

NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

Living Up to the Promise? Exploring Issues of Access and Equity among New England's Promise Programs



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For the first time in U.S. history, a proposal for nationwide free community college passed through the House of Representatives in the fall of 2021. Although the provision was ultimately dropped from President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better bill, its early presence suggests the political appeal of making college accessible to more Americans. Many New England states, municipalities and institutions have already embraced free college models, albeit with wide variation in eligibility criteria and implementation. For instance, Rhode Island passed legislation in May 2021 that removed a sunset provision in order to permanently establish the Rhode Island Promise program, which grants up to two years of free tuition for eligible Rhode Islanders at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI). These types of free college policies, widely known as “promise programs,” have the potential to expand access to a debt-free higher education, particularly for low-income, first-generation and other historically underrepresented student communities. Undocumented students, for example, could benefit immensely from free college policies, as college costs are often insurmountable without federal financial aid, for which these students are ineligible.

Promise programs are an encouraging approach to achieving equity in higher education and the workforce. When such programs are designed to complement existing federal and state higher education policies, they have the potential to fill opportunity gaps and ensure that historically excluded groups can access college and earn a postsecondary credential in a moneymaking field. However, common and current promise program implementation strategies, such as limiting eligibility to certain groups and types of colleges, can exacerbate inequality rather than reduce it. Furthermore, while the financial assistance promise programs offer may encourage more low-income students to enroll in college, programs should also provide recipients clear pathways to completing college and earning a credential—gaining access is not enough.

This report describes the landscape of New England’s promise programs. It addresses the following questions: A) In which institutions, cities and states in the region do promise programs currently exist? B) How are they implemented, and how does implementation vary? C) How are they funded? D) Who benefits from existing promise programs, and who is left out? E) How do promise program recipients benefit, both financially and otherwise? F) Do our region’s promise programs center equity by prioritizing support for historically underserved student groups?



By analyzing state and local promise programs with a spotlight on the enrollment, payout and graduation rates of four of New England's most prominent promise programs—the Rhode Island Promise, Connecticut's New Haven and Hartford Promise programs, and Boston's Tuition-Free Community College Plan—we hope that this report will inform policymakers, educational leaders and the public about the most effective ways to design and implement these programs as they create and advocate for similar efforts.

Findings suggest that recipients of New England's promise programs experience higher college graduation rates when they can use their scholarship to attend four-year colleges. The report also indicates that covering costs beyond tuition and fees will help promise programs support students more equitably. The New Haven and Hartford Promise programs currently lead the region by providing a diverse group of students with holistic support that goes beyond college enrollment. These promise programs embed clear pathways to college completion and financial stability post-graduation into their unique design. Especially in New England, where high-quality postsecondary opportunities abound, our policies should ensure that every student can access the resources they need to thrive. For that reason, this report concludes with policy recommendations that should be considered for new and existing promise programs. These include embedding mentorship components and expanding eligibility to students who are often excluded from free college programs, such as undocumented students, adult learners and justice-impacted individuals (those who are currently or formerly incarcerated).

This report concludes with the following eight recommendations to ensure that New England's promise programs effectively improve access and equity to higher education in the region:

1. Review promise programs' eligibility requirements, both in terms of who is eligible and what it takes to maintain the promise scholarship, to ensure equitable participation.
2. Provide students with a stipend for living costs.
3. Consider expanding eligibility to four-year colleges (for programs that are community college-only).
4. Add an advising component to scholarship-only programs.
5. Secure stable funding so families can depend on programs long-term.
6. Avoid overly-strict residency requirements after students graduate from college, and consider being flexible with residency requirements while students are in K-12.
7. Carefully consider the impact of instituting a first-dollar, middle-dollar or last-dollar program.
8. Avoid grant-to-loan programs.

EVEN AT PUBLIC COLLEGES, HIGHER EDUCATION IN NEW ENGLAND IS OFTEN UNAFFORDABLE

Often seen as the nation's higher education hub, New England benefits from a highly college-educated population. This is beneficial both for New Englanders who have postsecondary experience, and for our greater regional economy, as postsecondary credentials have been shown to increase individuals' likelihood of financial stability. Yet, affording to put off working and attend college is increasingly difficult for many in the region, widening entrenched opportunity gaps.

According to the College Board, the costs of attending college in the U.S. are on the rise for all types of institutions: public two-year, public four-year, and private colleges and universities. This is especially true in the six New England states as reported in a recent NEBHE Tuition and Fees report, where the average in-state tuition and fees at community colleges increased by **48%** since 2010-2011, and by **39%** at public four-year institutions for the same period. Meanwhile, median household income has risen **by only 19%** since FY2010. A study from the Pew Research Center also found that the shares of low-income students and students of color who have enrolled in college in hopes of earning certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees or higher have increased by 8% (low-income students) and 18% (students of color) from 1996 to 2016. Yet, as federal Pell Grants—the need-based grants many low-income students depend on to afford college—fail to maintain their purchasing power, postsecondary education has been slipping steadily out of reach for students and families of lower financial means, especially in the wake of the financial stresses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A FAMILY (OR ADULT LEARNER) EARNING \$30,000 PER YEAR NEEDS TO CONTRIBUTE NEARLY A QUARTER OF THEIR YEARLY INCOME TO AFFORD TUITION AND FEES AT FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC COLLEGES IN NEW ENGLAND. THIS IS *AFTER* THEIR MAXIMUM FEDERAL PELL GRANT (\$6,345 IN 2020-2021) HAS BEEN APPLIED.

Unequal access to college and the credentials it confers hurts young people's ability to financially support themselves later in life. Large college attainment gaps also perpetuate longstanding inequalities along racial, gender, immigration status and socioeconomic lines. Without an investment in *all* students' ability to complete postsecondary education, the region is missing out on a wealth of untapped potential and mistakenly maintaining higher education as privilege, rather than a mechanism for promoting equality of opportunity.



As it stands, the price of public colleges in New England makes it difficult for students to attend college without taking out student loans, especially for students from the lowest-income families. [NEBHE's Tuition and Fees report](#) found that the average net price—the remaining balance students must pay after federal grants are applied—of tuition and fees at public institutions in New England in 2020-2021 for students whose families earn under \$30,000 per year was \$232 at community colleges and \$6,751 at public four-year universities. Put another way, a family earning \$30,000 per year would need to contribute about 23% of their annual income toward tuition at a public four-year university each year. Clearly, low-income New Englanders face a large and growing affordability gap (the amount a student still needs to pay to attend college after financial aid resources have been applied), particularly for those attending four-year institutions. Many students turn to federal and private student loans to fill this affordability gap, which has been [proven](#) to force many borrowers to delay buying a house and growing their wealth after college, and weighs especially heavy on Black and Hispanic students, who take out more in student loans and take longer to pay it off. Accepting unaffordable postsecondary education depresses New England's economy and prevents young people, as well as adult learners, from reaching their full potential after high school and later in life.



UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS: HISTORY AND COMPONENTS

One way that college systems, cities and states across the U.S. and New England have addressed this college affordability crisis is through the development of tuition- or debt-free college guarantees, or promise programs. The name "promise program" stems from one of the first programs of its kind, the Kalamazoo Promise, a policy that was radical when instituted in 2005, and which guaranteed free college tuition for all graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools, boosting college enrollment and degree attainment among recipients. Since then, 350+ promise programs have spread to all corners of the country, with each program adopting a unique set of eligibility requirements and implementation structures. Following a wealth of literature on the subject, this report uses the term "promise program" to refer to place-based college scholarships covering all or most of the cost of attending college for all eligible students. Place-based means that only recipients from a defined geographic area can benefit from the promise scholarship, a feature meant to generate regional innovation and prosperity. In accordance with this definition, this report will exclude promise programs that cannot serve all students who meet their stated eligibility requirements due to a lack of funding (e.g., a program that can only serve the first 100 applicants).



A promise program is a place-based college scholarship that covers all or most of the cost of attending college for all eligible students.



ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Policymakers can implement various eligibility requirements to limit, or expand, the populations that a promise program serves. For instance, while promise programs are always place-based, many programs include additional residency requirements both to be eligible for the scholarship and to retain its benefits after students graduate from college. Programs that require students to remain in the promise area after graduating from college are sometimes referred to as "pay-to-stay" programs. Merit requirements, such as minimum high school GPA and attendance rates, clean disciplinary records, or community service requirements are sometimes required of promise recipients, though the stringency of such requirements varies widely across the country. Additionally, many promise programs restrict eligibility to recent graduating high school seniors, excluding adult or returning learners. Often, promise programs target support to low-income students by placing an income cap on eligibility. Promise programs may also impose academic and attendance requirements on students once they are enrolled in college.

FUNDING DESIGNS

Across the U.S. and in New England, wide variation exists in how promise programs are funded. Some promise programs are encoded in state or city law, like the Rhode Island Promise. Others, like New Haven Promise, receive their funding from private donor(s). Smaller promise programs, like the University of New Hampshire's Granite Guarantee, use institutional funding to support the scholarship, and still others, like the Hartford Promise, use some combination of public and private funding. Differences in funding designs can affect the stability and longevity of promise programs, which can subsequently impact students and families' ability to plan long term for their futures.

PAYOUT STRUCTURES

The most common awards of promise programs are first-dollar, middle-dollar and last-dollar scholarships. Promise programs may also “pay” students in more than just financial scholarships: some programs guarantee access to college advising, support systems, and personalized coaching to ensure students have a positive experience in college and beyond, in addition to offering financial support.

First-Dollar Scholarships: A student receives their promise scholarship before other grants and scholarships are applied. For instance, a student receiving the federal Pell Grant could apply the promise scholarship to tuition first and use the full amount of their Pell Grant for other expenses, such as room and board, textbooks, and transportation.

Middle-Dollar Scholarships: A student receives their promise scholarship after some grants and scholarships have been applied, but before all of them have been applied. For example, a Pell Grant-eligible student might be required to apply their Pell Grant toward tuition first, and then use the promise scholarship to fill any remaining gaps or cover non-tuition expenses, such as room and board.

Last-Dollar Scholarships: A student receives their promise scholarship after all other grants and scholarships have been applied to the cost of tuition. The student can apply the promise scholarship to fill the gap in their tuition costs after they have exhausted all other financial aid resources.

FIRST DOLLAR

VERSUS

LAST DOLLAR

METHODS OF FUNDING FOR
COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS

FIRST DOLLAR	LAST DOLLAR
Funds are provided to students first, or before any other grant or awarded funding	Students would draw upon any available public funding before being awarded College Promise funds.
Does not take into account any additional funding or grants that the student is eligible for	The total amount of funding varies depending on other public funding for which the student is eligible
Has the potential to reduce the associated costs that come with being a student, such as transportation, childcare, school materials, and other costs.	Does not have the potential of reducing the associated costs that come with being a student, such as transportation, childcare, school materials, and other costs

Source: [The American Association of Community College Trustees.](#)

Proponents of first- and middle-dollar scholarships argue that these payout mechanisms funnel more promise dollars directly to low-income students, because students who receive a Pell Grant can apply their promise dollars toward mandatory fees, textbooks and other necessary living expenses like rent, food, and childcare. Under last-dollar scholarship rules, students must first apply the full amount of their Pell Grant and other such grants to tuition costs, and promise dollars can only cover the student’s remaining balance on their college bill. In last-dollar scholarship programs, middle- and upper-income students (who do not receive federal need-based grants) may see their promise financial awards cover their entire tuition costs. Proponents of last-dollar scholarships see promise programs as a way to fill students’ gaps in financial need and stretch program dollars to serve more students.

All of New England’s promise programs use a last-dollar model, except for the New Haven Promise, which is a middle-dollar scholarship.



NEW ENGLAND'S PROMISE PROGRAMS ARE HIGHLY VARIED IN REACH AND DESIGN

As promise programs evolve and spread throughout New England, understanding how existing programs operate and which students they serve will help policymakers and education leaders consider how to best shape these programs to achieve equitable outcomes. New England's promise programs differ greatly in their eligibility requirements, payout structures and funding schemes, and not much research has been dedicated to tracking the impacts of these variables on promise program recipients' enrollment and success in college. Lawmakers should aim to carefully align eligibility requirements and payout structures with the overall goals of the promise program, being especially mindful to not only promote access to higher education, but also long-term economic equality by supporting students through college completion and beyond. Awareness about the region's promise program options can also help New England residents make informed decisions about their postsecondary enrollment.

There are *nine* free college programs in New England that met this report's definition of a promise program: a place-based college scholarship covering all or most of the cost of attending college for all eligible students. Of the six New England states, all but Maine have at least one promise program. In New Hampshire and Vermont, local promise programs guarantee eligible students a tuition-free college experience at a single college or at several eligible universities. New Haven, Hartford and Boston are the three major municipalities in New England that sponsor tuition-free college programs. At the state level, Connecticut recently implemented the Pledge to Advance Connecticut (PACT), a tuition-free guarantee at any community college in Connecticut, but funding beyond the fall 2021 semester is uncertain. So far, Rhode Island is the only New England state to legislate and fund a statewide promise program, which grants tuition-free studies at the Community College of Rhode Island for eligible students. **Figure 1** describes the characteristics of New England's promise programs.

Figure 2 highlights the eligibility requirements and funding of different New England promise programs. "Merit requirements" refers to academic, behavioral, or community service requirements that students must meet in high school to be eligible for the promise program. If a promise program has a residency requirement, students must agree to live or work in the geographic area for a set duration upon graduating from college. An income cap for eligibility indicates whether a program is open only to students from low-income families (yes) or open to all students (no). The scholarship format refers to the payout scheme: first-dollar, middle-dollar or last-dollar (see above for definitions of each term). "Undocumented students eligible" refers to the promise program's restrictions on allowing students without citizenship documentation to participate in the program. The "funding" column refers to the source(s) of the program's funding.



FIGURE 1: NEW ENGLAND PROMISE PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS*

State	Program Name	Level	Year it Began	End Date (if applicable)	Eligible Colleges
RI	Rhode Island Promise	Statewide	2017	N/A	Community College of Rhode Island
CT	Pledge to Advance Connecticut	Statewide	2019	2021	Any community college in CT
CT	New Haven Promise	Municipal	2010	N/A	Any four-year or two-year college in CT
CT	Hartford Promise	Municipal	2016	N/A	Accredited non-profit undergraduate institutions in the U.S. (excludes trade and technical schools)
MA	Mayor's Tuition Free Community College Program (TFCC)	Municipal	2016	N/A	Bunker Hill CC, Massasoit CC, MassBay CC, Roxbury CC, Urban College of Boston, Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology
MA	Boston Bridge	Municipal	2017	N/A	TFCC community colleges and all public four-year universities in MA
VT	Catamount Commitment	Institutional	2017	N/A	University of Vermont
VT	802 Opportunity	Institutional	Fall 2021	2023	Community College of Vermont
NH	Granite Guarantee	Institutional	2017	N/A	University of New Hampshire-Durham, University of New Hampshire-Manchester, Keene State College, Plymouth State University

*Promise programs that did not meet the requirements for this analysis were Massachusetts' North Shore Promise and John and Abigail Adams Scholarship, the Vermont State Colleges System, College Crusade of Rhode Island, and Maine's Early College program.

FIGURE 2: NEW ENGLAND PROMISE PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS AND FUNDING

Program Name	Merit Reqs.	Residency Req. After College	Income Cap for Eligibility	Scholarship Format	Undocumented Students Eligible	Funding Source(s)
Rhode Island Promise	Yes	Yes	No	Last-Dollar	Yes	Rhode Island State Legislature
Pledge to Advance Connecticut	Yes	No	No	Last-Dollar (all students receive at least \$250)	No	Connecticut Board of Regents/CT State Colleges and Universities (CSCU)
New Haven Promise	Yes	No	No	Middle-Dollar	Yes	Yale University (Scholarship-Only)
Hartford Promise	Yes	No	No	Last-Dollar	Yes	Private donors, City of Hartford, state and federal funding
Mayor's Tuition Free Community College Program (TFCC)	Yes	No	Yes	Last-Dollar + \$250	Only those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	City of Boston - Neighborhood Jobs Trust (large-scale real estate tax)
Boston Bridge	Yes	No	Yes	Last-dollar + 10% of tuition and fees	No	TFCC funding + statewide funding
Catamount Commitment	Yes	No	Yes	Last-dollar	No	University of Vermont
802 Opportunity	Yes	No	Yes	Last-dollar	No	Vermont Student Assistance Corps + Community College of Vermont
Granite Guarantee	Yes	No	Yes	Last-Dollar	No	Private fundraising

RHODE ISLAND PROMISE

The **Rhode Island Promise** represents New England's first statewide promise program to be codified into law. Although it was instituted in 2017, Rhode Island Gov. Dan McKee signed legislation on May 28, 2021 removing a sunset provision from the original program and granting permanent funding. The Rhode Island Promise guarantees Rhode Island high school graduates and GED recipients who enroll immediately at the Community College of Rhode Island up to two years of free tuition and mandatory fees. The Rhode Island Promise is a last-dollar scholarship, so students must apply all of their federal and state financial aid, along with outside scholarships, to their student accounts before the promise scholarship fills in any remaining gaps in financial need. Rhode Island Promise scholars must enroll full-time in the fall and spring semesters at CCRI and end their first year at CCRI with a college GPA of at least 2.5 and 30 or more earned credits to retain their promise scholarship into their second year. The program was championed by previous Gov. Gina Raimondo, who eventually lost a legislative battle for the scholarship to cover tuition at Rhode Island's public four-year institutions in addition to CCRI.

BOSTON'S TUITION-FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Boston's Tuition-Free Community College Plan (TFCC) was announced by then-mayor Marty Walsh in April 2016 and began serving Boston Public Schools graduates in June 2016 at Bunker Hill Community College and Roxbury Community College. Over time, the program has expanded to include four additional community colleges, and now serves students from public, private and charter schools as long as they are City of Boston residents. The Tuition-Free Community College Plan is a last-dollar scholarship that covers tuition and mandatory fee payments for students enrolled in one of the six qualifying Boston community colleges. The Tuition-Free Community College Plan is open only to students from low-income backgrounds who qualify for the Pell Grant. It is also structured to grant students up to three years of tuition-free community college and \$250 per semester for college-related expenses like textbooks and transportation. Tuition-Free Community College recipients must complete a FAFSA application each year and attain satisfactory academic progress according to their institution, which includes meeting a minimum grade point average requirement (a 2.0 or C average at most colleges) and earning enough credits to graduate on time (usually 12 per semester). Students are also eligible for mentoring through a local nonprofit via the city's college-completion initiative, Success Boston.

HARTFORD PROMISE

Hartford Promise supports students' education at both community colleges and four-year institutions anywhere in the U.S. Students attending community colleges receive up to \$2,500 per year for two years, which can be applied toward tuition, fees or other expenses after the student uses all other available financial resources. Students at four-year colleges receive up to \$5,000 per year for four years under the same circumstances. The Hartford Promise is open to all Hartford students, regardless of income; students must live in Hartford and attend Hartford Public Schools starting in the 9th grade. To be eligible, students must have a high school GPA of at least 3.0 and an attendance rate of 93%. In college, students must maintain satisfactory academic progress according to their institution. The Hartford Promise also uses an integrated college success model, which involves promoting the Hartford Promise opportunity to high school students and providing mentoring to promise recipients in the form of coaching, advising and career-development opportunities throughout their college experience.

NEW HAVEN PROMISE

New Haven Promise allows New Haven public schools students to use their promise scholarship at any Connecticut community college or four-year institution; students can receive scholarships up to the full cost of tuition at in-state public institutions and up to \$2,500 at in-state private institutions. Because the New Haven Promise is a middle-dollar scholarship, students can use the scholarship to pay for non-tuition college expenses like room and board after their Pell Grant has been applied. Scholarship eligibility is on a sliding scale depending on how long students have lived in New Haven. Eligible high school students must meet the program's residency conditions along with other core requirements: a 3.0 GPA, a 90% attendance rate, and 40 hours of community service. In college, students must maintain a 2.0 GPA and attend college full-time. New Haven Promise also employs an integrated model that includes supporting college readiness through K-12 schools, connecting students to campus resources in college, and career preparation with business partners. Additionally, New Haven Promise features a wealth-building component that includes workshops for students on acquiring high-quality jobs, financial literacy, home ownership and civic engagement.

New Haven Promise's Sliding Scale of Support Based on Residency

LENGTH OF ATTENDANCE	BENEFIT	LENGTH OF ATTENDANCE	BENEFIT
Pre-K-12	100%	6-12	80%
K-12	100%	7-12	75%
1-12	95%	8-12	70%
2-12	95%	9-12	65%
3-12	95%	10-12	0%
4-12	90%	11-12	0%
5-12	85%	12-12	0%

Families must be a resident in the city of New Haven and have their child enrolled in the city's public schools in order to qualify for the tuition benefit, outlined in the chart above

Source: New Haven Promise Moneyball Institute Report, 2019.

FIGURE 3: ENROLLMENT, PAYOUT, AND GRADUATION RATES OF FOUR NEW ENGLAND PROMISE PROGRAMS

Program Name	Approximate Number of Students Per Cohort	Average % of Cohort Who Are Low-Income	Average Scholarship Awarded Per Student Per Year	On-Time Graduation Rates of Promise Recipients
Rhode Island Promise	2,200	53%	N/A	30%
TFCC	154	100%	\$1,014	22%
Hartford Promise	130-140	75%	\$3,400	67% (four-year), 21% (two-year)
New Haven Promise	240	74%	\$6,000	65% (four-year), 23% (two-year)*

*92% of New Haven Promise recipients attend four-year colleges.

Source: NEBHE analysis of data shared by participating programs.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS:

Figure 3 highlights how differences in promise program design greatly affect the populations each program serves, the allocation of promise funds, and the success of promise students once enrolled in college. For instance, recipients of all four promise programs see relatively low graduation rates at community colleges, which is a statistic that is in line with national averages due to uncontrollable life circumstances or transfer to four-year institutions. However, Hartford and New Haven Promise recipients graduate from four-year institutions at rates of 67% and 65%, much higher than the national average given that Hartford and New Haven Promise scholars are mostly low-income, first-generation and students of color—populations that often face significant barriers to graduation. Various factors may contribute to the relatively high graduation rates of these populations, including the programs' mentorship elements and high school GPA cutoff of 3.0 for entry into the program, which ensures promise recipients have a strong academic background to begin with.

The Rhode Island Promise has seen a positive trend in graduation outcomes, and low-income students benefit the least from the program. Nearly one-third (30%) of the first cohort of Rhode Island Promise students graduated within three years, compared with 19% of first-time, full-time students who entered CCRI in fall 2016 and would have been promise-eligible had the program existed at that time. Also, low-income students' two-year graduation rates from CCRI more than doubled when the Rhode Island Promise was implemented in 2017: while 5% of first-time, full-time low-income students who entered CCRI in fall 2016 earned an associate degree within three years, 15% of first-time, full-time low-income students who began at CCRI in fall 2017 and 13% of those who entered in fall 2018 graduated on time. At the same time, the Rhode Island Promise has no income cap for eligibility, and just over half of its enrollment comprises low-income students, so most Rhode Island Promise funds are disbursed to middle- and high-income students enrolled at CCRI. This is a result of the grant's last-dollar payout structure, as low-income students' federal Pell Grants already cover tuition and fees at CCRI.

Hartford and Boston serve comparable numbers of students each year, but differences in program design determine how promise recipients benefit. Boston's Tuition-Free Community College Plan restricts participation to students who qualify as low-income, ensuring that 100% of scholarship funds are allocated to students with financial need. Additionally, it is one of few promise programs in New England to provide students with a cash-in-hand payment of \$250 each semester for assistance with non-tuition expenses like transportation or food. Hartford Promise's commitment to provide students up to \$5,000 per year and serve students at four-year colleges, where tuition is more expensive, means that on average, students see more financial benefits from the latter promise program.

WHO BENEFITS FROM NEW ENGLAND'S PROMISE PROGRAMS?

Promise programs offer an opportunity for students to receive a college degree while paying little or no tuition. Yet, not every student with postsecondary aspirations can benefit from a promise program, even if they live in an area that offers one. **Three groups are consistently left out of promise programs: adult learners, incarcerated students and undocumented students.** In New England, promise programs are often restricted to the following student groups:

- **Recent high school graduates.** Most of the region's promise programs limit participation to students graduating from high school within the past 18 months or first-time college students. Exceptions to this are the Pledge to Advance Connecticut (PACT) and Vermont's 802 Opportunity program. The Hartford Promise allows students to take one gap year after college. None of the programs support part-time enrollment, which has the potential to exclude older students and student parents, who are more likely to need to enroll part-time.
- **FAFSA-eligible students.** Most promise programs require students to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to demonstrate eligibility for the program. Undocumented students, including those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, cannot file a FAFSA and are excluded from most programs. Incarcerated students in federal or state correctional or justice institutions are also ineligible for federal loans or grants.
- **High-achieving students.** All New England promise programs require at least a baseline high school grade point average to participate, usually a 2.0 or higher. Some promise programs, like the New Haven and Hartford Promise, impose additional merit requirements, such as a 3.0 GPA, an overall high school attendance rate requirement, a clean disciplinary record in high school, or a community service requirement. All programs also require students to maintain "satisfactory academic progress" once in college to retain the promise scholarship, though specific requirements for college grade point averages and credit accrual differ among programs.



Two out of nine New England promise programs support adult and returning learners.



Four out of nine New England promise programs support undocumented students.

One of these supports only undocumented students with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS).



None of New England's promise programs allow for part-time enrollment.

AN EQUITY ANALYSIS OF NEW ENGLAND'S PROMISE PROGRAMS

In many cases, New England's promise programs have catalyzed college-going culture in school districts and led to increases in college enrollment directly after high school. Additionally, as with the New Haven Promise, promise programs can fuel the local economy by attracting potential homebuyers to the region to qualify for free college. While these often hard-won policies should be celebrated for their contributions to postsecondary access in the region, many students continue to be left behind by such programs.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in our country along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines. Thus, it is imperative to apply an equity lens when considering new higher education policies and practices in the region. In a report titled "A Promise Worth Keeping: An Updated Equity-Driven Framework for College Promise Programs" (2020), researchers from The Education Trust, a Washington D.C.-based non-profit, identify several ways promise programs can ensure that they serve students equitably. Their findings build on an earlier 2018 report in which Education Trust researchers examined 23 free college programs around the U.S. to understand whether promise programs usually benefit students from low-income families.

Figure 4 is an equity analysis of New England's promise programs that builds off the Education Trust's framework. It shows which promise programs meet the metrics of an equity-driven promise program: an "X" denotes that a program does not meet the equity metric, while a "✓" indicates that a program has met the equity metric. There are nine possible metrics, and the "total" column indicates how many of the nine equity metrics each promise program meets.



In a 2020 report titled, "A Promise Worth Keeping: An Updated Equity-Driven Framework for College Promise Programs," researchers from The Education Trust, a Washington D.C.-based non-profit, identify several ways in which promise programs can serve students equitably. They suggest that equitable promise programs should:



- Cover living costs, fees, at least four years of tuition and tuition for a bachelor's at a four-year college



- Ensure support for adult and returning students, students with a 2.0 GPA, part-time enrollment, undocumented students and justice-impacted students



- Award as a grant and do not convert into a loan at any time

FIGURE 4: AN EQUITY ANALYSIS OF NEW ENGLAND PROMISE PROGRAMS USING THE EDUCATION TRUST'S FRAMEWORK

		New England's Promise Programs								
		Rhode Island Promise	Pledge to Advance CT (PACT)	New Haven Promise	Hartford Promise	Tuition Free Community College (TFCC)	Boston Bridge	Catamount Commitment	802 Opportunity	Granite Guarantee
What Does it Cover?	Living Costs	X	X*	✓	X*	X*	X*	X	X	X
	Fees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X
	At Least Four Years of Tuition	X	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓
	Tuition for Bachelor's at a Four-Year College	X	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓
Whom Does it Cover?	Adult/Returning Students	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X
	Students With a 2.0 GPA (In College)	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓****	✓	✓
	Part-Time Enrollment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Undocumented Students	✓	X	✓	✓	✓***	X	X	X	X
Stays a Grant		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Total ✓		3	4	7	6	4	4	5	3	4

*PACT, TFCC and Boston Bridge programs provide a small stipend for living costs, but do not cover all living costs. Hartford Promise students can use their Promise Scholarship for unrelated expenses, but the maximum award is \$5,000.

**TFCC covers students receiving DACA or Temporary Protected Status (TPS), but not other groups of undocumented students.

***Catamount Commitment defaults to Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements for the University of Vermont, which is a 2.0 GPA for all majors except engineering and nursing.

Only three of the studied promise programs met at least five of nine equity metrics. **Out of all of New England's promise programs, the New Haven and Hartford Promise programs had the highest cumulative scores**, meeting seven and six out of nine equity metrics, respectively. New Haven's middle-dollar scholarship structure allowed it to outpace the Hartford Promise in one area, "living costs," because recipients can apply New Haven Promise dollars to non-tuition expenses such as books, housing, food, or transportation. While the Hartford Promise can also be applied to non-tuition expenses, the total award is capped at \$5,000 per year for students at four-year universities and \$2,500 for students at community colleges, making it unlikely to entirely cover living costs for students, which average at least \$10,000 per year in the U.S.

Importantly, the chart in Figure 4 is not an exhaustive list of all possible equity metrics against which to measure New England's promise programs. For instance, it leaves out whether students are required to meet stringent merit requirements in high school to qualify for the promise program, a requirement that could exclude students who are historically disadvantaged by the U.S. K-12 education system (e.g., English Language Learners, students with disabilities, BIPOC students, and others). It also omits whether programs have an income cap for eligibility, which can help programs prioritize college affordability for students from low-income families.

GOING BEYOND ACCESS: PAIRING PROMISE AWARDS WITH ADVISING

While cost often presents a significant barrier to completing a college degree, especially for low-income students, other barriers remain that promise programs should aim to address if they hope to improve not only access to college, but also completion. Students who are the first in their families to attend college may face particular challenges, including but not limited to navigating complex paperwork and enrollment steps, such as filing the FAFSA each year, experiencing culture shock, working part-time jobs and needing extra support juggling coursework and employment, and feeling isolated. Nationwide, programs like the Tennessee Promise have integrated mentoring into their promise program to promote college success, especially for first-generation college students. When promise programs combine financial support with other forms of support, such as advising, parental and community outreach, and ongoing coaching, they see higher rates of success and college completion. Several existing New England promise programs employ advising and support as part of their programs.

Promising Practices in New England

- **Hartford Promise** promotes an Integrated College Success model that includes both a "Reaching Forward" and a "Reaching Back" components. Reaching Forward programming includes building strong university partnerships, providing transition supports and mentoring to incoming college students, fostering peer-to-peer networks among scholars, and creating internships and work opportunities for Hartford Promise scholars. Its "Reaching Back" strategy includes working closely with Hartford Public Schools to reach students and families as early as fifth grade to inform them about the Hartford Promise program, as well as promote academic achievement among students.
- **Boston's Tuition-Free Community College Plan** works with Success Boston, a citywide college coaching initiative aimed at boosting the college graduation rates of Boston Public Schools students, many of whom are BIPOC students, first-generation college students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Once students indicate their interest in the Tuition-Free Community College program, they can opt into Success Boston coaching, which provides personalized academic, social and financial advising for at least two years through several Boston-area nonprofits.
- **New Haven Promise** begins preparing students for a high-quality career upon acceptance into the program. Its 40-hour community service requirement serves as a resume-building activity for students, who are connected to local non-profits through the New Haven Promise's network of community partners. Students are advised to complete three paid internships while in college, and New Haven Promise staff and peer mentors work to place students at career-focused internship sites. Students also attend workshops on financial literacy, home ownership, investing in graduate school, and other wealth-building strategies throughout their time in college and beyond.

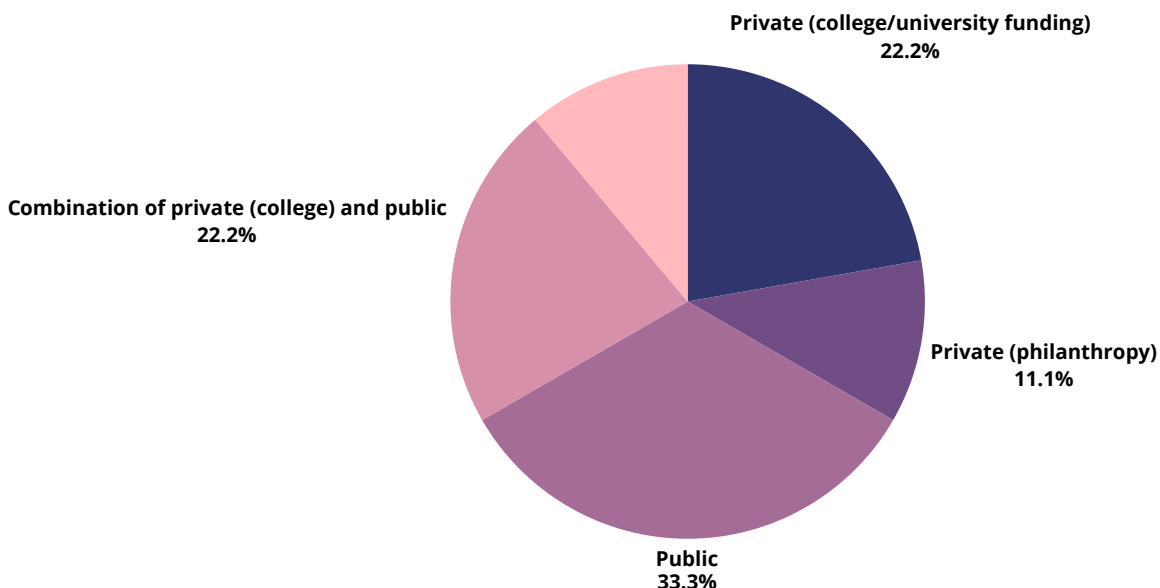
FUNDING IMPACTS PROMISE PROGRAMS' EFFECTIVENESS

A promise is a promise—until it's not. As families make decisions about where to set down roots and raise children, a guarantee of free college could be an influential factor. The New Haven and Hartford Promise programs have been designed with this idea in mind, as they both require students to live in the school district for a certain number of years to be eligible for the promise scholarship. Both New Haven and Hartford programs have stable sources of funding: the New Haven Promise receives its contributions from Yale University, one of the wealthiest colleges in the country, and the Hartford Promise recently combined its private fundraising efforts with grants from both the City of Hartford and the federal government.

Other programs have faced challenges to securing funding. The Board of Regents in Connecticut, for instance, pieced together funding for the Pledge to Advance Connecticut program semester-by-semester, with much of the burden falling on the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) to support the program after a plan to use funds from an online lottery program fell through. At the time of this report, data about whether the program would continue into the spring 2022 semester was unavailable. Whether funding for a promise program is secured through legislation, a private donation or some combination of resources, it is critical that students and community members can be assured of the longevity of a program in order to plan their postsecondary trajectories accordingly.

Figure 5 shows the breakdown of how New England's promise programs get their funding. A small percentage (11%) of promise programs receive funding through private philanthropy only, and 11% benefit from a combination of public funding—local or state government—and philanthropy. 22% rely on contributions from a single college or university system, while 20% of programs combine college/university funding with public dollars. A third of all New England promise programs are funded solely through public dollars.

FIGURE 5: NEW ENGLAND PROMISE PROGRAM FUNDING SOURCES



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In New England college systems, cities and states with a promise program already in place, policymakers should ensure that the program's eligibility requirements, maintenance requirements and other stipulations allow the promise program to serve the area's populations equitably. Scholarship-only programs should expand to include an advising or mentoring component, and all programs should work to secure stable funding to facilitate long-term planning. Promise programs should aim to maximize students' college-going experience so that their college experience puts them on the path to a high quality job and future financial security. See the following recommendations for specific guidance.

1. REVIEW ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS TO ENSURE EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION IN THE PROMISE PROGRAM.

- **Reexamine merit requirements in high school:** Stringent merit requirements for receiving a promise scholarship, such as a high GPA or clean disciplinary record in high school, can worsen inequality by favoring students who were already well-positioned and planning to attend college. It can unintentionally exclude students with disabilities, students who struggled with trauma throughout high school, late bloomers or other students with high postsecondary aspirations whose potential talents are not easily measured. GPA requirements should be flexible and students who do not meet standard measures of merit should be able to explain their circumstances through a letter or conversation with promise program officials to appeal their case.
- **Recognize the challenges that first-generation, low-income college students face in college through flexible GPA and credit-accrual requirements:** Students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to need to work in college. Therefore, strict merit requirements around a college GPA or pace of credit accumulation could disproportionately harm this group of students. Instead, more flexibility around attending part-time, along with services to support working students, student parents, and others would provide room for students to earn their degree on a timeline that works for them. Moreover, balancing the competing pulls of work and school displays a certain merit in itself. By kicking students out of the promise program for failing to keep pace with other students, these requirements may make it harder for students to graduate. The federal guideline of a 2.0 GPA for satisfactory academic progress should be sufficient for students to maintain their promise scholarship.
- **Include adult/returning learners, undocumented students and justice-impacted students:** Most promise programs are inherently designed to exclude these student groups. Existing programs should reevaluate their eligibility requirements to include all students, especially those from historically marginalized groups, in meaningful ways. For instance, instead of requiring students to file the FAFSA to prove their income eligibility for the promise program, programs can waive the FAFSA requirement for ineligible students, as is already done in Hartford. Furthermore, programs that include incarcerated students should not enforce difficult-to-meet eligibility requirements, such as enrolling in college within six months of receiving a GED. Such restrictions make it virtually impossible for many justice-impacted individuals to participate, even if they are not explicitly barred from the promise program.

2. PROVIDE A STIPEND FOR LIVING COSTS.

While covering tuition and fees is an excellent start at making college affordable, much of the rising costs of college today come from increases in living expenses such as rent, childcare and transportation. Therefore, if a promise program guarantees tuition and fee payments only, it is covering just a fraction of the entire cost of college for students. Small stipends, like those given to Tuition-Free Community College participants, are helpful but not sufficient to prevent students from needing to take out loans to afford college. Students must be able to use some or all of their promise scholarship money to cover non-tuition expenses, including room and board, textbooks, technology, transportation and childcare costs.

"AT THE NATION'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES, 80 PERCENT OF THE AVERAGE \$16,833 STICKER PRICE COMES FROM NON-TUITION EXPENSES. AT PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, THOSE EXPENSES MAKE UP 61 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL COSTS."

- Sara Goldrick Rabb and Nancy Kendall, "[The Real Price of College](#)"



3. CONSIDER EXPANDING ELIGIBILITY TO FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES.

For many students, a four-year university would best fit their personal and career goals. Due to longstanding and persistent barriers, transferring from community college to a bachelor's-granting institution is often difficult and time-consuming, and too few students manage to successfully transfer and graduate. While 80% of community college students express a desire to earn a bachelor's degree, just 25% successfully transfer to a bachelor's-granting institution after five years and only 17% earn a bachelor's degree after six years. By expanding eligibility to include four-year institutions, students could choose to attend the institution that best aligns with their goals.

4. ADD AN ADVISING COMPONENT TO SCHOLARSHIP-ONLY PROGRAMS.

A growing body of research indicates that gaining access to college is not enough to ensure students experience the benefits of postsecondary education. Students who enter college should have the support they need to complete college, earn a credential and pursue a well-paying job or additional education. While promise programs have seen success in increasing college enrollment overall, it is essential that programs are enticing students into college environments where they can grow and succeed. Advising programs, such as near-peer mentoring, peer-to-peer networks and on-campus coaching can help bridge the gap between simply accessing college and achieving one's academic and career goals.

5. SECURE STABLE FUNDING.

Promise programs should seek to diversify their funding streams and multiyear grants that can ensure the stability of the program. When families know they can count on a free college program, they will be more likely to invest in a promise community.



In addition to the recommendations above, the following suggestions should also be considered by cities and states hoping to implement a new free college program.



6. AVOID OVERLY-STRICT RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS.

- If a student needs to take care of an aging family member across state lines or cannot find family-sustaining employment in the state, they should not be tied down by a commitment made when they were likely a young adult. Strings attached to promise programs that require students to remain in-state after graduation can be overly restrictive and prevent students from taking job and life opportunities that best suit their needs—an outcome completely opposite from the freedom a college degree should afford students. Promise programs should not include stipulations around living and working in the area after college, especially if these requirements include punitive measures toward students.
- Additionally, while residency requirements to become eligible for the promise program can promote long-term investment in the state or municipality, these policies may adversely impact students with extenuating circumstances, such as parents moving in and out of the district, especially prior to high school. Programs should consider granting flexibility in their residency requirements, or only begin them in high school.

7. CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE IMPACTS OF DESIGNING THE SCHOLARSHIP WITH A FIRST-DOLLAR, MIDDLE-DOLLAR OR LAST-DOLLAR PAYOUT.

Last-dollar scholarships are popular in New England and around the country, largely because they require the smallest financial investment and can serve the greatest number of students. However, last-dollar scholarships can prove inconsequential when a low-income student's federal student aid already covers the cost of tuition. Books, living costs and other expenses remain real financial barriers to a college education for students. Therefore, a first- or middle-dollar scholarship allows low-income students to use promise scholarships to help defray some of these substantial "indirect" expenses, which often do not appear on college bills and are not covered by last-dollar promise programs. First- and middle-dollar promise scholarships can help reduce the hours students need to work to afford college and improve their academic performance. Furthermore, tax payers will know that promise program dollars are helping make college affordable for low-income students, rather than primarily supporting tuition payments for middle- and upper-income students who do not receive a Pell Grant.

8. AVOID GRANT TO LOAN PROGRAMS.

Some promise programs around the country convert students' promise scholarships into loans under various circumstances (e.g., not being employed in the state after graduation). Grant-to-loan policies should never be implemented, as they could adversely impact low-income students.



Building effective free college policies requires more than simply creating a promise program and assuming it will improve college access and success in the region. As New England's varied promise programs demonstrate, the design of a program, how scholarship money is paid out to students, and programs' eligibility requirements can all impact the widening gaps in higher education attainment that exist in our region. For established and new promise programs alike, opening enrollment to bachelor's-granting institutions, allowing students to use scholarship money to pay for non-tuition expenses, pairing scholarships with mentoring and eliminating overly-stringent requirements to maintain scholarships are all potential ways to boost higher education attainment in the region and close opportunity gaps. Furthermore, policymakers should consider designing promise programs mindful of the needs of historically excluded students, such as adult learners, incarcerated students and undocumented students, with an eye toward tapping into the wealth of assets these students bring to college campuses.

New England is home to some of the most esteemed higher education institutions in the world. Yet, students from the region's low-income families are not guaranteed a chance to attend New England's public colleges without accruing burdensome student debt. As the conversation on free college evolves, New England can lead the nation by placing equity at the center of its policies and programs. It is time to ensure that the region lives up to its promise of ensuring higher education is within reach—for *all* students.



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