



A “free college” movement is sweeping the nation. California is one of more than a dozen states that have adopted some kind of program celebrated as making college free for students. If designed well, a free college program has the opportunity to dramatically improve college-going rates, reduce the cost of college, and increase student success. Unfortunately, free rarely means free, and most of these programs focus primarily on covering tuition rather than the full cost of college. This can unintentionally perpetuate barriers to postsecondary access and success for students with the highest financial need.

In this Equity Alert, we provide an overview of an equity-driven free college framework created by our Washington DC-based colleagues at The Education Trust, and share findings from applying the framework to California’s new statewide program, the California College Promise. We also highlight and offer considerations for taking advantage of two unique aspects of the program that give districts flexibility in allocating the funding.

### CALIFORNIA AND FREE COLLEGE

California has a history of leading the nation in providing support for low-income students to attend public colleges or universities in the state tuition-free, long before the recent wave of free college proposals and programs. Currently, at the University of California and California State University, nearly 60 percent of students attend without paying tuition or fees due to institutional and state financial aid.<sup>1</sup> At the California Community Colleges, the Board of Governors Fee Waiver (BOGFW), recently renamed the California College Promise Grant, provides a full fee (tuition) waiver for all low-income students, reaching 42% of students in the system.<sup>2</sup> Every low-income student, regardless of their enrollment status (i.e., full or part-time course load) or whether they are a first-time or returning adult student can receive the College Promise Grant for an unlimited time period as long as they make satisfactory academic progress.<sup>3</sup> Although established in 1984, in contemporary terms, the California College Promise Grant is a particularly generous free college program for community college students.

Unfortunately, as any college student knows, tuition is just one piece of what it costs to attend college. Even with existing tuition grants and waivers, low-income students in our state have significant unmet financial resources to cover expenses such as housing, food, and textbooks. Despite a longstanding commitment to supporting the lowest-income students, a college education in California is nowhere near free. It is crucial that the state adopt thoughtful policies that aim to avoid these pitfalls and tear down the barriers facing students with the most financial need.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY-DRIVEN FREE COLLEGE POLICY

Our colleagues at The Education Trust recently released [A Promise Fulfilled](#), which includes an *equity-centered* framework to help policymakers and advocates understand how free college programs can be designed to advance opportunity and success for the students most challenged by the affordability crisis.

The Education Trust’s framework includes 8 criteria that should be used to determine whether a free college policy is truly equitable. These criteria address what costs a free college program covers, who is eligible for the program, and whether or not recipients have to pay back any of the grant aid (for an explanation and application of each criterion, visit [www.edtru.st/2OsF5qG](http://www.edtru.st/2OsF5qG)). State legislators and decision-makers should answer these questions when considering or seeking to improve free college policies:

1. Does the program help low-income students cover living expenses (i.e., non-tuition costs)?
2. Does the program cover the cost of fees (in addition to the cost of tuition)?
3. Does the program cover the cost of tuition for at least four years of college?
4. Does the program cover the cost of tuition for bachelor’s degree programs at four-year institutions?

5. Does the program provide benefits for adult and returning students?
6. Does the program impose GPA requirements beyond what is needed to maintain eligibility for federal financial aid?
7. Does the program impose enrollment intensity or credit accumulation requirements beyond what is needed to maintain eligibility for federal financial aid?
8. Does the program demand the repayment of aid?

**CALIFORNIA'S COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAM ONLY SATISFIES 3 OF 8 EQUITY-FOCUSED FREE COLLEGE CRITERIA**

Authorized in 2017 pursuant to Assembly Bill (AB) 19 and funded through the 2018-19 Budget Act, the California College Promise provides funding to community college districts that they may use to waive all or some of the fees for first-time, full-time community college students.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the current program only meets 3 of the 8 equity-focused criteria (see Figure 1 below), leaving significant room for improvement.

**Figure 1: The Education Trust's Analysis of the California College Promise<sup>5</sup>**

CRITERIA	GRADE	EXPLANATION
Living Costs for Low-Income Students	✓	The program allows institutions to waive fees rather than providing direct aid to students. Program beneficiaries receiving non-tuition restricted grants are able to use those grants to cover living costs.
Fees for All Recipients	✗	Participating institutions determine which fees, if any, to waive.
At Least 4 Years of College	✗	The program covers a maximum of one academic year.
Tuition at 4-Year Colleges	✗	The program does not include four-year institutions.
Adult and Returning Students	✗	Only first-time students are eligible.
Students with a 2.0 GPA	✓	The program does not include GPA requirements beyond satisfactory academic progress for renewal.
Students Enrolling Half Time	✗	Only full-time students are eligible.
Does It Stay a Grant Forever	✓	Aid is never required to be repaid.

The California College Promise is unique in that it gives districts flexibility to determine whether and how they use the funding to support students. District leaders will likely celebrate the opportunity to choose and feel political pressure to make college “free”, but we ask that they consider the equity implications of distributing the funding in two key ways:

- **Consideration 1:** If districts use California College Promise funds, they are not required to eliminate the cost of tuition for all students. Rather than extend free tuition to less needy students, **we urge leaders to use the flexibility in the program to address the significant unmet financial need of low-income students.** For students with the highest financial need, living expenses and other non-tuition costs are considerable barriers to access and success in an expensive state like California.
- **Consideration 2:** If a student enrolls part-time or withdraws, it is a local decision whether a student must repay aid. **Students should not be asked to repay California College Promise aid under any circumstances.** This sort of bait-and-switch provision will disproportionately impact students of color and low-income students.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In addition to considering the recommendations above, we urge policymakers to apply this equity-driven framework when refining the California College Promise and designing college affordability policies. We appreciate the new investment in and excitement about higher education, and hope future investments will be directed to the highest-need students, with an emphasis on reducing their debt burden and supporting their success. Doing so will help ensure that college is more affordable for students with the highest need and make certain that we do not exacerbate existing inequities.

## HOW CAN YOU GET ENGAGED?

- Join Ed Trust–West to receive updates and resources and to learn more about actions you can take to support free college implementation and other education equity issues: [www.edtrustwest.org/join](http://www.edtrustwest.org/join).
- Share this Equity Snapshot with your neighbors, colleagues, and other equity champions in your community.
- Contact your local elected representative and offer your thoughts on California's free college proposal: <http://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov/>.
- Attend a rally or hearing in Sacramento and speak up during public comment opportunities at a [Board of Governors' meeting](#).
- To learn more about The Education Trust–West's free college priorities, please reach out to us at [information@edtrustwest.org](mailto:information@edtrustwest.org).
- For more on The Education Trust's framework and to contact the authors, Dr. Tiffany Jones and Katie Berger, please visit <http://edtrust.org/freecollege>.
- Share this Equity Snapshot on social media using the hashtags #CAHigherEd #FreeCollege #CollegePromise and connect with us:



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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nico Savidge, “Getting Free College Tuition in California: A Quick Guide” (EdSource, 2018). <https://edsources.org/2018/getting-free-college-tuition-in-california-a-quick-guide/599039>

<sup>2</sup> Amy Rose, “California’s College Promise: Moving Beyond the Call for Free College for All” (California Budget & Policy Center, 2018). <https://calbudgetcenter.org/blog/californias-college-promise-moving-beyond-the-call-for-free-college-for-all/>

<sup>3</sup> Stacy Fisher, “The California Community Colleges Board of Governors Fee Waiver: A Comparison of State Aid Programs” (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2016). <http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/Reports/2016-CCCCO-BOG-FeeWaiver-Report-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Although similar in name, the California College Promise should not be confused with the more generous and existing California College Promise Grant (formerly BOGFW).

<sup>5</sup> Tiffany Jones and Katie Berger, “A Promise Fulfilled” (The Education Trust, 2018). <https://s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/edtrustmain/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/06112542/A-Promise-Fulfilled-Detailed-Criteria-9.6-18.pdf>