to know whether they qualify. Many programs also have a website that lacks information or is difficult to navigate, and often there are limited options for contacting program representatives.
- **Compliance costs**: Applicants must follow, and could easily miss an aspect of, specific steps required to access and maintain program benefits. This includes completing the FAFSA, required community service or mentorship hours, income verification, and maintaining a minimum GPA or credit hours per semester.
- **Psychological costs**: There are emotional burdens, like stigma or stress, associated with accessing and keeping program benefits. These psychological costs can result from having to meet citizenship requirements, follow discipline and behavior requirements, agree to a commitment to remain debt-free, and manage a lack of clarity on program benefits.

Barriers associated with accessing and sustaining the benefits of Promise programs reduce their effectiveness in closing gaps in postsecondary educational attainment, making it difficult or nearly impossible for students to access the scholarships they need to attend college. These requirements can also reinforce inequities by weighing more heavily on students who have historically been underserved in higher education.

For example, lower income students are more often required to verify their income, and are also more likely to have other demands on their time, such as from jobs needed to cover remaining costs. This can make it harder for them to complete required community service hours. As another example, minoritized students

are disproportionately subject to school discipline, making them ineligible for the benefits of Promise programs and placing another barrier to college attainment in front of them. To increase the effectiveness of Promise programs, policymakers can minimize barriers to program access by creatively shifting them away from students or eliminating them altogether.

Reducing Burdens Through Equitable Policy Design and Implementation

Policymakers often claim that program requirements are necessary to ensure only those who are eligible access program benefits. In practice, however, these barriers are more likely to deny access to those in need. Understanding these barriers could lead to program designs with greater potential to increase educational attainment and reduce inequities. For instance, burdensome requirements, such as writing an essay or having to apply for other scholarships, can be eliminated or reduced.

The following are key considerations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to reduce burdens that can limit the effectiveness of Promise programs:

- Consider the profiles of today's college students, who are increasingly older (40% over the age of 22), more likely to work while enrolled in school, and may take more than 4 years to complete a degree.
- Reevaluate Promise program requirements to avoid aforementioned barriers, and design new Promise programs with these barriers in mind.
- Fund student costs beyond tuition, including child-care, transportation, books, or food needs considering the rise in food insecurity across the nation.
- Create or strengthen synergies between policymakers and on-the-ground practitioners to ensure programs are implemented in ways that minimize barriers.
- Learn from Promise programs that seem to improve outcomes, especially for those who have been underserved. For example, Tulsa Achieves has been shown to improve transfer and bachelor's degree attainment, particularly for Latinx and Native American students.

With the proliferation of Promise programs, leaders must consider and re-evaluate how these programs are designed to alleviate the barriers placed on students. By reducing these burdens, especially to those who have been historically underserved in higher education, policymakers can maximize the effectiveness of Promise programs to benefit all students.