

Making a Place for Non-Traditional Students in Free, Reduced Price College Programs

MAY 2015 | LAUREN WALIZER

In cities and states across the country, programs offering reduced or no-cost tuition at eligible public institutions of higher education have become increasingly common. CLASP supports President Obama's America's College Promise plan, which would provide two years of tuition- and fee-free community college nationwide. As we noted in [our analysis](#) of this proposal, the president's plan is unique in its inclusion of part-time and older students. Many state and local programs leave out these and other [non-traditional students](#), such as those who are adults, are working, or have families.

Any efforts to design an effective program that would provide low- or no-cost community college must consider and target non-traditional students and the manner in which they participate in higher education, since these students now represent the majority of postsecondary students. For instance, at community colleges, 38 percent of students are age 25 or older,ⁱ 68 percent of students mix their enrollment over the course of a year or enroll less than full-time,ⁱⁱ and virtually all of the poor and low-income students face thousands of dollars in [unmet need](#).

Although many of these grant programs in cities and states are built to serve traditional full-time students enrolling in higher education immediately after high school (or severely limit the eligible population through similar time-restrictive measures),ⁱⁱⁱ in this brief we highlight the few innovative programs that are more accessible for non-traditional students. Some of their program-design elements include: flexibility in the continuity or intensity of enrollment, greater length of time between high school graduation and when grant eligibility expires, types of credential programs eligible, and more expansive grants covering costs beyond tuition and fees.

Tennessee ReConnect

WHAT ARE THE INITIAL ACADEMIC AND RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS?

Less publicized than the Tennessee Promise program for traditional students entering college immediately after high school, the Tennessee ReConnect program is specifically designed to re-engage Tennessee residents age 24 and older. Jointly, Tennessee Promise and Tennessee ReConnect are part of the state's Drive to 55 initiative, which aims to have 55 percent of Tennessee residents with postsecondary training by the year 2025.^{iv} To be eligible to participate in Tennessee ReConnect, residents must have already completed at least 30 credit hours toward an associate's of applied science (AAS) degree at any institution, but have been out of higher education for at least two years. An additional requirement is that students must have an adjusted gross income of less than \$36,000.^v

HOW MUCH FUNDING CAN A STUDENT RECEIVE AND FOR HOW LONG?

For any student who meets the eligibility requirements, the grant pays for 100 percent of tuition and fees, after other grant aid is applied. A student remains eligible for up to two years, up until earning the AAS degree, or completing the number of credit hours required to earn the degree. Students are allowed to apply for a leave of absence, which does not count against their two years of eligibility.

WHERE CAN THE AWARD BE USED?

At any of the 27 Tennessee College of Applied Technology institutions.

WHAT EXPENSES WILL THE AWARD COVER?

The award pays for tuition and mandatory college fees.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ENROLLMENT INTENSITY?

Students must enroll in at least nine semester hours per term.

The Alaska Performance Scholarship

WHAT ARE THE INITIAL ACADEMIC AND RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS?

The individual must be an Alaska high school graduate who completes the required curriculum with at least a 2.5 GPA and passes a career or college readiness exam.

HOW MUCH FUNDING CAN A STUDENT RECEIVE AND FOR HOW LONG?

Grants are provided in three tiers based on the academic and ACT/SAT performance of students: the lowest-performing students can receive up to \$2,378 per year, while the highest-performing students can receive up to \$4,755 per year (those in the middle tier can receive up to \$3,566 per year). Students are eligible to receive funds for up to six years after high school graduation, and for a maximum of eight semesters. Those in postsecondary education beyond the six-year window have the opportunity to apply for an extension.

WHERE CAN THE AWARD BE USED?

Students must attend public institutions in the state of Alaska. In addition to a number of two-year and four-year colleges, recipients can use their scholarship at select full- and half-time programs at seven career and technical training centers in the state. Some eligible programs award diplomas, while others award certificates.

WHAT EXPENSES WILL THE AWARD COVER?

The funds pay for any educational expenses that the institution includes in its student budget, including tuition, fees, books, supplies, room and board, and transportation. Students may also be able to use their award during the summer and/or on an accelerated basis.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ENROLLMENT INTENSITY?

Students can be enrolled in as few as five semester credits per term. Less-than-full-time students will see their awards pro-rated, and their enrollment will still count as a full semester toward their eight semesters of eligibility.

Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarships

WHAT ARE THE INITIAL ACADEMIC AND RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS?

All students must be residents of Arkansas for at least the previous year. Importantly, this program specifically allows non-traditional students to be eligible and sets unique criteria for them. Generally, a traditional student must be an Arkansas high school graduate with a minimum 2.5 GPA or ACT score of 19. Non-traditional students who have completed less than 12 semester hours in higher education have comparable requirements to the traditional students; those who have completed at least 12 semester hours of higher education must have earned a postsecondary GPA of at least 2.5, or have an ACT score of 19 or better.

HOW MUCH FUNDING CAN A STUDENT RECEIVE AND FOR HOW LONG?

Students can receive \$2,000 per year at a two-year institution, and – depending on whether the student is counted as a freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior – between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per year at a four-year institution. Students remain eligible until they attain a bachelor's degree or attempt 130 semester hours in eight semesters (this applies to full-time students; the requirement is 16 semesters for part-time students).

WHERE CAN THE AWARD BE USED?

All accredited public or private non-profit institutions that are headquartered in Arkansas, as well as select public or private nursing schools are eligible.

WHAT EXPENSES WILL THE AWARD COVER?

The program materials do not explicitly state which costs are covered. However, the authorizing legislation notes that the award cannot exceed the student's cost of attendance.^{vi} Although this has not been clarified by the state, it is probable that these grant funds can be applied to any cost of attendance categories that the postsecondary education institution has defined, and where the student has remaining need.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ENROLLMENT INTENSITY?

Again, there are different treatments for traditional and non-traditional students. Traditional students must maintain full-time enrollment in their degree program, while non-traditional students may be enrolled either full- or part-time (at least six credit hours). Additionally, the scholarship requires students to be continuously enrolled, but does allow for a hold to be placed for up to two semesters. Using this hold, a student can withdraw without permanently losing eligibility.

Legacy Scholars (Battle Creek, Michigan)

WHAT ARE THE INITIAL ACADEMIC AND RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS?

Generally, students must graduate from Battle Creek Public Schools or the Lakeview School District.

HOW MUCH FUNDING CAN A STUDENT RECEIVE AND FOR HOW LONG?

Students who entered one of these schools in the 8th grade or earlier are eligible for 100 percent of the scholarship amount, up to 62 credit hours. Individuals who enter the district in the 9th grade are eligible for 75 percent, and those entering in the 10th grade are eligible for 50 percent of the full scholarship amount. Students have up to five

years after high school graduation to use their award and can start or stop any time within that five-year period.

WHERE CAN THE AWARD BE USED?

The only eligible institution is Kellogg Community College, which is located in Battle Creek.

WHAT EXPENSES WILL THE AWARD COVER?

These scholarships cover the cost of tuition, mandatory fees, and books. It will pay for either traditional classroom or online courses.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ENROLLMENT INTENSITY?

Students must be enrolled for a minimum of six credit hours per semester.

Flexible postsecondary education options are important for students, but the stakes are higher when the opportunity for a free or significantly reduced price education is on the line. We strongly encourage more programs to take non-traditional students into account. Many non-traditional students come from underserved backgrounds, and/or lack the financial resources to pay the many costs associated with attending higher education. Because students have obligations beyond tuition and fees, the most effective “free community college” programs are designed as “first dollar” grants (in which program funds are applied *before* Pell and other grant aid, freeing up Pell grants and other aid to be used for living expenses), rather than “last dollar.” Incidentally or purposely excluding non-traditional students from programs of this type further disadvantages these individuals, who, crucially, would benefit the most.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ NCES. Digest of Education Statistics 2013. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_303.50.asp?current=yes

ⁱⁱ “Attendance Trends.” February 2015. American Association of Community College Data Points.

http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/Attendance_final.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of the programs offering free community college that require grant recipients to attend higher education full-time immediately after high school include Tulsa Achieves, the Pittsburgh Promise, and West Virginia’s PROMISE Scholarship.

^{iv} <http://driveto55.org/haslam-introduces-free-training-through-tenn-reconnect/>

^v <http://www.tn.gov/governor/legislation/tennessee-reconnect.shtml>

^{vi} Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship Rules and Regulations. https://static.ark.org/eeuploads/adhe-financial/Challenge_Rules.pdf