New Member Spotlight: Roy Chan on Improving Free College Programs

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> "Tuition-free programs must remain accessible and affordable for all types of students and should be designed with a promise to reduce the national student debt and the cost of college attendance in American society." - Roy Chan, Lee University

For this month's new member spotlight, SSN is excited to highlight [Professor Roy Chan](#) of Lee University and his research on college promise programs, otherwise known as free college programs. The high cost of college has been a major focus in recent years, as tuition bills continue to increase and Biden has moved to forgive large amounts of student debt, making college promise programs an increasingly important part of the conversation around access to higher education.

For his SSN membership contribution, Chan penned a policy brief entitled "[Should Free College Programs Require Students Take 15 Credits?](#)" where he details why policymakers should reduce or altogether eliminate compliance requirements such as credit hours and GPA requirements that are common in most promise programs. He argues that such a change would help more students, specifically those from underserved communities, obtain a college degree in an economical, timely manner.

Chan's research in this area began when he was a PhD student at Indiana University Bloomington where he worked as a student support staffer for the statewide Indiana 21st Century Scholars (TFCS) Promise Program. He told SSN:

> "From that initial work, I advised and mentored several low-income, first-generation students who were recipients of the TFCS but experienced several challenges (health, work, family) completing 15 credit hours per semester (which was required to renew their promise scholarship). I was devastated and sad to see several of my students, many who are working full-time outside of class, lose their scholarship at the end of each term. From this work experience, I decided to examine how credit hour policies affect underserved students at Indiana's statewide TFCS program."

Chan writes in his policy brief that of the nearly 400 college promise programs that exist across the nation, 216 have adopted minimum credit hour requirements of 30 credit hours per year. These requirements are being pushed because the average full-time student takes more than five years to complete the requirements for a traditional bachelor's degree. But Chan found that such requirements, "neither improved on-time nor delayed graduation rates and that the policy had a negative effect for low-income, first-generation students in regard to credit hour accumulation and cumulative GPA."

Based on this research, Chan lays out a set of recommendations to policymakers and practitioners who are seeking to design equitable tuition-free programs. Most notably, he recommends the reduction or elimination of credit hour and GPA requirements for college promise programs along with the addition of what he calls

"completion grants" for students who must delay graduation.

Via his work with the Scholars Strategy Network, Chan was able to share his research findings and recommendations with a policy specialist from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), a bipartisan organization focused on supporting state policymakers. Chan is now working with NCSL to share his findings with state policymakers in 2023. He told SSN:

> "My biggest takeaway was that there is a lot of interest from state legislators and policymakers regarding setting compliance requirements in promise program. I believe that policy leaders are beginning to take note of a few policies (credit hour, GPA, full-time status) that may have unintended consequences for promise recipients and are recognizing that such policies may have a clear negative impact on underrepresented students who receive a promise scholarship."

Looking ahead, Chan is interviewing academic advisors and program directors across multiple states to understand their perceptions of the 15 credit hour requirements and what they view as the benefits and consequences of such requirements.

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Roy Chan is an Assistant Professor of Education and the Ed.D. Program Director at Lee University. His research focuses on the internationalization and globalization of higher education, philanthropy and fundraising in institutional advancement, and college retention and degree attainment rates of low-income, first-generation students at 4-year public research universities.