

## FULFILLING THE PROMISE?

# Early Findings on Oregon's New College Grant Program

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Findings: Signs of progress .....	8
Findings: Implementation .....	10
Recommendations .....	15
Conclusion.....	17
Appendix A. Survey protocol.....	18
Appendix B. Focus group and interview protocols.....	24
Appendix C. Detailed results for figures 2, 3 and 4.....	28
References .....	29

## Tables

Table 1. How high school staff members initially learned about Oregon Promise.....	11
Table 2. Percentage of respondents who correctly answered five “quiz” questions about Oregon Promise.....	13
Table 3. The extent to which areas of confusion regarding Oregon Promise were addressed via the different sources of information .....	15
Table C1. Detailed results for figures 2, 3, and 4 .....	28

## Figures

Figure 1. Regions of Oregon .....	7
Figure 2. Oregon Promise’s impact on students’ views of college access and affordability.....	8
Figure 3. Oregon Promise’s impact on recipients’ decisions on whether to go to college.....	9
Figure 4. Oregon Promise’s impact on recipients’ decisions on where to go to college.....	9
Figure 5. How high school students learned about Oregon Promise.....	12
Figure 6. Relationship between correctly answering “quiz” questions in Oregon Promise survey and being positively influenced by the program .....	14

# Executive Summary

Oregon Promise was created by the Oregon Legislature and is administered by the Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC) of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). According to the OSAC website, this statewide grant program seeks to “encourage Oregon residents who are graduating high school students and recent GED graduates to immediately continue their education by providing funding to attend community college in Oregon,” with the first awards available for students entering college in fall 2016. Oregon Promise is designed to cover most or all community college tuition for eligible students after other state and federal grant aid has been applied. The Legislature approved Oregon Promise in July 2015; OSAC had to move quickly to make policy decisions and market the program to high school seniors that fall.

This report explores the implementation and signs of progress of Oregon Promise in its first year. To examine the program, Education Northwest collected survey data from nearly 1,500 students, as well as focus group and interview data from 27 high school counselors, administrators, and college access professionals across the state.

## Findings

### ***The availability of Oregon Promise grants is influencing students’ postsecondary decisionmaking.***

The majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- “Oregon Promise helped me see that college could be affordable”
- “Hearing about Oregon Promise made me think more about going to college”

In addition, nearly half of survey respondents who received an Oregon Promise grant reported that the grant influenced their decision to attend a community college and then transfer to a four-year institution. Nearly a third of first-generation respondents<sup>1</sup> who received the grant reported that without Oregon Promise, they would not have gone to college.

High school staff members also agreed Oregon Promise is starting to influence their students’ postsecondary decisions. Most commonly, high school staff members said the program encouraged students who had not been planning to pursue postsecondary education to do so.

### ***Stakeholders successfully raised awareness about the availability of Oregon Promise grants—but continued outreach is needed to reduce confusion about program details.***

In the face of an expedited rollout, OSAC launched a marketing campaign, and high school staff members reported hearing about Oregon Promise from many sources. High schools then played a major role in marketing the program, and did their best to integrate the program into college-preparation activities. Many schools encouraged a wide range of students to apply for Oregon Promise, and more than half of survey respondents said they heard about the program at their high school from more than one source.

More than 19,000 students applied for Oregon Promise grants, but many study participants said the application process was confusing. In no particular order, the following are five major areas of confusion:

- Whether Oregon Promise made college free and how many credits it covered per term
- The notification timeline and disbursement process
- The reapplication process
- Eligibility requirements
- Whether the Legislature will fund the program in 2017 and beyond

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<sup>1</sup> First-generation students are defined as having no one in their immediate family—parents, guardians, or siblings—with a college degree or certificate.

## Recommendations

To build on the early successes of Oregon Promise, Education Northwest recommends stakeholders:

- Mention that Oregon Promise covers up to 12-credits and include information on award notification and the disbursement timeline in outreach materials
- Continue to invest in targeted outreach to high school and college staff, as well as applicants, to increase awareness and participation
- Study recipients' experiences to understand the program's impact and inform improvements
- Stabilize funding and review requirements to ensure they are meeting the legislative intent of the program

# Introduction

Postsecondary education has innumerable benefits for individuals and society, including increases in lifetime earnings and improved health outcomes, job satisfaction, and social mobility for the individual, as well as his or her children (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). However, huge and persistent gaps based on family income exist in postsecondary education enrollment. In 2012, for example, 82 percent of recent high school graduates from the highest income quintile (\$90,500 annually or above) attended college, compared with 65 percent from the middle income quintile (\$34,060–\$55,253) and 52 percent from the lowest income quintile (below \$18,300; U.S. Census Bureau, as cited in Baum et al., 2013, p. 34).

Financial aid is key to expanding college access to low- and middle-income students. Studies have consistently found that federal grants, merit scholarships, and federal tax benefits (for example, the American opportunity credit and lifetime learning credit) have a direct effect on increasing college enrollment and persistence (Bettinger, 2004; Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall 2002; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Dynarski, 2003). Even students who receive relatively modest grants and scholarships of \$1,000 are more likely to enroll in—and less likely to drop out of—postsecondary institutions (Castleman & Long, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2015). In addition, financial aid has contributed to more equitable education outcomes by improving college enrollment and graduation rates for low-income students (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013).

Federal grants and loans are the largest source of financial aid for undergraduate students (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013). All 50 states provide financial support to undergraduate students who attend public state colleges, but state grants make up a small share of the total available financial aid.

A new trend in state student aid is grant programs that seek to make community college “free” (or nearly free) for eligible students. From 2014 to 2016, 23 states considered passing “free” community college bills, and four states—Kentucky, Minnesota, Oregon, and Tennessee—did so (Pingel, Parker, & Sisneros, 2016). There has been little research on the execution and impact of these new community college grant programs, however. This report presents the first exploration of the early implementation of a “free” community college grant program.

## Program synopsis

The Oregon Legislature created Oregon Promise in 2015, with the first awards available for students entering college in fall 2016. The Legislature appropriated \$10 million for the first year of the program, to be administered by the Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC) of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). According to the OSAC website, “The purpose of the Oregon Promise Grant is to encourage Oregon residents who are graduating high school students and recent GED graduates to immediately continue their education by providing funding to attend community college in Oregon.”<sup>2</sup>

To be eligible for Oregon Promise, students must have received an Oregon high school diploma or GED or completed home schooling within six months of enrolling in community college. They must also have at least a cumulative high school GPA of 2.5. All students who met these criteria; completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by March 1, 2016; and entered community college in fall 2016 were awarded the Oregon Promise grant.

Oregon Promise uses a “last dollar” scholarship model to make community college tuition free—for up to 12 credits per term—which means it covers the tuition and fees that remain after other state and federal grants have been applied. Eligible students whose tuition and fees are fully covered by other grants are eligible for up to \$1,000 to put toward other expenses.

The award duration is 90 attempted credit hours (not including remedial credits). Students must be enrolled at least half time at a public community college in Oregon and make satisfactory academic progress.

It is important to note that the initial rollout of Oregon Promise was expedited; the program was approved in July 2015, so OSAC had to quickly make key policy decisions regarding the implementation of Oregon Promise, as well as market it to high school

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise.aspx>

seniors, by fall 2015. This compressed timeframe provides important context for understanding the implementation outcomes of the program in its first year.

## Research questions and data collection

The purpose of this study was to examine the progress and implementation of Oregon Promise in its first year. The study was guided by the following questions:

- **Signs of progress:** *How is Oregon Promise influencing students' postsecondary decisions?*
- **Implementation:** *What information about Oregon Promise did high school staff members and students receive in the first year of the program? Did high school staff members and students understand the program rules and requirements?*

To answer these questions, we collected two sources of data. First, in collaboration with OSAC staff members and HECC's research director, we designed a survey to learn what students understood about Oregon Promise and what they thought about its impact on their lives. The survey protocol is in appendix A.<sup>3</sup>

To reach Oregon students who were most likely seniors in 2015/16—and thus may have been eligible for Oregon Promise—OSAC staff members administered the survey to FAFSA filers age 18 or 19. They also administered the survey to Oregon Promise applicants who had earned a GED. In total, OSAC staff members administered the survey to 46,281 individuals in September and October 2016. A total of 1,442 individuals completed the survey. Although the response rate was low, the sample was relatively large and provided a rich collection of perceptions on Oregon Promise.

Among the survey respondents:

- 95 percent were high school graduates, 2 percent had earned a GED, and 3 percent did not graduate or earn a GED
- 94 percent planned to attend college in fall 2016
- 81 percent were at least a little familiar with Oregon Promise
- 62 percent applied for Oregon Promise, and 41 percent were using the grant to pay for community college<sup>4</sup>
- 37 percent were "first generation" (defined in the survey as having no one in their immediate family—parents, guardians, or siblings—with a college degree or certificate)

In addition to collecting survey data, we also conducted focus groups and interviews with high school staff members to gather perspectives on Oregon Promise outreach, the program's influence on students, and potential improvements. The interview protocols are in appendix B.

We held two 30-minute focus groups with six college counselors from four high schools and three college access professionals (for example, ASPIRE, AVID, and TRIO coordinators) from three high schools at the Reach Higher Oregon Summit in July 2016. We also visited five high schools in October 2016, where we conducted a one-hour interview with 18 high school staff members who were most involved with Oregon Promise (specifically, nine counselors, five college access staff members, and four administrators). In total, we spoke to 27 individuals from 12 high schools.

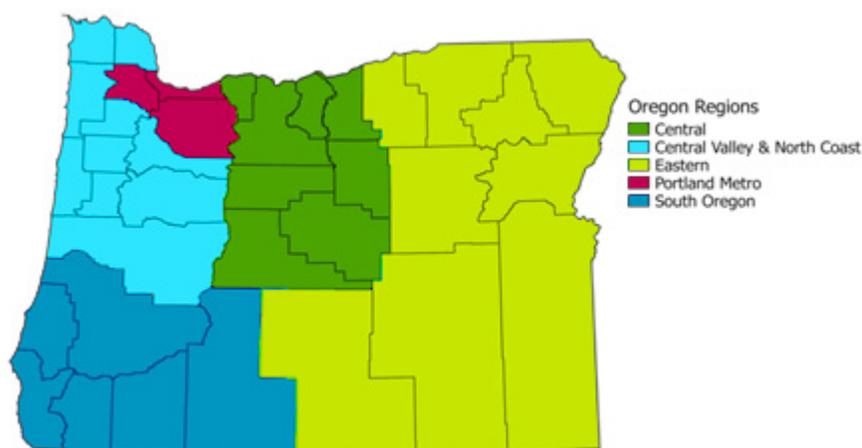
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<sup>3</sup> The survey asked for students' names and birth dates, so if Education Northwest were to conduct future research on Oregon Promise, we can match survey responses to student demographic and outcome data

<sup>4</sup> We also calculated that 56 percent of respondents were eligible for Oregon Promise. Respondents were considered eligible if they reported a cumulative high school GPA of 2.5 or higher and indicated they graduated in June 2016 or earned a GED after March 1, 2016—that is, within six months of college entry. The most common reasons we identified respondents as ineligible were that they graduated in June 2015 (28 percent) or did not provide their graduation year (12 percent). The remaining 4 percent were considered ineligible because they indicated they did not graduate or earn a GED (3 percent), or they earned a GED before March 1, 2016 (1 percent).

To ensure a geographically representative sample for the school interviews, we selected a public high school within each of Oregon's five regions: Central Oregon, Central Valley and North Coast, Eastern Oregon, Portland Metro, and Southern Oregon (figure 1). We prioritized high schools with high community college enrollment rates because we believed they would have the most experience with Oregon Promise; four of the five schools in the sample had community college enrollment rates above the state average of 30 percent.

**Figure 1. Regions of Oregon**



*Source: Authors' depiction of Oregon regions*

The sample consisted of two large urban schools, one large school in a rural area, and two small rural schools. Four of the schools had AVID, ASPIRE, and/or TRIO programs that provided college and career services. Only one school reported having a dedicated college counselor, and one school had one counselor and offered no college access programs.

To analyze the survey data, we calculated frequencies and percentages for survey items, as well as cross tabulations. We compared survey answers for first-generation and non-first-generation students to determine whether these groups perceived Oregon Promise differently. One focus area was the extent to which the program may have changed first-generation students' perceptions of college access and affordability. The goal of financial aid is to expand college access to low- and middle-income students, but confusion about how to access financial aid, as well as misperceptions about college's sticker price (actual tuition) and net price (tuition and fees minus financial aid), are widespread among low-income and first-generation college students and contribute to their lower postsecondary enrollment (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

The last survey question allowed students to write a comment about Oregon Promise, and 372 respondents submitted feedback, a question, or a story. We analyzed these comments for common themes. We also transcribed and analyzed focus group and interview data, producing analytical memos to document emerging themes. We then triangulated findings across data sources to identify the strongest themes.

## Limitations

This study's findings provide a small sampling of statewide perceptions of Oregon Promise during the first year of the program—they are not generalizable to the experiences and perspectives of all high school staff members, all high school seniors in 2015/16, and all Oregon Promise recipients in 2016/17. The findings can only provide some insights from across the state during the rollout of the program. They can be used in combination with other evidence to inform program improvement and future research.

# Findings: Signs of progress

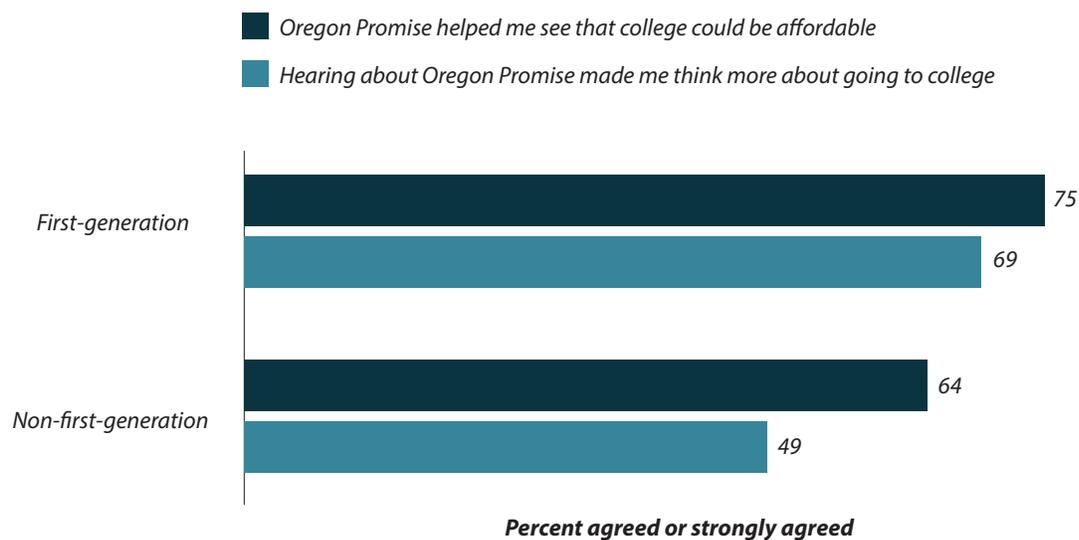
## **The availability of Oregon Promise grants is influencing students' postsecondary decisionmaking**

Most high school staff members we spoke with believed Oregon Promise is starting to influence their students' postsecondary decisions. Most commonly, they said the program encouraged students who had not been planning to pursue postsecondary education to do so.

Some staff members also thought Oregon Promise was prompting more students to decide to attend a community college and then transfer to a four-year institution rather than directly enrolling in a four-year school, although others did not observe this trend.

Students' viewpoints on Oregon Promise's impact were largely in line with high school staff members' observations. The majority of survey respondents who were at least familiar with Oregon Promise (1,168 individuals) said they agreed or strongly agreed that "Oregon Promise helped me see that college could be affordable" and "[h]earing about Oregon Promise made me think more about going to college" (figure 2).

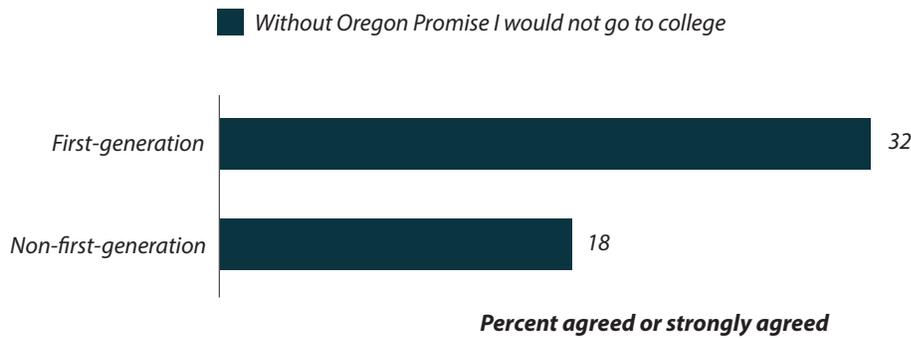
**Figure 2. Oregon Promise's impact on students' views of college access and affordability**



**Note:** For each survey item, differences in percentages between first-generation and non-first-generation students are statistically different. The detailed t-test results and percentages for each category, from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree," are in table 1 in appendix C.

Among survey respondents who said they were using Oregon Promise to attend community college (590 individuals), first-generation grant recipients were much more likely to report Oregon Promise influenced them to attend college than non-first-generation recipients. Nearly one-third of first-generation recipients agreed or strongly agreed that "Without Oregon Promise, I would not go to college," compared with 18 percent of non-first-generation recipients (figure 3).

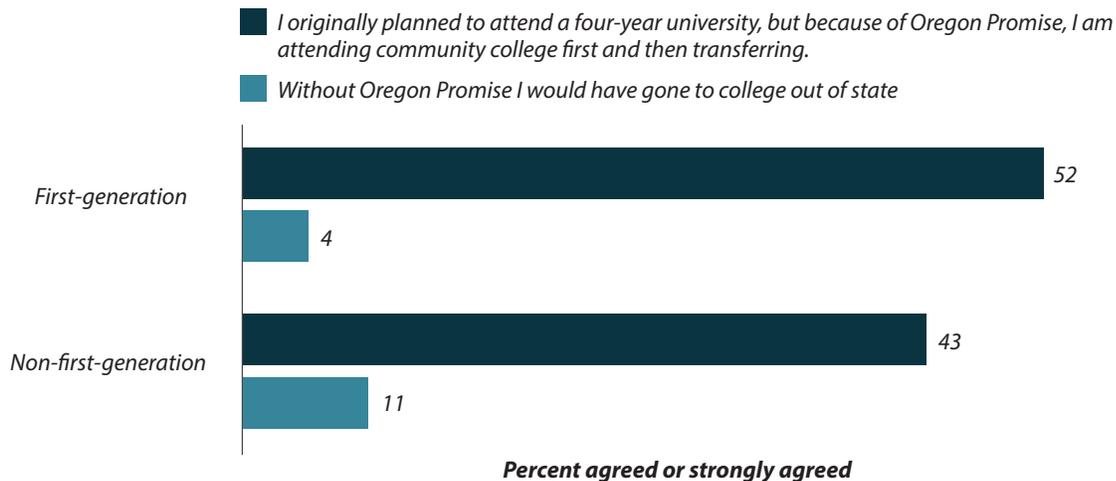
**Figure 3. Oregon Promise’s impact on recipients’ decisions on whether to go to college**



**Note:** For each survey item, differences in percentages between first-generation and non-first-generation students are statistically different. The detailed t-test results and percentages for each category, from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree,” are in table 1 in appendix C.

Overall, forty-five percent of recipients reported that the grant influenced them to attend a community college first and then transfer to a four-year institution, and only 8 percent reported without the grant, they would have attended college out of state (table C.1). First-generation recipients were more likely to report the grant influenced them to attend community college first, but less likely to report that without the grant, they would have gone to college out of state.

**Figure 4. Oregon Promise’s impact on recipients’ decisions on where to go to college**



**Note:** For each survey item, differences in percentages between first-generation and non-first-generation students are statistically different. The detailed t-test results and percentages for each category, from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree,” are in table 1 in appendix C.

Supporting the community college transfer experience—including the transfer and application of credits to a student’s chosen degree program at a university—may be crucial for meeting the goals of Oregon Promise and helping its participants. In Oregon and across the nation, many aspiring transfer students do not reach their educational goals; although nearly 80 percent<sup>5</sup> of first-time, degree-seeking community college students say they want to transfer to a university, fewer than a quarter do so, and only about 10 percent complete a bachelor’s degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Community college students’ self-reports of seeking a bachelor’s degree may be biased upward by the need to self-define as such to be eligible for financial aid and other services.

Finally, about 50 individuals shared positive comments about Oregon Promise via the survey's prompt for an open-ended response. Seventy-five percent were short expressions of gratitude, and 25 percent were impact stories. Below are four typical stories students shared:

“ *When I looked at the amount I was given, I [went] to my mom and said, ‘I can pay for college. I will get to complete my degree completely paid for.’ This will help me, literally, for years. I am going to become a pediatric dietitian.*

“ *I originally planned on going to the University of Oregon and taking out loans, but at the last second, my mom backed out of co-signing, and my dad's credit was too bad [for me] to get the funding I needed. It seemed like I applied for every possible scholarship, but I was only awarded \$600, which I was very frustrated with because of how hard I worked in school. But thanks to Oregon Promise, I'm able to attend [community college] this year instead of working and then going to school later on.*

“ *Oregon Promise has made it possible for me to go to college and avoid crushing [student] debt ... If the Oregon Promise grant is renewed (PLEASE!), and I am able to get two years of community college tuition paid for, it is a huge head start in my quest for a bachelor's degree in nursing.*

“ *My dad was unemployed for four years, and we were forced to spend all of my parents' retirement and my college savings to survive. With Oregon Promise, I'm able to attend college without putting excessive pressure on my family, and they can rebuild their retirement!*

## Findings: Implementation

### **Stakeholders successfully raised awareness about the availability of Oregon Promise grants—but continued outreach is needed to reduce confusion about program details.**

To promote Oregon Promise in its first year, OSAC sent a marketing kit to superintendents, counselors, community colleges, and community-based organizations. OSAC also created a website (complete with an FAQ page), a video, an infographic, and fliers about Oregon Promise, and it conducted a collaborative media outreach campaign with community colleges.

The awareness campaign was successful; 19,223 individuals applied for Oregon Promise—nearly a third of the high school graduating class of 2016. Among all the applicants, 10,459 had a valid FAFSA that listed at least one Oregon community college. Ultimately, 6,634 entered a community college in fall 2016 and received an Oregon Promise grant.

High school staff members initially learned about Oregon Promise from many sources (table 1), and then high school staff played a major role in raising awareness about the program. Common strategies included sending letters and emails to students and parents, delivering in-class presentations, having one-on-one conversations with students, and assisting students as they completed applications.

**Table 1. How high school staff members initially learned about Oregon Promise**

Source of information	Number of staff members who cited this source
OSAC	4
ASPIRE coordinator	3
District college/career coordinator	3
Community college staff member	3
Conversation with state senator	2
The Oregonian	2
Principal	1
Conference	1

Most schools also integrated information about Oregon Promise into their “FAFSA Completion Nights,” during which they have parents complete the FAFSA, the Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA), and the Oregon Promise application.

**“ We had a FAFSA completion push this year in our school, so there was a lot of work going on with FAFSA completion; obviously the two go together ... ‘We’re going to apply for FAFSA, and we’re going to do ORSAA and Oregon Promise.’**

At most schools in the study, staff members encouraged a wide range of students to apply Oregon Promise. Two schools were unique in that at one, staff members had all students apply because they were unclear about the program’s eligibility requirements and wanted to make sure all students would have the opportunity to potentially receive an Oregon Promise grant, while at another, staff members downplayed the program, given their lack of clarity about the benefits, requirements, and sustainability.

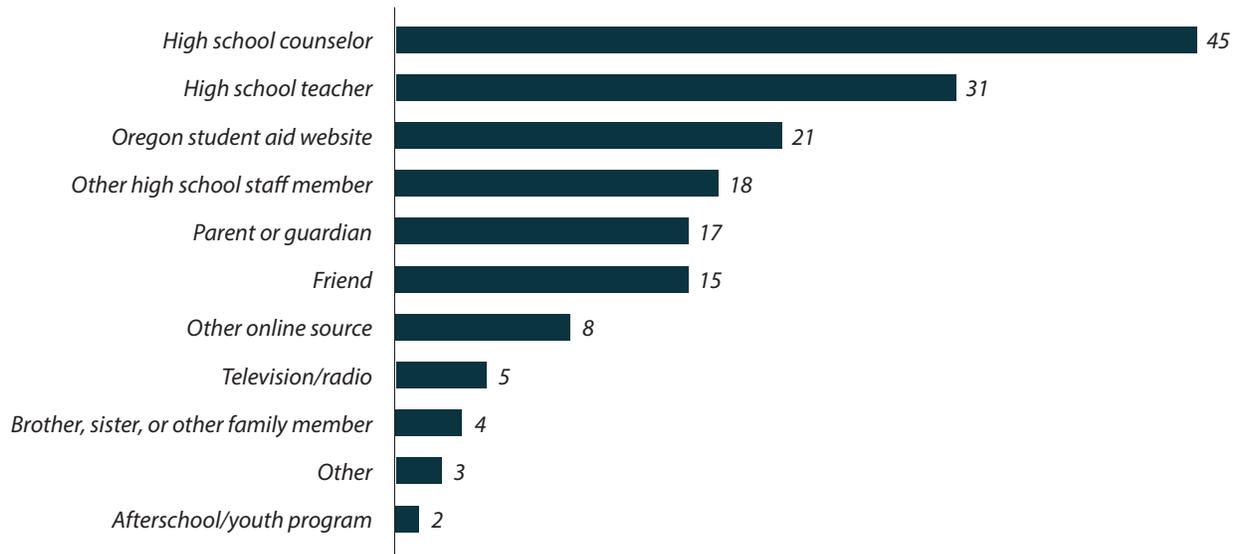
**“ We encouraged every student who qualified at the 2.5 [GPA]-and-above level to apply for the OP because at that time, at the beginning, we didn’t know who was going to get it and who wasn’t, so we thought, ‘You know what? Let’s get everybody.’**

**“ We said, ‘Oregon Promise—even if you don’t want to use it, at least get your name in there because you might change your mind later. Give yourself some options instead of just having one plan and having that plan crash next May.’**

**“ We were really looking, I think, at anyone who was approaching 2.5 [and] 2.5 and above, and it didn’t matter where they were going to school—just apply [for Oregon Promise].**

Based on survey data, most students learned about Oregon Promise at their high school from several sources. Specifically, 47 percent said they heard about the program from one source, 23 percent heard about it from two sources, and 30 percent heard about it from more than two sources. In addition, three of the top four sources of information about Oregon Promise were high school staff members (figure 5).

**Figure 5. How high school students learned about Oregon Promise**



**Percent who said they heard about Oregon Promise from this source**

Although more than 19,000 students applied for Oregon Promise grants, study participants said the application process was confusing. Most high school staff members said they received secondhand information about the program, and nobody mentioned receiving a marketing kit from OSAC. In addition, many high school staff members who were confused about the initial information they received about Oregon Promise experienced challenges in accessing accurate, complete, and timely information.

**“ We didn’t have [a] packet or brochure that we could hand to parents that showed ... what it is. We did have parents or students coming to us with ... [incomplete] information. The biggest battle was ... that the [news]paper said something, and the college said something, and trying to pull all that together and help them.**

High school staff members also said they were at the forefront in responding to frequent questions, complaints, and rumors about Oregon Promise. Along those lines, one of the major themes in the survey’s open-ended responses was that students received poor communication and information about Oregon Promise. For example, two students wrote:

**“ During the application process, there were many questions. I often asked teachers and called community colleges, but they were unaware of the answers. I think it would help if there was a packet released on everything someone might need to know instead of just the requirements [for being] an applicant. At this time, I’m still unaware [of] how to activate the grant so that my tuition and other expenses for fall term get paid.**

**“ My family had a lot of questions that no one seemed to be able to answer until the school year started. It was quite frustrating and left us scrambling to find additional funding. We were not aware [of] how the program worked or what the limit of funds included (that the maximum award included only tuition, not fees; that it was only for 12 credits, even though one would need to take 15 per term to graduate in six terms; or how many terms a recipient would have to complete). We could not find any information regarding these topics on any website, and the college had no answers until after the awards came out.**

Based on how frequently participants raised the issue, we identified five major areas of confusion regarding Oregon Promise. For each of the areas of confusion, most high school staff in our sample and around 30 survey respondents asked questions or remarked on the issue. In no particular order, they were:

- 1. Many students were told Oregon Promise made college free.** When many students received the Oregon Promise grant, it was smaller than they had expected or planned for. Part of this confusion may have been due to students and staff not knowing whether the program covered up to 12 or 15 credits per term—or not realizing Oregon Promise covered whichever amount was smaller: actual tuition at their community college or the average tuition among all community colleges in Oregon for up to 12 credits a term.
- 2. Students and high school staff members were unclear about the notification timeline and disbursement process.** High school counselors said they did not know when students would find out whether they would receive an Oregon Promise grant, and survey respondents who were Oregon Promise recipients expressed anxiety about not yet receiving the grant—even though they were weeks into the school year.
- 3. Students did not understand the reapplication process.** Students asked how to reapply for the second year, what the GPA requirement would be to reapply, and whether they needed to reapply every term or every year.
- 4. High school staff members and students had many eligibility-related questions.** There were specific questions about the eligibility of students who graduated early or started college in the winter or spring term; whether undocumented students were eligible; and which quarters in a student’s senior year to include in the cumulative GPA calculation to determine whether he or she met the 2.5 cutoff. In addition, some survey respondents did not know why they did not qualify for Oregon Promise and thus could only speculate. For example, one student thought he or she did not get the grant because of his or her undocumented status, another thought his or her parents’ income was too high, and a third thought Oregon Promise had run out of money.

In the survey, we asked respondents who said they were familiar with Oregon Promise five “quiz” questions about the program. Their answers revealed a relatively strong understanding of the basics—nearly all the respondents understood Oregon Promise is a community college grant program, more than two-thirds knew the GPA requirement, and more than half knew about the timing of college enrollment (table 2).

**Table 2. Percentage of respondents who correctly answered five “quiz” questions about Oregon Promise**

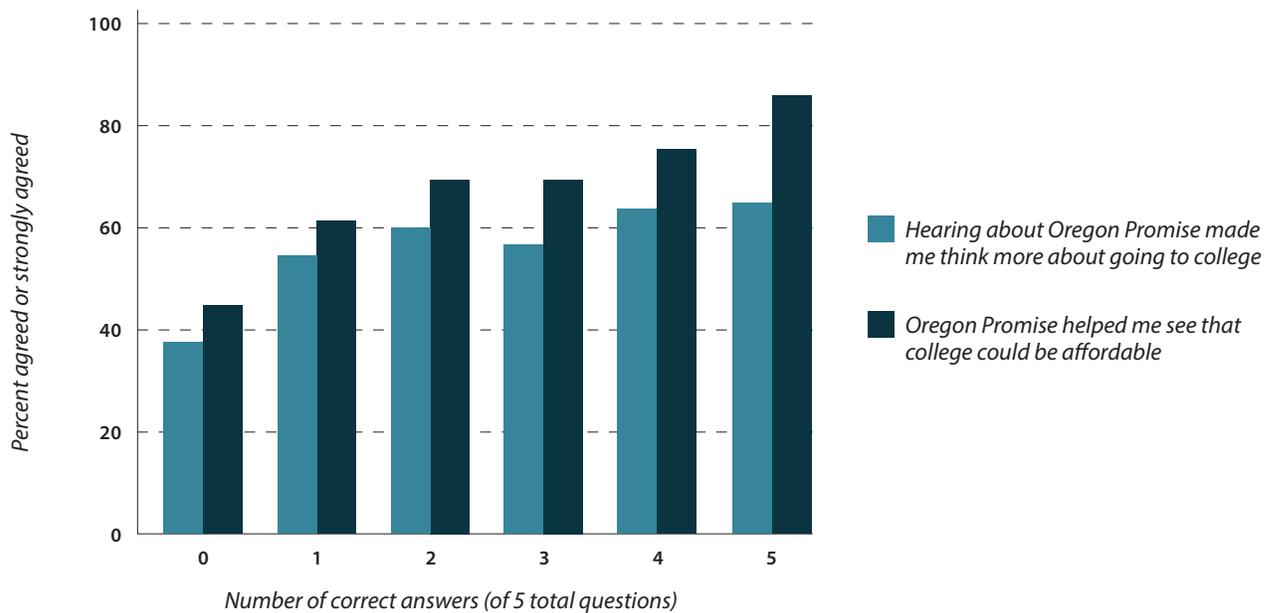
Quiz question	Correct answer	Percent answered correctly
What is the high school GPA required to qualify for Oregon Promise?	2.5 or above	69
To qualify for Oregon Promise, when must you enroll in college?	Within six months of graduating from high school or earning a GED	57
<b>True or false: Oregon Promise is available to students who attend...</b>		
A community college in Oregon	True	93
A public (state) four-year college in Oregon	False	53
A private four-year college in Oregon	False	61

- 5. Uncertainty about continued state funding for Oregon Promise made it difficult to fully integrate the program into schools’ postsecondary-readiness activities.** Additionally, many students asked whether Oregon Promise would be around in 2017.

Two less common areas of confusion that arose from the open-ended survey responses were whether participation in the Student Support Program at community college was required to receive an Oregon Promise grant and whether students could use the grant to purchase textbooks.

To ensure high school staff members effectively reach out to students and families about the program and all eligible students apply for it, both staff and students must have a clear understanding of Oregon Promise. Along those lines, students who believe Oregon Promise has value may be more likely to seek more information about it—and students who know the program’s requirements seem to be more likely to believe Oregon Promise has value. We found that the more correct answers respondents gave to the aforementioned “quiz” questions, the more likely they were to agree or strongly agree with these statements: “Oregon Promise helped me see that college could be affordable” and “Hearing about Oregon Promise made me think a more about going to college” (figure 6). Put another way, survey respondents who were more likely to be positively influenced by Oregon Promise were also more likely to understand the program’s requirements.

**Figure 6. Relationship between correctly answering “quiz” questions in Oregon Promise survey and being positively influenced by the program**



# Recommendations

## 1. Mention the 12-credit limit and include information on award notification and the disbursement timeline in outreach materials

We found that no Oregon Promise materials mentioned the number of credits the grant covers. We recommend adding this information (that is, the Oregon Promise grant covers up to 12 credits per term of actual tuition at their community college or the average tuition among all community colleges) to the program’s home page and/or infographic, as it was a main area of confusion for study participants.

In addition, we could find only vague information about Oregon Promise’s notification timeline and grant-disbursement process in existing materials. These issues were both sources of anxiety for many survey participants—particularly some awardees who were still waiting for their grant at the time they completed the survey in September or October.

If possible, we recommend adding more details to the FAQ webpage about when applicants can expect to learn whether they were awarded the grant and when it will be disbursed, or why the award notification and grant disbursement might be delayed. To support these efforts, community colleges’ financial aid offices can also add information to their website about when students should expect to receive the Oregon Promise grant and other financial aid.

We found all but two of the major areas of confusion regarding Oregon Promise were addressed via the program’s website, infographic, and/or FAQ webpage (table 3).

**Table 3. The extent to which areas of confusion regarding Oregon Promise were addressed via the different sources of information**

Area of confusion	Information provided and source of information
<b>Number of credits Oregon Promise grant covers</b>	Not addressed on the Oregon Promise website, infographic, or FAQ webpage
<b>Notification timeline and disbursement process</b>	Somewhat addressed on the website ( <a href="http://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise.aspx">http://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise.aspx</a> )—but no specific information was given regarding an expected timeline for award notification or grant disbursement <i>“You should frequently check your award status in the OSAC Student Portal. OSAC will also notify you by email once you have been awarded.”</i> <i>“Prior to the beginning of the term, OSAC will send funds directly to the Oregon community college where you are enrolled. Your college will apply the funds to your campus account. . .”</i>
<b>Reapplication process</b>	Addressed on the website <i>“Renewal information for those who already applied and were awarded for 2016–17 will be available in January 2017.”</i>
<b>Eligibility</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students who graduated early</li> <li>• Students who started college in the winter or spring</li> <li>• Undocumented students</li> <li>• Quarters included in cumulative high school GPA to determine cutoff</li> </ul>	All eligibility questions are addressed on the FAQ page ( <a href="http://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-Q-and-A.aspx">http://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-Q-and-A.aspx</a> )
<b>Funding renewal</b>	Addressed on the website <i>“Funding for Oregon Promise for the 2017–18 academic year is subject to Oregon Legislative approval. More information will be available in spring 2017.”</i>

## **2. Continue to invest in targeted outreach to increase awareness and participation**

As the years go by, understanding of Oregon Promise’s requirements will increase across the state. In the meantime, because the program is still new, outreach is key. We recommend continuing to invest in outreach, and we suggest five specific approaches.

First, OSAC should consider continuing to offer Oregon Promise information sessions to high school counselors and college access professionals, community college student services professionals, and prospective applicants. Training and information sessions could be delivered through a live or pre-recorded webinar and posted on the OSAC website.

Second, a designated person at OSAC should continue to be a contact for high schools across the state. When asked about ways to improve Oregon Promise, several counselors requested that the program designate a specific contact person.

Third, the Legislature may want to consider increasing the number of staff members at OSAC. Doing so might allow OSAC to conduct in-person trainings about Oregon Promise and other state aid programs at high schools and K–12 conferences throughout the state, thereby bolstering overall financial aid outreach and potentially increasing college enrollment.

Fourth, upon legislative approval of Oregon Promise funding for 2017/18, OSAC should widely disseminate reapplication information to current Oregon Promise recipients directly and/or through community college student services. Reminders to reapply for Oregon Promise may help boost FAFSA completion and the number of Pell grants awarded, as well; more than half of all Pell grant recipients do not refile a FAFSA after their freshman year because they miss the deadline, are not aware they need to reapply, or miss reminders about reapplication (Bird & Castleman, 2016).

Fifth, given the number of conflicting messages high school staff members and students received about Oregon Promise, we recommend OSAC continue to play an active role in coordinating communication and messaging related to Oregon Promise. Specifically, OSAC should collaborate with both the Oregon Community College Association and the Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development to ensure community colleges, high schools, media outlets, and the public receive consistent communication and aligned messaging about Oregon Promise. The Oregon Department of Education could also be a partner in these efforts, focusing on high school administrators, counselors, and educators.

## **3. Study recipients’ experiences to understand the program’s impact and inform future improvements**

In addition to studying Oregon Promise’s impact on student outcomes, future research should focus on recipients’ experiences. The data we collected from students through the open-ended survey responses revealed many insights related to the application process and how Oregon Promise influenced students’ postsecondary decisions and made an impact on their lives.

There is still much more to learn from Oregon Promise recipients that could inform program improvements, understanding of the reasons behind future program impacts, and knowledge of community college student experiences. For example, surveys or focus groups with Oregon Promise recipients who are in college could center on:

- The extent to which the program reduced financial strain and influenced postsecondary enrollment decisions (that is, deciding to enroll at all, deciding to start at a community college and transfer versus enrolling directly at a four-year institution, and deciding how many credits to take)
- Experiences with the program’s application and reapplication process
- Perspectives on the program’s community college student supports
- Experiences with the community college-to-university transfer process and overall “transfer college knowledge”<sup>6</sup>
- Perspectives on the program’s impact on skills that are harder to measure, such as motivation, sense of belonging in college, goal setting, and major choice

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<sup>6</sup> Transfer college knowledge is the contextual information needed to succeed as a community college transfer student (Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2016).

#### **4. Stabilize funding and review requirements to ensure they are meeting the legislative intent of the program**

The Legislature should consider stabilizing the funding for Oregon Promise so the program can continue to support recent high school graduates and GED recipients. Doing so could also facilitate statewide marketing of and communication related to Oregon Promise, as well as enable middle and high schools to build the program into their college-going culture; the ideal time to begin to prepare students for college is as early as middle school (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, & de la Torre, 2014; Perna & Swail, 2001; Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Hurd, 2009). A survey respondent asked:

**“ Will there be an Oregon Promise next year? I have a younger brother who will be graduating soon and I’m trying to encourage him to continue his education.**

The Legislature may also want to review the requirements of the program in statute, namely, the 2.5 GPA cutoff and 12-credit limit. Many high school staff members said lowering the GPA cutoff (to 2.0, for example) would allow Oregon Promise to reach more students who are interested in enrolling in vocational certificate programs at community college but do not believe they can afford to do so. This would allow more Oregon students to continue their education, receive postsecondary training, and potentially enter a high-wage industry in their community.

In addition, a number of students who submitted an open-ended response said they wished Oregon Promise covered up to 15 credits a term so that they could graduate on time, in six terms. Increasing the credit limit would also align Oregon Promise with evidence on the benefits of accelerating students’ progress through college (Klempin, 2014). Additionally, it would remove the current incentive for students to take fewer credits per term to ensure their Oregon Promise grant covers tuition—a practice that can lengthen the time it takes students to earn a degree.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the data we collected, Oregon Promise showed auspicious signs of progress in its first year. In the face of an expedited rollout, OSAC launched a marketing campaign, and high school staff members reported hearing about Oregon Promise from many sources. High schools then played a major role in marketing the program, and many students applied. Overall, study participants believe Oregon Promise is a valuable program that encourages students to consider and enroll in college.

Future research on the impact of Oregon Promise is needed to determine whether the experiences of our small sample are generalizable to all Oregon Promise recipients. Future research should examine the impact of the program on recipients’ college persistence and completion, as well as labor market outcomes. This research would provide the first insight into the extent to which a statewide community college grant program expands postsecondary education access, promotes postsecondary education completion, and improves the economic well-being of the state’s residents—all of which would help inform state and national policy.

# Appendix A. Survey protocol

## Oregon Promise Survey

### Email

Dear student,

Oregon is offering a new grant program to help pay for college called the Oregon Promise. Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission is conducting a survey to help improve Oregon Promise, and we need your input!

We invite you to make your voice heard by completing a short online survey. The purpose of this survey is to find out about your familiarity with Oregon Promise and how the program may have influenced your college and career plans.

This survey should take about five minutes to complete, and you are not required to participate. You may stop participating at any point during the survey or skip any questions with no consequences or risk. Participation will not affect your Oregon Promise grant or any other financial aid or college-enrollment opportunities. Your answers will help improve how Oregon Promise reaches out to students and could increase the number of students who participate in this program.

Your responses will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team. We will use the information you provide about your name and birthdate to link your survey response to information from your school. Survey responses will be combined and reported to education stakeholders and agencies. We will not use your name or personal information in any reports to ensure that no one will be able to identify your responses.

If you have any questions, you may contact Dr. Michelle Hodara at [michelle.hodara@educationnorthwest.org](mailto:michelle.hodara@educationnorthwest.org) or 503-275-0598.

Do you agree to take the survey and confirm that you are at least 18 years old?

Yes    No

*[Selecting "Yes" directs individuals to online survey.]*

## Survey questions

### I. Student information

1. What best describes your situation in September 2016?

- Graduate of an Oregon high school
- GED recipient
- Did not graduate from high school or earn a GED

*[If selected "Graduate of an Oregon high school," proceed to question 2. If selected "GED recipient," proceed to question 4. If selected "Did not graduate or earn a GED," skip to question 5.]*

2. When did you graduate from high school?

- June 2015
- December 2015
- June 2016
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

3. What high school did you graduate from? [Drop-down menu of all Oregon high schools]

*[Skip to question 5.]*

4. When did you earn your GED?

- After March 1, 2016
- Before March 1, 2016

### II. Plans for education after high school

5. What are your plans for the fall of 2016? Check as many options as fit your plans.

- Attend high school
- Earn a GED
- Attend college (such as university, community college, or vocational/technical school)
- Work full time
- Work part time
- Join the military
- Take care of family member(s)
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

*[If selected "Attend college," continue to next question. All others, skip to question 8.]*

6. Are you attending college in Oregon?

Yes/No/Don't know

7. Where are you beginning or did you begin your freshman year of college?

- Community college
- Private four-year university
- Public/state four-year university
- Other type of postsecondary education: Please specify\_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

### III. Familiarity with Oregon Promise

8. How familiar are you with the Oregon Promise program?

- Very familiar
- Familiar
- A little bit familiar
- Never heard of it

*[If selected anything other than "Never heard of it," continue to question 9. If selected "Never heard of it," skip to question 23.]*

9. From where did you receive information about Oregon Promise? Check all that apply.

- Friend
- Parent or guardian
- Brother, sister, or other family member
- High school teacher
- High school counselor
- Other high school staff member (not a teacher or counselor)
- Oregon student aid website (oregonstudentaid.gov)
- Other online source
- Afterschool/youth program
- Television/radio
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

10. Do you know the high school GPA required to qualify for Oregon Promise?

- Yes *[proceed to next question]*
- No *[skip to question 12 to exclude right guesses]*

11. What is the high school GPA required to qualify for Oregon Promise?

- At least a 2.0
- At least a 2.5
- At least a 3.0
- Don't know

12. Do you know when you must enroll in college to qualify for Oregon Promise?

- Yes *[proceed to next question]*
- No *[skip to question 14 to exclude right guesses]*

13. To qualify for Oregon Promise, when must you enroll in college?

- Within one year of graduating from high school or earning a GED
- Within two years of graduating from high school or earning a GED
- Within six months of graduating from high school or earning a GED
- Don't know

14. True or false: Oregon Promise is available to students who attend ...

	True	False	Don't know
A public (state) four-year college in Oregon			
A community college in Oregon			
A private four-year college in Oregon			

15. How much do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. Hearing about Oregon Promise made me think more about going to college.					
b. Oregon Promise helped me see that college could be affordable.					

16. Did you apply for Oregon Promise?

Yes/No

*[If yes, proceed to question 17. If no, skip to question 20.]*

17. Did you receive an Oregon Promise grant?

Yes/No

*[If yes, proceed to question 18. If no, skip to question 21.]*

18. Are you using the Oregon Promise grant to pay for community college?

Yes/No

*[If yes, proceed to question 19. If no, skip to question 22.]*

19. How much do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. Without Oregon Promise, I would not go to college.					
b. I originally planned to attend a four-year university, but because of Oregon Promise, I am attending community college first and then transferring.					
c. Without Oregon Promise, I would have gone to college out of state.					
d. I would have gone to community college anyway, even without Oregon Promise.					

*[Proceed to question 23.]*

20. Why did you not apply for the Oregon Promise grant? Check all that apply.

- I did not know how to apply for it.
- I did not meet the high school GPA required to qualify for Oregon Promise.
- My parents told me I shouldn't apply for it.
- A teacher or counselor told me I shouldn't apply for it.
- The application was too long and complicated.
- I wanted to attend a public university in Oregon.
- I wanted to attend a private college in Oregon.
- I wanted to attend an out-of-state college or university.
- I had no plans to attend college in fall 2016.
- Don't know
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

*[Proceed to question 23.]*

21. Why did you not receive the Oregon Promise grant? Check all that apply.

- I did not meet the high school GPA required to qualify for Oregon Promise.
- I decided to attend a four-year university instead of a community college.
- I decided to attend college out of state.
- I decided not to attend college in fall 2016.
- Don't know
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

*[Proceed to question 23.]*

22. Why are you not using the Oregon Promise grant? Check all that apply.
- I decided to attend a four-year university instead of a community college.
  - I decided to attend college out of state.
  - I decided not to attend college in fall 2016.
  - I did not need the money to pay for community college.
  - Don't know
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

*[Proceed to question 23.]*

23. What was your high school GPA upon graduation from high school or your last year of high school? Please estimate if you are uncertain of the exact number.
- 0–0.9
  - 1.0–1.9
  - 2.0–2.4
  - 2.5–2.9
  - 3.0–3.4
  - 3.5–3.9
  - 4.0 or higher
  - My high school doesn't use GPAs
  - Don't know

24. What is your full name?

First name: \_\_\_\_\_ Middle name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

25. What is your birthdate?

Month: \_\_ Day: \_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_

26. Does anyone in your immediate family (parents, guardians, brothers, or sisters) have a college degree or certificate?

Yes/No/Don't Know

27. Do you have questions about Oregon Promise? Do you have feedback or a story you want to share? If so, please use the box below.

Thank you for your time in completing the survey. Best wishes with achieving your goals!

# Appendix B. Focus group and interview protocols

## Reach Higher counselor focus group protocol

### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in a focus group regarding your experience with Oregon Promise. This focus group will take 30 minutes and cover topics related to how Oregon Promise relates to your work as a high school counselor. The results will be used by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to identify ways to strengthen Oregon Promise.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, decline to answer any question, or stop the interview at any time. There are no expected risks from your participation in this interview, and you will not be penalized if you choose to withdraw your participation.

We would like to record our conversation today via written notes and audio recording. The recording will be destroyed once the notes are complete. Although this focus group is not confidential, we will not use your name in any evaluation reports or presentations. Any direct quotes will come from “a school counselor.” Your name and your school’s name will not be part of the recording. Do I have your permission to record the focus group? Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

### Focus group questions

- 1. Please share your name and your school.**
  
- 2. [RECORDING STARTS HERE] How did you learn about Oregon Promise?**
  
- 3. What are some ways students and families hear about Oregon Promise?**
  
- 4. Do you notice students and families using Oregon Promise in their planning? If yes, please describe.**
  - a.** What do you notice about how students are planning to use Oregon Promise?
    - i. Probe for whether the program encourages students to consider college for the first time*
    - ii. Probe for whether the program encourages students to enroll in a two-year instead of a four-year institution*
  - b.** Has Oregon Promise influenced the college-going culture at your school? If yes, please describe.
  
- 5. Do you have any recommendations for how to improve awareness of Oregon Promise?**
  
- 6. Do you have any recommendations for how to improve use of Oregon Promise?**

# Reach Higher college access professional focus group protocol

## Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in a focus group regarding your experience with Oregon Promise. This focus group will take 30 minutes and cover topics related to how Oregon Promise relates to your work as a college access professional. The results will be used by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to identify ways to strengthen Oregon Promise.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, decline to answer any question, or stop the interview at any time. There are no expected risks from your participation in this interview, and you will not be penalized if you choose to withdraw your participation.

We would like to record our conversation today via written notes and audio recording. The recording will be destroyed once the notes are complete. Although this focus group is not confidential, we will not use your name in any evaluation reports or presentations. Any direct quotes will come from “a college access professional.” Your name and your school’s name will not be part of the recording. Do I have your permission to record the focus group? Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

## Focus group questions

- 1. Please share your name, school, and role.**
  
- 2. [RECORDING STARTS HERE] How did you learn about Oregon Promise?**
  
- 3. Has your program changed in any way this year because of Oregon Promise? If yes, how?**
  
- 4. What are some ways your program markets Oregon Promise to students and families?**
  - a. What outreach strategies work well? Why do you think they work well?
  - b. What outreach strategies do not work well? Why do you think they do not work well?
  
- 5. Do you have any recommendations for how to improve Oregon Promise?**
  - a. What are some ways the program may improve support for college access professionals?
  
- 6. How has Oregon Promise influenced students?**
  
- 7. Do you have any additional thoughts or feedback about the program?**

# School staff member interview protocol (at five schools)

## Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview regarding your experience with Oregon Promise. Did you receive this information sheet? [Give the person a copy to follow along with as you go over the main points.] Your school was selected because many graduates from your high school attend community college in Oregon. This interview will take no more than 60 minutes and will focus on Oregon Promise. The results will be shared in a presentation and reported to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, decline to answer any question, or stop the interview at any time. There are no expected risks from your participation in this interview, and you will not be penalized if you choose to withdraw your participation.

We would like to record our conversation via written notes and audio recording. The recording will be destroyed once the notes are complete. Although this interview is not confidential, we will not use your name in any evaluation reports or presentations. Any direct quotes will come from "a high school staff member." Your name and your school's name will not be part of the recording. Do I have your permission to record the interview? Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

## Questions

### 1. Let's start with some background information about your school community.

- a. What are some ways your school supports students in planning for life after high school?
  - i. Probe for schoolwide strategies/events and school culture
  - ii. Probe for specific programs (e.g., dual credit, etc.)

### 2. How did you hear about Oregon Promise?

- a. What types of information did you review to learn about the program?
- b. How did you access this information?
- c. To what degree did you find this information useful?

### 3. What are some ways students and families hear about the program?

- a. How does Oregon Promise come up in counseling sessions?
  - i. Probe for how they talk with students about the program
  - ii. Probe for which students they identify as good candidates
- b. Has your college access program changed in any way because of Oregon Promise?
  - i. Probe for activities
- c. What other types of outreach is your school doing to spread the word?
  - i. Probe for targeted vs. general outreach

**4. How are students and families responding to Oregon Promise?**

- a.** What do you notice about how students are planning to use Oregon Promise?
  - i. Probe for whether the program encourages students to consider college for the first time*
  - ii. Probe for whether the program encourages students to enroll in a two-year instead of a four-year institution*
  - iii. Probe for whether the program encourages students to go to an in-state college*
- b.** How do you think Oregon Promise has influenced the college-going culture at your school?

**5. What are some lessons learned from this first year of Oregon Promise?**

- a.** What worked well to spread the word at your school?
- b.** What will you do differently next year?

**6. Do you have any recommendations for how to improve awareness of Oregon Promise?**

- a.** a. What are some ways the program may improve outreach to students and families?
- b.** b. What are some ways the program may improve support for high school staff members?

**7. Do you have any recommendations for how to improve use of Oregon Promise?**

**8. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

# Appendix C. Detailed results for figures 2, 3 and 4

**Table C1. Detailed results for figures 2, 3, and 4**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree or strongly agree
<b>Hearing about Oregon Promise made me think more about going to college.</b>						
<b>All respondents</b>	3%	8%	30%	28%	30%	
<b>First-generation</b>	2%	6%	23%	32%	38%	69%
<b>Non-first-generation</b>	5%	11%	35%	24%	25%	49%
<i>t=6.69 (p=0.0000)</i>						
<b>Oregon Promise helped me see that college could be affordable.</b>						
<b>All respondents</b>	4%	7%	20%	33%	35%	
<b>First-generation</b>	4%	6%	15%	37%	38%	75%
<b>Non-first-generation</b>	5%	8%	23%	31%	33%	64%
<i>t=3.79 (p=0.0002)</i>						
<b>Without Oregon Promise, I would not go to college.</b>						
<b>All respondents</b>	15%	33%	27%	15%	10%	
<b>First-generation</b>	10%	25%	32%	19%	13%	32%
<b>Non-first-generation</b>	19%	40%	22%	11%	8%	18%
<i>t=3.86 (p=0.0001)</i>						
<b>I originally planned to attend a four-year university, but because of Oregon Promise, I am attending community college first and then transferring.</b>						
<b>All respondents</b>	8%	25%	21%	23%	22%	
<b>First-generation</b>	8%	19%	22%	25%	26%	52%
<b>Non-first-generation</b>	10%	30%	18%	22%	21%	43%
<i>t=2.15 (p=0.0320)</i>						
<b>Without Oregon Promise, I would have gone to college out of state.</b>						
<b>All respondents</b>	29%	42%	21%	5%	3%	
<b>First-generation</b>	25%	51%	20%	3%	1%	4%
<b>Non-first-generation</b>	32%	36%	21%	6%	5%	11%
<i>t=2.78 (p=0.0057)</i>						

**Note:** Agree or strongly agree percentages sometimes add to one digit lower or higher because of rounding.

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