

Statewide college promise programs



Executive Summary

College promise programs direct scholarship dollars to a specific state, region or institution with the goal of increasing higher education attainment and encouraging local economic development. The design of promise programs impacts which students are able to access scholarship funds, as well as college enrollment, completion and workforce development within a region. Missouri's primary statewide promise program is the [A+ Scholarship](#), which funds tuition and fees at participating public community colleges and vocational/technical schools for eligible graduates of A+ high schools.

Highlights

- Most promise scholarships are last-dollar programs that require students to use all available public funds (e.g., Pell grants) prior to being awarded additional funding. Low-income students are the least likely to receive state funds in last-dollar programs.
- Eligibility requirements (e.g., GPA, residency) and additional program requirements (e.g., credit hours, community service) also influence what populations benefit most from promise programs.
- Promise scholarships are most often associated with increased college enrollment and completion. Local, first-dollar programs (e.g., Kalamazoo Promise) have demonstrated the strongest positive effects for low-income, non-White and female students.
- Missouri's A+ Scholarship has been associated with increased two-year college enrollment and completion among eligible students, but slightly reduced four-year college enrollment in the state.

Limitations

- Due to significantly different designs between statewide promise programs, there has not yet been enough research to evaluate which elements of promise program design are most important to increase college access and completion.
- Additional research, particularly in Missouri, is needed to understand the effect of statewide promise programs on keeping students in the state for college and future job opportunities.

Research Background

Program design

As of April 2020, there are 403 place-based scholarship programs that provide financial awards to students pursuing college education in a defined geographic area.¹ Statewide promise programs, or place-based scholarships supported by state dollars, exist in over 20 states, including Missouri. Missouri's primary statewide promise program is the [A+ Scholarship](#), which funds tuition and fees at participating public community colleges and vocational/technical schools for eligible graduates of A+ high schools. The design of statewide promise programs influences their potential impacts on college access, affordability and workforce development in several ways.²⁻⁶

First vs. last-dollar programs: First-dollar programs give scholarship recipients their financial award before they receive any other grant or award funding. In contrast, last-dollar programs, such as Missouri's A+ Scholarship Program, require that students use all available public funds (e.g., Pell grants) prior to being awarded additional funding. Most statewide promise programs are last-dollar scholarships, which means that low-income students who have received the maximum Pell grant allocation often receive fewer or no state scholarship funds, even if they meet the eligibility qualifications of the promise program. In addition to providing financial aid, some state promise programs provide additional student support services like mentoring, counseling, early registration and summer bridge programs. In most last-dollar programs, eligible students whose tuition is fully covered by federal Pell grants typically cannot access the program support available to state promise program participants.

High school student eligibility: Many promise programs have financial and/or merit-based requirements. Other common eligibility requirements include state residency, years of attendance of in-state public schools, and [FAFSA completion](#). Missouri's A+ program, for example, is a merit-based program that is available to students who (1) are US citizens or permanent residents, (2) graduate from an A+ school that they attended for at least two years, (3) have a 95% overall high school attendance record, (4) complete fifty hours of unpaid tutoring or mentoring during high school, (5) avoid the use of drugs and alcohol, (6) receive a proficient or advanced score on the algebra I end of course exam and (7) graduate with an unweighted GPA of at least 2.5 on a 4.0 scale. Several [accommodations](#) have been made to these requirements (e.g., [GPA requirements for A+ scholarships](#)) due to COVID-19. While not eligible for the A+ Scholarship, adult learners in Missouri may be eligible for the [Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant](#).

Program requirements: Programs often require students to maintain a certain level of enrollment, performance and/or community service after college enrollment. Students with additional work and family obligations outside of school may have the most difficulty meeting these obligations. A+ students in Missouri who are enrolled in college must maintain 12 semester credit hours (6

hours during the summer), over a 2.0 cumulative GPA in their first fall semester and over a 2.5 cumulative GPA thereafter.

Program outcomes

Promise programs can increase college enrollment, although the magnitude of the effect depends on the program.² Participation in the [Tennessee Promise](#) Program, for example, is associated with increased community college enrollment due to the reduced financial burden of attending college for some students.⁷ However, some students reported that the various program requirements (e.g., pre-enrollment meetings, community service, full-time enrollment) created barriers to participation in the program. Local promise programs that provide scholarships to students in a specific county or school district are typically better studied than statewide programs. For example, there is substantial evidence that the first-dollar Kalamazoo Promise increases college enrollment and completion, especially among women, low-income and non-White students.⁸⁻¹⁰

In general, there is little research about how promise programs impact student retention in-state after graduation and other community outcomes. The announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise Program was associated with reduced movement out of Kalamazoo Public Schools, which maintains talent in the school district and supports the retention of a skilled potential workforce in the region.¹⁰ However, in a recent study of three citywide college promise programs in Wisconsin, Connecticut and New York, the effects of promise programs on in- and out-of-region mobility varied significantly.¹¹ Higher income families were most likely to move into a promise-targeted region, likely due to the costs associated with moving. In addition to the economic and community effects, recent evidence also suggests that promise programs can influence institutional spending by directing some funding away from instruction and academic support to institutional grant funding.¹²

Missouri's A+ Scholarship: Missouri's A+ Program is designed to improve high school quality and increase community college enrollment in the state. A+ Schools receive additional state funding for meeting specific graduation and career development standards ([RSMo. 160.545](#)); A+ scholarship recipients receive state funding to attend public community college or vocational/technical school.

In a review of Missouri's A+ Program between 2008-13, the Missouri Department of Higher Education reported that, compared to students who did not receive the A+ scholarship, A+ students attending two-year institutions were more likely to graduate within three years and transfer to a four-year institution.¹³ Additional research supports that the students from A+ Schools have increased college enrollment and completion at two-year institutions, but also an almost 4% decrease in four-year college-going rates.¹⁴ The enrollment effects of the Missouri A+ Program suggest that it most impacts students who would not have gone to college and those who would have chosen other postsecondary institutions (e.g., four-year institutions, out-of-state

schools).^{14,15} Because most research depends on aggregated school data, additional research is needed to understand the student-level impacts of the A+ program and how it varies based on race, gender and income.

Recently, demographics for A+ Award recipients were obtained via a legislative request to the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development. The median family income for A+ award recipients in 2019-20 was \$91,550. A majority of A+ scholarship awards (91%) are awarded to White students. Relative to their share of Missouri's overall population (12%), Black/African American students receive disproportionately fewer A+ awards (3%).¹⁶

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