

# PROMISES TO KEEP: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST YEAR OF OREGON PROMISE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Oregon Promise seeks to help newly graduated high school students and recent GED recipients pursue higher education by covering most of the cost of attending a community college in the state of Oregon. The grant was approved by the Oregon State Legislature in 2015 and first came available to students in Fall 2016. The grant is expected to have served nearly 6,500 students in the first year with a minimum of \$1,000 and a maximum of \$3,248 being awarded to each student who qualified for the grant (minus a \$50 co-pay per term).<sup>1</sup> Oregon Promise is administered by Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC).

This analysis explores the role that Oregon Promise has played in the lives of the first cohort of students, advisors and administrators to utilize the program. Since its conception, this study has been guided by two main research questions: 1) did Oregon Promise expand enrollment, especially for specific demographics, among students who would have otherwise not gone to college; and 2) how have outreach, messaging, and specific supporting programs, impacted student experiences? In an attempt to answer these questions, our study relied on a combination of focus groups and interviews (both in person as well as over the phone) with Oregon Promise recipients as well as administrators and advisors from various community colleges throughout the state of Oregon. This study builds on the work of Education Northwest's 2016 study *Fulfilling the Promise? Early Findings on Oregon's New College Grant Program*.

## FINDINGS:

The key findings we uncovered during our study:

1. Without Oregon Promise, many students we talked to would:
  - a. Be working more hours at their job;
  - b. Have more student debt (by way of school loans);
  - c. Have taken a year off of school to earn money before beginning college; and/or
  - d. Be attending a four-year university or institution (possibly out of state).
2. Pell recipients frequently thought Oregon Promise covered more of their tuition than it actually did.

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Coordinating Commission (2016). *Oregon Promise: What we know thus far about Senate Bill 81*.

3. Enrollment trends vary widely by college.
4. Oregon Promise increased student mobility.
  - a. Some students were able to move away from home to attend a non-local community college. The rural community colleges in our study experienced a decreased enrollment of recent high school graduates.
5. Oregon Promise does not appear to have affected racial and ethnic diversity on community college campuses.
6. Most students appreciated the support they received as part of their First Year Experience. Students and administrators benefited from the presence of success coaches.
7. Communication between the Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC), advisors, and students was inadequate at first but is improving.
8. Most students first learned about Oregon Promise on their high school campuses through in-person interactions.
9. “Free college” marketing was misleading.
10. Roll-out was confusing and frustrating for students, advisors, and administrators due to inconsistent messaging and a short window for implementation.

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#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

To strengthen the role of Oregon Promise in promoting higher education, we recommend:

1. Avoid marketing Oregon Promise as “free community college” and make sure all outreach material reflects this change.
  - a. Market the program as a grant ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,397 per year (in 2016-17), minus a \$50 co-pay per term.
2. “Continue to invest in targeted outreach to increase awareness and participation”<sup>2</sup>
  - a. Education Northwest made this recommendation, and we find it still applies as most students heard about the program from high school teachers or staff.
3. Promote community college networking to establish best practices for First Year Experience and high school outreach.
4. Decrease the credit minimum from six to four credits per term.  
Most classes are four credits, so this would let a student take a single class.
5. Provide a system for students to take a term off, particularly in cases of emergency.
6. Focus energy on strengthening communication between HECC, administrators, advisors and students.
7. Continue to fund Oregon Promise and its supporting programs.

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<sup>2</sup> Education Northwest (2016). *Fulfilling The Promise? Early Findings on Oregon’s New College Grant Program*.