

Spurring Innovation in New Jersey County Colleges through a Tuition-Free Pilot Program

By Dr. Stefani Thachik

Introduction:

Economic trends are driving the rising value of higher education in New Jersey and most residents will need a postsecondary certification or degree to get ahead. College Promise programs can help increase social, economic, and civic mobility by making higher education accessible and affordable. This spring, New Jersey will be piloting the state's first tuition-free college program, known as the New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG).

The CCOG Program will be piloted at 13 county colleges across New Jersey, which were selected through a competitive community college innovation challenge during the summer of 2018. The pilot is a key component of a larger state-wide learning community that is developing best practices for student success and building capacity for support services as New Jersey looks to expand the program in the future.

Program Description and Overview

At first glance, New Jersey appears to be a success story as the state boasts a postsecondary attainment rate of **51.2%** [1], ranking 6th among all states. However, this ranking hides the disparities in attainment rates observed among residents from different zip codes, racial and ethnic identities, and socioeconomic strata. For **two-year public colleges** [2], about 16% of Latinx students and 11% of African American students graduate in three years, compared to 30% for Asian students and 25% for white students. While the state's overall ranking may be one of the highest in the nation, it's still far from where it needs to be.

In **September of 2017** [3], the state set a goal to ensure that 65% of residents hold a postsecondary degree or high-quality credential by 2025 ("65 by 25"). As a state, we can only attain this goal if we change our approach to higher education and begin to address the barriers that many face in accessing and completing postsecondary education.

[1] A Stronger Nation 2019: Lumina Foundation. (2019). Retrieved from strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2018/#state/NJ

[2] Promoting Student Success in Higher Education. (2018). Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. Retrieved from state.nj.us/highereducation/forums.shtml

[3] New Jersey Launches '65 by '25: Many Paths One Future' Campaign. (2017, September 19). Retrieved from [nj.gov/highereducation/documents/pdf/index/65 by 25 Campaign Launch Release 9-19-17.pdf](http://nj.gov/highereducation/documents/pdf/index/65%20by%2025%20Campaign%20Launch%20Release%209-19-17.pdf)

These barriers can be academic, social, and financial. While community colleges are often seen as a cost-saving route to earning a higher education credential, the net price for low-income students at New Jersey's public two-year colleges is higher than the national average (**\$7,057 compared to \$6,126**) [4]. If New Jersey wants to reach the goal of 65% by 25, the state needs to address equity gaps in college enrollment, improve overall completion rates, and engage adults, especially those with some postsecondary experience.

Governor Murphy's **plans** [5] for a stronger and fairer economy recognizes the key role of higher education, and the Governor outlined a vision for a state-wide tuition-free county college program (CCOG) upon taking office in January 2018. With the support of the Governor, the legislature, and community leaders, the state budget funded an initial phase of the CCOG program this fiscal year and tasked the Secretary of Higher Education and the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA) with designing an efficient and effective pilot program in the spring 2019 semester.

With the benefit of learning from previous college promise programs in other states and localities, New Jersey aimed for a program that meets the needs of today's students and encourages residents to apply. To qualify, students must have an adjusted gross income (AGI) between \$0 and \$45,000 and enroll in at least six credits at a pilot community college. CCOG awards for qualified students will include the costs of tuition and approved education fees not already covered by other grant funds. Recent state law expanding state financial aid to NJ Dreamers helps to expand access to the new program further.

Community College Innovation Challenge

The first step in implementation was selecting the inaugural cohort of county colleges based on their participation in a Community College Innovation Challenge (CCIC). Each school was asked to submit an application that addressed the county college's ability to successfully implement the CCOG Program. The applications were assessed according to three key criteria: proposed outreach efforts, student supports, and costs forecast using each college's own data on current and prospective students.

Interest was great, as all 19 county colleges submitted high-quality applications to participate. While the budget did not have enough funds to offer CCOG awards at all 19 county colleges, every school received a planning grant of \$250,000 to help

[4] State Higher Education Finance (SHEF) Fiscal Year 2017. (2019, February 25). Retrieved from sheeo.org/projects/shef-%E2%80%94-state-higher-education-finance

[5] The State of Innovation: Building A Stronger And Fairer Economy in New Jersey. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.njeda.com/about/Public-Information/Economic-Plan>

build capacity for the program in the future. Based on other state programs' successes, New Jersey recognized that increased enrollment resulting from this program might require additional supports to help students succeed. Some institutions are focusing on marketing their programs and services to targeted populations and hosting workshops to help with completing the FAFSA, while others are increasing the size of their support staff to help with the influx of students. This support for capacity building was a pivotal step New Jersey took to ensure the CCOG program's sustainability and success.

The interest from all county colleges in the CCIC and the innovative strategies described in the applications spurred the creation of a learning community to share best practices and lessons learned among county colleges. Outside experts from other state's programs have shared their experiences, and our own county college experts have had their ideas workshopped through a series of online webinars. We have also held two in-person convenings in coordination with the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, with participation from all the county colleges.

Outcomes and Results

From the start, the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education has partnered with the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA) in order to build a tuition-free community college program that would have the most impact. HESAA's projections found that approximately 13,000 students at the 13 pilot schools would benefit from this program.

During the CCIC application process, county colleges were asked to provide student unit-record level data on aid awarded to all students, as well as credit hours completed, average unmet need of each student with an AGI of \$45,000 and below, and the net price and anticipated costs of attendance.

While the pilot is just beginning this spring, the state plans to continue to monitor and evaluate the program's success. That state will track data in the areas of enrollment, cost and financial aid disbursements, academic progress, county-level employment data, messaging and outreach, and student narratives. The use of quantitative and qualitative data will help provide a fuller story of how CCOG is working in New Jersey.

Conclusions:

While New Jersey is starting with a pilot tuition-free college program, the state has been able to leverage lessons learned from the variety of initiatives across the nation to reach the populations with most need, such as adults and low-income students. As "free college" expands across the nation, we too hope to expand it across the state. The Community College Opportunity Grant will provide one pathway forward to addressing affordability and access as New Jersey strives to reach 65 by 25.

Find out more about the College Promise movement by visiting collegepromise.org/join

About the Author

Dr. Stefani Thachik serves as the Director of Policy and Outreach for the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education in New Jersey. Her main roles include assisting in the development, communication, and implementation of policy and programmatic initiatives benefiting students within the state.

Prior to this role, Stefani worked in academic and students affairs for ten years with a focus on leadership, career development, and student success. She received her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University, her M.Ed. in Counselor Education from Clemson University, and her B.S. in Psychology from James Madison University.

