

# Free College Tuition Programs for Adults

The Current Landscape and Directions for the Future



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We also would like to thank the many organizations that helped us compile our database of adult-eligible free college tuition programs. The Upjohn Institute and Penn AHEAD promise program databases as well as College Promise's catalog of college promise programs and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association's Adult Promise website provided a solid foundation for identifying potential programs. Staff from several of these organizations plus staff from Walmart, Lumina Foundation, Education Commission of the States, Guild, and Coursera gave feedback on our initial list of adult-eligible programs too.

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## Executive Summary

### ABOUT THE PROJECT

The rising cost of college and the growing need for postsecondary education and training has generated great interest in free college tuition programs. Yet many of these programs aim to serve recent high school graduates and little is known about the programs open to adults. To fill this knowledge gap, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), under a grant from Walmart, conducted a scan of free college tuition program websites in spring 2021. The research identified not only adult-eligible programs but also a subset of programs with features that make them adult friendly.

This report captures the findings from this scan and concludes with considerations for practitioners and policymakers as well as research needs for advancing the field. The project's website includes an interactive map, a downloadable database of programs, and a webinar that explores how free college tuition programs for adults might better leverage employers in establishing and growing programs.

### NUMBERS AND LOCATIONS OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS

During the 2020–21 academic year,

**67** adult-eligible programs were active.

**22** states plus the District of Columbia had at least one adult-eligible program within their borders.

**15** programs were statewide programs.

**4** programs were open to adults exclusively.

### NUMBER OF ADULT-FRIENDLY PROGRAMS

**30** programs allowed participants to have prior postsecondary experience.

**18** programs allowed participants to enroll part time.



### PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

**SIXTY-THREE PROGRAMS** required that participants apply for financial aid. This fact is not surprising because **64 programs were last-dollar programs** that covered remaining tuition costs after financial aid was applied.

**EIGHTEEN PROGRAMS** required participants to **demonstrate financial need**. Adult-friendly programs were more likely to have financial need requirements.

**FIVE PROGRAMS** had **postgraduation residency and/or work requirements**. Failing to meet these requirements could result in the conversion of participants' financial awards (i.e., grants that covered remaining tuition costs) into loans.

**NINE PROGRAMS** required that participants **pursue a program of study often identified as high need or high demand** in the labor market. Adult-friendly programs were more likely to have such a requirement.

Most programs were offered at community colleges, with **57 PROGRAMS** including at least one public 2-year college. **Eighteen programs** allowed participants to enroll at a public 4-year college.

## Introduction

**Between 1990–91 and 2020–21, after adjusting for inflation, the average published tuition and fees at public 2-year and 4-year colleges more than doubled (College Board, 2020).**

At the same time, the shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, as well as rapid technological advancement, has made postsecondary attainment more critical than ever for Americans to avoid unemployment and access good-paying jobs (Carnevale et al., 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), as well as for the United States to remain economically competitive (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

The confluence of these factors has spurred growing interest in free college tuition programs. First, a large segment of the American public now supports this idea. A January 2020 Pew Research Center poll found that 63% of Americans somewhat favor or strongly favor making tuition free at public colleges and universities for all U.S. students (Hartig, 2020). The Campaign for Free College Tuition conducted a smaller poll of 2,000 Americans in March 2021, asking a slightly more targeted question. This poll found that 81% strongly or somewhat supported “a federal program that provides *two-years of free community college tuition* [emphasis added] to individuals looking to learn and improve their skills” (Campaign for Free College Tuition, 2021). Federal and state government officials are taking notice. In April 2021, President Biden proposed providing Americans with 2 years of free community college as part of the American Families Plan (The White House, 2021). As of May 2021, the nonprofit organization College Promise had identified 31 statewide promise programs “delivering tuition-free college opportunities” (College Promise, n.d.). Employers also are increasingly thinking about how their employees can upskill inexpensively, and they are developing innovative programs in collaboration with postsecondary institutions to help accomplish this goal (St. Amour, 2020).

Despite the great interest in free college tuition programs to help Americans attain postsecondary credentials, many free college programs and state legislative proposals restrict eligibility to recent high school graduates, thus excluding older aspiring students (Pingel et al., 2016). Yet helping just recent high school graduates complete credentials will not enable the United States to meet postsecondary attainment goals (Pingel et al., 2016). About 59% of all U.S. residents age 25 or older have less than an associate’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and Americans with this educational attainment experience lower median earnings and higher unemployment rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020)—particularly during economic downturns (Kochhar, 2020) than those with greater educational attainment.

Yet even though the need to help adults secure postsecondary credentials is great, little is known about free college programs for eligible adults. This project seeks to help fill this gap in our knowledge of adult-eligible free college tuition programs by identifying these programs and then examining their characteristics as advertised on program participants websites. **This report presents our findings for the following research questions and then closes with next steps for the field.**

1. How many adult-eligible free college tuition programs exist? Where are they located?
2. What are the student eligibility criteria for these adult-eligible programs? To what extent are the criteria adult friendly?
3. Which programs of study can program participants pursue? Which types of institutions can they attend?
4. What financial and nonfinancial supports do these adult-eligible free college tuition programs provide and for how long? Are they first- or last-dollar programs?
5. What do we know about the funders and partners involved in these programs?

## How Many Adult-Eligible Free College Tuition Programs Exist? Where Are They Located?

From March to May 2021, this project identified 67 adult-eligible free college tuition programs. For programs to be included as adult eligible, they (a) had to be active during the 2020–21 academic year with the intention of continuing in 2021–22; (b) had to provide full tuition to at least one accredited postsecondary institution for sufficient time to cover at least 100% of “normal time” to a certificate or degree; (c) had to be offered at a broad access institution; (d) could not be restricted by veteran or disability status, gender, race/ethnicity, or employment with a single employer (although restrictions based on financial need, residency, educational attainment,

and field of study or employment requirements were allowed); and (e) most importantly, could not be restricted to recent high school graduates or include specific high school attendance or high school residency requirements. Exhibit 1 provides the study’s full inclusion criteria, and Appendix A details the numerous databases, reports, and experts in the field that helped us identify these adult-eligible programs. It is important to note that programs do change across time, and decisions to include or exclude programs, as well as the coding of included programs, were based on the program characteristics reported on websites between March and May 2021.<sup>1</sup>

### EXHIBIT 1. CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION AS AN ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAM

INCLUSION CATEGORY	INCLUSION DETAILS
ACTIVE IN 2020-21	<p>Must be active in the 2020–21 academic year.<sup>a</sup></p> <p>Must also intend to continue beyond 2020–21 (or at least no indication that it’s a short-term or pilot program).<sup>b</sup></p>
FINANCIAL AWARD	<p>Must provide a financial award (e.g., grant, scholarship, or combination of such awards) that covers full tuition<sup>c</sup> to at least one accredited postsecondary institution participating in the program.<sup>d</sup></p> <p>Excludes programs that require repayment of financial award (e.g., loans, income sharing agreements) but includes programs that have awards that can convert to loans if participants do not comply with requirements.</p> <p>Excludes information campaigns or policy priorities related to adults’ postsecondary education, without a financial award.</p>
DURATION OF AWARD	<p>Must provide financial award for at least 100% of “normal time” to certificate/degree completion (e.g., 2 years for an associate’s degree program or less than 2 years for a certificate/credential program that normally takes less than 2 years to complete). Excludes programs that indicate they offer an award only for a “course,” “semester,” or “one year” for more than one-year programs.</p>

Continued on next page.

<sup>1</sup>Program websites did not always specify the academic year connected to the program details listed. That said, the goal of program websites is to provide current information to students. Given that data collection occurred in spring 2021, it can be inferred when academic year information was not explicitly stated on websites that information provided was based on the 2020–21 academic year. In one instance, the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship program website suggested that although students had to attend full time in the 2020–21 academic year, the program would be reducing the minimum credit hour requirement for returning adult learners from 12 to 6 hours going forward. This project’s analysis is based on the program’s 2020–21 requirement.

**EXHIBIT 1. CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION AS AN ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAM**

Continued

<b>UNIVERSAL / BROAD ELIGIBILITY</b>	<p>Program benefits should be targeted broadly to potentially eligible students. To ensure broad accessibility, programs had to include at least one public 2-year institution or a 4-year institution that has an acceptance rate of 80% or more.<sup>e</sup></p> <p>Programs that restrict eligibility based on veteran status, disability status, race/ethnicity, or gender, or to individuals from a single employer are not included.</p> <p>Program eligibility requirements based on age (e.g., 25 years old), financial need (e.g., low-income), residence (e.g., state resident for 1 year), educational attainment (e.g., high school completer, postsecondary experience or lack thereof), field of study, occupational field, or industry are allowed.</p>
<b>ADULT TARGET POPULATION</b>	<p>Generally, should indicate that “adult,” “nontraditional,” “independent,” “24+,” etc. students are included or at least that such populations are not excluded for award (e.g., program is open to all local residents). Excludes programs limited to recent high school graduates.</p>
<b>K-12 SCHOOL ATTENDANCE / RESIDENCY POLICY</b>	<p>Excludes programs that require that participants resided/attended for any length of time or graduated from a designated K-12 school/district/state to be eligible. Programs may stipulate high school completion as an eligibility requirement, but not a residency/attendance during elementary/secondary years. Residency in a state (e.g., 1 year) as an adult is allowable, but not residency as a minor.</p>

<sup>a</sup> Michigan Reconnect, for example, is not included because students cannot use it until the summer of 2021, after the 2020-2021 academic year.

<sup>b</sup> Michigan’s Future For Frontliners, for example, is not included because while it was offered in the 2020-21 academic year it was a temporary program.

<sup>c</sup> Note that some states use the term “fee” to reflect “tuition” (e.g., California). If “fee” reflects “tuition” the rules described above regarding covering tuition apply.

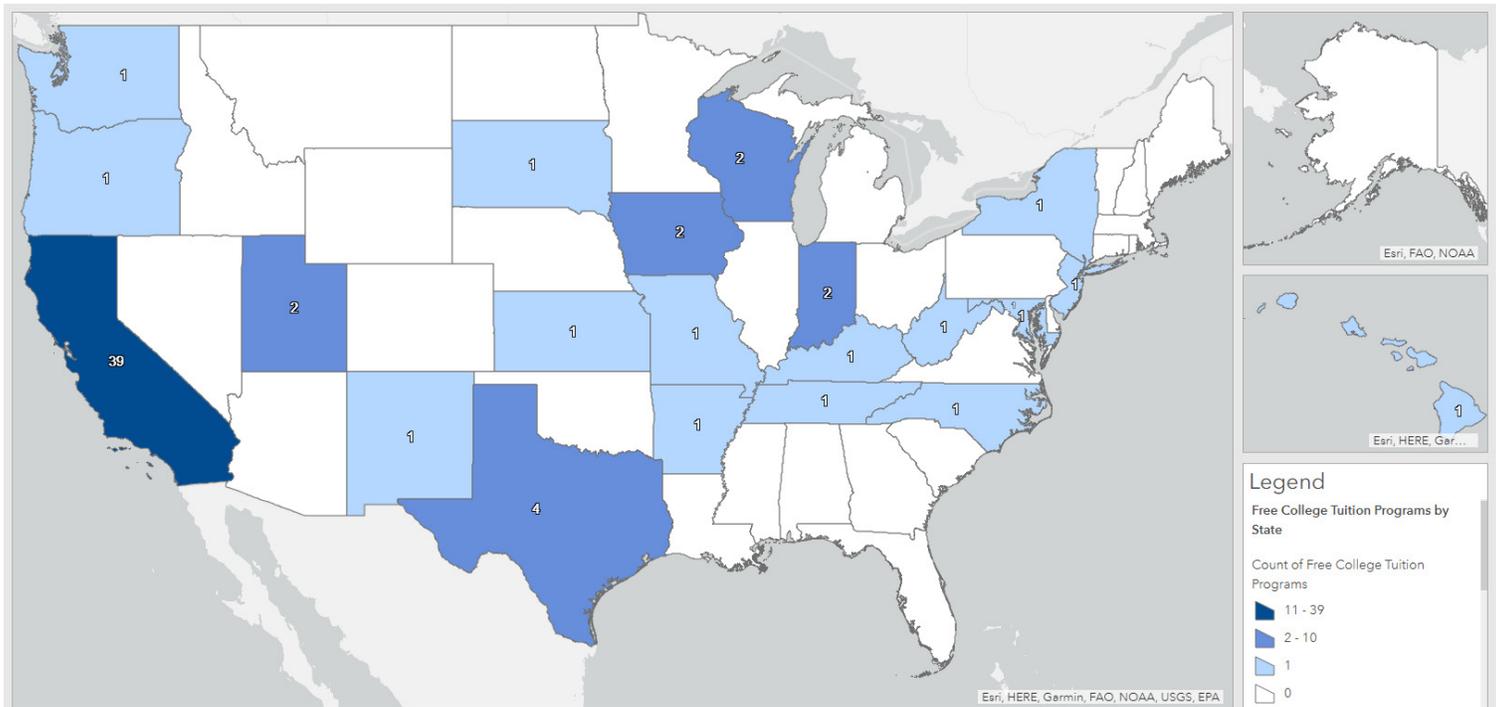
<sup>d</sup> DC Mayor’s Scholars Undergraduate Program, Oregon Promise, Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship, and Tennessee Reconnect, for example, cover full tuition to at least one but not all participating institutions.

<sup>e</sup> To ensure that programs’ 4-year colleges were broad access institutions we used undergraduate admissions data from Fall 2019 from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System as reported on the U.S. Department of Education’s College Navigator. Broad access institutions were defined as admitting 80% or more of all applicants in keeping with Nicholas Hillman’s (2016) commonly used definition. This broad access requirement eliminated programs like Minnesota’s Promise Plus Free Tuition Program, New Jersey’s Rutgers University-Newark Talent and Opportunity Pathways Program, UT Austin’s Texas Advance Commitment, Texas A&M’s Aggie Assurance Program, Washington State University’s Cougar Commitment, Cox Scholars Program at Indiana University Bloomington, and the University of Richmond’s Richmond’s Promise to Virginia.

This project also sought to discern whether programs specifically targeted adults or served students without regard to age or adult status. As discussed later in this report, only four of the 67 adult-eligible programs could be considered adult-only programs based on program requirements for age and/or financial independence.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of adult-eligible programs were agnostic about whether participants were adults, as long as the participants met the program criteria.

As for the availability of adult-eligible programs, slightly fewer than half of all states plus the District of Columbia (22 total) had at least one adult-eligible free college tuition program within its borders. As Exhibit 2 depicts, California had the greatest number of programs (39), with 37 programs administered locally by individual community colleges or community college districts with state support under California Promise. (California Promise funding allows but does not require California community colleges or community college districts to waive enrollment fees for first-time, full-time students who do not qualify for the separate California College Promise Grant, formerly known as the Board of Governors Fee Waiver [California Community Colleges, n.d.] ) Texas has the next highest number of adult-eligible programs, with four programs, and Indiana, Iowa, Utah, and Wisconsin have 2 programs each.

**EXHIBIT 2. MAP OF 67 ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS**



**Source:** 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see the subsection on Age/Dependency Status later in this report.

State counts show the number of programs that exist in a state, but programs can comprise more than one institution. Thus, it is useful to know the number of institutions involved in these programs. Among adult-eligible programs, statewide programs, such as the commonly cited Tennessee Reconnect, were not the norm. In fact, just 15 of these 67 adult-eligible programs (22%) were statewide, defined as a program including all institutions from at least one sector in the state (e.g., all technical colleges, all community colleges, all public 4-year colleges). Two programs (3%) did not quite meet the statewide definition but still

comprised 10 or more institutions. Another 10 programs (15%) involved two to nine institutions and typically were run by a community college district or a college with multiple campuses. Finally, 40 programs (60%) included just one participating institution. Looking at institutional participation by state puts the state counts shown in Exhibit 2 in some perspective. California may have 39 programs, but 30 of these programs were single-institution programs. California had the same number of statewide programs (1) as the less populous states of Hawaii and South Dakota.



## What Are the Student Eligibility Criteria for These Adult-Eligible Programs? To What Extent Are the Criteria Adult Friendly?

**The two general categories of eligibility criteria are as follows:** (a) initial requirements that participants must meet to enter a program, and (b) subsequent requirements that participants must meet to continue in a program or fulfill program obligations after graduation. This section includes a discussion of each type of requirement.

### Initial Student Eligibility Requirements: Adult-Friendly Criteria

**This discussion of initial student eligibility requirements begins by looking at requirements that affect programs' adult friendliness.** Adults can participate in the 67 adult-eligible free college tuition programs identified. That said, some of these adult-eligible programs had requirements that would be difficult for some adults to meet, thus making these programs less adult friendly. This project therefore examined the extent to which adult-eligible programs have initial eligibility requirements that are adult friendly through two specific lenses: prior educational attainment requirements and enrollment intensity requirements.

#### PRIOR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

**It is first useful to consider the extent to which educational requirements for adult-eligible programs are responsive to the educational needs of U.S. adults.** All the adult-eligible programs identified would allow adults who held a high school diploma or equivalent and had no previous postsecondary experience to participate. However, just 27% of U.S. residents age 25 or older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018) meet these educational requirements. The infographic in Exhibit 3 highlights how some programs' educational requirements exclude adults.



EXHIBIT 3. U.S. ADULTS' EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT COMPARED WITH ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS' EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Adults who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent



Adults who have some college but no degree



Adults who have an associate's degree



Source: Educational attainment data come from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, and American Community Survey, 2018 and were prepared in April 2020 for Table 104.40 of the 2019 Digest of Education Statistics. Free college tuition program data come from the 2020-21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

Stakeholders involved in free college tuition programs should consider the implications of such educational attainment restrictions. First, to be eligible for federal student aid, students do not need to have completed high school or the equivalent if they meet “ability to benefit” requirements. To be more adult friendly, programs might therefore consider applying the same ability to benefit requirements. Second, some adults with an associate’s degree might need to secure a new credential in order to move from a low-paying job to a high-demand, higher-paying job more in line with changing labor market needs. Programs might consider the reskilling needs of their local residents and revisit such program requirements accordingly.

Third, and of greatest concern, however, is the fact that one fifth of U.S. adults who have enrolled in postsecondary education but have not yet earned a credential are excluded from nearly half of all adult-eligible free college tuition programs.<sup>3</sup> Results from a recent National Student Clearinghouse report underscore the sheer number of students excluded when programs require participants to be first-time<sup>4</sup> postsecondary students. The report found

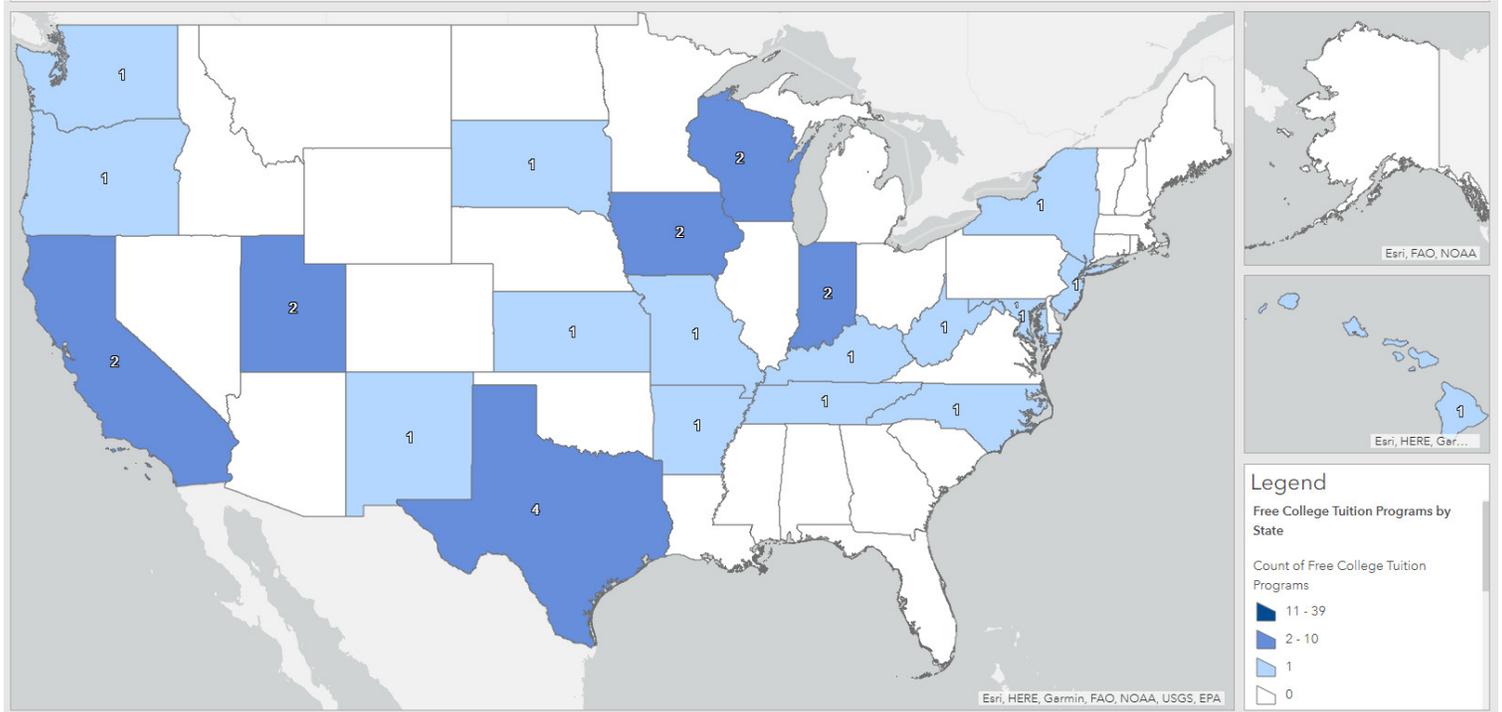
that 35.9 million Americans had enrolled in postsecondary education between 1993 and 2018 but had not earned a degree or certificate during that 25-year period and were no longer enrolled (Shapiro et al., 2019). These former students tend to experience lower earnings (Belfield & Bailey, 2017) and are more likely to default on their student loans (Woo et al., 2017) than those who complete a credential. At the same time, these former students have demonstrated prior interest in postsecondary education and free tuition could incentivize their return.

Given the size and importance of this group, this study looks specifically at whether adult-eligible programs allow adults with prior postsecondary enrollment to participate, viewing programs that do as more adult friendly. Exhibit 4 indicates that limiting adult-eligible programs to those that allowed prior postsecondary enrollment reduces the total number of programs available from 67 to 30. The 37 programs removed were exclusively in California and were funded under California Promise, which requires participants to be first-time students. Looked at another way, the top two bars in Exhibit 5 reveal that the number of statewide programs and the number of programs with 10 or more participating institutions is the same among all adult-eligible programs and adult-eligible programs that allow prior postsecondary attendance. Only the number of single-institution programs and programs with two to nine participating institutions declined when applying this adult-friendly criterion.

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of adults with some postsecondary education but no degree comes from a table that was prepared in April 2020 for Table 104.40 of the *2019 Digest of Education Statistics*.

<sup>4</sup> Although not all free college tuition programs specified what they meant by first-time students, those that did generally applied the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System definition, which captures students attending any postsecondary institution for the first time, not including summer enrollment or postsecondary coursetaking before high school graduation. For more information, see [What is a “first-time” student?](#)

**EXHIBIT 4. MAP OF 30 ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS THAT ALLOWED PRIOR POSTSECONDARY ATTENDANCE**



Source: 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

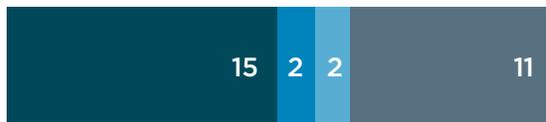
**EXHIBIT 5. NUMBER OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS, BY BREADTH OF INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION AND ADULT FRIENDLINESS**



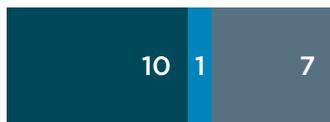
ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS (N = 67)



ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS THAT ALLOWED PRIOR POSTSECONDARY ATTENDANCE (n = 30)



ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS THAT ALLOWED PART-TIME ATTENDANCE (n = 18)



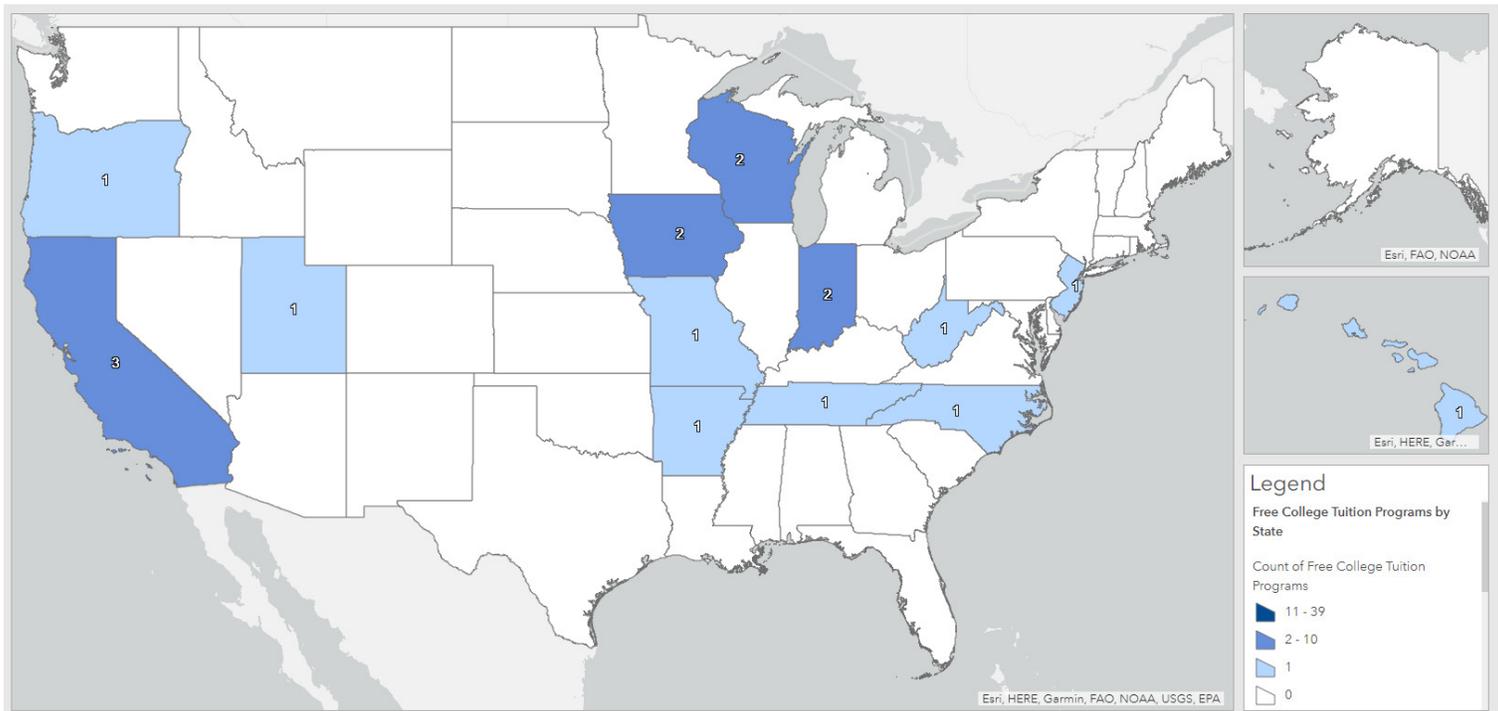
Source: 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

## ENROLLMENT INTENSITY

**In considering the adult friendliness of adult-eligible programs, it also is important to consider whether such programs are responsive to adults' multiple obligations and responsibilities.**

Even when adults do not have to pay college tuition, they still typically have to pay for books and supplies, as well as housing and living expenses for themselves and potentially family members too. Adults often must work to cover these costs, which can make attending college full time challenging. In addition, adults with children may want to pursue postsecondary education to better provide for their families but face time constraints that can make attending full time difficult. Not surprisingly given these other adult duties, recent data from the nationally representative National Postsecondary Student Aid Study found that 63% of financially independent students<sup>5</sup> (an often used proxy for adults) were pursuing their undergraduate education part time (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

### EXHIBIT 6. MAP OF 18 ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS THAT ALLOWED PART-TIME ATTENDANCE



**Source:** 2020-21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

<sup>5</sup> All students age 24 and older are considered independent for federal financial aid purposes. So, too, are students who are married; a graduate or professional student; a veteran; a member of the armed forces; an orphan; a ward of the court; or someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor, or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. For more information, see [For purposes of applying for federal student aid, what's the difference between a dependent student and an independent student?](#)

Given that so many adults attend part time, this study explores whether adult-eligible programs allow participants to do so, viewing programs that do as more adult friendly. Exhibit 6 indicates that limiting adult-eligible programs to those that allowed part-time enrollment reduces the total number of programs available from 67 to 18. The number of programs in California decreased from 39 to three, and the number in Texas decreased from four to zero. Utah lost one of its two programs, and nine states that previously had one program now have zero programs. It also is useful to examine the breadth of institutions participating in the 18 programs that remain. Exhibit 5 above indicates that there are still 10 statewide programs. Similar to programs that allow prior postsecondary attendance, programs that allow part-time attendance have a higher proportion of statewide programs and a lower proportion of single-institution programs than adult-eligible programs at large. This occurs largely because of the elimination of programs funded under California Promise (which focuses on first-time, full-time students).

Although the 67 adult-eligible free college tuition programs permit adults to participate, programs that allow prior postsecondary attendance and/or part-time attendance enable a broader range of adults to participate. For this reason, this project highlights programs that meet these two adult-friendly criteria in the following ways. First, in addition to the maps already presented in this report, Appendix B displays all 67 adult-eligible free college tuition programs by state and color codes them based on these adult-friendly measures. Second, the interactive map on this project's [website](#) allows users to filter programs based on these adult-friendly criteria. Finally, this study analyzed whether the program characteristics of adult-friendly programs differed markedly from the larger group of adult-eligible programs. When substantively important gaps occurred, they are highlighted in this report.

## Initial Student Eligibility Requirements: Additional Criteria

**Initial student eligibility criteria regarding prior educational attainment and enrollment intensity strongly shape adults' ability to participate in adult-eligible free college tuition programs.** That said, other initial student eligibility criteria also influence adult enrollment in such programs, including requirements about filing for financial aid, financial need, age/dependency status, and residency.

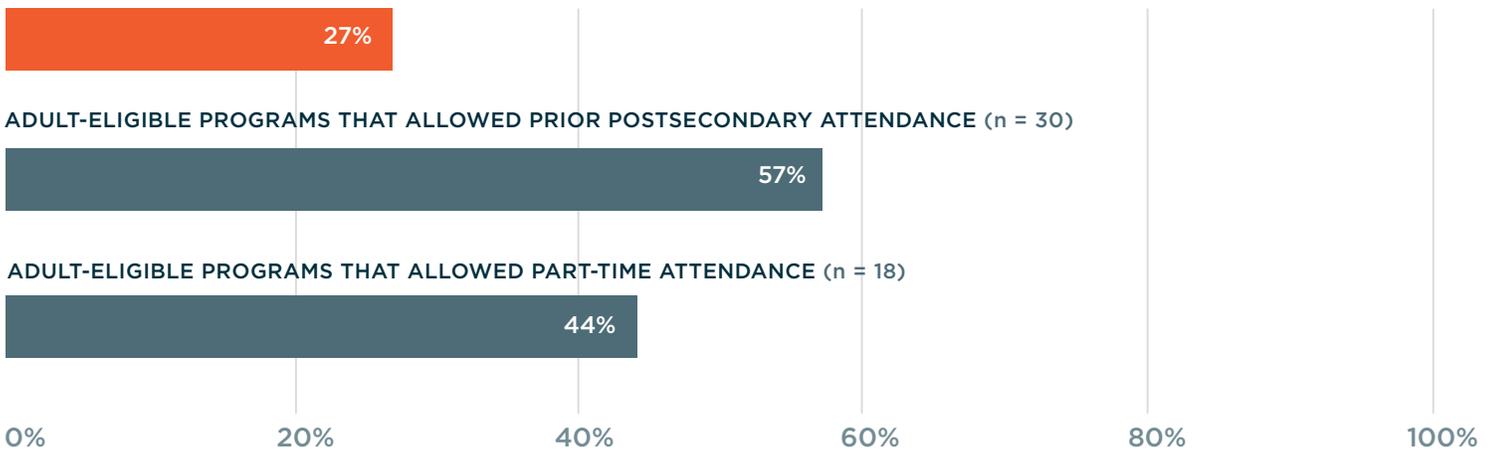
### FILING FOR FINANCIAL AID

The most common student eligibility requirement was applying for financial aid. Sixty-three programs (94%) required participants to do so. Typically, financial aid filing requirements were fulfilled by filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), but the California programs and Washington's Husky Promise, to name just two examples, allowed undocumented students not eligible to file the FAFSA to file state aid applications open to undocumented students instead. The four programs that did not require students to file any financial aid form either encouraged it (Achieve Your Degree at Ivy Tech, the California College Promise Grant, and Free City) or required applicants ineligible to file to provide other documentation to demonstrate need (DC Mayor's Scholars Undergraduate Program).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Many program websites highlighted that applying for financial aid was a requirement for renewing participation. Other programs did not explicitly state this renewal requirement, but programs mandating initial financial aid filing likely continued to require it given that such aid often was critical to programs covering tuition costs.

## EXHIBIT 7. PERCENTAGE OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS WITH AN INITIAL FINANCIAL NEED ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENT, BY ADULT FRIENDLINESS

### ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS (N = 67)



Source: 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

### FINANCIAL NEED

Some programs required students to not only apply for financial aid but also demonstrate financial need. Despite calls that free college tuition programs should focus on students from low-income backgrounds to be more equitable,<sup>7</sup> only 18 of the adult-eligible free college tuition programs (27%) did so. That said, as Exhibit 7 shows, adult-friendly programs allowing prior postsecondary attendance and part-time attendance were much more likely to require students to demonstrate financial need, at 57% and 44%, respectively.

It is worth noting that financial need requirements varied among programs. Some defined financial need based on Pell Grant eligibility. Other programs used expected family contribution as calculated via the FAFSA (e.g., \$6,500 or less; \$9,872 or less). Still others based eligibility on falling beneath certain income ceilings, (e.g., \$40,000 or less, \$60,000 or less, \$65,000 or less, \$80,000 or less, \$95,000 or less, and \$145,000 or less), with higher dollar limits used for married households filing jointly.<sup>8</sup>

### AGE/DEPENDENCY STATUS

Age is another initial eligibility criterion for many College Promise and free college programs. Yet among our 67 adult-eligible programs, just five programs (7%) clearly included an age requirement. Of these five programs, three programs noted fairly young minimum age requirements, (age 17, 18, and 20, respectively). The two remaining programs required participants to be at least 24 and at least 25, respectively.

These latter two programs' age requirements generally aligned with the age criteria used to identify financially independent students. For federal financial aid purposes, all students age 24 and older are considered independent students. That said, the federal government recognizes that those under age 24 may be financially independent from their parents and have adult responsibilities. As noted previously in footnote 5, additional criteria used to identify independent students include being married; a graduate or professional student; a veteran; a member of the armed forces; an orphan; a ward of the court;

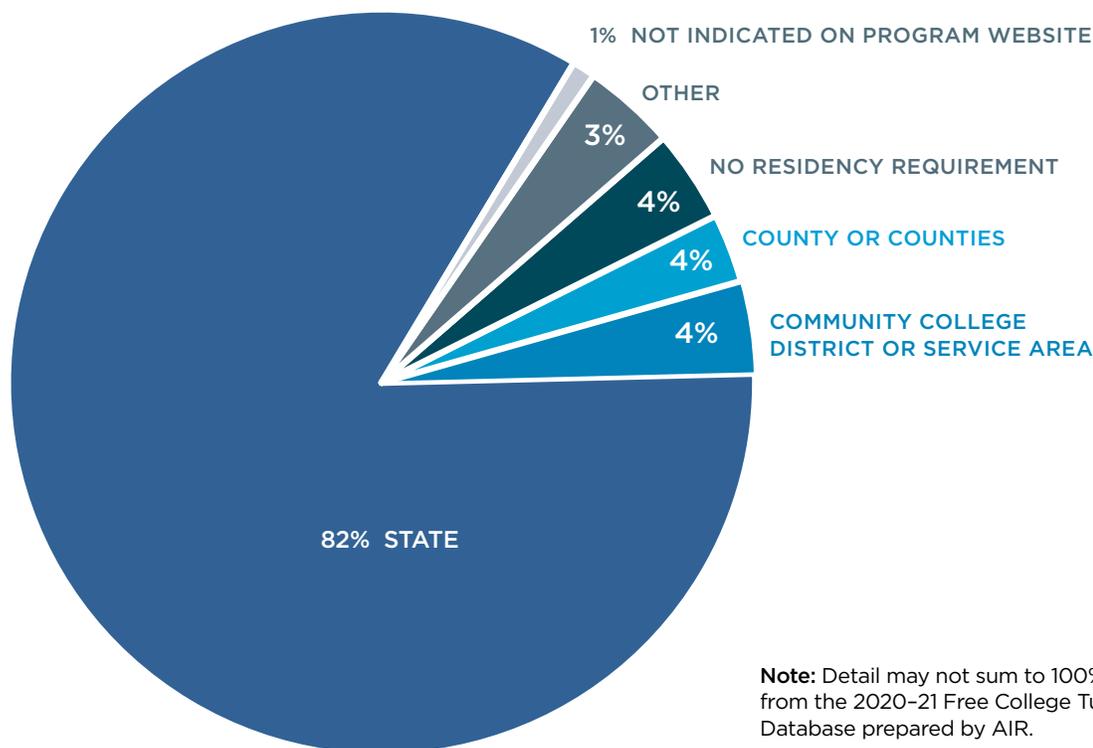
<sup>7</sup> See, for example, [https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/uploads\\_docs\\_pubs\\_ihep\\_state\\_free\\_college\\_intro.pdf](https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/uploads_docs_pubs_ihep_state_free_college_intro.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Some programs funded as part of California Promise indicated that students who had enough financial need to qualify for the separate California College Promise Grant (formerly known as the Board of Governors Fee Waiver) should apply to that program instead to receive free tuition. Programs such as these that indicated that participants had to have a financial need requirement above a certain threshold (rather than below) were coded as not having a financial need requirement.

or someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor, or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless (Federal Student Aid, 2020). Two additional adult-eligible free college tuition programs did not list an age requirement but did require participants to be independent students.

Taking these requirements together results in the aforementioned four adult-eligible programs that could be considered adult only: MATC Promise and Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant (based on minimum age requirements) and Tennessee Reconnect and the Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant (based on dependency status requirements). These programs' orientation toward adults did not end there, however. All four met both adult-friendly criteria, allowing participants to have prior postsecondary experience and to attend part time.

**EXHIBIT 8. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS' INITIAL RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS**



**Note:** Detail may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Data are from the 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

<sup>9</sup> Two programs coded officially as “other” had state-like or state-related residency requirements. The first was the DC Mayor’s Scholars Undergraduate Program, which had a District of Columbia residency requirement but technically no state residency requirement given that DC is not technically a state. The second was the Tahoe College Promise program, which was administered in California and open to California residents but also open to Nevada residents living in ZIP codes within the Tahoe Basin.

<sup>10</sup> Note that as described in the inclusion criteria displayed in Exhibit 1, programs that had residency requirements tied to K-12 school attendance were already excluded from this project’s database.

Programs seeking to enroll adult students should consider using the broader independent student classification in identifying adult students rather than age criteria. Because so many programs already require students to file the FAFSA, using the FAFSA’s independent student criteria would not add burden to students or administrators in determining program eligibility.

## RESIDENCY

Most programs open to adults had some type of residency requirement. As Exhibit 8 shows, state residency was most common, with 55 programs (82%) having this requirement.<sup>9</sup> Adult-friendly programs were less likely than adult-eligible programs to have a state residency requirement, again largely because California Promise programs were removed. Looking at other residency requirements, only about three programs (4%) required residency within a specific community college district, with another three programs (4%) requiring residency in a specific county or counties.<sup>10</sup>

## Renewal and Postgraduation Eligibility Requirements

**Adult-eligible free college tuition programs did not just have initial eligibility requirements. Many had requirements for continuing in the program and a few had requirements after completing the program.**

### ACADEMIC RENEWAL REQUIREMENTS

Programs often want to ensure that their funds are going toward students who are progressing toward a credential. Websites for 57 programs (76%) stated that students must meet certain academic requirements to remain in the program. Academic requirements listed ranged from staying in “good standing” to having a given grade point average, earning a specific number of credits, completing a certain proportion of credits attempted, and meeting satisfactory academic progress requirements as defined by the institution for remaining eligible for federal student aid. Programs’ use of satisfactory academic progress as a measure is not surprising given that many free college tuition programs use federal aid to help cover students’ tuition.

### RESIDENCY/WORK REQUIREMENTS AFTER POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION

Only a few programs had postgraduation requirements. Exhibit 9 shows that five programs (8%) stated that participants must reside in a specified place after postsecondary completion, and five programs (8%) stated that participants must meet specified work requirements after postsecondary completion, with four programs requiring both.

The details of these requirements and the repercussions for not fulfilling them varied by program. As for the length of residency or work required, 3 years was most common; however, the New York Excelsior Scholarship’s time commitment was equal to the length of time the award was received. Three programs had postgraduation requirements beyond just working in the state; these programs indicated that students must be employed within a given period after graduation. For example, the Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant in Missouri required employment within 12 months. Build Dakota and the Arkansas Future Grant specified 6 months, with Build Dakota having the additional stipulation that employment must be in the field of study pursued. Failure to meet residency and/or work requirements had consequences; five of the six programs with postgraduation requirements indicated that noncompliance would result in awards converting to loans. The one remaining program did not note what would happen to awardees who did not fulfill the obligations in their signed letter of commitment.

## EXHIBIT 9. ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS WITH POSTGRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

PROGRAM	STATE	LIVE IN STATE	MEET WORK REQUIREMENTS	CAN CONVERT TO LOAN
THE EXCELSIOR SCHOLARSHIP	NY	Yes	Yes	Yes
ARKANSAS FUTURE GRANT	AR	Yes	Yes	Yes
CHEROKEE COUNTY PROMISE	IA	Yes	Yes	Not indicated on program website
FAST TRACK WORKFORCE INCENTIVE GRANT	MO	Yes	Yes	Yes
BUILD DAKOTA SCHOLARSHIP	SD	Not indicated on program website	Yes	Yes
WEST VIRGINIA INVESTS	WV	Yes	Not indicated on program website	Yes

Source: 2020-21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

Programs with residency and work requirements were more likely to have adult-friendly initial eligibility requirements, suggesting that some of these programs may have been designed with adults in mind. All five programs requiring postcollege residency requirements and all five programs with specified work requirements allowed participants to have prior postsecondary experience. Four of the programs with postcollege residency requirements and three of the programs with postcollege work requirements allowed students to attend part time.

## Which Programs Of Study Can Program Participants Pursue? Which Types Of Institutions Can They Attend?

Adult-eligible free college tuition programs do not just have student eligibility requirements. A few have requirements on what participants can study and all set parameters on where participants can attend.

### ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS OF STUDY

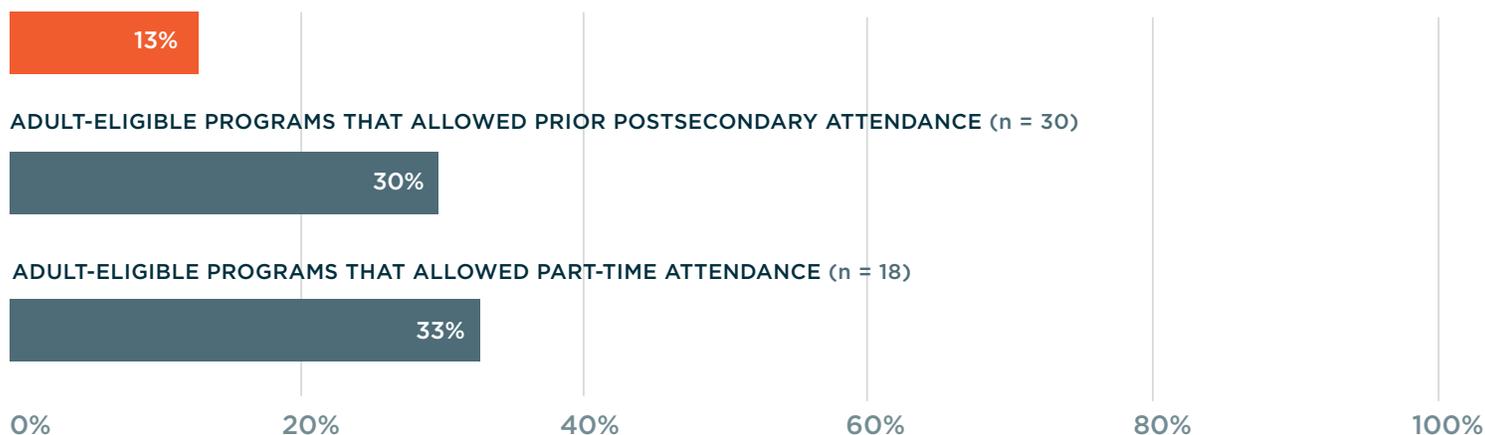
Requiring students to pursue specific programs of study was not common among adult-eligible free college tuition programs. As Exhibit 10 reveals, nine programs (13%) indicated that participants had to pursue a specific program of study. As for the types of programs of study eligible, websites typically noted that the fields and degrees that students could pursue were to be “high-need” and/or “high-demand” programs aligned with the state or regional economy. It is worth highlighting, however, that program of study requirements were roughly twice as common for adult-friendly programs. About 30% of the programs that allowed participants to have prior postsecondary experience had such requirements, as did 33% of the programs that allowed students to attend part time. This finding suggests that programs with eligibility criteria more accommodating to adult students may be more likely to seek to use free college tuition programs to meet labor force needs.

### ELIGIBLE TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS

Free college tuition programs also vary in the types of eligible institutions in which students can enroll. As Exhibit 11 indicates, 57 (85%) of the programs included at least one public 2-year institution option, as defined by Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System institutional sectors. Another 18 (27%) of programs included at least one traditional public 4-year college option.<sup>11</sup> It was far less common for programs to include an institution that was not a community college or a public 4-year institution. That said, adult-friendly programs were more likely than the broader set of adult-eligible programs to include certain sectors. Specifically, programs that allowed prior postsecondary attendance were more than 10 percentage points more likely to include a traditional public 4-year college. Programs that allowed part-time attendance were more than 10 percentage points more likely to include a public 2-year college; a public 4 year, primarily associate’s college; a public less-than-2-year college; and a private nonprofit 4-year college.

### EXHIBIT 10. PERCENTAGE OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS INCLUDING PROGRAM OF STUDY REQUIREMENTS, BY ADULT FRIENDLINESS

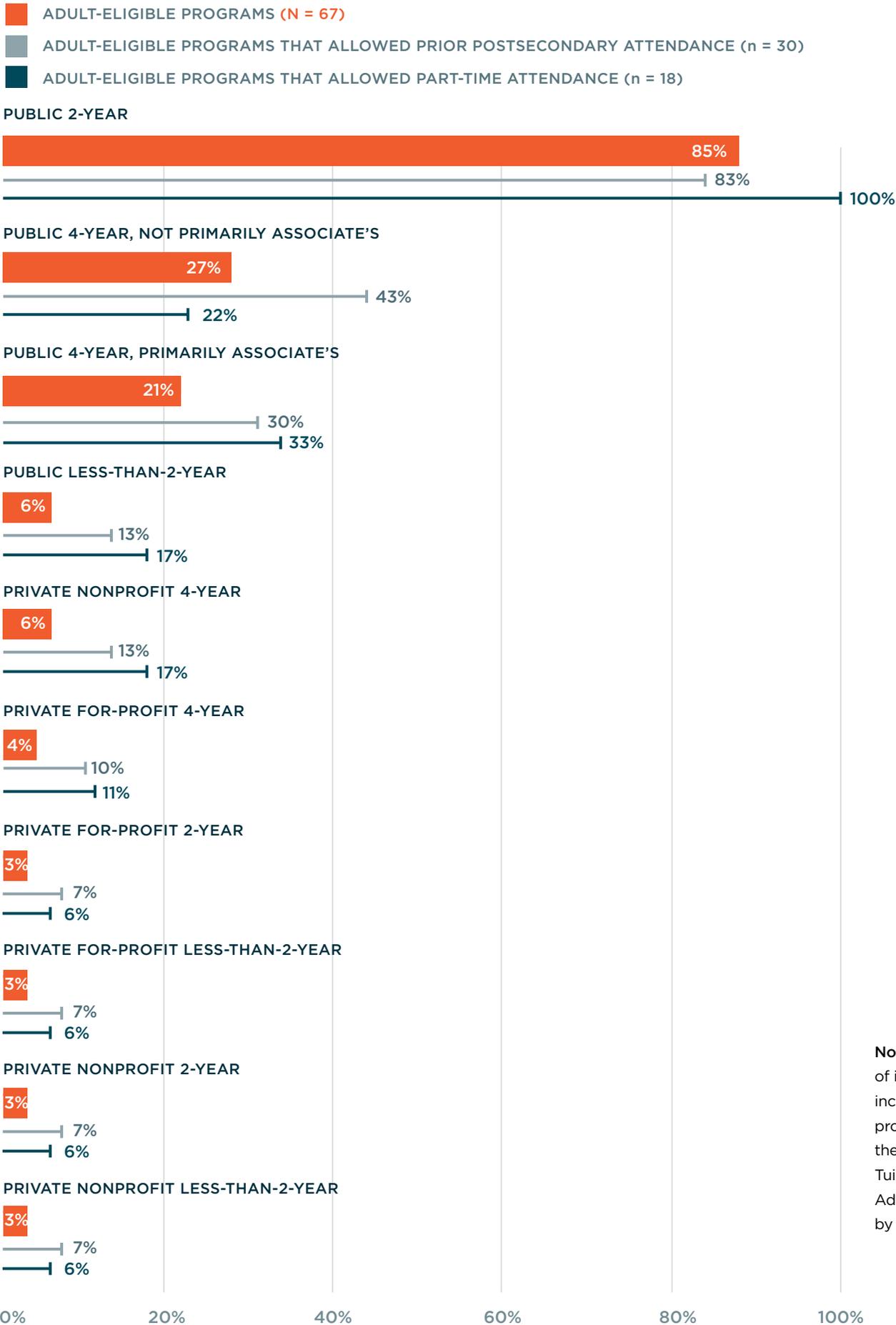
ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS (N = 67)



Source: 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

<sup>11</sup> As the third bar of Exhibit 11 reveals, another 14 (21%) of programs included at least one college traditionally considered a community college in that it primarily awarded associate’s degrees but was classified as a 4-year institution because it also offered bachelor’s degrees.

**EXHIBIT 11. PERCENTAGE OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS INCLUDING AN INSTITUTION FROM A GIVEN INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR, BY ADULT FRIENDLINESS**



**Note.** More than one type of institution could be included within a given program. Data are from the 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

## What Financial and Nonfinancial Supports Do These Adult-Eligible Free College Tuition Programs Provide And For How Long? Are They First- Or Last-Dollar Programs?

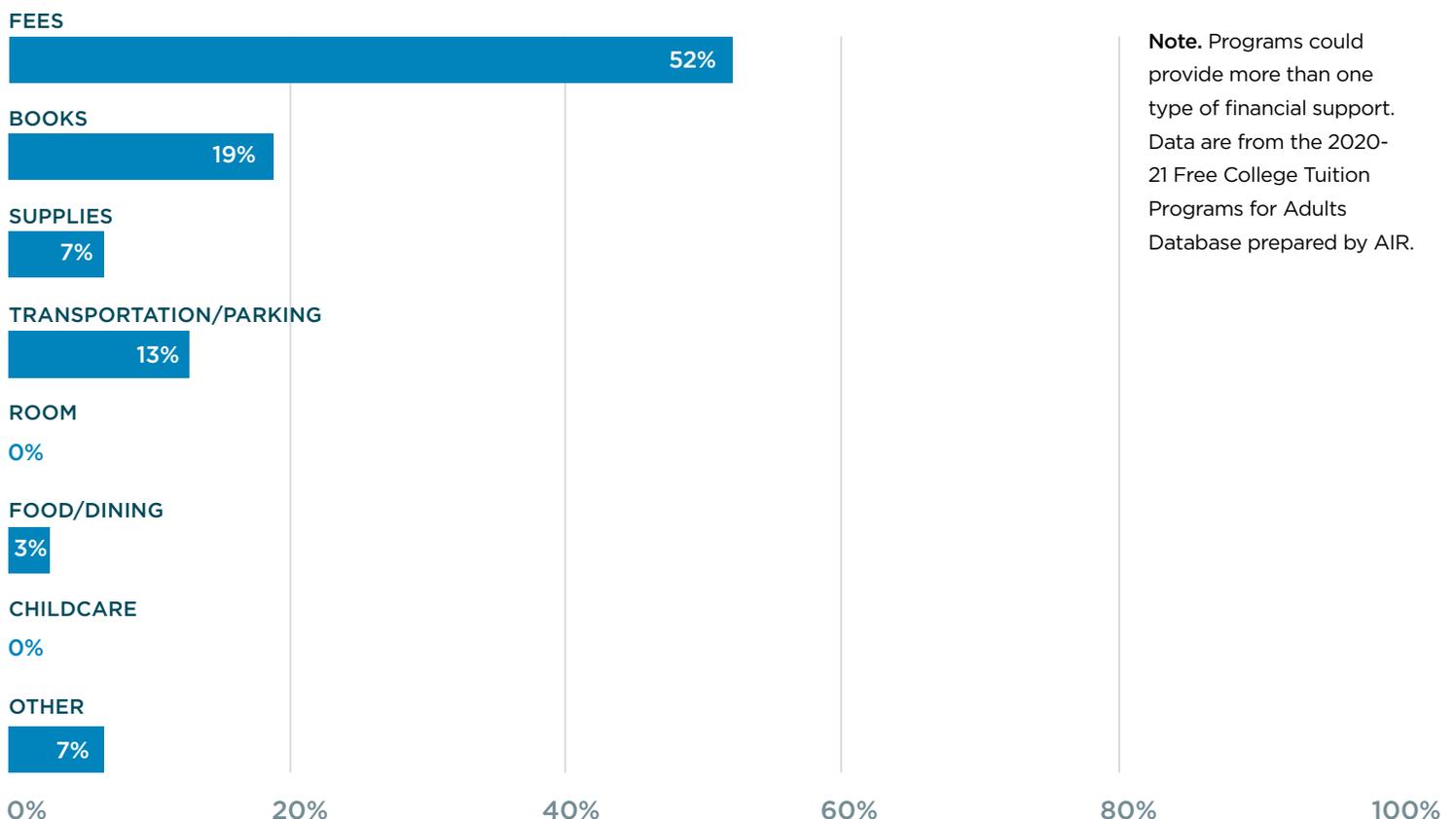
Having discussed program requirements, it is helpful to look at what programs offered.

### ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

By definition, all programs included in this study provided free college tuition.<sup>12</sup> Exhibit 12 shows the percentage of adult-eligible programs that noted covering specific additional types of expenses. Specifically, 35 programs (52%) indicated covering fees, which could include health, technology, and campus fees, depending on the institution.<sup>13</sup> Support for books, transportation and parking, and supplies followed behind at 19%, 13%, and 7%, respectively. Two programs (3%)—West LA College Promise and Los Angeles College

Promise—offered students the option to receive a voucher or financial assistance toward food/dining, transportation, or books.<sup>14</sup> No programs covered room (e.g., rent or campus housing) or childcare. Examining financial supports by adult friendliness reveals that providing supports for books was considerably less common for adult-friendly programs allowing prior postsecondary enrollment (3%) and part-time attendance (6%) than among all programs (19%). On the other hand, covering fees was somewhat more common for programs allowing prior postsecondary experience and programs allowing part-time attendance (60% and 61%, respectively) compared with all programs (52%).

**EXHIBIT 12. PERCENTAGE OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS COVERING OTHER FINANCIAL SUPPORTS, BY ADULT FRIENDLINESS**



<sup>12</sup> As noted in the inclusion criteria, California uses the term “fee” to reflect “tuition.” Therefore, the project treated California’s covering of fees as covering tuition.

<sup>13</sup> A few additional programs noted that they did not cover all fees but covered enrollment fees. They were not counted as covering fees.

<sup>14</sup> These programs were counted as offering all three types of financial supports.

## NONFINANCIAL SUPPORTS

Reviews of the research literature suggest that financial supports alone are not enough to ensure that students complete postsecondary credentials; nonfinancial support services also are critical (Bailey et al., 2015; Mayer & Tromble, 2020; Nathenson & Radford, 2021). Nevertheless, just 15 adult-eligible programs (22%) noted providing student support services specifically through their program. Adult-friendly programs offered such supports at similar rates, differing by no more than 4 percentage points than the rate for all adult-eligible programs. In terms of the types of supports that programs provided, assistance tended to focus on counseling, advising, and/or mentoring, with some programs specifically highlighting a focus on student success and/or assistance with students' academics and/or careers.

It is important to note that programs that did not report offering student support services through their program may instead direct participants to existing support services provided by the program's participating institution(s). For example, the Southwestern College Promise Program's [website](#) noted that although the program itself focused on covering tuition, "Southwestern College offers a variety of services, including child care, the Jag Kitchen food pantry, learning communities, such as First-Year Experience (FYE), Umoja, Bayan and Puente, and the PowerStudy Program, which embeds tutors in certain classes."

Future research should explore the pros and cons of embedding nonfinancial supports into free college tuition programs versus directing adults in such programs to supports offered by participating institutions. On the one hand, separating support services for program participants and other students may create

inefficiencies and silos. On the other hand, participants in programs that embed or even require participants to use supports<sup>15</sup> may be more likely to use them than participants in programs who must seek out different staff or apply separately for supports.

## DURATION OF AWARD

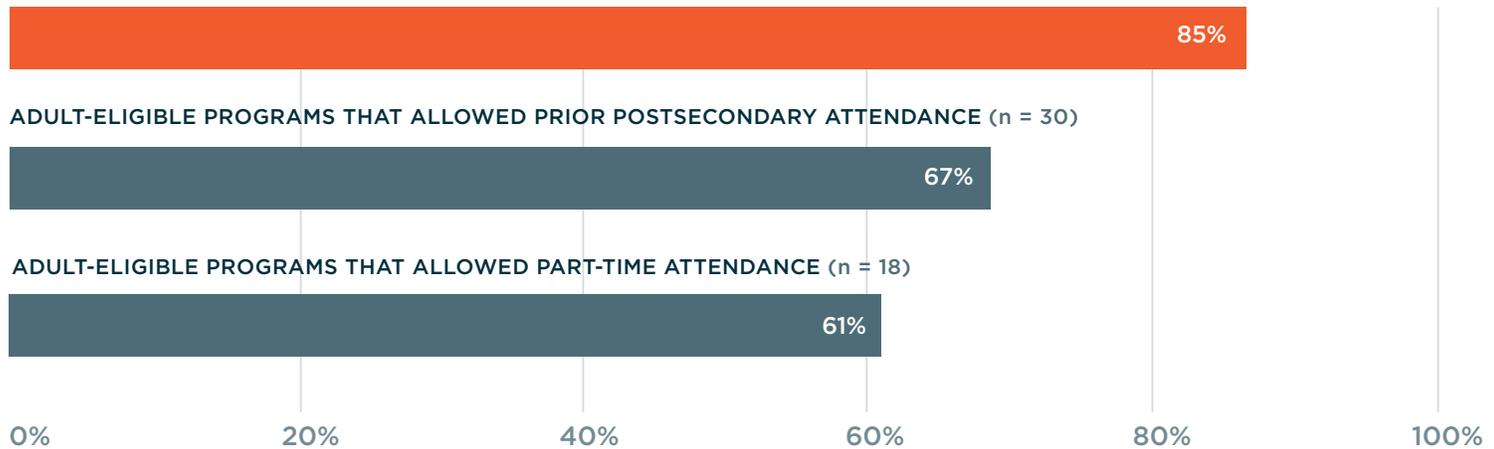
Free college tuition offers tended to be time limited. Fifty-seven of the adult-eligible programs (85%) indicated a maximum duration for the financial award provided. That said, great variation existed in the structuring of the lengths of awards. Assuming other renewal requirements were met, up to 2 years was common, with California programs in particular specifying coverage of students' first two academic years. This 2-year duration also aligns with the Biden administration's American Families Plan proposal regarding free community college (The White House, 2021). A smaller proportion of programs indicated a willingness to provide free tuition for more than 2 years. Still other programs defined duration not by years or terms but by attempted or earned college credits. Others, like Dream Weber, Tennessee Reconnect, and West Virginia Invests used multiple criteria to determine when awards would end, such as completion of a credential, earning a certain number of credit hours, and/or time elapsed in years or terms, whichever came first.

Adult-friendly programs were less likely to specify a maximum duration. As Exhibit 13 illustrates, 67% of the programs that allowed prior postsecondary experience and 61% of the programs that allowed students to attend part time specified a maximum duration (compared with 85% of all programs). This may suggest that programs with more adult-friendly eligibility criteria also are more likely to consider and offer greater flexibility on the amount of time that participants can take in completing their credentials.

<sup>15</sup> Los Angeles College Promise, for example, requires participants to meet with a Promise counselor and a success coach once per semester.

### EXHIBIT 13. PERCENTAGE OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE FREE COLLEGE TUITION PROGRAMS REPORTING A MAXIMUM DURATION FOR THEIR FINANCIAL AWARD, BY ADULT FRIENDLINESS

ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS (N = 67)



Source: 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

### FIRST DOLLAR/LAST DOLLAR

**Promise programs fall into two general categories: first dollar and last dollar.** A first-dollar award provides a specific amount of support regardless of other financial aid. A last-dollar award fills the gap between a student's other sources of financial aid and, at a minimum, the cost of tuition. The vast majority of adult-eligible free college tuition programs were last-dollar programs, but three first-dollar programs were identified: the California College Promise Grant, the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship, and

Free City in San Francisco. All three covered tuition fees first, allowing participants, especially students from low-income backgrounds, to use other aid to cover other costs of attendance. Free City participants who also were eligible for the California College Promise Grant (and therefore already had their enrollment fees covered) were even able to convert the funds they would have received under the Free City tuition waiver into a Free City Grant, which they then could use for other educational expenses.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Missouri's Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant was a last-dollar grant because it covered remaining tuition after governmental aid was applied. That said, somewhat like Free City, participants whose tuition costs were met by government aid were eligible to receive \$500 per term to cover remaining educational costs.

## What Do We Know About the Funders and Partners Involved In These Programs?

**Free college tuition program websites were oriented to potential students.** Thus, it is not surprising that most sites did not indicate their funders and were even less likely to note their partners. That said, this study gathered some insights about funders and partners from this initial scan.

First, government funding and support were important. The fact that many programs required filing the FAFSA indicates that many programs sought to use federal student aid when possible to help them cover students' tuition costs. Some programs also leveraged resources through state financial aid programs and/or other state grant programs to support program costs. State legislation also made some programs possible; the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship and California Promise Program are two such examples.

Second, some programs were bringing in nongovernmental stakeholders. Several programs' websites showcased the support of local philanthropy, including sometimes leveraging a college's foundation, which then cultivated partnerships with employers; hosted fundraisers; and worked with private donors, estates, and family foundations to secure funds. A few programs touted having funding from, and partnerships with, employers. Cherokee County Promise's website noted bringing in local firms such as Cherokee State Bank, Cherokee Industrial Corp., Cherokee Regional Medical Center, and RJ Thomas. The websites for Build Dakota and Ivy Tech's Achieve Your Degree showcased long lists of industry partners.



## Where Should the Field Go From Here?

The rising cost of college and the increasing need for postsecondary education has yielded growing interest in free college tuition programs. Yet limited information exists about the range of free college tuition programs available to adults. This scan is an early step in advancing free college tuition programs for adults. This final section of the report outlines study findings, implications for practitioners and policymakers, and future research needs. It ends with a call to action.

### KEY STUDY FINDINGS

This study identified 67 adult-eligible free college tuition programs. In terms of location and breadth, 22 states plus the District of Columbia have at least one adult-eligible program within their borders, and 15 adult-eligible programs were statewide. But this project also underscored that it is important to consider not just which programs are technically adult eligible but also which programs have adult-friendly criteria that enable more adults to participate. Only 30 programs allow the sizable number of adults with some postsecondary experience to receive free college tuition through their program. And only 18 programs allow participants to enroll part time, as the majority of adult undergraduates currently do. In addition, only four adult-eligible programs could be considered adult-only programs, each allowing prior postsecondary participation and part-time attendance.



### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS

First, stakeholders involved in free college tuition programs should carefully consider their eligibility requirements. Such requirements have a strong impact on who can participate in these programs, which can lead to inequities. In particular, the research team encourages those developing new programs and running existing programs to examine their program requirements with an eye toward whom the program is most trying to serve versus who stands most to benefit. To avoid excluding adults, stakeholders should reflect carefully on the education attainment and enrollment intensity requirements they establish for their programs. Also, those involved in developing or executing adult-only programs should consider identifying adults using the federal aid definition for financially independent students rather than age to be more inclusive of the adult population. In addition, individuals shaping programs should examine how setting and defining a maximum duration for receiving free tuition could prevent adults from achieving the program objective of helping participants complete a credential.

Second, those running programs should ensure that their websites clearly communicate program features and requirements to students. The research team often found it hard to identify key program information, suggesting that prospective participants likely would as well. Staff responsible for answering questions about programs could track frequently asked questions and suggest website updates that could clarify program details accordingly. In addition, staff across free college tuition programs could share models and lessons learned for presenting program details to students.

Third, program staff should revisit how they market their programs. Several programs were advertised as for adults in their program name or initial program description, but these programs did not meet the adult-friendly criteria of allowing participants to have prior postsecondary enrollment or to attend part time. Conversely, multiple programs that did meet these adult-friendly criteria did not market themselves to adults through their name or initial program description. Programs that are truly adult friendly should say so; others should not.

Fourth, program staff need to collect data on their programs. Capturing and sharing information about the number of adult programs can help bring in funders and partners. Tracking and analyzing student outcomes will foster continuous improvement and can further help in securing additional funding. Researchers can be partners in this work.

## FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

As this study shows, free college tuition programs' eligibility requirements and conditions for participation can have strong implications for adult student access. It is important to uncover and be transparent about these implications and determine whether they are intended or unintended by those who developed these programs. Further research should be conducted on several aspects of free college tuition programs in order to understand policy decisions' equity implications and other consequences for students.

First, research should document in detail the various funding models used and explore the equity of different models. The research should break out the different program costs, including covering not only tuition but also targeted support services, expenses for promoting the programs to the public, and administrative costs. Understanding and publicizing the array of funding models that programs use may help policymakers and other stakeholders develop effective new programs and expand existing ones. Having this cost information also will help determine programs' return on investment, which could encourage additional funding.

Second, further research should explore the role of partners that support free college tuition programs. Who are they? What spurred them to get involved, and what do they hope the programs will achieve? How can partnerships be more strongly leveraged to improve and expand programs? This project seeks to begin addressing this topic through a companion webinar. The webinar, which will be recorded and posted on this project's [website](#), dives deeper into how Ivy Tech has worked with the private sector in creating and building its program, Achieve Your Degree.

Third, to improve programs, the field needs to hear from students. This study's identification of adult-eligible and adult-friendly programs will facilitate collecting data regarding the demographic characteristics of adult program participants as well as how these adults heard of their program, located program information and requirements, and experienced their program. In capturing student perspectives that can inform program design, researchers should also involve adults not enrolled in adult-eligible free college tuition programs but who are attending institutions participating in the program and adults not doing either but who are part of the program's intended audience.

Finally, to advance and scale programs, researchers need to study free college tuition programs' student outcomes and determine how these programs can be made more effective. This work should include investigating the outcomes of programs that combine support services with free tuition versus programs focused exclusively on providing free tuition. Disentangling the impact of different types of support services provided as well as the ways these support services are administered (through the program vs. the institution; required vs. optional services) will further support programs that are both emerging and existing. Researchers also should explore the differing features and outcomes of statewide programs versus programs that are in multiple institutions but are not statewide and single-institution programs. Smaller programs may have more tailored supports and devoted local sponsors, but multiple-institution or statewide programs may have a higher profile that increases student awareness and take-up.

Done right, providing adults the opportunity to attain postsecondary credentials without paying tuition has the power to improve the trajectory of individuals, their communities, and the United States as a whole. Working together, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers can advance our understanding of existing free college tuition programs for adults and improve the equity and effectiveness of current and future programs.

## Appendix A: Methodology

### INCLUSION CRITERIA

Because of the varying conceptualizations of “free college” that abound in the research literature and in practice, the research team first developed a set of inclusion criteria to bound the scope of programs under review and, more importantly, capture the more specific population of programs of interest (i.e., broadly accessible free tuition programs for adult learners versus the more common “promise program” model targeted toward recent high school graduates). In developing the inclusion criteria tailored for the scope of this study, the research team considered the research literature on free college tuition and promise programs (e.g., Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2017) and reviewed comprehensive “promise program” databases from the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and the Penn Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) at the University of Pennsylvania. Exhibit 1 at the beginning of this report describes the full inclusion criteria for adult-eligible programs.

### DATA COLLECTION AND CODING

Using the inclusion criteria as a screening rubric, several hundred potentially eligible programs were reviewed to determine whether they met the criteria. Primary data sources included the [Upjohn Institute](#) and [Penn AHEAD](#) promise program databases, [College Promise’s \*Catalog of Local and State College Promise Programs\*](#), and research and reports found on the [State Higher Education Executive Officers Association’s \*Adult Promise\* website](#). Specifically, the research team also consulted numerous other reports and resources in identifying potential programs.<sup>17</sup>

After initial screenings, project staff made preliminary determinations for program inclusion; additional senior staff verified all final determinations for inclusion. Concurrent with the initial program review process, the research team developed a program database for collecting program location and administrative information, student eligibility criteria, institution and program of study eligibility, and financial award details.

Following a review protocol, from March to May 2021, a team of researchers reviewed the official program websites for each identified program that met the inclusion criteria. Researchers scanned program websites to complete a Smartsheet data collection form, which populated the underlying database. As additional themes and program features were uncovered during the initial review and coding processes, data elements and definitions were refined, and several new data elements were added. On occasion, this additional coding uncovered that initially identified programs did not meet the program criteria; those programs were subsequently dropped after consultation with senior staff.

<sup>17</sup> The research team consulted resources provided by Best Value Schools ([Best Colleges With Free Tuition 2020](#)), the Campaign for Free College Tuition ([Promise Programs](#)), The Century Foundation ([“Free College:” Here to Stay?](#)), College Promise ([Ecosystems of Support for Adult Students](#)), Education Commission of the States ([Seeking Support: State Financial Aid Programs and Adult Students, 50-state policy database, Free Community College: An Approach to Increase Adult Student Success in Postsecondary Education](#)), Education Trust ([A Promise Fulfilled, A Promise Worth Keeping](#)), the Institute for Higher Education Policy ([The State of Free College](#)), NASPA ([State Investment in Higher Ed: Free College and Promise Programs in 2019](#)), the National Conference of State Legislatures ([A Legislator’s Toolkit for the New World of Higher Education](#)), Research for Action ([Affordability, Access, and Success: A Framework for Examining Statewide College Promise Programs](#)), and the U.S. Department of Education ([America’s College Promise Playbook](#)). The team also looked at programs mentioned in journal articles (such as [Promise for Whom?](#) and [Is a College Promise Program an Effective Use of Resources? Understanding the Implications of Program Design and Resource Investments for Equity and Efficiency](#)) and news articles (such as [CNBC’s Here’s How to Go to College for Free](#) and [Money Magazine’s All the Places in the U.S. Where You Can Go to College for Free](#)).

To collect data elements not readily found on public-facing websites (e.g., partnerships and funders), a secondary data collection effort was conducted by contacting programs directly with a standardized email message and an open-response data collection form. Despite two volleys of outreach, only 10 programs responded. Automatic responses from multiple programs suggested that staff monitoring these email addresses were overwhelmed with questions from students about financial aid. Staff accustomed to answering student financial aid questions also may not be as informed about the funding sources and partners involved in these programs. This report includes the information gathered from websites and this outreach, but the research team sees this as an area for future research, in which contacting more senior administrators may be more fruitful.

#### DATA VALIDATION

To help ensure the database captures free college programs open to adults, project staff provided the initial roster of identified programs to multiple key informants active in “free college” and “promise program” research, policy, or practice. Feedback from the key informants led to a second wave of program identification, website review, and database input, yielding some programs not previously recorded.

Senior project staff assessed program information captured in the database to ensure high interrater reliability (e.g., initial double coding of program websites) and internal validity (e.g., plausible values, logical values across related data elements). When necessary, data were updated to reflect programs’ design more accurately.

#### QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

From the full program database, consisting of mostly text-based data, researchers constructed an analytic data file conducive for analysis in statistical software. Categorical and binary data elements were derived from the fuller program database to isolate key program design features. Descriptive analyses of the analytic data file included summary statistics, counts, proportions, and crosstabulations.

## Appendix B: List of Adult-Eligible Free College Tuition Programs, by State, Adult Friendliness, and Breadth of Institutional Participation

- Both Prior Postsecondary Attendance and Part-Time Attendance Allowed
- Just Part-Time Attendance Allowed
- Just Prior Postsecondary Attendance Allowed
- Neither Prior Postsecondary Attendance Nor Part-Time Attendance were allowed
- Not indicated on program website

State	Program Name	Prior Postsecondary Attendance Allowed	Part-time Attendance Allowed	Breadth of Institutional Participation
AR	<a href="#">Arkansas Future Grant</a>	●	●	Statewide
CA	<a href="#">Barstow College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">California College Promise Grant</a>	●	●	Statewide
CA	<a href="#">Canyons Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Contra Costa Community College District's (4CD) First Time + Full Time = Free Tuition (FT3) Promise</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">De Anza College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Foothill College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Free City</a>	●	●	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Free Tuition</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">GCCPromise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Golden Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Grossmont-Cuyamaca College Promise</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">Irvine Valley Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Lake Tahoe College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Los Angeles College Promise</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">Los Rios Promise</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">Mendocino College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Merced College Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">MiraCosta Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Mission Promise Scholarship</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Modesto Junior College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Moorpark College Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">North Orange Promise</a>	○	●	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Oxnard College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Palomar Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Panther Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Pirates' Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Promise Scholars Program</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">Rio Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Saddleback College Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Santiago Canyon College (SCC) Promise Scholarship</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Sequoias Promise Program</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions

State	Program Name	Prior Postsecondary Attendance Allowed	Part-time Attendance Allowed	Breadth of Institutional Participation
CA	<a href="#">Shasta College Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">Southwestern College Promise Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">SRJC for Free</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">State Center Community College District</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">The Butte College Promise Scholarship Program</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">The Woodland Community College Promise Program</a>	○	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
CA	<a href="#">Ventura College (VC) Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
CA	<a href="#">West LA College Promise</a>	○	○	Single institution
DC	<a href="#">DC Mayor's Scholars Undergraduate Program</a>	●	○	Multiple (10+) institutions
HI	<a href="#">Hawai'i Promise Program</a>	●	●	Statewide
IA	<a href="#">Cherokee County Promise</a>	●	●	Single institution
IA	<a href="#">Future Ready Iowa Last-Dollar Scholarship</a>	●	●	Statewide
IN	<a href="#">Achieve Your Degree</a>	●	●	Statewide
IN	<a href="#">Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant</a>	●	●	Statewide
KS	<a href="#">Wichita Promise</a>	●	○	Single institution
KY	<a href="#">Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship</a>	●	—	Statewide
MD	<a href="#">Maryland Community College Promise</a>	●	○	Statewide
MO	<a href="#">Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant</a>	●	●	Statewide
NC	<a href="#">VanGuarantee Scholarship Program</a>	●	●	Single institution
NJ	<a href="#">New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant</a>	●	●	Statewide
NM	<a href="#">New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship</a>	●	○	Statewide
NY	<a href="#">The Excelsior Scholarship</a>	●	○	Statewide
OR	<a href="#">Oregon Promise</a>	●	●	Statewide
SD	<a href="#">Build Dakota</a>	●	○	Statewide
TN	<a href="#">Tennessee Reconnect</a>	●	●	Statewide
TX	<a href="#">Buff Promise</a>	●	○	Single institution
TX	<a href="#">Falcon Promise</a>	●	○	Single institution
TX	<a href="#">Lone Star College-Promise Scholarship</a>	●	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
TX	<a href="#">UTRGV Tuition Advantage</a>	●	○	Single institution
UT	<a href="#">Dream Weber</a>	●	○	Single institution
UT	<a href="#">SLCC Promise</a>	●	●	Single institution
WA	<a href="#">The Husky Promise</a>	●	○	Multiple (2-9) institutions
WI	<a href="#">MATC Promise</a>	●	●	Single institution
WI	<a href="#">Nicolet Promise</a>	●	●	Single institution
WV	<a href="#">West Virginia Invests</a>	●	●	Multiple (10+) institutions

Source: 2020–21 Free College Tuition Programs for Adults Database prepared by AIR.

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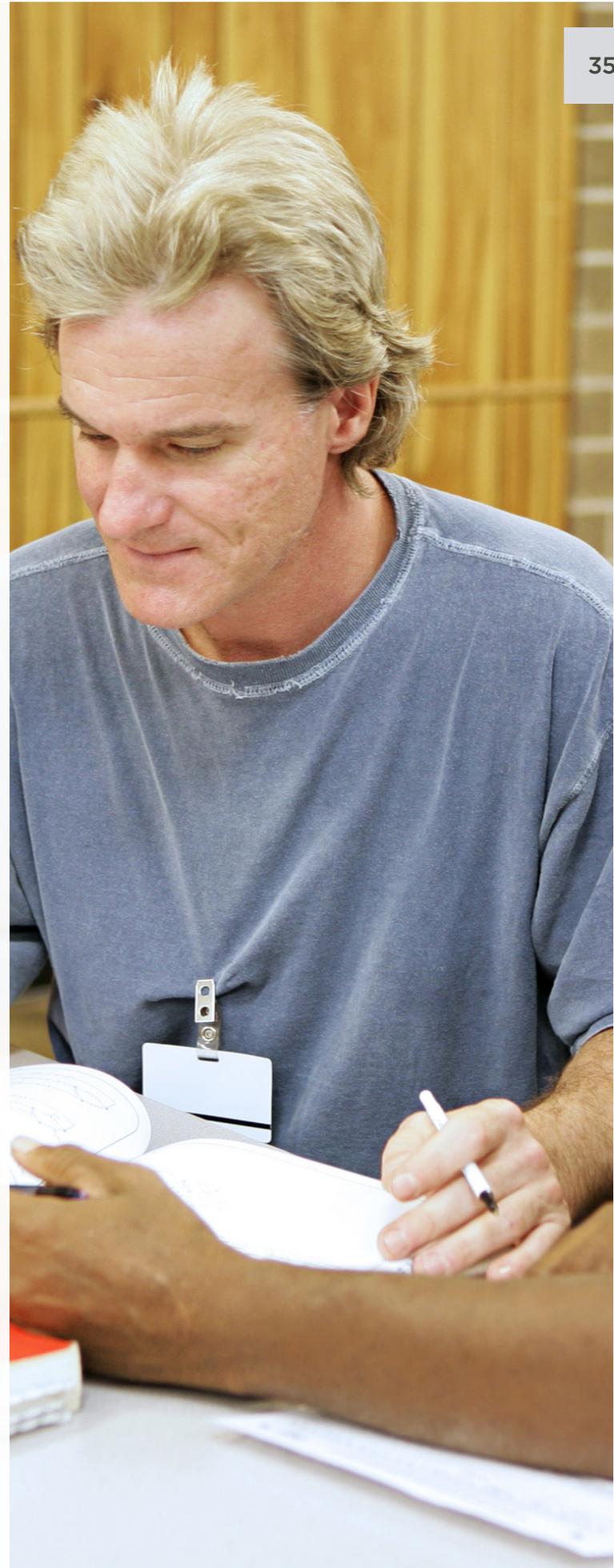
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