PROMISES AND PITFALLS

OREGON’S LEGISLATION TO MAKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FREE HAS HAD A MIXED IMPACT.

BY ANDREA HENDERSON
IN CRAFTING THE OREGON PROMISE, SEVERAL KEY POLICY CONSIDERATIONS WERE IDENTIFIED AS CRITICAL BY THE STATE’S COMMUNITY COLLEGES. FIRST, THE PROGRAM HAD TO BENEFIT LOW-INCOME STUDENTS. SECOND, THE PROGRAM NEEDED TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS EFFORTS. FINALLY, THE PROGRAM NEEDED TO INCREASE PELL GRANT MONEY INTO THE STATE, AS WELL AS INCREASE THE ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS DIRECTLY OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL.

IN 2015, OREGON PASSED LEGISLATION CREATING THE SECOND statewide “Promise” program offering free tuition for community college students. Yet in Oregon, the tuition isn’t free. Nor are all students eligible.

Two years later, the impact of the Oregon Promise on students has been mixed. The program’s experiences to date offer suggestions for policy changes, both in Oregon and for other states considering implementing their own promise programs.

The Oregon Promise is a state grant available to high school students who have graduated within the last six months. It is also available to undocumented students and recent GED students. While the grant pays for up to the average tuition cost at the community colleges, for many students, the grant doesn’t cover the full cost of tuition. To qualify for the grant, students must have a GPA of 2.5 or better graduating from high school. To continue to receive the grant, students must maintain a 2.00 GPA and complete a first-year experience course.

In crafting the Oregon Promise, several key policy considerations were identified as critical by the state’s community colleges. First, the program had to benefit low-income students. Second, the program needed to support student success efforts. Finally, the program needed to increase Pell Grant money into the state, as well as increase the enrollment of students directly out of high school.

The structure of the program accomplished the first goal. While technically a last-dollar program that aided middle income students who were not Pell eligible, the legislation ensured that all students applying for the grant receive a minimum award of $1,000. Students whose expected family contribution on the FAFSA was zero thus benefited from the Oregon Promise.

The program also addressed student success efforts in several ways. The legislature provided funding for new advisors and startup costs for a first-year experience course. Each recipient’s continued eligibility for the Oregon Promise is also predicated upon their completion of that first-year experience course. The results have been impressive. Fall-to-winter term retention was 87 percent, while year-to-year retention of eligible students was 84 percent.

Finally, the Oregon Promise has increased the number of students who complete their FAFSA. In 2016, Oregon led the nation in increased FAFSA filings among high school seniors. The program also increased the enrollment of graduates directly from high school. After the start of the Oregon Promise, the percentage of recent high school graduates enrolling for the fall term increased from 20.3 to 23.3 percent.

While the Oregon Promise accomplishes many important policy goals, its success has been marred by a lack of sustainable funding. In the 2017 legislative session, the cost to continue the program was estimated at $48 million. However, only $40 million was appropriated, necessitating changes to eligibility. Faced with a difficult decision just two months before the start of the fall term, the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission instituted an income cap on recipients. Those students whose expected family income exceeded $18,000 lost the grant, an unfortunate decision which affected more than 2,000 students.

Another pitfall of the program is the requirement that high school students achieve a 2.5 GPA. Colleges in Oregon have identified this policy as a top priority for change, citing fears that the GPA limitation will have a disparate impact on some students. Future advocacy efforts will focus on making the grant available for all high school graduates.

Based on the experiences of the Oregon Promise to date, states seeking to implement a promise program should consider the following:

- Is the program designed to target low-income or middle-income students?
- How might the program be structured to ensure equity?
- What sources of dedicated funding might be available?
- How will the program increase retention and completion?
- What impact will the program have on enrollment?

Lessons learned from Oregon will hopefully guide other states to grapple with these important policy questions as we seek to increase the access and success of all community college students.

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