AIDING ATTAINMENT

Leveraging State Financial Aid FOR ACCESS AND SUCCESS

STATE AID BENCHMARKING TOOL

The State Aid Benchmarking Tool summarizes the recommendations outlined in the _Aiding Attainment_ report and is designed to help states enhance their aid programs to promote greater access and equity. It includes Foundational policies and practices that all states should aim to implement. Additionally, the tool highlights Advanced policies and practices that foster even greater accessibility and equity. These Advanced strategies are designed to provide additional opportunities to underrepresented students including students of color and low-income, undocumented, rural, and adult and working students. The tool also provides examples of states successfully implementing these Foundational and Advanced policies and practices.

The policies and practices outlined in this tool allow states to benchmark their current practices against best practice. A state that has not yet implemented any of the Foundational policies or practices in one row should consider starting with those policies, whereas a state that has already implemented the Foundational policies can look toward putting more Advanced practices in place. Like any policy decision, there are tradeoffs states must consider. States must also consider what is feasible and most useful for their state context.

Before using the tool, states may want to consider the following questions:

- What are the goals of the state's financial aid program? (The Urban Institute has a helpful resource that outlines potential goals.)

- Who are the underserved populations in the state?

- Which populations are facing barriers in accessing higher education, and what are those barriers?

- What is feasible to accomplish in the state?

PROGRAM DESIGN

Need-Based Aid

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ Provide at least one program that is solely based on the students' financial need.

→ Award larger amounts to students with the most financial need.

ADVANCED

→ Provide need-based aid to populations who are ineligible for federal need-based aid (i.e., undocumented students).

→ Offer multiple means for students to demonstrate eligibility for need-based aid (FAFSA, free or reduced price lunch, SNAP, etc.).

EXAMPLES

- Most states—41—offer at least one need-based aid program with no additional merit eligibility requirements.
- Students in Washington who are eligible for SNAP will automatically be granted state need-based financial aid (HB 2214, beginning with the 2025-26 school year).
- The All Iowa Opportunity Scholarship prioritizes awards for certain students including those who age out of the state's foster care system or participated in federal TRIO and GEAR UP programs.

Basic Needs & Non-Tuition Expenses

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ Design aid programs so that state need-based aid plus Pell will help cover non-tuition expenses.

ADVANCED

→ Create aid programs specifically addressing the non-tuition needs of low-income students, such as funds to be used toward indirect costs of college (housing options, meal plans, and textbook assistance).

EXAMPLES

- California's Student Success Completion Grants provide students with additional financial aid to help offset the total cost of community college attendance.

FOUNDATIONAL: Policies and practices that all states should aim to do.

ADVANCED: More advanced policies and practices to improve aid accessibility and equity, particularly for low-income students, students of color, non-traditional students, and other underrepresented groups.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Short-Term Training

FOUNDATIONAL

POLICY OR PRACTICE

- ➡ Allow students to use state aid toward quality short-term credentials and workforce training programs.
- ➡ Require institutions that receive aid for short-term training to collect and report student outcomes data.
- ➡ Prioritize aid for low-income, unemployed, underemployed, and low-wage individuals.

ADVANCED

- ➡ Develop aid programs that support the stacking of credentials from short-term, noncredit credentials into credit-bearing programs and degrees.
- ➡ Target aid at populations that are underrepresented in the workforce and at programs that lead to high-wage, high-growth careers.
- ➡ Couple aid with additional advising support for program participants to help students navigate short-term and workforce training programs and secure good jobs.

EXAMPLES

- Aimed at supporting individuals from low-income backgrounds, Louisiana's MJ Foster Promise Program was unanimously passed in 2021 to provide financial assistance for students pursuing an associate degree or a short-term postsecondary credential aligned with high-demand, high-wage careers.
- Connecticut's CareerConneCT specifically targets populations underrepresented in the workforce including BIPOC individuals, people with disabilities, opportunity youth, immigrants, and veterans. Applicants are assigned a career coach or case manager to support them in identifying and completing training.

Promise Programs
Note: While not all states will offer Promise programs, the following foundational policies and equity plays should be considered if a Promise/Free Tuition program is offered.

FOUNDATIONAL

POLICY OR PRACTICE

- ➡ Provide free tuition at community and technical colleges.
- ➡ Include a minimum award amount or middle dollar program so high-need/ full Pell-eligible students will still receive funding that can be used toward non-tuition expenses.

ADVANCED

- ➡ Provide free tuition at two- and four-year institutions.
- ➡ Provide a first-dollar promise program, making tuition free for all students and allowing students to use additional aid (such as Pell) for non-tuition expenses.
- ➡ Develop a tuition cap at select institutions to make college an affordable option for low- and middle-income students.

EXAMPLES

- Oregon Promise is a last-dollar program but provides a minimum award ($2,124 for the 2024-25 award year) so even students who are eligible for the full Pell grant will receive aid.
- The New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship is a first-dollar program that covers tuition and required fees for residents at two- and four-year colleges.
- The NC Promise Tuition Plan caps tuition at four NC universities at $500 a semester for in-state students. Two of the participating institutions are HBCUs and one is a Historically American Indian University.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Merit Aid

Note: While not all states will offer merit aid, the following foundational policies and equity plays should be considered if a merit program is offered.

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

- Provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate merit including GPA, test scores, attendance, class rank, or completing a specific curriculum.
- Only require standardized testing scores if ACT or SAT is provided for free to all students.
- Align merit aid requirements to college admission requirements.

ADVANCED

- Leverage merit aid programs to encourage students to engage in activities that increase the likelihood of college persistence such as completing advanced coursework or a college-prep curriculum.
- Use merit aid to target middle-income students who may not be eligible for need-based aid.
- Develop a merit-aware index that takes into consideration the academic profile of a student's high school and the student's academic experience.

EXAMPLES

- The TEXAS Grant provides multiple ways for students to meet eligibility including completing 12 hours of college credit, graduating in the top third of the high school graduating class, earning a 3.0 GPA, completing one math course beyond Algebra II, or completing an advanced career and technical course.
- Kentucky's KEES program allows students to earn additional money for college with an annual GPA of 2.5 and ACT score of 15. Award amounts increase as GPA and ACT scores increase, and the GPA is considered annually, so one bad year will not ruin a student's chances to receive the award. Students can also earn bonuses for performance in advanced courses.

Program Alignment & Simplicity

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

- Utilize the same eligibility and renewal requirements across all aid programs.

ADVANCED

- Consolidate programs into one simplified aid program.

EXAMPLES

- North Carolina recently consolidated three different programs into one program—the Next NC Scholarship. Although the program has some differences on the back-end between community college and four-year colleges, the program is communicated as one program to students and families.

ACCESSING AID

Applications

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ Use FAFSA (and a state-based alternative for students who are ineligible for the FAFSA) as the sole application for state financial aid.

→ Utilize summer deadlines to ensure students have time to complete the application.

ADVANCED

→ Implement a universal FAFSA policy to increase FAFSA completion and increase FAFSA application support.

→ Institute a rolling application deadline so students can apply for aid anytime throughout the year.

→ Automatically enroll eligible students in state aid programs.

EXAMPLES

● More than a dozen states have implemented a universal FAFSA policy.

● Students in 7th and 8th who are financially eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch are automatically enrolled in Indiana's 21st Century Scholars program, removing the need for parents to submit an application for their student.

Income Thresholds

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ Utilize Pell eligibility (or a comparable SAI calculation for students unable to file the FAFSA) as the determination for state need-based aid.

ADVANCED

→ Provide need-based aid beyond Pell eligibility to middle-income students.

EXAMPLES

● The Oregon Opportunity Grant is a need-based grant that provides aid to students who are just beyond Pell-eligibility.

Award Amounts

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ State aid, in combination with federal aid, should cover tuition and fees at all public institutions for low-income students.

ADVANCED

→ State aid, in combination with federal aid, covers the cost of attendance (room and board, transportation, books and supplies in addition to tuition and fees) at all public institutions for low-income students.

→ Implement a scholarship displacement policy to prevent institutions from reducing aid for private scholarships (as permitted by federal regulation).

EXAMPLES

● In California, public and private colleges are barred from scholarship displacement—the practice of adjusting a financial aid package after a student receives an external scholarship.

ACCESSING AID

Enrollment Status

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ Allow students to access state aid who do not enroll immediately after high school.

→ Allow students to enroll less than full time.

ADVANCED

→ Provide additional, targeted grants to incentivize and reward strong enrollment behaviors such as taking credit-bearing courses over the summer, enrolling in 15 credits a semester, meeting with an advisor, or enrolling directly after high school.

EXAMPLES

- Indiana's Frank O'Bannon Grant offers performance incentives for academic performance and accelerated completion.

Renewal Eligibility

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

→ Utilize satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirements for award renewal eligibility and allow students to regain access to state aid.

ADVANCED

→ Support institutions in communicating SAP requirements, developing a straightforward appeal process, and providing support to students with a financial aid SAP warning to get back on track or navigate the appeal process.

EXAMPLES

- California created unique SAP requirements for the Chafee ETV grants which serve students involved in the foster system. The state also requires colleges to consider homelessness, as defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, as an extenuating circumstance for SAP appeals.

Communications

COMMUNICATIONS & TRANSPARENCY

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

- ➡ Develop a statewide campaign on college affordability.
- ➡ Require common terms and elements of financial aid offers and ensure all financial aid elements have precise, consumer-friendly definitions and titles.
- ➡ Create a landing page for each scholarship including information such as eligible institutions, need and/or merit requirements, age requirements, deadlines, award amounts, and scholarship application timeline, etc. and provide information about aid programs in multiple languages.
- ➡ Develop a state aid calculator so students can see estimated aid at the state's colleges in one place.
- ➡ Begin outreach to students about aid program eligibility as early as middle school.

ADVANCED

- ➡ Develop a chatbot or free texting service to answer basic questions around aid programs and FAFSA completion.
- ➡ Send direct communications to students before they apply with information on the state aid they qualify for.
- ➡ Tie financial aid awards to a state's direct admissions initiative so students can see where they are admitted and how much aid they qualify for.

EXAMPLES

- New York uses common financial aid offers across all public institutions.
- Arizona's AskBenji is a digital FAFSA chatbot that provides free 24/7 support to help Arizona families complete the FAFSA.
- Oklahoma provides resources about FAFSA and financial aid in Spanish and access to Spanish-speaking staff members to answer families' questions.
- North Carolina created a calculator for the Next NC Scholarship that shows students how much federal and state aid they can expect to receive based on their SAI by college.
- Washington's Guaranteed Admissions Program is piloting a program with a select number of institutions where students will receive notification of eligibility for the Washington College Grant along with the direct admissions.

COMMUNICATIONS & TRANSPARENCY

Data

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

➡ Report on key metrics related to aid such as FAFSA completion, aid uptake and renewal, average costs by institution, unmet need, and average aid coverage by institution.

➡ Disaggregate data with a special focus on students historically underrepresented in higher education, such as low-income students, first-generation college students, and students of color.

➡ Provide counselors and nonprofit college advisors with data on FAFSA completion and eligibility for state financial aid.

ADVANCED

➡ Report on metrics to help measure the return on investment of aid such as time to degree and wages by degree.

➡ Conduct regular evaluations of aid programs to determine effectiveness of the programs in increasing access and success for underrepresented students.

EXAMPLES

● Kentucky's 2021 Return on Investment report looks at the state's return on investment for financial aid and higher education appropriations. Additionally, the state has produced reports on student debt and the impact of unmet need.

● In Michigan, school counselors can access a portal that shows whether students have filed a FAFSA as well as whether the student is eligible for the Achievement Scholarship (based on SAI) or Tuition Incentive Program (based on Medicaid eligibility).

● In North Carolina, the Finish The FAFSA effort has a login for counselors *and* nonprofit partners to access a portal to view whether students have completed the FAFSA or were flagged with errors.

Partnerships

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

➡ Partner with school counselor associations, college access organizations, and youth-serving organizations to promote financial aid messaging and provide affordability training.

ADVANCED

➡ Partner with and develop data sharing agreements with other state agencies to promote state aid and identify eligible recipients.

➡ Partner with mentoring organizations provide mentoring to program recipients.

EXAMPLES

● Michigan Student Aid works directly with the Department of Health and Human Services to identify eligible Medicaid recipients for the Tuition Incentive Program (determined based on Medicaid receipt).

● Students who participate in Tennessee Promise are given a tnAchieves mentor to guide them through the application and enrollment process. Similarly, adults who participate in Tennessee Reconnect have access to Reconnect Navigators. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission also partners with the Departments of Human Services, Labor & Workforce Development, and Transportation to build awareness of the Reconnect grant and identify eligible state employees for upskilling.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Adults and Working Learners

FOUNDATIONAL

➡ Allow students to access state aid who do not enroll immediately after high school.

➡ Allow adults and working learners to enroll less than full time, and observe a 12-month funding calendar to prevent breaks in aid.

ADVANCED

➡ Develop an aid program with additional advising, coaching, or navigation supports specifically for adults and returning students.

➡ Fund specialized grant programs for adults and working learners, offering support for non-tuition expenses such as childcare.

EXAMPLES

- Tennessee Reconnect is the state's version of a promise program for adults and working learners. In addition to providing tuition-free community college programs, TN Reconnect also provides Reconnect Navigators to help adult learners access aid and enroll in college.
- Minnesota's Postsecondary Child Care Grant provides aid to student parents with children under 12 years of age; the award can amount to as much as $6,500 per child per academic year.

Rural Students

FOUNDATIONAL

➡ Ensure state aid, in combination with Pell, will cover non-tuition expenses.

➡ Invest in financial aid application support in rural areas.

ADVANCED

➡ Develop an aid program for rural students that will help cover non-tuition expenses.

EXAMPLES

- The Florida Farmworker Student Scholarship Program is a merit program for students who are farmworkers or children of farmworkers.
- The Montana 10 program is a comprehensive financial aid and student support program for rural, low-income, American Indian, and other underserved students in the state.

Undocumented Students

FOUNDATIONAL

➡ Provide in-state tuition for undocumented students.

➡ Allow undocumented students access to state aid programs.

➡ Develop a simple, state-based alternative to the FAFSA for undocumented students.

ADVANCED

➡ Offer aid programs specifically for low-income undocumented students to make up for students' lack of Pell eligibility.

➡ Allow students to demonstrate financial need via eligibility for public benefits (such as free or reduced price lunch, WIC, or state-based Medicaid program).

EXAMPLES

- 19 states + D.C. offer in-state tuition and access to some state financial aid or scholarships for undocumented and DACA students.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Justice-Impacted Learners

POLICY OR PRACTICE

FOUNDATIONAL

➜ Amend statutes and policies to ensure state financial aid eligibility for currently and formerly incarcerated learners, including removing explicit and implicit restrictions such as bars on aid for incarcerated students, prohibitions based on conviction history, and policies prioritizing non-incarcerated students for financial aid.

➜ Clearly state eligibility or ineligibility on scholarship landing page and application.

➜ Provide physical, mail-in financial aid applications to incarcerated students.

ADVANCED

➜ Implement an SAP and credit hour reset policy to enable justice-impacted learners to regain state aid eligibility.

➜ Offer state financial aid advising to currently incarcerated individuals, and provide formerly incarcerated learners with reintegration supports that include advising around state financial aid.

➜ Prioritize financial aid for coursework leading to licensure in fields that are accessible to individuals with criminal convictions.

EXAMPLES

• Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have no barriers to aid access for justice-impacted learners.

Check out the full suite of *Aiding Attainment* resources, including the state aid benchmarking tool, state spotlights, student aid scenarios, and more at **edstrategy.org/resource/aiding-attainment.**