

The Promise of a Higher Education

SHOULD BE OPEN TO ALL — EVEN THOSE IN PRISON

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THE UNITED STATES HAS THE WORLD'S [LARGEST](#) PRISON SYSTEM.¹ While the U.S. constitutes only 5% of the global population, it has more than 20% of the world's prison population — with nearly [2.3 million](#) people in jails, prisons, and detention centers.² Simply put, we have long had a mass incarceration problem marked by vast [racial disparities](#).³ Black men ages 18 to 19 are 12 times more likely to be imprisoned than White men of the same age, and Black women are imprisoned at twice the rate of White women.

But attitudes about mass incarceration are changing in the U.S. Advocates are rightly calling for criminal justice reform, and the passage of the [FIRST Step Act of 2018](#) was not only a major coup for advocates but a culmination of a bipartisan effort to improve the criminal legal system. At this moment, people on both sides of the [political aisle](#) agree that higher education is a better investment than incarceration, and a "[common-sense strategy](#)" to reduce recidivism is coalescing around expanding access to a quality higher education for incarcerated individuals.⁴

It is easy to understand why. [Research](#) shows that correctional education programs reduce the rate of recidivism by 28% and are [associated](#) with fewer violent incidents in participating prisons.⁵ These programs result in net savings to taxpayers and are significantly more cost-efficient than incarceration.

Currently, there are efforts at the federal level to restore Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated individuals, but states must follow suit by giving incarcerated individuals access to state financial aid — especially as state disinvestment is driving up tuition and Pell Grants are not keeping pace with rising college costs.

In an effort to make college more affordable, numerous states have expanded their financial aid offerings to include free college programs, which promise to make public colleges, especially community colleges, tuition-free for students. Unfortunately, many incarcerated students are shut out of these programs.

Some states restrict their programs to particular groups of students, as a means of holding down costs, or have eligibility requirements — like being a recent high school graduate, attending school full time, and participating in mentorship or community service — that may exclude many low-income, part-time, returning adult, undocumented, and incarcerated students. Nevada's [Promise Scholarship Program](#), for example, requires a student to be a recent high school graduate, attend school full time, and participate in mentorship and community service. Several other states have one or more of these requirements. What's more, many free college programs are "last dollar," meaning they cover only the tuition and fees that are left over after other aid has been applied. As a result, students from low-income backgrounds who qualify for other forms

of need-based aid may receive no additional funds for costs beyond tuition — such as room and board, transportation, child care, and books — which can quickly add up.

If the goal of free college programs is to make college *more affordable* and *more accessible* for *students with the greatest need*, these states may be going about it the wrong way. States should direct aid to students who can least afford to pay, not impose restrictions on them (but more on that later).

Over the last decade, 44 states have set goals to increase the number of residents graduating from college. But to meet these statewide college attainment goals, many states will need to increase attainment among adults from every walk of life — including incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students — and not just recent high school graduates. Unfortunately, many incarcerated students lack the means to pay for college, since they do not have access to federal Pell Grants (except through the U.S. Department of Education's [Second Chance Pell experimental sites initiative](#)). Free college programs could help put higher education within their reach, but only if these programs are designed to be inclusive.

To get a sense of how accessible free college programs are for incarcerated individuals, we reviewed 23 active statewide programs.⁶ The results weren't great. We found that only half of them are designed in a manner that is truly inclusive of incarcerated individuals. These include the following:

1. [California College Promise Grant](#)
(formerly known as Board of Governors [BOG] fee waiver)
2. [California College Promise](#)
3. [Hawaii Community College Promise Grant](#)
4. [Maryland Community College Promise Scholarship](#)
5. [Maryland Guaranteed Access Grant](#)
6. [Nevada Promise Scholarship Program](#)
7. [New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant](#)
8. [Oregon Promise Grant](#)
9. [Rhode Island Promise Grant](#)
10. [South Carolina WINS Scholarship Program](#)
11. [Access Utah Promise Scholarship Program](#)
12. [Washington College Grant](#)

We also learned that nearly half of active statewide free college programs have statutory, regulatory, or practice barriers that explicitly prohibit incarcerated individuals from being eligible. (Our findings echo those of the Vera Institute of Justice, which observed that [more than 30 states](#) bar incarcerated students from applying for state financial aid.)⁷

The few programs that do provide access to students in prison have major caveats. While some allow incarcerated students to apply, program requirements make it all but impossible for those students to successfully participate. The requirements of Maryland's [Community College Promise Scholarship](#) and [Guaranteed Access Grant](#) are unique, in that these programs are intended for students who are enrolled full time in a classroom setting. That effectively means that only incarcerated students who are nearing release and residing in a halfway house can qualify. The terms of the [Rhode Island Promise](#) program are particularly strict, as students must enroll directly out of high school and must commit to live and work in the state after graduating and/or continue their education in Rhode Island.

“Over the last decade, 44 states have set goals to increase the number of residents graduating from college. But to meet these statewide college attainment goals, many states will need to increase attainment among adults from every walk of life — including incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students — and not just recent high school graduates.”

THERE ARE HIDDEN BARRIERS FOR INCARCERATED STUDENTS APPLYING FOR FREE COLLEGE PROGRAMS

Burdensome documentation or residency requirements, which require a student to reside in the state for a certain amount of time before participating in the program, can add another hidden layer of barriers that incarcerated students must overcome to qualify for financial aid in a given state.

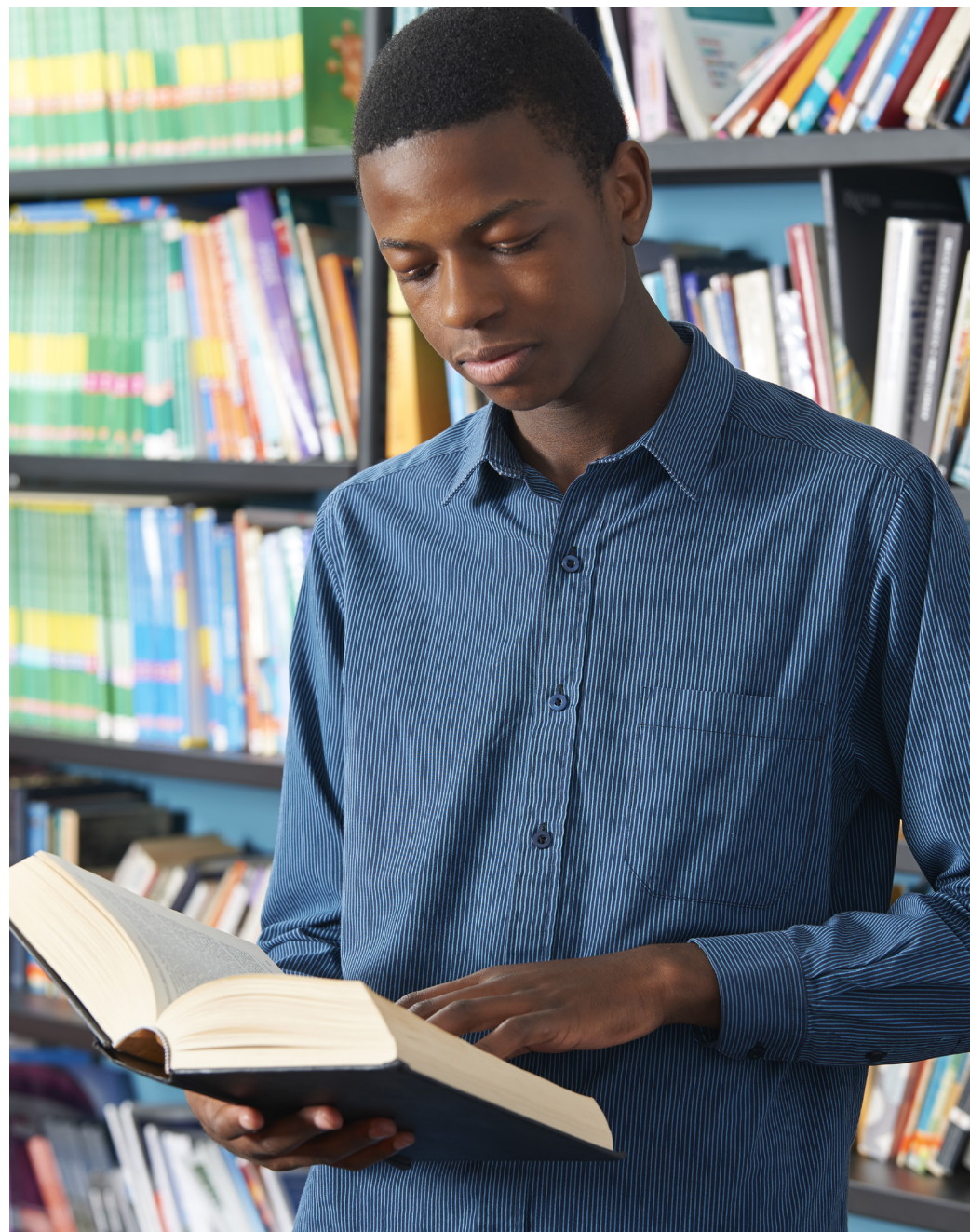
Students incarcerated in states like Maryland, Nevada, and Rhode Island, which have residency requirements for student aid, may have to worry about whether being incarcerated there will count as time in residence. Meanwhile, students who are incarcerated in California, which requires non-native students to show that they intend to make California their permanent home, may have a tough time establishing that intent, since [transfers to and from facilities are common](#).⁸ (Transfers may also make it harder for incarcerated students to complete postsecondary programs.)

Students generally apply for state financial aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) — even if they are not concurrently applying for federal aid. But people in prison may face additional hurdles to completing the FAFSA:

- *Lack of access to the internet.* Very few prisons offer internet access to incarcerated people, so colleges and universities must provide extra support to help aspiring students who are incarcerated submit paper applications.
- *Registering for selective service.* Male financial aid applicants are required to register with the Selective Service Administration by age 26 — in the event that there is a military draft — to qualify for federal financial aid. Although men who are not yet 26 can still register and become eligible for aid, those who are 26 or older and failed to register must go through an appeals process. This requirement is potentially burdensome for incarcerated individuals, who have very limited access to telephone and internet

communication and may, therefore, have a hard time contacting college financial aid offices to explain the extenuating circumstances that prevented them from registering by the age deadline. If passed, a bill that was recently introduced in the House of Representatives ([H.R. 5492](#)) would repeal the requirement that males between the ages of 18 and 26 register for the draft and no longer penalize individuals for prior failure to register with the Selective Service Administration.

- *Income tax verification.* Because students who are incarcerated often have limited access to financial records while in prison, they may struggle to meet income tax verification requirements. Also, students who are incarcerated may find it difficult to collect documents from spouses and parents.
- *Student loans in default.* Students are ineligible for federal financial aid if they have federal student loans in default, and many states have incorporated this requirement into their financial aid programs. About [10%](#) of FAFSAs in the first year of the Second Chance Pell pilot were submitted by applicants with an existing federal student loan in default status.⁹ In comparison, about 2% of FAFSAs in the overall population were submitted by applicants with an existing loan in default status.
- *Limited communication with financial aid offices.* Many financial aid offices communicate entirely by email or through online portals, neither of which is freely available to most incarcerated students, especially before they are enrolled.



SOLUTIONS

States can take several steps to increase access to financial aid and expand postsecondary education in prisons. First, states can remove regulatory, statutory, and practice barriers that keep students from accessing aid. These barriers were documented in a report by Vera: [A Piece of the Puzzle: State Financial Aid for Incarcerated Students](#).¹⁰ States can also act to ensure that colleges apply admissions and enrollment standards equitably for students who are incarcerated and recognize the unique conditions posed by a prison setting. For example, states can work to ensure that colleges do not limit eligibility to exclude those convicted of violent offenses from prison-based education programs. Finally, states can support access to aid — both federal and state — by investing in college navigators and counselors who can help guide incarcerated students through the financial aid application process. [TRIO](#) and veterans' services programs might serve as models for states looking to develop better support for incarcerated students, who, unlike non-incarcerated students, lack easy access to information and assistance.

As the recent 2020 report from The Education Trust — *A Promise Worth Keeping: An Updated Equity-Driven Framework for Free College Programs* — shows, these barriers are not just limited to incarcerated individuals; undocumented students, returning adults, and others may encounter them as well. As the popularity of free college programs grows, advocates should support their creation, while ensuring that their eligibility requirements are equitable and do not undermine participation or efforts to increase college access for students impacted by the criminal legal system. Programs in Hawaii and New Jersey can serve as models for what inclusive policies look like.

If we as a nation don't purposefully invest in our most vulnerable students, we will be denying these students an opportunity to better their lives. We will also be denying our country the benefit of their contributions. Free college programs should be designed and implemented to advance an equitable and just higher education system that is open to *all* students — including those who are incarcerated.



A SPOTLIGHT ON TENNESSEE

TENNESSEE PIONEERED THE IDEA OF FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOR STATE RESIDENTS, which was born out of a larger initiative called [Drive to 55](#). The aim of Drive to 55 was to equip 55% of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential by the year 2025. While the initial goal was an ambitious one, it was, unfortunately, not designed to ensure equity, and many of the students who stood to benefit most — adult and returning students, undocumented students, incarcerated students, and more — were left out. [Tennessee Reconnect](#) addressed some of these concerns by providing the same benefits as [Tennessee Promise](#), a last-dollar scholarship that covers tuition and fees for Tennessee high school graduates attending a community or technical college, but for adult and returning students — making Tennessee the first state to do so. However, Tennessee should continue this momentum by ensuring incarcerated students — who have been excluded from similar programs across the nation — have access to both of their state promise programs.

This matters for a state like Tennessee, which has about [24,000 Tennesseans](#) incarcerated in state and local facilities — with about 44.1% of that incarcerated population made up of African American and Latino men.¹¹ Moreover, according to a report by the [U.S. Department of Education](#), from 1989-1990 to 2012-2013, Tennessee state and local appropriations for correctional facilities rose by 89%, while state and local appropriations for higher education remained stagnant.¹²

The Tennessee legislature has had opportunities to remove provisions from the state law that made incarcerated people ineligible for financial assistance. These bills ([HB0512/SB1362](#)) would have given incarcerated students, who were otherwise eligible, access to TN Promise and Reconnect.

Yet, the common objection to these bills was the same [ill-informed argument](#) heard from Gov. William Weld of Massachusetts back in the 1980s: “We’ve got to stop giving a free college education to prison inmates, or else the people who cannot afford to go to college are going to start committing crimes so they can get sent to prison to get a free education!”¹³ This is the wrong mentality. Education isn’t a privilege; it’s a right. If, as Horace Mann said, “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance-wheel of the social machinery,” then why wouldn’t policymakers want people who need higher education to help transform and renew their lives and their communities to have the same access to educational programming as everyone else? Furthermore, evidence shows that [education is a better investment than incarceration](#).¹⁴ If Tennessee invested in incarcerated students and provided them access to state financial aid, more students could enroll in postsecondary courses, become more upwardly mobile, and help support the Drive to 55 initiative.

Tennessee must build on the great work that was begun by the governor’s office and organizations like the [Tennessee Higher Education Initiative](#), which funds and coordinates on-site degree-bearing college programs for incarcerated individuals in Tennessee prisons to ensure that they have access to postsecondary education credentials, such as associate degrees and technical certificates. Simply put, giving incarcerated individuals access to a postsecondary education could once again make Tennessee a leader in boosting educational attainment levels.

FAST FACTS ABOUT FREE COLLEGE PROGRAMS¹⁵

STATE	ARE INCARCERATED STUDENTS ELIGIBLE? (Y/N)	ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS	STATUTORY / REGULATORY BARRIERS	HIDDEN BARRIER(S)	POST-COMPLETION OBLIGATIONS
1. California College Promise Grant (formerly known as BOG fee waiver)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *	<p>Must plan to attend or currently be attending a California community college.</p> <p>Must be considered a resident OR be exempt from non-resident fees under the California Dream Act.</p> <p>Must complete and submit either FAFSA or California Dream Act application.</p> <p>Must have financial need.</p>		Must be considered a resident or be exempt from non-resident fees under the California Dream Act.	None
2. California College Promise Program	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *	<p>Must be a first-time college student with no college experience.</p> <p>Must enroll as a full-time student, defined as 12 or more semester units or the equivalent.</p> <p>Must be a California resident or eligible for non-resident tuition exemption.</p> <p>Must complete a FAFSA or Dream Act application.</p>		<p>Must be a California resident or eligible for non-resident tuition exemption.</p> <p>Must enroll as a full-time student, defined as 12 or more semester units or the equivalent.</p>	None


* An asterisk next to a check mark denotes that incarcerated students are technically eligible but may have to overcome hidden barriers to participate.

3. Connecticut PACT	✘	<p>Must be a Connecticut high school graduate.</p> <p>Must be a first-time college student.</p> <p>Must fill out the FAFSA application and accept all awards.</p> <p>Must attend community college full time, defined as 12 or more credits per semester.</p> <p>Must participate in a degree or credit-bearing certificate program.</p> <p>Must remain in good academic standing once enrolled.</p>	<p>To be eligible for PACT, a student must be eligible to participate in Title IV aid programs.</p>	<p>Must attend community college full time, defined as 12 or more credits per semester.</p>	None




At this moment, people on both sides of the political aisle agree that higher education is a better investment than incarceration, and a “common-sense strategy” to reduce recidivism is coalescing around expanding access to a quality higher education for incarcerated individuals.





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<p>4. Delaware Student Excellence Equals Degree Scholarship Program</p>		<p>Must become a first-year student immediately after graduating from a Delaware public or non-public high school.</p> <p>Must satisfy Delaware residency policy: students 18 years or older shall have resided in Delaware for at least six consecutive months; shall have been employed full time (at least 30 hours per week) in Delaware for six consecutive months.</p> <p>Must have graduated from a Delaware public or non-public high school with a minimum cumulative average of either 80 or higher on a 100-point scale, a GPA of 2.5 or higher.</p> <p>The student and parent/legal guardian or relative caregiver must verify that the student has not been convicted of any felony.</p> <p>Must satisfy admission requirements of Delaware Tech and must be enrolled in a degree-seeking program.</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA application.</p> <p>Must complete and submit applications for all financial aid programs the student is eligible for, administered by the Delaware Higher Education Commission and Delaware Tech.</p> <p>Must complete the application for admission by the priority application date – April 1st.</p> <p>Must send a final official academic transcript no than June 30th of each year to verify graduation and GPA.</p>	<p>Student and family must certify that the student has not been previously convicted of a felony.¹⁶</p>	<p>Must enroll as a first-year student immediately after the student graduates from a Delaware public or non-public high school.</p> <p>Must satisfy Delaware residency policy: students 18 years or older shall have resided in Delaware for at least six consecutive months; shall have been employed full time (at least 30 hours per week) in Delaware for six consecutive months.</p> <p>Must have graduated from a Delaware public or non-public high school with a minimum cumulative average of either 80 or higher on a 100-point scale, a GPA of 2.5 or higher.</p>	<p>None</p>


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5. Hawaii Community College Promise Program		<p>Must qualify for Hawaii resident tuition.</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA application.</p> <p>Must be enrolled in a classified degree or certificate program with six or more credits per semester.</p> <p>Must maintain satisfactory progress as defined by federal requirements in Title IV of the Higher Education Act.</p> <p>Must be determined by the campus to have unmet direct costs.</p>			None
6. Indiana 21st Century Scholars		<p>Must be a resident of Indiana when applying and receiving the scholarship.</p> <p>Must be one of the following: U.S. citizen or U.S. national; U.S. permanent resident who has a 1-151, 1551, or I-551C.</p> <p>Or be a non-citizen with one of the following designations: refugee, asylum granted, indefinite parole and/or humanitarian parole; Cuban-Haitian entrant, status pending.</p> <p>Must have been enrolled in the seventh or eighth grade at an IN public or private school.</p> <p>Must be a member of a family that meets the income eligibility guidelines.</p>	Students become ineligible for scholarship funds if they commit a crime or illegally use controlled substances. Likely makes incarcerated students ineligible. ¹⁷	<p>Must be a resident of Indiana when applying and receiving the scholarship.</p> <p>Must have been enrolled in the seventh or eighth grade at an Indiana public or private school.</p> <p>Must be eligible to receive federal financial aid.</p>	None
7. Louisiana Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)		<p>Must have a minimum High School GPA of 2.5.</p> <p>Must have minimum ACT Score (or SAT equivalent) of the prior year state average, but never less than a 20.</p> <p>Must enroll full time as a first-time freshman, by the first semester following the first anniversary of high school graduation.</p> <p>Must be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.</p> <p>Must meet TOPS Louisiana residency requirements.</p> <p>Must complete and submit a FAFSA and TOPS application.</p>	Louisiana's program, TOPS, includes a statutory barrier for students who have criminal convictions other than misdemeanor traffic violations. ¹⁸	<p>Must enroll full time as a first-time freshman, by the first semester following the first anniversary of high school graduation.</p> <p>Must meet TOPS Louisiana residency requirements.</p>	None


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<p>8. Maryland Community College Promise Scholarship</p>	<p> *</p>	<p>Must be eligible for in-state tuition.</p> <p>Must enroll in a vocational, certificate, or associate degree program or participate in a registered apprenticeship at a community college in the state within two years after graduating from high school or completing a GED in the state.</p> <p>Must have a minimum cumulative GPA of at least 2.3 on a 4.0 scale or its equivalent at the end of the first semester of their senior year in high school.</p> <p>Must have an annual adjusted gross income of not more than \$100,000 in a single-parent household or \$150,000 in a two-parent household.</p> <p>Must enroll in at least 12 credit hours per semester or a sequence of credit or non-credit hours that leads to licensure certification or participate in a registered apprenticeship program.</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA application.</p>		<p>Must be eligible for in-state tuition.</p> <p>Must enroll in a vocational, certificate, or associate degree program or participate in a registered apprenticeship at a community college in the state within two years after graduating from high school or completing a GED in the state.</p> <p>Must enroll in at least 12 credit hours per semester or a sequence of credit or non-credit hours that leads to licensure certification or participate in a registered apprenticeship program.</p>	
<p>9. Maryland Guaranteed Access Grant</p>	<p> *</p>	<p>Must be eligible for in-state tuition.</p> <p>Must complete and submit the Maryland State Financial Aid Application (MSFAA).</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA by March 1st.</p> <p>Must demonstrate need and meet certain income requirements.</p> <p>Must enroll at a two-year or four-year Maryland college or university as a full-time (12+ credits per semester), degree-seeking, undergraduate student.</p> <p>Must have an unweighted cumulative 2.5 GPA.</p> <p>Must be under the age of 22 at the time of graduating high school; under the age of 26 at the time of receiving the first award for GED recipients.</p>		<p>Must be eligible for in-state tuition.</p> <p>Must be under the age of 22 at the time of graduating high school; under the age of 26 at the time of receiving the first award for GED recipients.</p> <p>Must enroll at a two-year or four-year Maryland college or university as a full-time (12+ credits per semester), degree-seeking, undergraduate student.</p>	<p>None</p>


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<p>10. Mississippi Higher Education Legislative Plan (HELP)</p>		<p>Must be a U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen and registered with the Selective Service, if required.</p> <p>Must be a current legal resident of Mississippi.</p> <p>Must have no criminal record, other than misdemeanor traffic violations.</p> <p>Must be enrolled or accepted for enrollment as a full-time undergraduate student at an eligible Mississippi postsecondary institution, pursuing a first associate or baccalaureate degree.</p> <p>Must complete an online application on or before March 31 and submit all required supporting documents by April 30 of the same year.</p> <p>Must have a cumulative GPA of 2.5 calculated on a 4.0 scale, certified by the high school counselor or another school official.</p> <p>Must have completed 17.5 units of high school coursework that included the College Preparatory Curriculum.</p> <p>Must have an ACT score of at least 20 or a combined score of 950 on the Old SAT Critical Reading and Math sections, a combined score of 1410 on the Old SAT Critical Reading and Math plus Writing sections, or a score of 1020 on the New SAT.</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA application and be Pell-eligible.</p> <p>Must not currently be in default on federal or state education loan or owe a repayment on a federal or state grant.</p> <p>Must meet any other general requirements for admission and student financial aid at the student's eligible institution of choice.</p> <p>Must be in compliance with the terms of federal and other state aid programs.</p>	<p>Students with criminal records are not eligible for these scholarships.¹⁹</p>	<p>Must be a current legal resident of Mississippi.</p> <p>Must have completed 17.5 units of high school coursework that included the College Preparatory Curriculum.</p> <p>Must not currently be in default on federal or state education loan or owe a repayment on a federal or state grant.</p> <p>Must be Pell-eligible.</p>	<p>None</p>


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<p>11. Missouri A+ Scholarship Program</p>		<p>For “initial postsecondary students:”²⁰</p> <p>Must enroll and attend full time at a participating public community college or vocational/technical school, or private two-year vocational/technical school. (Students who have a disability, as defined by Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and are unable to enroll full time because of their disability but are enrolled in at least six credit hours, may be considered to be enrolled full time.)</p> <p>Must be seeking a degree or certificate at the school in which the student is enrolled.</p> <p>Must not be pursuing a degree or certificate in theology or divinity.</p> <p>Must not have a criminal record preventing receipt of federal Title IV student financial aid.</p> <p>Must make a good faith effort to secure all available federal financial aid by completing the FAFSA.</p> <p>Must achieve at least a 2.0 cumulative grade point on a 4.0 scale at the end of the fall semester.</p> <p>Must complete 12 semester credit hours or the equivalent (six hours during the summer term) each term in which student receives an A+ award. Students in clock-hour programs must complete 90% of the clock hours required for the applicable federal payment period.</p>	<p>The agency regulations require that students be eligible for federal Title IV financial aid to be considered for the state scholarship. Incarcerated students are eligible for some Title IV programs, but not others, and so their eligibility for A+ Scholarships is unclear.²¹</p>	<p>Must not have a criminal record preventing receipt of federal Title IV student financial aid.</p> <p>Must enroll and attend full time at a participating public community college or vocational/technical school, or private two-year vocational/technical school.</p>	<p>None</p>

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<p>12. Nevada Promise Program</p>	<p> *</p>	<p>Must be a resident of Nevada, less than 20 years of age, and have not previously been awarded an associate degree or bachelor's degree.</p> <p>Must have a high school diploma awarded by a public or private high school located in this state or public high school that is located in a county that borders this state and accepts pupils who are residents of this state.</p> <p>Must not be in default on any federal student loans or owe a refund to any federal program that provides aid to students.</p> <p>Must complete the FAFSA application.</p> <p>Must apply to the participating community college.</p> <p>Must attend at least one training meeting held by a participating community college or local partnering organization.</p> <p>Must meet at least once with the mentor assigned to the student.</p> <p>Must complete at least 20 hours of community service and submit to the participating community college verification of the completion of that community service.</p> <p>Must enroll in or plan to enroll in at least 12 semester credit hours in an associate degree program, a bachelor's degree program, or a certificate of achievement program at a participating community college for each semester of the school year immediately following the school year in which the student was awarded a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma or equivalent document.</p>		<p>Must be a resident of Nevada, less than 20 years of age.</p> <p>Must have a high school diploma awarded by a public or private high school located in this state or public high school that is located in a county that borders this state and accepts pupils who are residents of this state.</p> <p>Must not be in default on any federal student loans or owe a refund to any federal program that provides aid to students.</p> <p>Must attend at least one training meeting held by a participating community college or local partnering organization.</p> <p>Must meet at least once with the mentor assigned to the student.</p> <p>Must complete at least 20 hours of community service.</p> <p>Must enroll in or plan to enroll in at least 12 semester credit hours in an associate degree program, a bachelor's degree program, or a certificate of achievement program at a participating community college for each semester of the school year immediately following the school year in which the student was awarded a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma or equivalent document.</p>	<p>None</p>


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<p>13. New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant</p>		<p>Must enroll in at least six credits at any community college.</p> <p>Must not have a prior college degree.</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA or the New Jersey Alternative Financial Aid Application.</p> <p>Must meet the institution's standards for satisfactory academic progress and make satisfactory academic progress.</p> <p>Must have a total household adjusted gross income between \$0 - \$65,000.</p>			<p>None</p>


Nearly half of active statewide free college programs have statutory, regulatory, or practice barriers that explicitly prohibit incarcerated individuals from being eligible. The few programs that do provide access to students in prison have major caveats. While some allow incarcerated students to apply, program requirements make it all but impossible for those students to successfully participate.




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<p>14. New York Excelsior Scholarship</p>		<p>Must be a resident of New York and have resided in New York for 12 continuous months before the beginning of the term.</p> <p>Must be a U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen.</p> <p>Must have either graduated from high school in the United States, earned a high school equivalency diploma, or passed a federally approved “Ability to Benefit” test, as defined by the Commissioner of the State Education Department.</p> <p>Must have a combined federal adjusted gross income of \$125,000 or less.</p> <p>Must be pursuing an undergraduate degree at a SUNY or CUNY college, including community colleges and the statutory colleges at Cornell University and Alfred University.</p> <p>Must be enrolled in at least 12 credits per term and complete at least 30 credits each year (successively), applicable toward student’s degree program through continuous study, with no break in enrollment, except for certain reasons that can be documented.</p> <p>If the student attended college before the 2019-20 academic year, said student must have earned at least 30 credits each year (successively), applicable toward his or her degree program before applying for an Excelsior Scholarship.</p> <p>Must not be in default on a student loan made under any New York or federal education loan program, or behind on repayment.</p> <p>Must execute a contract agreeing to reside in NY for the length of time the award was received, and, if employed during such time, be employed in NY.</p>	<p>Incarcerated students are not eligible for state financial aid.²²</p>	<p>Must be a resident of New York and have resided in New York for 12 continuous months before the beginning of the term.</p> <p>Must not be in default on a student loan made under any NY or federal education loan program, or behind on repayment.</p> <p>Must be enrolled in at least 12 credits per term and complete at least 30 credits each year (successively), applicable toward student’s degree program through continuous study, with no break in enrollment, except for certain reasons that can be documented.</p>	<p>Must execute a contract agreeing to reside in New York for the length of time the award was received, and, if employed during such time, be employed in New York.</p>
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<p>15. Oklahoma Promise Program</p>		<p>Must be a resident of Oklahoma or enrolled in a school district located in the state that serves students who reside in both Oklahoma and an adjacent state.</p> <p>Must be a U.S. citizen or lawfully present in the U.S.</p> <p>Must have a record of satisfactory compliance.</p> <p>Must have graduated within the previous three years from a high school accredited by the State Board of Education, or the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics with a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA on a 4.0 scale.</p> <p>Must have graduated within the previous three years from a high school accredited by the State Board of Education with a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA on a 4.0 scale and have achieved a composite score of 22 or higher on the ACT.</p> <p>Must have satisfactorily completed within the previous three years an educational program that was provided through a means other than a public or private school and achieved a composite score of 22 or higher on the ACT.</p> <p>Must have completed the curricular requirements for admission to an institution within The Oklahoma State System of Higher Education and one additional unit or set of competencies in a course that meets college admission requirements.</p> <p>Must have satisfied admission standards as determined by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education for first-time entering students for the appropriate type of institution, or, if attending a private institution, have satisfied admission standards as determined by the private institution.</p> <p>Must have secured admission to, and be enrolled in, an institution that is a member of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, a postsecondary vocational-technical program offered by a technology center or school that meets the eligibility requirements for federal student financial aid, or a private institution of higher learning located within this state.</p>	<p>The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education has promulgated regulations barring students incarcerated in state, federal, or private correctional facilities from receiving benefits from the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access (Oklahoma's Promise) program.²³</p>	<p>Must be a resident of Oklahoma or enrolled in a school district located in the state that serves students who reside in both Oklahoma and an adjacent state.</p> <p>Must have graduated within the previous three years from a high school accredited by the State Board of Education, or the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics with a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA on a 4.0 scale.</p>	<p>None</p>



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<p>16. Oregon Promise</p>		<p>Must complete and submit the Oregon Promise Grant Application by the appropriate deadline and the FAFSA or ORSAA application.</p> <p>Must have been an Oregon resident at least 12 months before college attendance.</p> <p>Must be a recent Oregon high school graduate or GED test graduate.²⁴</p> <p>Must have a 2.5 cumulative high school GPA or higher; or a GED test score of 145 or higher on each test.</p> <p>Must plan to attend at least half-time at an Oregon community college within six months of high school graduation or GED test graduation.</p> <p>Must not have more than 90 college credits completed or attempted.</p>		<p>Must have been an Oregon resident at least 12 months before college attendance.</p>	<p>None</p>
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Research shows that correctional education programs reduce the rate of recidivism by 28% and are associated with fewer violent incidents in participating prisons. These programs result in net savings to taxpayers and are significantly more cost-efficient than incarceration.





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<p>17. Rhode Island Promise</p>		<p>Must be a Rhode Island resident who qualifies for in-state tuition and fees.</p> <p>Must be a recent graduate from high school (public, private, or home school) or earned an HSED/GED.</p> <p>Must be admitted and enrolled in the semester immediately following high school graduation or receipt of HSED/GED.</p> <p>Must have graduated and earned their HSED/GED before 19.</p> <p>Those who graduated from high school at ages 19, 20, or 21, may be eligible if provide documented reasons for late graduation (e.g., repeated a grade, started K-12 late).</p> <p>Must enroll as a full-time student, and take no fewer than 12 credits per semester.</p> <p>Must commit to living and working and/or pursuing continued education in Rhode Island.</p>		<p>Must be a Rhode Island resident who qualifies for in-state tuition and fees.</p> <p>Must be a recent graduate from high school (public, private, or home school) or earned an HSED/GED.</p> <p>Must have graduated and earned their HSED/GED before 19.</p> <p>Students who graduated from high school at ages 19, 20, or 21, may be eligible if they provide documented reasons for late graduation (e.g., repeated a grade, started K-12 late).</p> <p>Must enroll as a full-time student, and take no fewer than 12 credits per semester.</p> <p>Rhode Island has no statute, regulation, or policy that makes incarcerated students ineligible to receive state government aid. However, state higher education institutions distribute much of the financial aid in the state, and it is subject to their additional eligibility requirements.</p>	<p>Must commit to living and working and/or pursuing continued education in Rhode Island.</p>
<p>18. South Carolina WINS Scholarship</p>		<p>Must be receiving a Lottery Tuition Assistance Program Scholarship (LTAP).</p> <p>Must meet the USDA income eligibility guidelines for free and reduced-price meals.</p> <p>Must be enrolled in at least six credit hours per semester.</p> <p>Must be majoring in a critical workforce area as defined by the State Board of Technical and Comprehensive Education.</p>			<p>None</p>

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<p>19. Tennessee Reconnect</p>		<p>Must have been a Tennessee resident for at least one year.</p> <p>Must be a U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen.</p> <p>Must qualify as an independent student on the FAFSA.</p> <p>Must comply with U.S. Selective Service requirements, if applicable.</p> <p>Must not be incarcerated.</p> <p>Must not be in default on a student loan.</p> <p>Must not owe an outstanding balance to an institution.</p> <p>Must be admitted to and enroll in a Tennessee public community college at least part-time (minimum 6 hours) in courses leading to a certificate or associate degree.</p> <p>Must maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA.</p>	<p>Must not be incarcerated.²⁵</p>	<p>Must have been a Tennessee resident for at least one year.</p> <p>Must comply with U.S. Selective Service requirements, if applicable.</p> <p>Must not be in default on a student loan.</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>20. Tennessee Promise</p>		<p>Must complete an online application for the Tennessee Promise program.</p> <p>Must attend full-time.</p> <p>Must complete and submit the FAFSA application by February.</p> <p>Must attend a mandatory meeting led by the local partnering organization. Failure to attend the mandatory meeting will result in loss of the Tennessee Promise scholarship.</p> <p>Must apply to and enroll in an eligible institution.</p> <p>Must complete and report eight hours of community service to the partnering organization by July.</p> <p>Must provide all requested documentation and complete the process of FAFSA verification, as required by institution.</p> <p>Must maintain a 2.0 GPA at a community college or four-year institution.</p>	<p>Must not be incarcerated.²⁶</p>	<p>Must attend full time.</p>	<p>None</p>

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<p>21. Access Utah Promise Scholarship</p>	 *	<p>Must have a high school diploma or equivalent.</p> <p>Must not have previously earned an associate degree or higher postsecondary degree.</p> <p>Must be a resident of the State of Utah under Utah Code 53B-8-102 and Regent Policy R512.</p> <p>Must demonstrate financial need, per sections 4.2 and 4.7.</p> <p>Must accept all other grants, tuition and/or fee waivers, and scholarships offered to attend the institution in which the applicant enrolls.</p> <p>Must maintain academic good standing as defined by the institution the student attends.</p>		<p>Must be a resident of the State of Utah under Utah Code 53B-8-102 and Regent Policy R512.</p>	
<p>22. Washington College Bound Scholarship</p>		<p>Must be a graduate of a Washington State high school with a cumulative 2.0 GPA or higher.</p> <p>Must have no felony convictions.</p> <p>Must complete and submit FAFSA and WASFA (Washington Application for State Financial Aid) beginning senior year.</p> <p>Must be accepted to an eligible college and begin attending within one year of high school graduation.</p> <p>Must meet program state residency requirements.</p>	<p>Students with a felony conviction are not eligible to participate.²⁷</p>	<p>Must be accepted to an eligible college and begin attending within one year of high school graduation.</p>	<p>None</p>

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<p>23. Washington College Grant</p>	<p>✓*</p>	<p>Must be a “needy student” and meet the income cutoff.</p> <p>Or be a former foster youth, a disadvantaged student, or an opportunity internship graduate.</p> <p>Must be enrolled and accepted as an undergraduate student at a participating college.</p> <p>Must be enrolled at least half-time each semester (6 credit hours).</p> <p>Must have a high school diploma or its equivalent.</p> <p>Must maintain satisfactory progress (successful completion of 6 credit hours for each term).</p> <p>Must not pursue a degree in theology.</p> <p>Must submit and complete the FAFSA application.</p> <p>Must certify that the student does not owe a refund or payment on a state or federal grant and is not in default on a loan.</p>		<p>Must certify that the student does not owe a refund or payment on a state or federal grant and is not in default on a loan.</p>	<p>None</p>
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If we as a nation don't purposefully invest in our most vulnerable students, we will be denying these students an opportunity to better their lives. We will also be denying our country the benefit of their contributions.



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ENDNOTES

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- The states reviewed were CA, CT, DE, HI, IN, IA, MD, MO, MS, NV, NJ, NY, OK, OR, RI, SC, TN, UT, WA. To review this information, The Education Trust first reviewed state public documents, including the websites of the agencies overseeing the programs, to determine eligibility requirements. Then, Ed Trust reached out directly to the state agency overseeing each program to verify whether students who are incarcerated were eligible for the program and assess concerns about hidden barriers – such as residency, community service, enrollment intensity requirements, etc.
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- The following active programs were omitted from this report because they were limited only to certain disciplines or areas of study, required a minimum high school GPA of 3.0 or above or a minimum ACT score of 20 or above — or were enacted, funded, and implemented after the completion of our analysis in July 2020: [Arkansas Future Grant](#), [Iowa Future Ready Last-Dollar Scholarship](#), [Indiana Workforce Ready Grant](#), [Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship](#), [Missouri Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant](#), [Michigan Futures for Frontliners](#), [Michigan Reconnect](#), [Montana Promise Grant Program](#), [New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship](#), [Build South Dakota Promise Program](#), [Virginia G3 Program](#), [West Virginia Invests Grant](#), [West Virginia Promise](#), [Wyoming Works Grant](#)
- Del. Code Ann. tit. 14 § 3404A(a)(2).
- Ind. Code §§ 21-12-6-5(a)(4) and 21-12-6-6(a)(5)
- La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 17:5028.
- Miss. Code Ann. § 37-106-75(3)(e).
- High school students and renewal students have different requirements.
- Mo. Code Regs. Ann. tit. 6 §10-2.190(3)(A)(12).
- N.Y. Educ. Law § 661(6)(d).
- Okla. Admin. Code § 610:25-23-5.
- Based on the passage of [HB 2910](#) during the 2019 legislative session, starting January 2020, Oregon Promise provides more flexibility for applicants who are recently released from correctional facilities in Oregon. If a student obtains their high school diploma or GED while in custody and meets certain criteria, they can participate in Oregon Promise if they attend an Oregon community college within 6 months of their release date (rather than their graduation date). <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2019R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/HB2910/Enrolled>
- Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-4-904(6).
- Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-4-904(6).
- Wash. Rev. Code § 28B.118.010.