

Including Undocumented Students in Tuition-Free Community College Proposals

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Congress is considering a proposed budget reconciliation package that would include tuition-free community college for eligible students without regard to the students' immigration status. The proposal would [provide](#) \$111 billion in grants to states from fiscal years (FY) 2023 to 2028. The federal government [would fully fund](#) tuition-free community college for the first year, with participating states contributing five percent each year until they contribute 20 percent in FY 2027-28. States that receive federal grants under this program would not be able to deny tuition-free community college to students based on "citizenship, alienage, or immigration status." The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of undocumented students' current access to in-state tuition and state financial aid, including Promise programs, and the economic and state-level benefits of increasing college access and equity for all students through tuition-free community college.

Background

The United States is home to approximately [427,000 undocumented students](#) enrolled in postsecondary education, representing about two percent of all postsecondary students. Of these students, 181,000 are Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)-eligible (they either hold DACA or would have been eligible for DACA). Research indicates that removing financial barriers to higher education for undocumented students increases college enrollment, and improves academic achievement, credits attempted, and first-semester retention.¹ In addition, 65 percent of all jobs require at least some postsecondary education or training beyond a high school degree.² Without broad access to higher education, talent shortages will affect employers and the economy. As a result, states have continuously acted on these challenges by implementing policies to expand access to higher education for all state residents regardless of immigration status. Congress is proposing to build on these efforts through its tuition-free community college proposal.

¹ Flores, S. M. (2010). State dream acts: The effect of in-state resident tuition policies and undocumented Latino students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33, 239-283; Flores, S. M., and Horn, C. L. (2009). College Persistence Among Undocumented Students at a Selective Public University: A Quantitative Case Study Analysis. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 11(1), 57-76; Darolia, R. and Potochnik, S. (2015). Educational "When", "Where", and "How". Implications of In-State Resident Tuition Policies for Latino Undocumented Immigrants. *The Review of Higher Education*, 38(4), 507-535; Grosz, M. and Hines, A. (2021). Granting In-State Tuition to Undocumented Students Increases Their Rates of College Attendance, Center for Poverty & Inequality Research, University of California-Davis. Policy Brief. 9 (7). Retrieved from https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/hines_grosz_undocumented_students_brief.pdf?1611781753.

² Carnevale, A. P. & Rose, S. J. (2015). The economy goes to college: The hidden promise of higher education in the post-industrial service economy. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/EconomyGoesToCollege.pdf>.

Current State-Level Policies on Higher Education Affordability

An increasing number of states [offer in-state tuition and state financial aid](#) to eligible state residents regardless of their immigration status. These policies have proven successful, with a growing number of states acting to expand access to in-state tuition and state financial aid, including Promise programs to undocumented students.

- **In-State Tuition and State Financial Aid:** Undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition and state financial aid in [17 states and D.C](#) if they meet certain requirements. An additional four states provide undocumented students with access to in-state tuition, but not state financial aid. Ten additional states [provide access](#) to in-state tuition exclusively to DACA recipients.
- **Promise Programs:** Tuition-free state financial aid programs, also known as Promise programs, can improve college access and affordability.³ Promise Programs are typically a scholarship that covers tuition and mandatory fees after all other federal and state aid is applied. By the academic year 2018-2019, undocumented students who met certain requirements were eligible for Promise programs in seven states: Delaware, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington.⁴ More recently, in 2020, New Mexico and Maryland launched Promise programs that are open to undocumented students.⁵ In addition, states that do not have statewide programs offer several local Promise programs. For example, while California does not have a statewide Promise program design, the state provides funding for locally designed Promise programs. In 2019, there were [110 Promise programs](#) at community colleges across the state. California community colleges that accept state funding for their Promise programs are required to waive tuition for all eligible students regardless of their immigration status. In Texas, local Promise programs in [Dallas](#), [Houston](#), and [San Antonio](#), offer free-tuition community college to eligible students, regardless of immigration status.

A Complement to State-Level Success

Congress' proposal for tuition-free community college, which is open to eligible students regardless of immigration status, follows a state-level trend that started in 2001. The federal government is proposing to follow and complement current state policies by further removing financial barriers to degree completion.

³ Dowd, A., Rosinger, K.O., & Castro, M.F. (2020). Trends and perspectives on finance equity and the promise of community colleges. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Vol. 35. Springer, 517-588. Perna, L.W., & Leigh, E. (2018). Understanding the promise: A typology of state and local college promise programs. *Educational Researcher*, 47, 155-180.

⁴ For a checklist on which state-level Promise programs provide access to undocumented students, please see here: Jones, T., Ramirez-Mendoza, J., & Jackson, V. (October 2020). A promise worth keeping: An updated equity driven framework for free college programs. The Education Trust, 12. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-Promise-Worth-Keeping-An-Updated-Equity-Driven-Framework-for-Free-College-Programs-October-2020.pdf>.

⁵ New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship to Include Four-Year College Students. New Mexico Higher Education Department. (February 2021). <https://hed.state.nm.us/news/new-mexico-opportunity-scholarship-to-include-four-year-college-student>; Community College Promise Scholarship. Maryland Higher Education Commission. (2021). https://mhec.maryland.gov/preparing/Pages/FinancialAid/ProgramDescriptions/prog_MDCCommunityCollegePromiseScholarship.aspx.

- **Pro-Workforce.** Ensuring all state residents are eligible regardless of immigration status will help expand access to higher education and allow the American workforce to fill critical workforce shortages in key industries.⁶
- **Builds on State Trends.** Allowing all state residents to more easily access higher education is a policy already followed, with some variation, by almost half of all U.S. states, encompassing most undocumented students in higher education in the U.S.

The congressional proposal for tuition-free community college seeks to build on state-led momentum that expands access to higher education to eligible state residents, including undocumented students. Tuition-free community college will act as a complement to state-level policies, helping ensure wider access to higher education and fortifying the U.S. economy by allowing more people to receive an education and training. The proposal will help the U.S. meet critical skills shortages.

Table 1: Undocumented Student Access to In-State Tuition and State Financial Aid, and Promise Programs By State⁷ ([Source](#))

State	Number of Undocumented Students in Higher Education	Share of All Students in Higher Education Who Are Undocumented	Access to In-State Tuition and State Financial Aid?	Access to Promise Programs?
California	94,030	3.0%	Yes	Yes (Local)
Texas	58,255	3.1%	Yes	Yes (Local)
Florida	40,152	3.0%	Yes (In-State Tuition Only)	No Data**
New York	25,296	1.8%	Yes	Yes
Illinois	17,757	2.1%	Yes	No Data
New Jersey	17,590	3.0%	Yes	Yes
Washington	15,039	3.3%	Yes	Yes

⁶ This has been demonstrated during the pandemic, where DACA recipients are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response serving in professions and occupations facing critical shortages such as health care and education. Please see:

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2020/04/06/482708/demographic-profile-daca-recipients-frontlines-coronavirus-response/>.

⁷ “Portal to the States.” Higher Ed Immigration Portal (2021).

<https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/>; “Undocumented students in higher education: How many students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and who are they?” (March 2021).

<https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Undocumented-Students-in-Higher-Education-Updated-March-2021.pdf>.

Georgia	14,201	2.0%	No	No Data
Virginia	12,387	2.0%	Yes	No Data
Massachusetts	11,632	2.0%	Limited to DACA	No Data
Maryland	9,730	2.2%	Yes	Yes
Arizona	9,480	2.0%	Limited (150% Rate)	No Data
North Carolina	8,741	1.2%	No	No Data
Nevada	*	3.7%	Limited	Yes
Connecticut	*	2.3%	Yes	No Data
Colorado	*	1.8%	Yes	No Data
Utah	*	1.8%	Yes	No Data
Oregon	*	1.3%	Yes	Yes
Indiana	*	1.2%	Limited to DACA	No Data
Pennsylvania	*	1.1%	Limited	No Data
Michigan	*	1.0%	Limited	No Data
Ohio	*	0.9%	Limited	No Data
Alabama	*	*	No	No Data
Alaska	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Arkansas	*	*	Limited to DACA	No Data
Delaware	*	*	Limited	Yes
Hawaii	*	*	Yes	No Data
Idaho	*	*	Limited to DACA	No Data
Iowa	*	*	Limited	No Data
Kansas	*	*	Yes (In-State Tuition Only)	No Data
Kentucky	*	*	Yes (In-State Tuition Only)	No Data
Louisiana	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Maine	*	*	Limited to DACA	No Data

Minnesota	*	*	Yes	No Data
Mississippi	*	*	Limited to DACA	No Data
Missouri	*	*	No	No Data
Montana	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Nebraska	*	*	Yes (In-State Tuition Only)	No Data
New Hampshire	*	*	No	No Data
New Mexico	*	*	Yes	Yes
North Dakota	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Oklahoma	*	*	Yes	No Data
Rhode Island	*	*	Yes	Yes
South Carolina	*	*	No	No Data
South Dakota	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Tennessee	*	*	No	No Data
Vermont	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
West Virginia	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Wisconsin	*	*	No	No Data
Wyoming	*	*	No State Policy	No Data
Washington, D.C.	*	*	Yes	No Data

*Sample size is too small to report for the state.

** There are 348 Promise programs across the country, the majority of which are local programs. Existing policy scans and databases do not collect data on whether students are eligible, regardless of immigration status. See [here](#) for the most up-to-date scan.