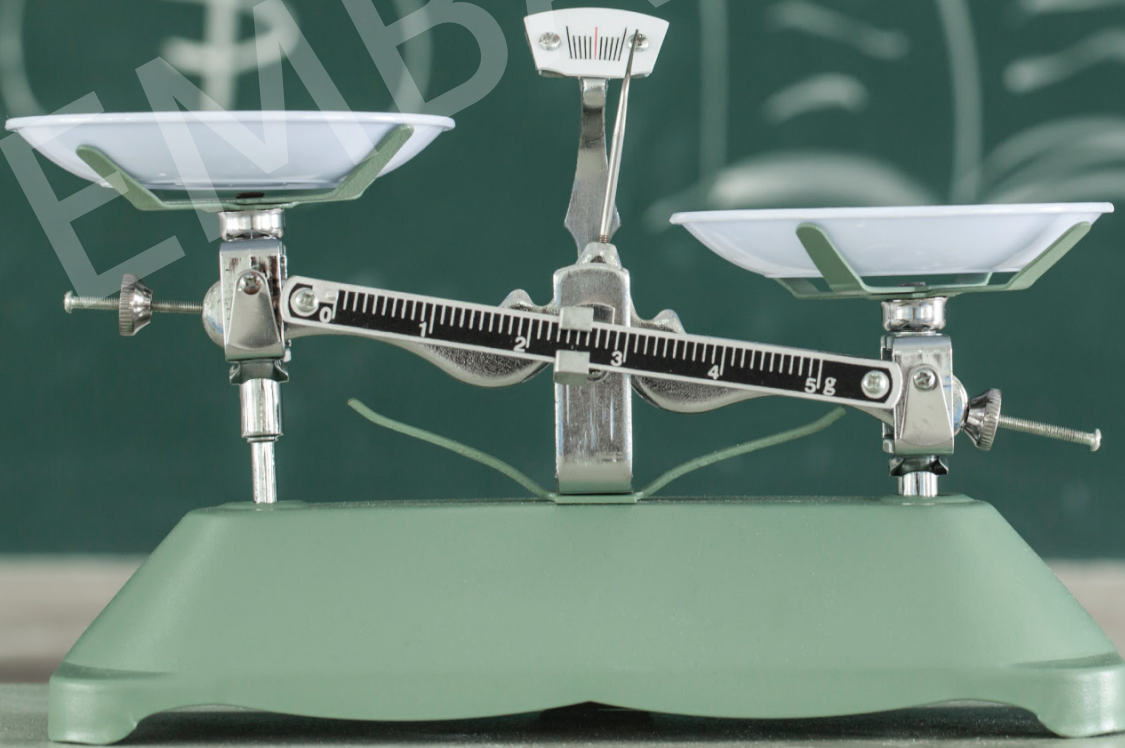# BEYOND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

How Strategic Scholarship Programs Can Support Increased Postsecondary Access and Attainment

Helios
Education Foundation

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About Helios Education Foundation

Helios Education Foundation exists to support postsecondary attainment for all students in Arizona and Florida, with an emphasis on low-income and historically underrepresented communities. Driven by our fundamental beliefs of community, equity, investment, and partnership, Helios has invested more than $350 million in partnerships and initiatives focused on improving education outcomes in the two states we serve.

We take a multi-pronged approach—working across four domains, including performance-based community investments, systemic public policy efforts, research and data, and impact-driven communications—that together support the significant changes required to foster equitable progress across the education continuum.

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Introduction

Despite the varying perspectives on the value of education beyond high school, the earnings premium associated with postsecondary attainment—along with increased access to workforce opportunities, better health outcomes, and broader economic benefits that accompany it—makes it one of the highest returns on investment available.

Employers largely continue to prioritize college credentials, especially two- and four-year degrees, when screening and hiring job candidates. Until this changes, postsecondary attainment will remain one of the most reliable pathways for individuals to achieve economic prosperity.

A big part of what makes the conversation about the value of college so fraught is the challenge of affording a college education in the first place. Far too many students cannot afford to make the initial investment required to enroll in college, much less persist and complete. Even after substantial financial aid, the unmet need can be too great and the net cost of attendance can be prohibitively expensive, either to take on or continue to afford. Nearly 90 percent of Pell Grant recipients still face unmet financial need.[1] Survey data and other research consistently show that cost is a leading reason students stop out of college.[2]

[1] Stein, T. and Butler, N. (2024). How well do college emergency aid micro-grant programs work? Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/ explainer/college-emergency-aid-micro-grant-programs/
[2] See for example: Gallup, Inc., and Lumina Foundation. 2024. Cost of College: The Price Tag of Higher Education and Its Effect on Enrollment. Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc.

About This Brief

Beyond Financial Support is an update and expansion of **a brief Helios released on innovative scholarships in 2017**. This latest brief highlights how institutional and private scholarship providers are moving beyond traditional models by implementing strategic program design, enhanced administration, and wraparound supports. This brief also identifies key considerations for scholarship providers regarding program design to ensure their programs are as efficient as possible and can deliver sustainable, positive impacts for the students, communities, and institutions they serve.

This brief does not make a case for a single type of non-traditional scholarship or grant program, nor does it promote particular goals or target student populations. It also refrains from making recommendations or critiques related to the structure or policies related to institutional financial aid packages, apart from offering insights into the purpose and function of certain financial aid types, such as emergency scholarships.

Instead, by highlighting innovative and increasingly prevalent models and program design features, the brief aims to inform scholarship providers, foundations, and policymakers as they develop or revise scholarship programs to meet the needs of students and communities served. This brief also functions as a useful guide for evaluating the effectiveness and efficacy of scholarship programs, which is essential to improving and sustaining any program.

Postsecondary institutions are adapting to a changing environment shaped by economic pressures and evolving political contexts. While tuition increases have slowed in some states, the overall cost of attendance, including essential living expenses, remains a significant consideration, particularly for low- and middle-income students. According to the College Board, average net costs at public two- and four-year institutions in 2024-25 continue to challenge affordability, even after financial aid is applied. Many students still face gaps between available aid and total costs, which can influence borrowing decisions or enrollment choices. These dynamics, along with changing demographics and heightened expectations around the return on investment of higher education, are prompting both institutions and scholarship providers to explore innovative, student-centered approaches to support access and success.

Simultaneously, the policy landscape for equity-focused strategies in higher education is shifting. The U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 ruling on race-conscious admissions has required institutions to rethink how they advance access and inclusion. Alongside this, public discourse around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives has become more polarized, prompting colleges and funders to identify new, legally sustainable avenues for supporting historically underrepresented students. Within this evolving context lies a significant opportunity for scholarship providers to lead with creativity and intention—designing programs that broaden participation, foster achievement, and uphold equity in thoughtful and locally responsive ways.

Nearly 90 percent of Pell Grant recipients face unmet financial need.

The Role of Scholarships in Increasing Postsecondary Access and Attainment

In combination with financial aid, scholarships can make a meaningful difference for many students who might otherwise struggle to pay for college, either at the outset of their postsecondary journey or along the way. Scholarships can be seen as important tools for reducing inequality, increasing access to postsecondary education, and increasing rates of persistence and completion, particularly among low-income students. Meanwhile, postsecondary access and completion rates for students in the top income quartile are relatively unaffected by changes in the net cost of attending.[3] However, even small increases or decreases in cost can meaningfully impact the likelihood that low-income students will complete their postsecondary education.

Scholarships and grant aid have been shown to positively affect postsecondary access and attainment. A 2024 meta-analysis of more than 86 studies—with combined samples of more than 7.6 million students—found that, despite variations among grant aid programs, on average, they produced positive effects across key areas related to postsecondary attainment, including enrollment, credit accumulation, persistence, and completion.[4]

> **Aid policy alone cannot eliminate inequality in postsecondary attainment. Inequality in educational outcomes begins in childhood and grows with each transition from elementary school to secondary school. Even if the direct costs of college are equalized for all, students' academic preparation, networks, and family support are not.[5]**

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[3] Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M. S. (2009). Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[4] LaSota, R. R., Polanin, J. R., Perna, L. W., Rodgers, M. A., & Austin, M. J. (2024). Does Aid Matter? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of grant aid on college student outcomes. Review of Educational Research, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543241239955

[5] Dynarski, S., Page, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2023). "College costs, financial aid, and student decisions." In Handbook of the Economics of Education, vol. 7, pp. 227-285. Elsevier.

Similarly, another meta-analysis of studies of 42 grant aid programs—with awards ranging from $300 to $19,000—also found a positive impact on college persistence and completion. These programs increased the probability of persistence and completion by 2–3 percentage points, and the researchers estimate that an "additional $1,000 of grant aid improves year-to-year persistence by 1.2 percentage points with smaller effects for degree completion."[6]

In addition, scholarships, especially private ones not tied to federal or institutional eligibility criteria, are one of the most flexible sources of funding students can use, and they can help fill funding gaps when other sources of aid have been applied.

Central Florida Transfer-Ready Scholarship

The **Central Florida Transfer-Ready Scholarship** addresses a key barrier in the transition from Valencia College to the University of Central Florida (UCF): completing major-specific prerequisite courses before earning an associate degree. Many students finish their associate degree without these prerequisites, only to discover they are ineligible for federal aid to cover the extra credits. This scholarship incentivizes smarter credit planning to avoid that gap.

Funded by Helios Education Foundation, the program offers up to $1,250 per student across three incentive points: $500 for completing prerequisites at Valencia, $250 for enrolling at UCF with all prerequisites met, and $500 for transferring and enrolling part-time at UCF—an option designed for students who may struggle with a sudden shift to full-time enrollment.

By December 2024, the program had awarded 1,895 students nearly $703,000 in scholarships, and facilitated the transfer of 427 students from Valencia to UCF. This program exemplifies how targeted financial aid and strategically designed scholarship models can reduce administrative barriers and promote transfer success.

But financial support alone is often not enough. Scholarship providers are increasingly recognizing the importance of providing additional support in conjunction with funding. The impact of scholarship programs—particularly those designed for students who face barriers to postsecondary access and completions—is influenced by factors such as program design (including visibility, eligibility criteria, and administrative requirements) and corresponding wraparound supports (including advising, FAFSA completion support, peer mentoring, or family engagement).

As postsecondary institutions, private funders, scholarship providers, and guidance counselors work to serve students better and help them reach their college and career goals, the variety and scope of scholarship programs are becoming more intentional in their purpose and design.

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[6] Nguyen, T.D., Kramer, J.W., & Evans, B. J. (2018). The effects of grant aid on student persistence and degree attainment: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the causal evidence (CEPA Working Paper No.18-04). http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp18-04

College Affordability and Financial Aid: Scholarships in Context

Scholarship providers operate in a complex landscape of federal, state, regional, local, and private financial aid programs. Some of these programs are need-based, merit-based, or a combination of both, while others are veterans' benefits (e.g., the GI Bill and Post-9/11 GI Bill). Another class of programs provides student loans or is tied to student work (e.g., federal work-study).

Much of this complexity is driven by two intersecting forces: the fact that a postsecondary education is often difficult to afford and the fact that a postsecondary certificate or degree is so valuable in the workforce.

Leading education economics researchers describe the phenomenon as "the increasing tension between the perceived necessity of a college degree and the challenge of paying for it." This tension, coupled with broader efforts to expand postsecondary access, "has led to a proliferation of financial aid policies at the federal, state, and local levels. More students are receiving more aid and more different types of aid than ever before."[7] However, despite expanded access to financial aid and rising national attainment rates, students from low-income families continue to earn college degrees at much lower rates than their more affluent peers.[8]

[7] Dynarski, et al. Op. cit.
[8] Ibid.

Spotlight on the Cost of College

According to the College Board's annual *Trend in College Pricing and Student Aid 2024* report, first-time, full-time students at public two-year colleges needed to cover, on average, $15,810 in expenses (housing, food, books, supplies, transportation, and personal expenses) after grant aid.

For first-time, full-time students at public four-year colleges, the national average net price after grant aid was $36,150.[9] Notably, "public flagship universities[10] in 45 states had lower in-state tuition and fees in 2024-25 than in 2019-20, after adjusting for inflation." For example, the University of Florida's published tuition price in 2024-25 was 19 percent lower than in 2019-20, and the University of Arizona's 2024-2025 tuition rate was 10 percent lower.[11]

Despite these declines in tuition price, the cost of education at most public flagship universities continues to be unaffordable for low and middle-income students when measured against the Lumina Foundation's affordability benchmark.[12,13]

In addition to taking on significant debt to finance their postsecondary education, many students are also turning to potentially risky alternatives to the traditional financial aid system, such as income-share agreements—which require them to pay a percentage of their future income in exchange for up-front payment of their tuition and fees[14]—and crowdfunding platforms.

[9] Ma, J., Pender, M. & Oster, M. (2024). Trends in college pricing and student aid 2024, New York: College Board.
[10] While there is no official designation, public flagship universities are typically understood to be the largest, and most well-known universities in a given state.
[11] Ma, et al. Op. cit.
[12] Mugglestone, K., Dancy, K., & Voight, M. (2019). Opportunity Lost: Net Price and Equity at Public Flagship Institutions. Institute for Higher Education Policy.
[13] Lumina Foundation (2015). A benchmark for making college affordable. https://www.luminafoundation.org/ files/resources/affordability-benchmark-1.pdf
[14] Zaber, M.A., Steiner, E.D., Gebremariam, H.. Spears, A., Tariq, Z.H., & Carman, K.G..(2023) "Income Share Agreements: Market Structure, Communication, and Equity Implications of s Student Loan Alternative." Rand Corporation.

The Complexities of Financial Aid Systems

Beyond the baseline question of whether a student can afford college at all, the complexities of the financial aid system and institutional processes present additional barriers to access and completion. Even with advising and support, these challenges are often difficult for students to navigate.

From completing the FAFSA to identifying institutional and non-institutional scholarship and grant programs for which they are eligible, to ensuring they are meeting application and renewal deadlines, to meeting all program requirements, students often face a significant administrative burden.

They also face difficulties in determining how much money they need to pay for college. Research shows Americans tend to underestimate the actual cost of a postsecondary education. In a Gallup-Lumina Foundation survey, only 23 percent of people without a degree estimated the average annual cost of a bachelor's degree within $5,000. Nearly half underestimated the cost by more than $5,000, and individuals who had enrolled in two- and four-year degree programs were just as likely to underestimate the annual cost as those who had never enrolled.[15]

This tendency to underestimate costs also has implications for expanding access to postsecondary education among all student groups and especially among groups that experience historically lower rates of college-going.[16]

Strategic Scholarship Models

Scholarship programs today are evolving beyond traditional merit- or need-based models to better support the full spectrum of students' educational journeys. In response to growing evidence that financial aid alone is not sufficient to ensure postsecondary success, scholarship providers are increasingly designing programs that are intentional in both purpose and structure. These program models are diverse in scope—varying by target population, award design, and institutional context—but they share a common goal: to increase college access, persistence, and completion, particularly for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

The sections that follow highlight several types of innovative scholarship models, each designed to address specific barriers to student success or serve students in particular ways. Programs that integrate wraparound supports, for instance, combine financial assistance with advising, academic coaching, and career preparation to support students holistically. Performance-based scholarships link financial aid to students' progress toward academic benchmarks, encouraging continued enrollment and completion while often providing supplemental services. Meanwhile, place-based or promise programs eliminate the financial barrier for students in a specific geographic area and aim to foster a local college-going culture.

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[15] Gallup, Inc., and Lumina Foundation. 2024. Cost of College: The Price Tag of Higher Education and Its Effect on Enrollment. Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc.
[16] Ibid.

While each model has unique design considerations, their effectiveness extends beyond the amount of funding they provide. These program types illustrate how scholarship programs—and other forms of financial aid—can be reimagined or enhanced to address students' real-world challenges, serving as scalable solutions to improve access and outcomes in postsecondary education.

Model Type	Core Design	Primary Goal	Key Features
Wraparound Support Programs	Financial support + non-academic student services	Increase persistence and completion	Academic advising, coaching, tutoring, career planning, emergency aid
Performance-Based Scholarships	Funding linked to academic benchmarks (e.g., credits, GPA)	Encourage continued enrollment & progress	Disbursed incrementally; may include required advising or workshops
Place-Based/ Promise Programs	Funding for students in defined geographic area	Expand access and foster community impact	Tuition/fee coverage; may be first- or last-dollar; often paired with outreach
Completion/Last-Mile Grants	Aid for students close to graduation	Prevent stop-outs near degree completion	Covers unmet tuition/fees; may require academic planning or counseling

Scholarships Combined with Wraparound Supports

While affordability is a critical factor in accessing and completing postsecondary education, students also face an array of academic and social challenges that go beyond their finances. From strategically sequencing their courses to navigating the complexities of postsecondary institutions and campus culture, these challenges can hinder academic progress and success, especially if students lack adequate support or do not know where to find it. One key advantage of scholarship programs is that they can connect recipients to support services that improve their chances of enrolling, persisting, and graduating. In this way, programs can be much more than a source of financial aid. They can be reliable resources that students do not have to seek out but are instead built into their receipt of scholarship funds.

Some programs, like the commonly referenced Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), offer comprehensive support that includes academic advising, tutoring, and career guidance in addition to the last-dollar scholarships they provide.[17,18] Others, which are less intensive and less expensive to administer, may offer one or two support services, such as monthly coaching and access to ad hoc academic support.

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[17] Scrivener, S., & Weiss, M. J. (2013). More graduates: Two-year results from an evaluation of Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for developmental education students. MDRC.
[18] Reber, Sarah. (2024). Supporting students to and through college: what does the evidence say? Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/ uploads/2024/12/20241211_CESO_Reber_CollegeSupports_1c.pdf#page=32.07

Scholarships and other forms of grant aid that combine the financial award with additional wraparound supports can improve results, likely because they address intersecting financial, academic, and social barriers to success.[19]

Stay the Course, for example, is a comprehensive scholarship support model (developed by Catholic Charities Fort Worth) that pairs modest financial aid with personalized, relationship-based case management to improve outcomes for community college students. Focused on addressing both academic and non-academic barriers, the program provides emergency scholarships alongside high-touch guidance from trained "navigators." These navigators help students manage challenges related to housing, transportation, childcare, and course planning, while also offering consistent, tailored support that empowers students to persist through personal and academic obstacles. Participants receive help accessing institutional and community resources, as well as emotional and motivational support throughout their college experience. An MDRC randomized controlled trial found that Stay the Course significantly improved persistence, credit accumulation, and graduation rates, particularly for women, who nearly doubled their completion rates compared to the control group.[20]

HSI ELEVATE

The HSI ELEVATE Program (most recently known as HSI EXCELlence) is a powerful example of a wraparound approach to student support, going beyond tuition assistance to address a full range of factors that impact student success. Funded by Helios Education Foundation, the program is offered to students at six Maricopa Community Colleges. In addition to financial assistance, it provides personalized coaching, academic resources, and basic needs support, as well as intentional family engagement to foster student persistence and achievement. Nearly 3,000 students have benefited from the support and resources the program offers since it launched in 2014.

A third-party evaluation conducted in December 2024 found that participants consistently outperformed peers in GPA and completion rates. Students also reported high satisfaction with the program's support structure, which includes success coaches, Canvas Hub tools, and financial assistance. Many credited the program for helping them feel connected and confident in their academic journey. While persistence results were mixed, participants' academic progress and strong transfer readiness suggest the program effectively fulfills its goals. HSI ELEVATE offers a replicable model for scholarship design, particularly for first-generation college students navigating two-year institutions.

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[19] Nguyen, et al. Op. cit.
[20] Miller, C., Headlam, C., Manno, M., & Cullinan, D. (2020). Increasing student success in developmental mathematics through support programs: Findings from a randomized controlled trial of Stay the Course. MDRC.

One key advantage of scholarship programs is that they can connect recipients to support services that improve their chances of enrolling, persisting, and graduating.

Performance-Based Scholarships

Performance-based scholarships offer a financial award contingent on a recipient meeting designated academic milestones or benchmarks, such as credit accumulation or minimum GPA. Unlike traditional merit-based programs that reward past achievement, these programs aim to incentivize and support ongoing progress toward completion. In addition to performance requirements, they frequently require students to participate in advising, tutoring, or other support services.

Performance-based scholarship programs vary significantly in terms of eligibility requirements, disbursement schedules, academic progress benchmarks, award amounts, and wraparound support services, but generally have three common characteristics:

- Awards are distributed incrementally (tied to performance)
- Students have flexibility in how they are permitted to use funds
- The program does not replace existing financial aid packages[21]

It is also important to note that grant aid programs like the Pell Grant typically include performance-based requirements. Even though initial program eligibility is based on financial need, recipients must maintain satisfactory academic progress requirements to continue receiving aid. While these requirements are not as stringent as those in some performance-based scholarship programs that release funds in small increments, they still place pressure on students. Scholarship providers should be mindful that low-income students already face such requirements and that conditioning too much aid on academic performance, as with satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirements, could push students out of college, ultimately harming long-term outcomes."[22]

Research consistently finds that performance-based programs show positive outcomes. An MDRC evaluation of six performance-based programs showed improved persistence, credit accumulation, and degree completion rates.[23] Other studies have found increased bachelor's degree completion rates[24] and increased uptake of advising services.[25]

[21] Reber, S. Op. cit.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Mayer, A., Patel, R., Rudd, T., & Ratledge, A. (2015). "Designing scholarships to improve college success: Final report on the Performance-based scholarship demonstration." New York: MDRC
[24] Erwin, C., Binder, M., Miller, C & Krause, K. (2021). "Performance-based aid, enhanced advising, and the income gap in college graduation: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 43 (1): 134–53. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720979180.
[25] Angrist, J., Lang, D., & Oreopoulos. P. (2009). "Incentives and services for college achievement: Evidence from a randomized trial." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 1, no. 1 (2009): 136-163.

Project QUEST

Project QUEST is a career-focused, performance-oriented scholarship and support program based in San Antonio, Texas, serving adults pursuing credentials in high-demand fields like healthcare, IT, and skilled trades.

The program's financial assistance is tied to academic progress and continued enrollment. Recipients receive support covering tuition, transportation, and other basic needs, but must meet regular milestones to maintain eligibility. The program's signature feature is its intensive, personalized case management: each student is assigned a navigator who offers academic guidance, motivation, and accountability. This wraparound structure ensures that participants are both financially supported and consistently coached toward timely credential completion.

A 2014 randomized controlled trial found that QUEST participants had significantly higher degree and certificate completion rates, and increased earnings several years post-program compared to the control group. The model's focus on persistence, completion, and workforce entry illustrates how performance-based aid can extend beyond GPA or credit thresholds to support broader economic mobility. QUEST is particularly effective for adult learners and first-generation college students, and it has become a national model for integrated workforce and education support.[26,27]
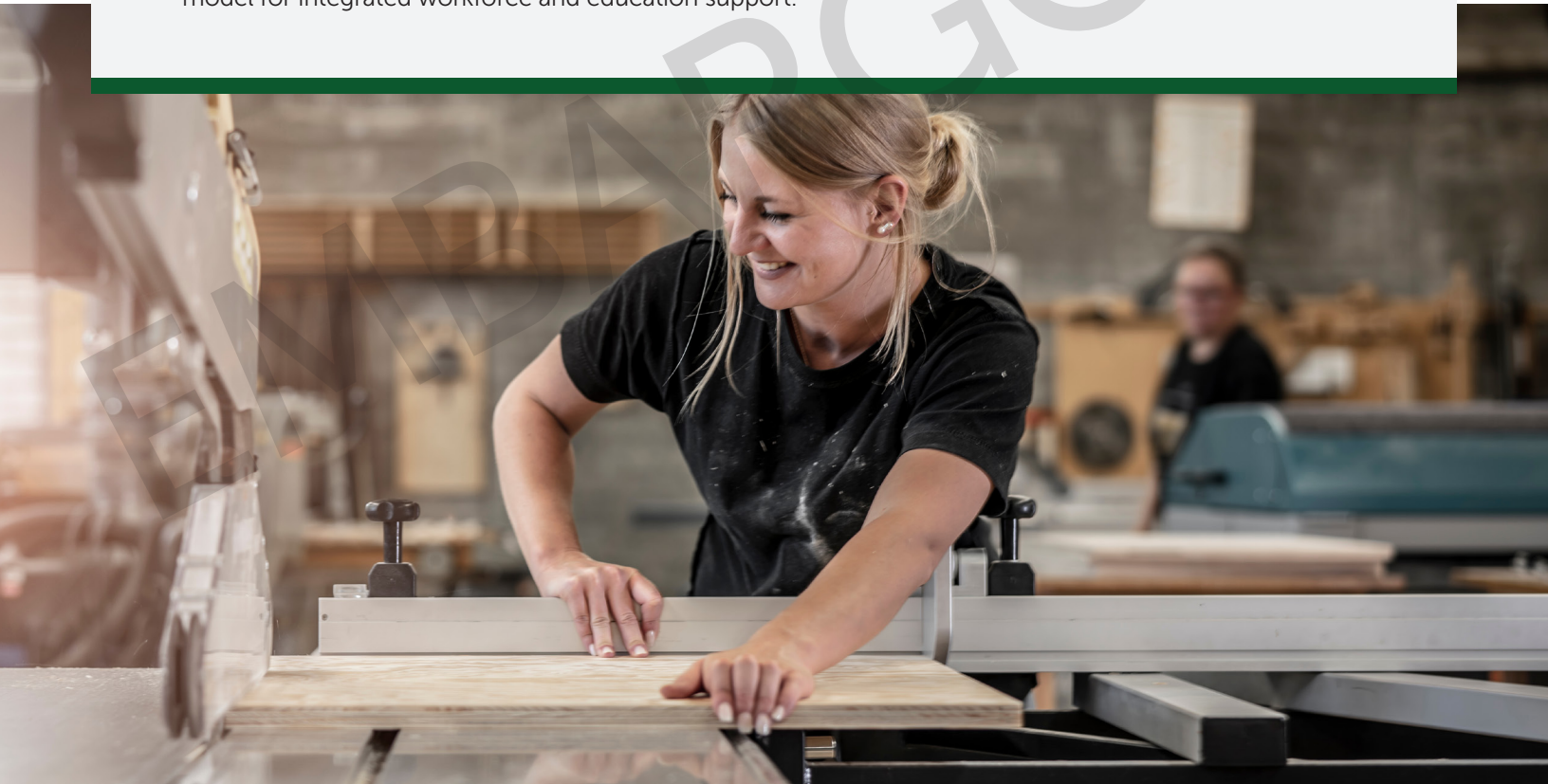
[26] Maguire, S., Freely, J., Clymer, C., Conway, M., & Schwartz, D. (2010). Tuning in to local labor markets: Findings from the Sectoral Employment Impact Study. Public/Private Ventures. https://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/tuning-in-to-local-labor-markets-findings-from-the-sectoral-employment-impact-study.html
[27] Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2014). Sustained gains: Year Up's continued impact on earnings. Economic Mobility Corporation. https://economicmobilitycorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/quest-study-report.pdf

Promise and "Free College" Programs

Local, regional, and state-based promise or "free college" scholarship programs are becoming increasingly common. College Promise, a national nonprofit, reported there were 425 place-based promise programs nationwide in 2023, serving students in every state. These programs typically cover tuition and fees at designated institutions for students who reside in a specific geographic area and meet other eligibility criteria. State-level promise programs and free college programs follow similar models but are available to broader populations.

Programs vary in scope and scale, and there are crucial differences with respect to program design that influence how they serve students.[28] Despite this variability, the core policy rationale underpinning these programs is consistent: they aim to expand access to postsecondary education, foster a college-going culture, and strengthen economies in the places they serve (municipalities, regions, states).[29]

Because program designs differ, so do their outcomes. Researchers note that the most expensive types of promise programs to implement—first-dollar programs that "provide substantial funding with minimal academic requirements and cover quality four-year institutions"—are those likely to have the greatest impact. In contrast, last-dollar programs—though less expensive to operate—may have comparatively limited impact.[30]

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

UCF Downtown Scholars Success Initiative

The **UCF Downtown Scholars Success Initiative** is a place-based scholarship and college access program designed to increase enrollment and success among students from downtown Orlando neighborhoods. Launched in 2021, the program supports students from Evans, Jones, and Oak Ridge high schools—schools with historically low college-going rates—through a two-phase model: precollegiate programming and a summer bridge experience at UCF Downtown. Funded by a $2 million grant from Helios Education Foundation and a matched endowment from UCF, the initiative addresses both access and persistence.

Selected students receive SAT/ACT prep, FAFSA completion support, and case management to guide them through the application and enrollment process. Those who continue into the summer bridge program have their tuition, housing, books, and supplies fully covered and gain access to peer mentors and campus engagement activities. In 2023–24, 81 students applied to the pre-college program, 36 participated, and 11 completed the summer bridge—an 83 percent increase from the prior year. This program not only improves postsecondary access for underserved communities but also redefines the university's relationship with the surrounding neighborhoods by embedding equity and community partnership into its enrollment strategy.

[28] Perna, L. W., & Leigh, E. W. (2017). Understanding the promise: A typology of state and local college promise programs. Educational Researcher, 47(3), 155-180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17742653 (Original work published 2018)
[29] Anderson, C. (2019). Local-level, place-based scholarships: a review of the literature. Educational Review, 73(5), 638–661. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1619520
[30] Reber, S. Op. cit.

Although much depends on effective program design, research suggests that promise programs can be effective strategies for expanding postsecondary access and success. A 2018 meta-analysis of 33 program studies found that local promise scholarships, in addition to improving postsecondary enrollment and completion rates, have the potential to positively impact district enrollment and promote positive student outcomes.[31]

Notably, given their scale, promise and free college programs have the potential to affect financial aid systems at the state level. If states alter aid levels in response to local and regional promise programs, they can increase reliance on less stable funding sources (local/regional and private sources). Such changes affect the fiscal sustainability of programs, as well as student outcomes.[32]

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

New Mexico State-Sponsored Scholarships

New Mexico's scholarship support for recent graduates and adult learners is among the most inclusive statewide tuition assistance programs in the country, offering full coverage of tuition and required fees for state residents pursuing certificates, associate, or bachelor's degrees at public institutions. The state does this through two programs: the Lottery Scholarship, which primarily serves full-time students entering college directly after high school (and is a promise-type program), and the Opportunity Scholarship, which was designed to expand eligibility to adult learners, returning students, and part-time enrollees (many of whom have been historically excluded from traditional financial aid programs).

The Opportunity Scholarship has helped more than 40,000 students annually access or return to postsecondary education, particularly those who paused or delayed their academic journeys due to financial constraints. Institutions frequently align this aid with academic advising, degree planning, and reengagement strategies to better support adult learners.

While the scholarship itself does not include formal wraparound services, its structure enables institutions to reimagine how they serve non-traditional students. Early results suggest increased enrollment and stronger persistence among recipients, especially those balancing education with work or caregiving. As one of the most expansive efforts of its kind, New Mexico is shifting what is possible for state-level financial aid.[33]

[31] Anderson, C. Op. cit.
[32] Odle, T. K., Wright-Kim, J., & Castrejón, A. (2025). Whose last dollar? Estimating the effects of promise programs on financial aid awards. The Journal of Higher Education, 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2455332
[33] The Opportunity Scholarship: A scholarship for returning students. New Mexico Higher Education Department. https://www.reachhighernm.com/returning-students/#

Program Goals and Design Matter Significantly

How grant and scholarship programs are designed and structured greatly influences the impact they have and the student populations they can serve. This is perhaps most readily exemplified by the differences between first-dollar programs and last-dollar programs. First-dollar programs provide funding before other sources of financial aid, such as Pell Grants or state grants, while last-dollar programs cover remaining tuition and fees only after all other aid has been exhausted.

There is growing acknowledgement that many last-dollar models—including most Promise or "free community college" programs—often provide little to no additional financial benefit for Pell-eligible students. This is because their tuition and fees are almost always covered by their Pell Grant award. Despite prevailing messaging that suggests they are designed to enable more low-income students to enroll in and complete college, the financial benefit for these students is often minor.[34]

This is important because non-tuition expenses—such as housing, transportation, books, and food—account for approximately 80 percent of the cost of attendance at community colleges nationwide. Since last-dollar promise programs do not help cover these costs, they do not address the most significant areas of unmet need for Pell-eligible students.[35]

However, last-dollar programs may be particularly beneficial for middle-income students who do not qualify for Pell Grants but still struggle to afford college.[36] As such, these programs can be seen as providing opportunities for students who might otherwise struggle to find need-based grant or scholarship aid.

In addition, last-dollar models are generally less expensive to implement and sustain than first-dollar programs. This cost-effectiveness has made them politically appealing in many communities. Ultimately, first-dollar and last-dollar programs have their place in the universe of postsecondary financial aid. Scholarship providers and program designers need to be clear about—and communicate transparently—which students their programs serve and the impact they truly have.

[34] Burke, Lilah. (2023). "How the promise of free college doesn't always help low-income students." Hechinger Report. https://hechingerreport.org/how-the-promise-of-free-college-doesnt-always-help-low-income-students/
[35] Goldrick-Rab, S. and Kendall, N. (2016). The real price of college. The Century Foundation. https://tcf.org/content/report/the-real-price-of-college/
[36] Burke, L. Op. cit.

Financial Emergency and Completion Assistance Scholarships and Grants

Financial Emergency

Unforeseen expenses or sudden financial hardships can easily derail low-income college students, essentially forcing them to make a choice between meeting basic needs and continuing their education. Emergency grants (also known as microgrants) and scholarships—whether offered by postsecondary institutions or private providers—are designed to help students manage these crisis moments and persist in their education.

By providing relatively immediate, one-time aid to cover expenses, these programs directly address crisis instances of one of the most common barriers to student success: affordability.[37] Award amounts are usually small, sometimes as little as a few hundred dollars, and most institutional programs have limited budgets that constrain the number of students they can serve.[38] But for students who do receive emergency aid, the sums can be life-changing in both the short and long term.

Emergency aid goes beyond scholarships. Many institutions also provide support through campus vouchers (for essentials like books, food, or transportation), food pantry access, or emergency loans.[39] A review of emergency aid by the Bipartisan Policy Center indicates that "emergency aid may be most impactful when it is part of holistic support for students."[40]

[37] Dachelet, K. and Goldrick-Rab, S. (2015). Investing in student completion: overcoming financial barriers to retention through small-dollar grants and emergency aid programs. Scholarship America. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED628062.pdf
[38] Stein and Butler, Op. cit.
[39] Kruger, K, Parnell, A. & Wesaw, A. (2016). Landscape analysis of emergency aid programs. NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. https://www.naspa.org/files/dmfile/Emergency_Aid_Report.pdf#page=25.42
[40] Stein and Butler, Op. cit.

Emergency Financial Assistance for Undergraduate Students Who Are Parents

Students who are parents represent an often-overlooked segment of the undergraduate population in the United States. Approximately 18 percent of U.S. undergraduate students are parents.[41] Among these 3.1 million student parents, 51 percent attend community colleges, 16 percent attend public four-year institutions, and 13 percent attend private nonprofit institutions.[42]

Students who are parents often face a distinct set of challenges in balancing their caregiving responsibilities and the need to financially support dependent children with the demands and cost of postsecondary education.[43] When this balance is tipped by unexpected expenses or lost employment, maintaining postsecondary enrollment can be impossible without assistance.

In May 2025, Scholarship America—together with the ECMC Foundation, Ascendium Education Philanthropy, Trellis Foundation, and Crimsonbridge Foundation—**launched a first-of-its-kind emergency scholarship fund** specifically for students who are parents. The fund is designed to enable postsecondary persistence and completion by providing "fast, flexible financial support to student parents who are on the brink of dropping out due to unexpected expenses."[44]

Retention and Completion

Retention and completion programs also seek to ensure that momentary financial need is not the barrier that prevents students from persisting and completing their certificate or degree. However, retention and completion programs approach the problem from a different angle. Whereas emergency scholarships and grants are designed to help students pay for acute and unexpected personal expenses (again, including basic needs, transportation, or medical), retention and completion scholarships are typically designed to cover known or predicted unmet need—often identified using institutional administrative data—that students who are on track to graduate may experience.

For example, the Georgia State University Panther Retention Grant program represents a proactive institutional approach to ensuring students do not drop out because of an inability to cover their tuition and fees. Using student records, university staff identify students who are on track for graduation but have "unmet need and modest balances for tuition and fees" to offer microgrants that help them meet the shortfall. Grant offers are conditional; students must agree to a set of wraparound activities that include meeting with a financial counselor and creating a financial plan for the rest of their educational journey at the university.[45]

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[41] Anderson, T. et al. 2024. Who are undergraduates with dependent children? An updated overview of student-parent characteristics Using 2020 Data. n.p.: Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative.
[42] Dundar, A., Anderson, and Kate Westaby. 2024. Where do student parents attend college? A snapshot of student-parent attendance Patterns Using 2020 Data. n.p.: Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative.
[43] One example of the unique needs of students who are parents is the need for child care. In recognition of this, the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS grant) is designed to help Title IV postsecondary institutions provide affordable campus-based child care for student parents who are Pell grant recipients. As of the time of writing, the CCAMPIS program continued to be funded.
[44] https://scholarshipamerica.org/blog/national-emergency-scholarship-fund-for-student-parents/
[45] https://success.students.gsu.edu/panther-retention-grants/

Helios Last Mile Scholarship at Florida International University

The **Helios Last Mile Scholarship**, implemented by the Florida International University Foundation, supports students within 30 credits of completing their undergraduate degree. Designed to remove final financial obstacles to graduation, the program pairs modest, need-based scholarships with robust academic and personal support. The scholarship specifically targets students who are academically eligible to graduate but at risk of stopping out due to unmet financial need.

Since the program was established in 2021, 792 students have received support. Among them, 757 (95 percent) have graduated and another 33 are on track to graduate in 2025. In addition to financial assistance averaging $1,021 per student, recipients participated in over 830 financial wellness coaching sessions, 542 tutoring sessions, 196 career development events, and 116 college life coaching sessions. These layered supports reflect the program's commitment to addressing financial, academic and personal needs holistically.

The Helios Last Mile Scholarship demonstrates that even modest financial support, when well-timed and coupled with personalized coaching, can dramatically boost graduation rates and close equity gaps for students nearing completion.
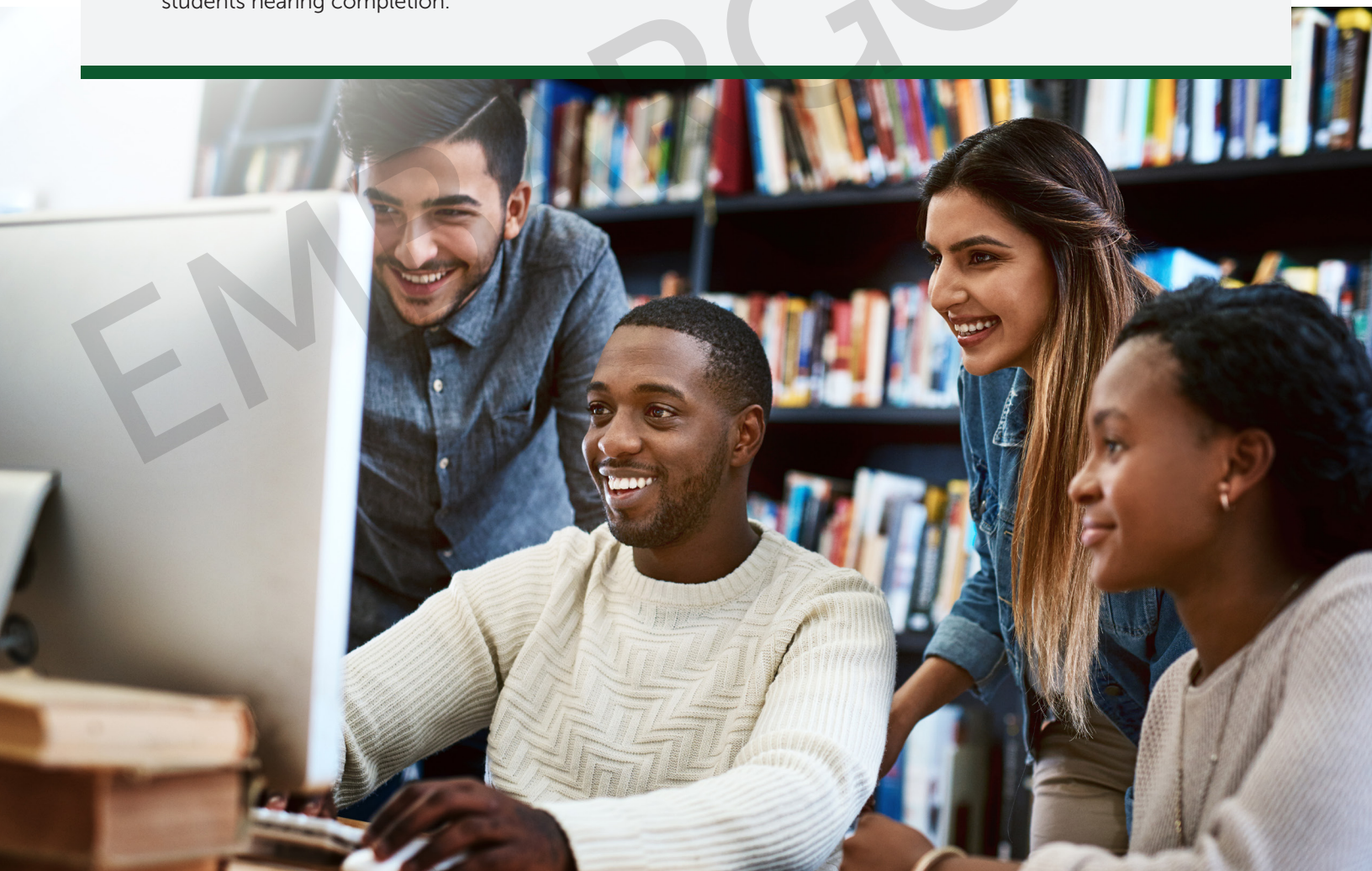
Key Considerations for Scholarship Program Design

Students Served

- Who is the program intended to serve? What specific barriers to postsecondary access, persistence, and completion does the program aim to address for this student population?

- Does administrative data show that the program is effectively meeting the needs of its target student population?

Wraparound Supports

- What kinds of pre-enrollment wraparound supports (e.g., advising, FAFSA assistance, enrollment guidance) can the program provide?

- What kinds of post-enrollment, ongoing wraparound supports can the program provide to help recipients progress, persist, and complete their education (e.g., coaching, tutoring, career services)?

Program Structure

- What restrictions does the program have on how students may use the funds? What purpose do these restrictions serve?

- Is there a merit or performance component to the eligibility or renewal criteria designed to incentivize?

- Does the award end up replacing other sources of aid (e.g., institutional grants)?

Program Administration

- How can the application process be simplified (where relevant) or streamlined to reduce complexity?

- What steps can be taken to ensure students clearly understand award timing, amounts, and renewal?

- Are any aspects of the program requirements creating a barrier for students?

- How do changing state and federal policies impact the program, if at all?

Efficacy and Sustainability

- How will the program measure its impact? What metrics are most important (e.g., does the program primarily strive to increase completion rates more than expand access?)

- How can the program's administrative data be used to improve or retool certain components, as needed? What additional data is required?

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