SHEEO

THE POWER OF A PROMISE:

IMPLICATIONS AND IMPORTANCE OF ADULT PROMISE PROGRAMS

SHEEO Adult Promise Project

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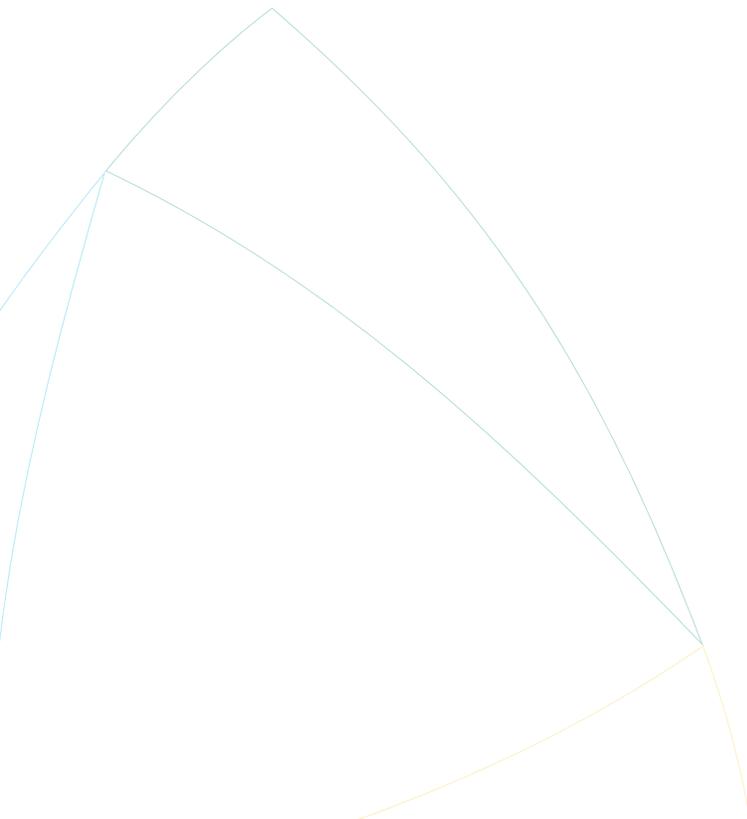
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INTRODUCTION

Promise programs (also known as free college programs) have grown in popularity over the last few years. When targeted correctly, these programs have the potential to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for underserved students. By focusing a promise program on adult students and including additional supports and services, states can connect with non-traditional students who previously believed college was not an option. However, the message of a promise program is strong and should not be misused. This paper helps to define the concept of a promise program for adults, discusses the value proposition of a promise, provides an overview of current and proposed promise programs, and outlines critical considerations for states considering an adult promise program.

BACKGROUND

Since 2016, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) has explored the interest in and feasibility of implementing "promise-type" aid programs for students over the age of 25. With generous support from Lumina Foundation, SHEEO is currently supporting program development and implementation in five states (Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington), each of which is implementing a pilot program to better serve adult learners (hereinafter Adult Promise Program) in their state.
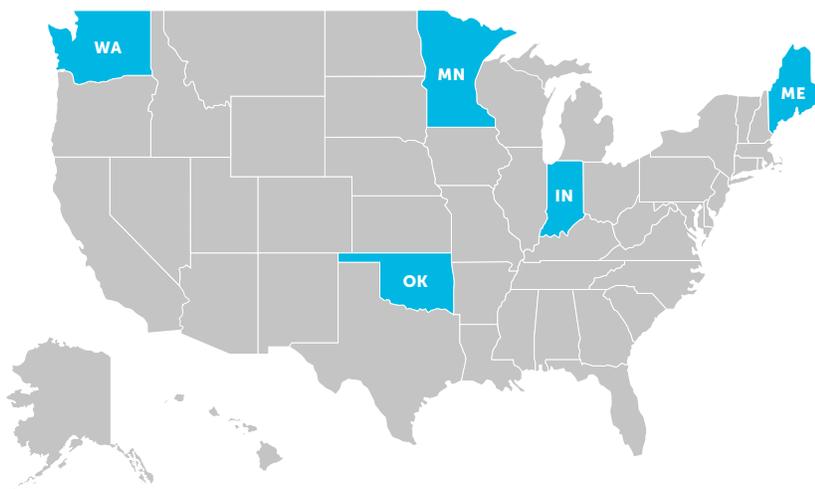
When this work began, there was a disconnect between the need to improve postsecondary completion rates for adult learners and the public and political interest in creating promise programs geared toward traditional-age students. Although nearly 40 percent of undergraduate students are over the age of 25 and adult students are crucial for states looking to meet postsecondary attainment goals and address their workforce needs,[1] the initial flurry of activity around free college and promise programs was squarely focused on recent high school graduates. In fact, every statewide promise program implemented before 2017 specifically excluded adult students.[2] In SHEEO's *Design Template* document, which serves as the framework for state pilot Adult Promise Programs, we posit three reasons why most early promise programs focused exclusively on traditional students:

1. Restricting the population to traditional-age students (usually defined as ages 18-24) limits the cost of the program and further makes the cost more predictable. Unlike some adult students, students straight out of high school won't have education debt or have exhausted their aid eligibility for federal Pell grants through prior postsecondary education attempts. Traditional-age students are also more likely to receive state grant funds, for which adult students are sometimes ineligible.

1. Pingel, S., Parker, E., & Sisneros, L. (2016). Free Community College: An approach to increase adult student success in postsecondary education. *Education Commission of the States*. Retrieved from *https://www.ecs.org/free-community-college-an-approach-to-increase-adult-student-success-in-postsecondary-education*.

2. Mishory, J. (2018). The future of statewide college promise programs. *Century Foundation*. Retrieved from *https://tcf.org/content/report/future-statewide-college-promise-programs/?agreed=1*.

2. Outside of higher education circles, it is not widely understood or accepted that adult students comprise a significant proportion of undergraduate enrollment.

3. Perhaps most importantly, high school students are essentially a captive audience and are easy to contact with information about the program, easing the outreach challenges associated with identifying potential adult students.

However, over the last two years, this disconnect between the need to serve adult students and the structure of promise programs has mostly gone away as the momentum has grown around promise programs. For example, legislators in Indiana and Tennessee implemented specific Adult Promise Programs during the 2017 sessions. Also in 2017, the University of Hawai'i System implemented the first single statewide promise program that is available to all students attending two-year institutions in the state, not just traditional students enrolling straight from high school.

As this trend continues and more states develop their own Adult Promise Programs, they will take different approaches to both design and implementation. Differences in governance structure will influence how each state goes about obtaining institutional buy-in for an Adult Promise Program. The size and policies of state aid programs will factor into how the financial aid component of the promise program is structured. In other words, **state context matters**. These differences are already evident in the five very different Adult Promise Programs that are beginning to take shape in Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington. SHEEO is not prescriptive in its guidance and technical assistance to these states and supports states as they develop Adult Promise Programs that meet their unique needs. For example, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Washington are taking a statewide approach to implementation, while Maine and Minnesota are piloting their Adult Promise Programs locally at selected postsecondary institutions.

> Through the Adult Promise Pilot Program, it has become evident that there is no established standard definition of an Adult Promise Program. The variety in pilot programs across participating states indicates that this definition of an Adult Promise Program should be broad enough to allow for the multiplicity of the current state programs and assist other states seeking to implement similar programs. This white paper is intended to provide this necessary definition and description.

The term *promise program* means different things to different stakeholders. Often synonymous with free college, promise programs have become a "catchall term for all kinds of plans intended to make college more affordable."[3] For example, the **College Promise Campaign**, an advocacy organization for these types of programs, considers there to be 200 college promise programs in 43 states.[4] These programs may be statewide but are more typically based within an institution or city. To be considered a promise program, the College Promise Campaign requires three criteria to be met: the program must have a central goal of increasing postsecondary attainment, a financial aid award above existing federal and state aid, and some component of *place* for eligibility (e.g., focused on students in a specific city or region).[5]

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3. Harris, A. (2018). America Wakes Up From Its Dream of Free College. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from *https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/09/where-did-americas-dream-of-free-college-go/569770*.

4. Hiestand, R. (2018). The Promise of College Promise. *College Promise Campaign*. Retrieved from *http://collegepromise.org/policy-tools/the-promise-of-the-college-promise*.

5. See *https://ahead-penn.org/creating-knowledge/college-promise*.

Another typology of promise programs by the **Century Foundation** focuses on statewide programs and considers 18 of these programs to exist in 16 states. These programs range from early commitment programs created in the 1990s to statewide efforts like Tennessee Promise, as well as niche programs that offer free tuition to students enrolling in very specific credential programs.[6] Statewide programs include:

- **Hawai'i's Promise**, which fills any unmet need (including books, supplies, and transportation) for students attending community college.[7] To receive the scholarship, students must be residents of Hawai'i, submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and maintain satisfactory academic progress (SAP). There are no eligibility limitations regarding age or enrollment intensity.[8]

- **The Oregon Promise**, which provides a last-dollar tuition waiver of up to $3,397 for all students who recently graduated from high school with a 2.5 GPA and attend community colleges.[9] The program requires a $50 student co-pay per term, and students must complete a first-year experience program. Students can attend half time and need only maintain SAP to be eligible. To receive the grant, students must complete the FAFSA and Oregon Student Aid Application.[10]

- **The Tennessee Promise Program**, a last-dollar scholarship open to all recent high school graduates in the state who complete the FAFSA and enroll in a community college, college of applied technology, or other eligible institution. Students must meet with a mentor, maintain a 2.0 GPA once enrolled, and complete eight hours of community service per term.[11] Given the success of this program, Tennessee created a separate promise program, TNReconnect, for non-traditional students in 2017.

While not comprehensive, the above list of examples demonstrates the wide range of programs that have been called promise programs. It is important to establish a clear definition of the components that make up an Adult Promise Program so that interested states can understand the parameters that go into creating a program of their own.

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6. Mishory, 2018.

7. University of Hawai'i Community Colleges. (2017). What is Hawai'i's Promise? Removing "Cost" as a Barrier to Higher Education. Retrieved from *https://www.hawaii.edu/govrel/docs/2017_hawaii-promise_lb.pdf*.

8. Ibid.

9. Crane, P., Cox, A., & Thomas, K. (2017). Oregon Promise and the Public Good. *Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission* [Powerpoint Slides]. Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/Th%20315%20Cox%20Thomas.pdf*.

10. Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. (2018). Oregon Promise Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved from *https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-faq.aspx*.

11. Tennessee Promise. (2018). Resources for Parents & Counselors. Retrieved from *http://tnpromise.gov/parents.shtml*.

DEFINING AN ADULT PROMISE PROGRAM

An **Adult Promise Program** should consider the unique challenges and financial constraints adult learners face. Adult learners lead busy lives, balancing myriad commitments. They are more likely to work and have obligations and expenses related to the care of children than traditional students.[12] They also may have outstanding debt or financial holds related to prior postsecondary education attempts.[13] These factors create issues and barriers that will not be addressed through an Adult Promise Program if it mimics those designed with traditional students in mind. For example, a state that creates a program that requires full-time enrollment[14] or has a community service component[15] may not resonate with potential adult learners nor increase the likelihood of their success.

We define an Adult Promise Program as a program that:

- Promotes a simple, transparent message that postsecondary education is affordable for adult learners.

- Makes a financial commitment to adult students through leveraging aid from all available sources. Commits to fill in the gaps where needed to cover tuition and fees.

- Establishes and supports programs and services that are tailored to the unique needs of adult students and will help them succeed in postsecondary education.

Each of these components is critical to setting up a successful program. A large part of the interest and excitement around promise programs comes from the **simplicity and clarity of the message**. States should strive to ensure that the messaging around their programs does not become bogged down in details that distract from the more straightforward message: that college can be affordable, or even free, for adult students, and they have the opportunity to take advantage of their state's program.

A strong message should communicate the most important ideas in one or two sentences.[16] It should be easy to understand and remember, and should be tailored to the intended audience. For example, Indiana markets the straightforward message that the Workforce Ready Grant "pays for all tuition and regularly assessed fees for qualifying high-value certificates."[17] While there

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12. Kazis, R., Callahan, A., Davidson, C., McLeod, A., Bosworth, B., Choitz, V., & Hoops, J. (2007). Adult learners in higher education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results (Occasional Paper 2007-03). U.S. Department of Labor. Washington, DC. Retrieved from *https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/adultlearners.dol_.pdf*.

13. Taliaferro, W., & Duke-Benfield, A.E. (2016). Redesigning State Financial Aid to Better Serve Nontraditional Adult Students: Practical Policy Steps for Decision Makers. Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success. Washington, DC. Retrieved from *https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Redesigning-State-Financial-Aid-to-Better-Serve-Nontraditional-Adult-Students.pdf*.

14. For example, the Nevada Promise Scholarship requires enrolling in at least 12 credits per semester, and the Rhode Island Promise requires that students earn at least 30 credits per year. See *https://www.csn.edu/promise* and *http://www.ccri.edu/ripromise*.

15. For example, Tennessee Promise requires eight hours of community service per semester. See *http://tnpromise.gov/parents.shtml*.

16. Brelage, E. (2018). *Communicating the Promise: Developing a Compelling Message Framework* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/SHEEO%20Adult%20Promise%20Presentation%20VOX.pdf*.

17. Next Level Jobs Indiana. (2018). How it works: Workforce ready grant. Retrieved from *https://www.nextleveljobs.org/Job-Seeker/How-It-Works*.

are some qualifying criteria to be eligible for the grant, these are not included in the marketing message itself. Instead, Indiana focuses on the core message that will matter most to their intended audience: free tuition and fees for students earning certificates that can provide an economic return on investment. Messaging is not one-size-fits-all. This particular message works with Indiana's potential adult learners and policymakers because Indiana has a large manufacturing sector.[18] States with different circumstances should choose a message that resonates with the realities of their context.[19]

Along with this message, an Adult Promise Program must make a financial commitment to eligible participants. As mentioned above, adults with some college and no degree may have already exhausted their eligibility for federal Pell grant dollars, which promise programs geared toward traditional students rely upon as their financial backbone.[20] While Pell will still be a significant funding source for many students, when setting up an Adult Promise Program it is important to explore multiple potential sources of funds to cover the cost of tuition and fees. These funds may include state grant funds, institutional aid, local foundations and philanthropy, and more creative sources like front-end employer-based tuition reimbursement plans.

States should consider other sources of government benefits when designing a program, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. These funds can help address the non-tuition expenses that make up a significant proportion of the full cost of college.[21] They also address one of the main critiques of promise programs — that free tuition does not mean free college. But more importantly, these programs can provide real financial support to adult learners seeking to earn a credential of value and obtain stable, rewarding employment.[22]

Finally, to be successful, Adult Promise Programs should **provide supports and services** to increase the likelihood that potential students succeed. These include:

- Efforts to market, reach out, and recruit potential adult learners and help them enroll and apply for financial aid.

- Supports and services like prior learning assessment and structured scheduling, which set them up for success and may reduce the time it takes to earn a credential.

- Efforts that keep students on track once enrolled, such as emergency grant programs that provide funds to students who have unexpected expenses that may impact their ability to stay enrolled.

18. Moutray, C. (2017). State manufacturing data. *National Association of Manufacturers*. Retrieved from *http://www.nam.org/Data-and-Reports/State-Manufacturing-Data*.

19. Brelage, 2018.

20. Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016.

21. Duke-Benfield, A.E., & Walizer, L. (2018). *Maximizing Benefits Access in Pilot States* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/Benefit%20Access%20Presentation%20SHEEO.pdf*.

22. Ibid.

THE VALUE OF A PROMISE – AND ITS POTENTIAL SHORTCOMINGS

Promise programs are not without criticism. Much of this criticism argues that while promise programs are politically powerful, they are not the most targeted way to help disadvantaged students succeed. For example, traditional promise programs provide more dollars to middle- and upper-income students than to lower-income students. However, although the financial investment in lower-income students is often small, the messaging aspect of these programs can reach lower-income students and eliminate sticker shock. While students in the lowest income ranges may not receive additional aid through a promise program, the resonance of the message could be the impetus that causes them to enroll, which means that the program is providing a real benefit to that student. To learn more about the pros and cons of a free college program, see the resources listed at the bottom of this page.[23],[24],[25]

While promise programs may not be the ideal policy in all instances, their political feasibility means the trend is sure to continue. For states considering implementing a promise program, including specific components can dramatically improve their impact on underserved students. Promise programs that include adult students are one way to obtain this equity focus. Adult students often receive far less financial aid than traditional-age students (due to eligibility requirements and income calculations based on dependent students).[26] Adult students are also in need of supports and services that differ from traditional-age students. These supports and services can be built into a promise program and create lasting impacts.

If designed correctly, Adult Promise Programs have the potential to increase adult student enrollment and retention. However, it is essential that states are very cautious in what they promise and how they frame the promise. The term *promise* is a powerful tool because of the meaning it holds for potential students. Adult students who enroll because of a promise program expect that the promise will be kept. Unfortunately, this is not always possible.

For example, the Oregon Promise (for traditional students) originally promised free tuition regardless of family income. This was a risky promise for a program tied to discretionary spending. In its second year, the program was underfunded and the state was forced to institute an income cap to meet budgetary constraints. These restraints were removed for the third year of the program,[27] but the income cap can come back at any time if funding is not available. When creating an Adult Promise Program, states should ensure that they have the resources and support to maintain their commitments. The five pilot states are taking different approaches to fund their programs. For example, Indiana's program is funded through an earmarked, legislative appropriation, while Washington will rely on its state need-based aid program. On the other end of the spectrum, Oklahoma is working with institutions and the business community to help fund the last-dollar scholarship component of its program.

23. Harris, 2018.

24. Goldrick-Rab, S., & Miller-Adams, M. (2018). Don't Dismiss the Value of Free-College Programs. They Do Help Low-Income Students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from *https://www.chronicle.com/article/don-t-dismiss-the-value-of/244468*.

25. Jones, T., & Berger, K. (2018). A Promise Fulfilled: A Framework for Equitable Free College Programs. *The Education Trust*. Retrieved from *https://edtrust.org/resource/a-promise-fulfilled*.

26. Taliaferro, W., & Duke-Benfield, A.E. (2016). Redesigning state financial aid to better serve nontraditional adult students. Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from *https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Redesigning-State-Financial-Aid-to-Better-Serve-Nontraditional-Adult-Students.pdf*.

27. Báez-Arévalo, J. (2018). Adjustments Expand Eligibility for the State's Largest Financial Aid Programs for 2018-2019. *Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission.* Retrieved from *https://mailchi.mp/state/financialaid18-19?e=c49bbfd968*.

CREATING A FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT ADULT STUDENT SUCCESS

Forty-one states, including the five Adult Promise Pilot states, have ambitious goals to increase postsecondary attainment. None will accomplish its goal without closing equity gaps and increasing the number of adults over age 25 with a postsecondary credential.[28] Given declining projections of high school graduates in most states, states must focus on adult learners to reach the level of attainment necessary for 21st century economic and workforce demands.[29]

An Adult Promise Program can be a framework to align, leverage, and support existing and new efforts to increase adult student success. State SHEEO agencies can use the Adult Promise Program to engage postsecondary institutions, policymakers, the business community, other state and local government agencies, and the public on this critical state need. Interested states can look to the five pilot states of Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington to see some of the possibilities for program development.

INDIANA

Indiana: As the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE) implements the Workforce Ready Grant program, they are engaging with associate-granting institutions to assess how well they currently serve adult learners and areas where they can improve. Indiana contracted with the Center for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) to conduct 360 assessments which survey institutional staff and adult learners on how well the institution is currently serving its older, non-traditional students.[30] After analyzing the survey results, Indiana plans to provide grant funding to selected community colleges to address the primary areas of improvement. For Indiana, this project is part of a broader focus on and commitment to adult learners. The work with CAEL will build on a foundation of efforts to serve adult students in Indiana. ICHE has conducted multiple policy audits over the last five years to make sure their policies do not create barriers for adults to re-enroll in postsecondary education. For example, they revised state policies to allow state financial aid to cover PLA fees. The state also made changes to two grant programs to enable returning adult students to receive aid even if they don't meet satisfactory academic progress standards.[31]

28. Lumina Foundation. (2018). *A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent*. Retrieved from *http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2018/#page/downloads*.

29. Bransberger, P., & Michelau, D. (2016). *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*. *WICHE*. Retrieved from *https://knocking.wiche.edu*.

30. See *https://www.cael.org/higher-education/adult-learner-360*.

31. Tierney, S. (2017). *Indiana's Adult Student Outreach and Support* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/Tierney_SHEEO%20Adult%20Promise%20Presentation.pdf*.

MAINE

Maine: Maine recently passed attainment goal legislation which states that "by 2025, 60 percent of Mainers will hold education and workforce credentials that position Maine and its families for success."[32] The state has a ways to go – the current attainment rate is 43 percent.[33] Maine also has the oldest population in the nation, which means that adult learner engagement and success is even more critical. The state's attainment goal is tied to their strategic plan, which highlights the Maine Adult Promise Program as one of its four main policy priorities (the others being Strong Foundations, Future Success, and New Opportunities). By featuring the Adult Promise Program prominently in its strategic plan and initiative, Maine can promote the program to a broad coalition of stakeholders including universities, community colleges, the business community, and localities within the state.

MINNESOTA

Minnesota: The Minnesota Office of Higher Education and Minnesota State system are working together to support a series of Adult Promise Program pilots that will reengage adult learners with some college but no degree at four institutions: Inver Hills Community College, Lake Superior College, Riverland Community College, and South Central College.[34] These institutions were selected through a competitive RFP process in which they had to demonstrate a commitment to serving adult learners, describe the various supports and services in place that most effectively serve adult learners, and outline how they would improve upon them. Through this RFP process, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education and Minnesota State were able to deeply engage with these institutions and understand more thoroughly how they are focusing efforts on adult student success. As these institutions implement Adult Promise Programs, our members are sharing best practices and lessons learned with the other community colleges in Minnesota using a communities of practice model. This model will enable scaling of successful programs statewide to improve how institutions serve adult students across the state.

32. Maine Spark. (2018). Maine Spark: Connect to Your Future.
Retrieved from *http://mainespark.me/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/MS_FactSheet-Ver10-edited062218.pdf*.

33. Maine Spark. (2018). Maine Spark: Connect to Your Future, Policy Priorities.
Retrieved from *http://mainespark.me/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MS-PolicyPriorities-LetterSize-FNL-2.pdf*.

34. Minnesota Office of Higher Education. (n.d.). MN Reconnect Pilot Program.
Retrieved from *https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/mPg.cfm?pageID=2313*.

OKLAHOMA

Oklahoma: In Oklahoma, the Adult Promise Program (Reach Higher: Direct Complete) will be squarely focused on economic and workforce needs, providing funding and support to adults with some college but no degree who return to complete a certificate or degree connected to jobs on *Oklahoma's 100 Critical Occupations* list.[35] Because Oklahoma lacks a strong, well-funded financial aid program, it is critical to identify and commit other partners to fund the last-dollar scholarship component of their program. Over the last year, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education has engaged the business community, Native American education offices, philanthropic organizations, other state agencies, and state colleges and universities to explore funding the initiative and obtaining buy-in and support from these multiple partners.[36]

WASHINGTON

Washington: Unlike Oklahoma, Washington has a well-funded state grant program for which adults are eligible.[37] The State Need Grant will be leveraged to provide a financial commitment to returning adult learners as part of the Adult Reengagement Framework. Washington is also developing a MicroGrant to cover small dollar pre-enrollment barriers. Like Minnesota, Washington institutions have several adult-centered programs and services at postsecondary institutions that can be shared, scaled and expanded to support returning adults. An interactive web-based tool is being developed with the Workforce Board to match prospective returning adults to programs and provide their contact information to campuses. The statewide marketing campaign is also an opportunity to engage policymakers and the broader public about the critical economic importance of increased adult learner attainment in Washington.[38]

35. Reach Higher Oklahoma. (2017). Oklahoma's Adult Promise Initiative.
    Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/Oklahoma%20one-pager-June%202017.pdf*.

36. Oklahoma State System of Higher Education. (2017). SHEEO Adult Promise Grant Proposal Summary.
    Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/Oklahoma-Grant%20summary.pdf*.

37. Washington Student Achievement Council. (2017). Fully Fund State Need Grant.
    Retrieved from *https://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2017.sap.sng.handout.pdf*.

38. Washington Student Achievement Council. (n.d.). Program Plan for Washington.
    Retrieved from *http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/Program%20plans%20for%20pilot%20states%20WA.pdf*.

CONCLUSION

An Adult Promise Program is more than just a financial commitment to provide free tuition and fees to adults. The political viability of promise programs makes them an excellent vehicle for delivering additional supports and services to adult learners, who are currently underserved in higher education. While we aim to help clarify the definition of an Adult Promise Program, we recognize that these programs are not one-size-fits-all. The focus, messaging, financial commitment, and student support services differ based on each state's current landscape, giving each pilot state a slightly different focus. States considering an Adult Promise Program are encouraged to read SHEEO's *Design Template*, which delves deeper into the specific steps and considerations necessary to develop a strong program.

ABOUT THE STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) is the national association of the chief executives of statewide governing, policy, and coordinating boards of postsecondary education. Founded in 1954, SHEEO serves its members as an advocate for state policy leadership, a liaison between states and the federal government, and a vehicle for learning from and collaborating with peers. SHEEO also serves as a manager of multistate teams and as a source of information and analysis on educational and public policy issues. Together with its members, SHEEO advances public policies and academic practices that enable Americans to attain education beyond high school and achieve success in the 21st century economy.

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ABOUT LUMINA FOUNDATION

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. The foundation's goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.