



Southern Regional Education Board

Oklahoma's Promise Program Performance Review

Prepared at the request of the
Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

June 11, 2018

Southern Regional Education Board

Oklahoma's Promise Program Performance Review

Executive Summary

At the request of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the Southern Regional Education Board conducted a review of Oklahoma's Promise program between August 2017 and February 2018. This report summarizes findings and observations from the review and provides recommendations. The review is organized around five areas of interest identified by the Regents; findings for these areas are summarized below.

Contribution to program and State Regents' goals. Oklahoma's Promise has been effective and efficient in meeting the program's goals of encouraging students from families with limited resources both to aspire for college and to prepare academically while in high school. Since the program's creation, Oklahoma's Promise has contributed thousands of students toward achievement of the State Regents' educational attainment goal and to the state's workforce. However, the general public may not be fully aware of how powerful the program is for the state.

Efficiency and effectiveness of program structure. The structural elements of Oklahoma's Promise program are effective and reflective of the direction the state needs to go to continue building a strong and vibrant economy grounded in a well-educated workforce. With a program of this magnitude, the policies and procedures that undergird the structure must be clear, reasonable, and operational. While many of the program's structural elements and their supporting policies and practices have evolved over the life of the program, policymakers and those who implement the program have been attentive to the changing conditions in the state and the needs of its people and institutions.

Program outcomes. Oklahoma's Promise outcomes have consistently provided evidence supporting the program's goals. Performance, persistence, and completion data document the success of the program in supporting low-income students as they move on to college. Key measures—including high school academic performance of participants, college-going rates, college academic performance of participants, and employment in the state after degree completion—reveal how Promise students perform highly on most measures and surpass the performance of non-Promise students in most areas.

Efficiency and effectiveness of program administration. The State Regents' office is an effective key contact with local counselors as well as with parents and students. Recent budget cuts, however, have reduced operating funds for marketing. This review was unable to adequately gauge the effectiveness of other structural elements, particularly the central role of school counselors in identifying qualified students, promoting the program with students and their families, and following up as students move from fifth grade into middle grades and high school. Importantly, it not clear how many or what percentage of income-eligible students do not enroll in the program.

Coordination with other financial aid. While an in-depth analysis of how Oklahoma's Promise awards have been coordinated with other financial aid was not possible for this report,

available sources suggest that multiple efforts are in place to support Oklahoma's Promise students when additional financial aid is needed to cover costs of attendance through other state financial aid programs and from individual institutional programs.

Recommendations

The benefits to the students, their families, the state, and its businesses generated by the Oklahoma Promise program make it one of the premier student support initiatives in the nation. Oklahoma's Promise has served all eligible applicants since the Program's inception because state policymakers and the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education have made Oklahoma's Promise a top priority for more than a quarter of a century. Overall, SREB found Oklahoma's Promise to be a sound and effective example of how a state can invest valuable resources in its students and see a strong return on that investment. This program review suggests the following recommendations:

- 1. The state should continue to support Oklahoma's Promise at a level at which all eligible students are served.**
- 2. In Oklahoma's Promise Year-End Report and other relevant publications, the State Regents should explain how the program contributes to achievement of the State Regents' educational attainment goal.**
- 3. To increase the percentage of income-eligible students who enroll in Oklahoma's Promise by 10th grade, the State Regents should strengthen current activities that have demonstrated good results and pursue additional promising strategies.**
- 4. The State Regents and the State Department of Education should conduct a study of the effectiveness of current marketing and administrative activities for Oklahoma's Promise.**
- 5. The State Regents, in collaboration with postsecondary institutions participating in the Oklahoma's Promise program, should conduct a study of students who enroll in college, but do not persist, to identify causes and make recommendations on how to increase the college completion rates of these students.**
- 6. The State Regents and the State Department of Education should promote concurrent enrollment for Oklahoma's Promise students who are in their senior year of high school.**
- 7. The State Regents, in collaboration with participating postsecondary institutions, should report annually on all types and amounts of financial aid that Oklahoma's Promise students receive.**

Southern Regional Education Board

Oklahoma's Promise Program Performance Review

At the request of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the Southern Regional Education Board conducted a review of Oklahoma's Promise program between August 2017 and February 2018. This report summarizes findings and observations from the review and provides recommendations. The review is organized around five areas of interest identified by the State Regents:

1. To what extent has Oklahoma's Promise program been effective and efficient in meeting the program's goals and the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education degree-completion goals?
2. To what extent has the program structure efficiently and effectively supported the program goals?
3. To what extent have program outcomes met the program goals?
4. To what extent has program administration efficiently and effectively supported the program goals?
5. To what extent has a program award coordinated effectively and efficiently with other financial aid that a participating student may receive?

More specifically, the review examined several aspects of Oklahoma's Promise program to better assess the five organizing questions. Through review of background information, reports, and interviews, SREB addressed the following areas:

Program Structure

- Application requirements
- Application time period
- High school academic and conduct requirements
- College requirements
- Award amount
- Award limitations

Program Outcomes

- High school academic performance of program participants
- College-going rates
- College academic performance of program participants, including persistence and degree completion
- Employment in the state after degree completion

Program Administration

- Marketing and communication efforts
- Administration of program awards

Program Coordination with Other Financial Aid

- Coordination with other financial aid that a student may receive

Additionally, the review considered key strengths and challenges of the program, suggestions to improve program effectiveness, and similar statewide Promise programs. Information was assembled from web pages, other documents, interviews and staff of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. The recent report by the Task Force on the Future of Higher Education was particularly timely and useful. Following a brief overview of Promise programs in the nation, the remaining sections discuss findings and observations for each of the five key questions above; recommendations conclude the report.

It is important to note that Oklahoma's Promise has served all eligible applicants since the program's inception. This has been possible because state policymakers and the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education have made Oklahoma's Promise a top priority for more than a quarter of a century. The state legislature's decision to create a permanent, dedicated funding stream for Oklahoma's Promise a decade ago has provided the kind of stability that families can count on. As a result, the program represents tremendous opportunity coupled with individual personal responsibility for eligible students in middle grades and high school to earn a college degree. The value to the state, its families, students, and businesses of this long-term investment is apparent in the high percentage of eligible students who complete the high school Oklahoma's Promise requirements, enter a postsecondary institution, complete a degree, and are employed in the state.

Early Commitment Promise Programs and Free College Programs

Promises to pay for students' college are not new. Eugene Lang's I Have a Dream initiative from the 1980s, in which he pledged to personally pay college costs for East Harlem sixth graders, was one of the earliest efforts to help large numbers of low-income students cover college costs. Various versions of this kind of commitment have emerged over the past four decades; today, Promise programs vary and often are not limited to low-income students.

The growth in free college programs has been predominantly in free community college initiatives, which are widespread across the nation. Unlike Oklahoma's and Indiana's Promise programs, free community college efforts usually limit participation to students enrolled in two-year and technical colleges. Community- or locally-based promise programs, as opposed to statewide programs, are also very common. Under this approach, a local group provides funds to cover college costs for students who graduate from area high schools. Local efforts date back many years, but the Kalamazoo Promise, created in 2005, was the first widely recognized community-based promise initiative. A group of anonymous donors created a scholarship fund for Kalamazoo Public School graduates to encourage them to complete a certificate or degree and stay in the Kalamazoo area to work.

A recent report, *The Future of Statewide College Promise Programs*, suggests that policymakers now design Promise programs with two goals in mind—to address college affordability and debt concerns and to increase college attendance among students who might not otherwise enroll. While several states have state-based Promise programs, many do not have a means-tested criterion for eligibility; additionally, few are “early commitment” programs that begin with

students in middle or high school when students and their families agree to the Promise pledge. Only Indiana's 21st Century Scholars Program and Washington state's College Bound Scholarship closely resemble Oklahoma's Promise. Both Indiana and Washington serve income-eligible students in 7th and 8th grade and require a pledge. Under the College Bound criteria, however, student income may not exceed 65 percent of the state's median family income at graduation from high school. The award covers tuition at comparable public college rates, some fees, and a small book allowance. Also in Washington state, foster youth are automatically enrolled.

1. To what extent has the Oklahoma's Promise program been effective and efficient in meeting the program's goals and the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education degree-completion goals?

The State Regents report that the goal of the Promise program is "to encourage more Oklahoma middle school and high school students with limited financial resources to aspire for college, prepare themselves academically in high school, and ultimately earn college degrees." Statutory language further specifies that the Oklahoma Promise should be a program "whereby a broader range of the general student population of this state will be prepared for success in postsecondary endeavors" (Title 70, Section 2602). The Oklahoma State System of Higher Education's Complete College America degree-completion goal calls for increasing the number of degrees and certificates earned each year by 67 percent by 2023.

While available data provide insight on the impact of Oklahoma's Promise on encouraging middle and high school students from lower- and low-middle income families to prepare for and enter postsecondary education, higher education aspirations are difficult to measure and monitor among middle grade and high school students, particularly by income level. ACT scores provide some indication, however, of success in meeting the state's program goal to better prepare students academically in high school in that ACT scores reflect the benefit of taking the required core curriculum. For 2016, those scores reveal a considerable difference by income level: Oklahoma's Promise students from families earning under \$50,000 had an average ACT score of 20.6 compared to 18.5 for non-Promise students in that income bracket. Even Oklahoma's Promise students in the income group over \$50,000 nearly matched the average score for non-Promise students.

Enrollment and completion data for the Promise Program and for OSSHE institutions help document how Oklahoma's Promise students prepare academically for college and how the Program contributes to the System's degree-completion goal. Of the 8,322 students enrolled in Oklahoma's Promise in the 2017 high school graduating class, 71.5 percent completed program requirements. OSRHE estimates that this enrollment represents about 18 percent of the high school sophomore enrollment in 2014-15.

Although enrollments have declined for the past few years, both the number and the percentage of students completing Oklahoma's Promise high school requirements have increased in recent years. OSRHE projects that 6,050 high school students will complete Oklahoma's Promise high school requirements in 2018, compared to 5,951 in 2017. The percentage of Oklahoma's Promise high school students completing the program requirements in 2017 was 71.5 percent; that is

projected to reach 73 percent in 2018. Given the Program's eligibility requirements and high academic standards, a 73 percent completion rate of high school requirements for this program is remarkable among students who may have come from households with little or no postsecondary experience and who had little hope of going to college.

The decline in program enrollments may be explained in large part by demographic changes in the state. The dramatic decline in the estimated percent of Oklahoma families with total income under \$50,000 may have been a major contributor. In 2000, an estimated 61 percent of families earned under \$50,000, but that percentage had dropped to 40 percent by 2016. Gradual increases in Oklahoma's Promise enrollment occurred following 2000 when the income requirement was raised to \$50,000. The decision to phase in higher income eligibility levels over the next few years should draw more students into the program and reverse current downward enrollment projections. OSRHE reports that the percentage of students potentially eligible to participate in Oklahoma's Promise is estimated to increase from 40 percent to about 45 percent. Future scheduled income limit increases in 2021-22 should continue to provide more income-eligible students for the program. A second contributor to program enrollment declines may be concern among some low-income families about drawing attention to their residency status.

General enrollment trends in the state's institutions in OSSHE over the decade 2006 to 2015 show a similar fluctuation pattern. Between 2006 and 2011, total enrollments rose steadily, but enrollments have declined gradually from 2012 through 2015. Declining college enrollments generally may increase the importance of Oklahoma's Promise as an incentive to prepare more students for college and move Oklahoma closer to its college completion goal while providing the talent and skills needed to grow the kind of workforce the state needs.

Recent program changes to include students in selected career technology programs may contribute to achievement of both state and system goals, but, based on recent enrollment data, the numbers will be small — in Fall 2016, 47 Oklahoma's Promise students were enrolled in state career-technology centers. Since most Oklahoma technology centers have full-time-equivalent enrollments of less than 1,000, the number of students meeting college requirements may limit the numbers eligible for an award. However, the opportunity to receive an award may motivate students seeking a certificate to take more credits and extend their enrollment to move into associate degree programs. The five-year eligibility criterion still applies and may be an added incentive for these individuals.

The program's impact is reflected in completion data as well. In 2016-17, Oklahoma's Promise college graduates earned about one of every six degrees and certificates of all types awarded to Oklahoma residents. That year, current and former Promise students earned nearly one of every five bachelor's degrees, 15 percent of all associate degrees, 10 percent of all certificates awarded to Oklahoma residents, 10 percent of all master's degrees, and over 12 percent of all professional degrees.

In summary, available information indicates that Oklahoma's Promise has been effective and efficient in meeting the program's goals of encouraging students from families with limited resources to aspire for college and to prepare academically while in high school. Individuals interviewed for this report, however, were concerned that the general public is not aware of how powerful the program is for the state. One interviewee described the program as a "game changer

for the state.” Some middle grade and high schools appear to be very effective in enrolling eligible students in the program; some do not. While there is room to improve on the proportion of income-eligible students that enroll in the program, there are many factors beyond the control of the schools that explain why more eligible students do not enter the program. Many students may not meet GPA and curricular requirements in high school; others may have cultural or personal situations that influence their participation decision; still others may not be able to bridge the financial gap between available aid and the cost of higher education.

The data also demonstrate how the program has advanced the degree-completion goals established by OSRHE. As a later section of this report notes, Oklahoma’s Promise students outperform non-Promise students on most measures. OSRHE reports that the state has surpassed its college completion goal set in 2011. In 2016-17, Oklahoma’s Promise college graduates accounted for approximately 17 percent of all associate and baccalaureate degrees awarded to Oklahoma residents. Since the program’s creation, Oklahoma’s Promise has contributed thousands of students toward achievement of the state’s educational attainment goal and, more importantly, to the state’s workforce. Far too many of these students would not have been able to go to college or graduate had it not been for Oklahoma’s Promise. Additionally, there are thousands more who are still in the pipeline, have intentions of returning to complete a degree, or have some credits but left higher education before completing the degree. This return on investment for students, their families and the state is impossible to ignore. Put another way, where would the state be today if the Program had not been created and had not been so effective?

2. To what extent has the program structure efficiently and effectively supported the program goals?

Program structure considers application requirements, application time period, high school academic and conduct requirements, college requirements, award amounts, and award limitations.

Application requirements. Basic application stipulations—requiring that individuals be U.S. citizens or lawfully present in the United States, state residents or residents of an adjacent state under a contract authorized in Oklahoma statutes, and in financial need—are reasonable and typical of state-supported financial aid programs. Additionally, requiring parental, custodial, or guardian signatures and agreement to help the student comply with Oklahoma’s Promise requirements is important given the ages of the applicants and the value of adult involvement in the program.

In statewide, need-based Promise programs designed specifically for low-income families and students, the income cap is a key condition. Oklahoma’s current income threshold of \$50,000 at the time of application falls between Indiana’s requirement of a maximum annual income of \$45,510 for a family of four and Washington’s requirement that student income not exceed 65 percent of the state’s median family income at graduation from high school, or \$56,500 for a family of four.

Application time period. The application time period is also a significant criterion for Promise programs. Research supports the importance of students’ early identification and

commitment to prepare for the rigors of postsecondary study. Requiring that students meet eligibility requirements before entering 10th grade reinforces the importance of preparing in middle school for the curricular demands of high school and college. Other eligibility requirements underscore the need for students to begin well before 10th grade to stay in school, do homework, and avoid substance abuse and criminal activity.

Providing enrollment opportunities for three years—eighth, ninth, and 10th grades—is a generous timeframe. These grades cover a critical period to make curricular decisions because it is particularly important to align enrollment years with curricular requirements. Washington state requires an interested student whose family meets the income requirements in seventh or eighth grade to submit an application by June 30 of the student’s eighth grade year; students must enroll by the end of eighth grade. Indiana allows enrollment in seventh or eighth grade.

A case could be made for Oklahoma’s Promise that moving the enrollment option to seventh grade would give students more time to use middle school courses to strengthen their academic readiness. An argument might also be made that 10th grade is too late in the secondary school preparation period to ensure that students can take full advantage of their final high school years and prepare to take acceleration options such as concurrent enrollment and Advanced Placement courses. Students should be on track by 9th grade to successfully complete curricular requirements for admission to a public postsecondary institution.

The option to use program funds within three years after high school graduation is a good opportunity for students who cannot enter college directly from high school. OSRHE reports that about 80 percent of students eligible for the scholarship enter college the first year after high school graduation. The flexibility of the second and third years appear to draw an additional 3 to 5 percent back to postsecondary education. These data suggest that approximately 15 percent of students who complete Oklahoma’s Promise requirements upon graduation from high school do not use the scholarship within three years—that would be nearly 905 students in 2016. Some may decide to go to an out-of-state college; others may return through the REACH program more than three years later. The three-year window provides such students the opportunity to still take advantage of their scholarship and reap the benefits of their Promise commitment and hard work in high school. It also reminds them that the state understands their challenges, values their success through high school and wants them to return for higher education. The apparent cost to the state for this option is insignificant compared to the payoff if the individual enrolls in higher education as a new or returning student. Allowing program-eligible students to use their scholarship through the Reach Higher Adult Degree Completion pathway is an additional advantage for these students.

High school academic and conduct requirements. Over more than two decades, higher education and K-12 have developed appropriate high school academic and conduct requirements. For example, the 2.5 GPA requirement in core curriculum courses in grades 9 through 12 sends a message that more than a 2.0 is needed to successfully compete in college-level work. The 2.5 GPA requirement may discourage some students from applying for the Promise program, but that may be offset by students’ willingness to rise to expectations by working harder to achieve a higher GPA to benefit from the scholarship. The conduct requirements are fair and underscore the seriousness of committing to a pathway that will prepare students for college and the workforce.

College requirements. College requirements for Oklahoma’s Promise participants should be in line with institutional admission requirements for students generally, and that is the case with Oklahoma’s Promise. Additionally, prohibiting Oklahoma’s Promise students from admission under special admission standards, expecting these students to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirements and maintaining eligibility for federal financial aid — all further underscore the importance of the academic readiness strength of the program. College requirements for Oklahoma’s Promise students that are less than admission requirements would be setting many students up for failure and generally lowering expectations that Promise students can successfully compete in college-level work.

Award amounts. Perhaps the most challenging structural component of the Promise Program to manage is the award amount. Oklahoma is recognized as one of the most affordable states in the nation for public higher education, and the Promise program helps keep Oklahoma competitive, especially with institutions in neighboring states. Beyond tuition, however, major costs of attendance—mandatory fees, housing, books, etc.—need to be covered by the student’s resources or by other financial aid awards.

Since the Promise award is indexed to tuition, award amounts have mirrored tuition increases. To keep pace with tuition between 2010-11 and 2015-16, the average annual Promise award at two-year colleges increased by 32.4 percent (from \$1,304 to \$1,727). The increase was 37.1 percent at regional universities (from \$2,943 to \$4,036) and 13.1 percent at research universities (from \$3,622 to \$4,095). Additionally, during that same period, a sample of institutions shows an increase of nearly 89 percent in mandatory fees at a two-year college, 73 percent at a regional university, and 21 percent at a research university.

Students must cover multiple costs, not just tuition. In 2015-16, the Promise award covered only 22 percent of the total cost of attendance at research universities, 31 percent at regional institutions, and 17 percent at community colleges. To cover the “affordability gap” between the financial aid available and the total cost of attendance, students often turn to loans. During the 2015-16 academic year, 35.5 percent of Promise recipients in the state system carried loans; in comparison 32.6 percent of all resident undergraduates had loans. These percentages varied widely by institutional type: at research universities, 50.6 percent of Promise recipients had loans compared to 42.2 percent of all resident undergraduates; nearly 37 percent of Promise recipients at regional institutions had loans while 41 percent of all resident undergraduates had loans; and at community colleges, close to 16 percent of Promise recipients had loans, compared to nearly 21 percent of all resident undergraduates who had loans. Two observations are apparent: A Promise award may reduce Promise students’ dependence on loans when compared to all resident undergraduates, and the dependence on loans is much higher at research universities than at either regional institutions or community colleges. State Regents’ data also show that the average Promise loan for those in the state system is somewhat smaller, at \$5,448, than the average resident undergraduate loan of \$6,866.

What we do not understand, however, is how many students who qualify for a Promise award do not enroll, or enroll and drop out, because they do not want to increase work hours or take out a loan (if they can secure one). In 2016-17, 46 percent or 2,153 first-year Promise recipients had an estimated family contribution (EFC) of zero. Among all Promise recipients in college that year, 38 percent had an EFC of zero. The “affordability gap” is often too large for low-income families

to cover. Yet, determining how unmet need impacts access and success is difficult to measure—the number of students who qualify for a Promise award but do not take advantage of the aid because they cannot cover other costs of attendance is not known. The inability to cover the “affordability gap” may be a significant factor in the persistence and completion of eligible students. A survey of non-returning students at the end of their freshman and sophomore years may shed light on the extent to which the costs of mandatory fees and other expenses made a difference in their decision to withdraw.

Award limitations. Recent legislation added limitations to the program relative to remedial courses, income verification, and a credit-hour cap. The impact of prohibiting the use of Promise awards to cover remedial noncredit-earning courses will be seen across several areas, notably enrollment in credit-bearing courses. The State System’s initiative to place students who need remediation in corequisite courses should enhance these students’ success rates. By fall 2017, Oklahoma’s Scaling Corequisite Initiative aimed to have 75 percent of all State System students needing academic support enrolled in corequisite remediation. Emerging results from other states on the use of corequisite models over traditional “free standing” developmental education courses suggest that students will be better prepared by the former to succeed in credit-bearing courses and to stay on track to complete a degree on-time or close to it.

The new Second Income Limit rule may also make a difference in persistence and completion rates. Under the recent program change, the second income limit rule will apply annually to all Promise students enrolled in postsecondary education. For any year that the income reported on FAFSA exceeds \$100,000, the student will not receive the Promise benefit. Additionally, any year that the student does not receive the award because his or her income exceeds the income limit will count toward the five-year period of scholarship eligibility. In comparison, income eligibility in Indiana is checked only at the point of application to the program when the student signs the pledge in 6th grade; in Washington, students must meet income-eligibility by the end of the 8th grade year and again in their senior year of high school.

Among the changes to Oklahoma’s Promise called for in Senate Bill 529 (2017) was a cap on the number of credit hours paid in college. Previously, there had been no limit on the number of credits Promise awards would cover each term. Capping the number of credit hours should not only save the state money, it should also save the students money. By avoiding courses that do not count toward their degree, students will have a better chance of graduating on time. Promise students will save cost of attendance expenses by taking the courses and number of credits they need to fulfill degree requirements. Oklahoma’s existing 15 to Finish Initiative could prove to be helpful in encouraging on-time completion of a bachelor’s degree in four years. Many factors that hamper low-income students’ ability to take 15 credit hours every semester are offset by the program’s allowance of awards over a five-year period. OSRHE reports that on-time completion by Promise students consistently surpasses completion rates of non-Promise students for students completing in five to 10 years. Even though the Promise award period ends after five years, Promise students appear to persist and complete at least up to 10 years after initial enrollment.

This section has examined several structural characteristics of Oklahoma’s Promise. With a program of this magnitude, the policies and procedures that undergird the structure must be

clear, reasonable, and operational. While many of the program's structural elements and their supporting policies and practices have evolved over the life of the program, policymakers and those who implement the program have been attentive to the changing conditions in the state and the needs of its people and institutions. This review found the structural elements of Oklahoma's Promise program to be effective and reflective of the direction the state needs to go to continue building a strong and vibrant economy grounded in a well-educated workforce.

3. To what extent have program outcomes met the program goals?

Data on Oklahoma's Promise outcomes document the extent to which the goals for the program are being achieved. These goals include encouraging students with limited financial resources to aspire for college, preparing academically in high school, and earning college degrees. The analysis of outcomes for this review relied on reports, interviews, and other information from the state system office. For the most part, the data account for Promise students at public institutions or about 94 percent of all Promise students; outcomes information on Promise students attending private institutions and career technical centers was not available.

High school academic performance of program participants. Oklahoma's Promise students out-perform non-Promise students on multiple high school performance measures. The percentage of the program's enrolled students who complete the program's rigorous high school requirements is a key indicator of how influential the program is for targeted students. That number reached 71.5 percent for 2017. Additionally, high school GPAs of Promise students have risen in recent years and have significantly exceeded that of all seniors in the last decade. Between 2007 and 2017, the overall GPA of Promise students ranged from 3.37 to 3.44, compared to a range of 3.0 to 3.08 for all Oklahoma seniors.

Performance on the ACT is another strong indicator of Promise students' achievements over non-Promise students. Among families earning under \$50,000, a higher percentage (69 percent) of Oklahoma's Promise students took the ACT than did non-Promise students (29 percent) from these families. Additionally, average ACT scores of students in this income bracket were higher for Oklahoma's Promise students at 20.6 than for non-Promise students at 18.5.

College-going rates. One of the clearest indicators of how well Oklahoma's Promise is helping close achievement gaps and encouraging students with limited financial resources to pursue higher education is the college-going rate. Program data show a significant difference in college-going rates between Oklahoma's Promise completers and non-Promise students. Although the rate dropped slightly to 85 percent in 2016-17, the college-going rates among Promise completers for several previous years was 87 percent, far exceeding that of non-Promise students at 44 percent. Also, the college-going rate of Promise completers has remained high for a decade, while the college-going rate for non-Promise students declined from 50 percent to 44 percent over the same period.

College academic performance of program participants. Once enrolled in college, the academic performance of program participants has surpassed that of non-Promise students on several metrics.

Oklahoma's Promise students obtained a GPA of at least 2.0 their freshman year at a rate of about 81 percent, on par with non-Promise students. For the past several years, college

freshman-to-sophomore persistence rates for Oklahoma’s Promise students (82 percent in 2016-17) have exceeded those of non-Promise students (74 percent).

Six-year completion rates at 45 percent among Promise students, however, signal that a number of Promise students withdraw from their postsecondary institutions before earning a degree. Consistent and timely information that might explain why Promise students leave, and what kind of intervention might be successful in preventing the withdrawal, is not currently available from the postsecondary institutions. All institutions that serve Promise recipients should attempt to determine why Promise students withdrew and report that information to the State Regents. A systemwide, targeted study of persistence and retention among Promise students may yield ideas about strategies to improve persistence.

Retention initiatives at Florida State University and Georgia State University are worth reviewing. For example, Florida State University increased retention by establishing a process based on detailed data and creating a team committed to student success and representative of units from across the campus who meet weekly to assess progress. The university’s aggressive retention initiative has produced results: Florida State reports first-year retention rates ranging from 91 percent to 93 percent for first-time-in-college students in cohorts between 2010 and 2014. Also using predictive analytics and interventions, Georgia State University tracks more than 30,000 students daily and sends alerts if they appear to be moving off track. With institutional Panther Retention Grants (micro grants to cover students’ unmet financial need), 5,300 students have returned to the classroom.

Full-time enrollment plays an important role in degree completion, especially for on-time completion. Oklahoma’s Promise students have consistently enrolled full-time at higher rates than non-Promise students—in recent years, at least 94 percent of Oklahoma’s Promise students enrolled full time, while full-time enrollment ranged from 84 percent to 88 percent among non-Promise students. That trend is also reflected in degree completion rates, with Promise students showing five-year completion rates of 41 percent compared to 35 percent for non-Promise students; six-year rates were 45 percent and 39 percent, respectively.

College remediation rates for non-Promise students rose slightly from 39 percent in 2015 to 41 percent in 2016, somewhat higher than for Oklahoma’s Promise students at close to 39 percent in 2016. Given the probability that Promise students may have come from weaker elementary and middle school academic backgrounds, this minor difference in remediation rates illustrates how effective the Program’s high school curricular requirements are in helping Oklahoma’s Promise students prepare better before they leave high school. Concurrent courses are an additional option to further strengthen Promise students’ preparation for entry-level college courses while they are still in high school.

Oklahoma is in the initial cohort of Complete College America’s Scaling Corequisite Initiative to increase the state’s and institutions’ scaling corequisite academic support. This initiative is central to the Promise program’s goals of increasing college completion numbers. A university interviewee commented on the institution’s positive experience with corequisite courses, especially in the math area. With implementation of this initiative underway, Promise students in public institutions should see a significant benefit in retention and success rates.

Employment in the state after degree completion. Keeping as many college graduates in Oklahoma to support economic development and workforce needs is a major state objective. In 2014-15, one year after graduation, Oklahoma’s Promise graduates were employed in Oklahoma at a higher rate (88.5 percent) than all Oklahoma resident graduates (85.2 percent).

Oklahoma’s Promise outcomes have consistently provided evidence supporting the program’s goal to encourage students with limited financial resources to aspire for college, prepare academically in high school, and earn college degrees. Performance, persistence, and completion data document the success of the program in supporting low-income students as they prepare to leave high school and move on to college. Key measures—including high school academic performance of participants, college-going rates, college academic performance of participants, and employment in the state after degree completion—reveal that Promise students perform highly on most measures and surpass the performance of non-Promise students in most areas.

4. To what extent has program administration efficiently and effectively supported the program goals?

The State Regents’ office is responsible for administering Oklahoma’s Promise, which includes providing marketing and communication information as well as administration of program awards. As a statewide program, Oklahoma’s Promise encompasses public and private schools, colleges and universities, career technical centers, independent and for-profit institutions.

Marketing and Communication. To market and communicate information about Oklahoma’s Promise, statute requires OSRHE and the State Board of Education to develop, promote, and coordinate a public awareness program. Statute further specifies that “each school year, every 5th- through 9th-grade student in Oklahoma’s public and private schools, and students educated by other means and who are in the equivalent of the fifth through ninth grade shall be apprised, together with the parent, custodial parent, or guardian of the student, of the opportunity for access to higher learning under the Promise Program.”

To carry out this mandate, marketing and communication efforts must rely heavily on contacts in the schools. Language in Oklahoma’s Promise legislation calls for each public school district with 8th, 9th, or 10th grade classes to designate at least one counselor or teacher as the Promise program contact; private schools must identify at least one school official as a contact person. One school superintendent interviewed for this report attributed much of the program’s success in his schools to a counselor who strongly believed in the program and communicated well and constantly with students and parents. This example highlights the key role that school counselors play in promoting the program with students and their families.

Postsecondary institutions also must play a lead role in working with schools and communities to communicate Oklahoma’s Promise program benefits. An interviewee from a regional university said the institution had numerous activities underway in high schools with literature provided by the State Regents office. For the institution’s recruiters, Promise is at the forefront of their conversations with schools and students. He noted that the university conducts outreach specifically to Promise students because “their clock is ticking.” This individual also emphasized that students must be reached early, well before the junior and senior year of high school.

Promise program staff in the State Regents' office work directly with the State Board of Education to promote the program. The State Department of Education has a counselor network for Promise contacts, and both state agencies send materials to schools, coordinate a promotional campaign annually in late spring, and collaborate to ensure alignment across the core curriculum, graduation requirements and college admission requirements.

The State Regents' office is a key contact with local counselors as well as with parents and students. In one year alone, this office handled over 30,000 inquiries about the Promise program. In early fall, the State Regents office sends new posters and other material to schools with 8th, 9th, 10th graders and maintains an Oklahoma's Promise Facebook site year-round. Recent budget cuts have reduced operating funds for marketing to approximately \$55,000 a year, which allows the office to provide only social media activity. With a \$300,000 marketing budget in previous years, the State Regents provided more services and activities.

The enabling statute notes that another purpose of the program is to "establish and maintain a variety of support services whereby a broader range of the general student population of this state will be prepared for success in postsecondary endeavors." An important component of effective marketing and communication is OSRHE's Oklahoma's Promise website and the Oklahoma College Assistance Program web site. OSHRE offers extensive information in a user-friendly format organized for students, parents, educators and administrators; parallel web pages are available in Spanish. Within each group are subgroups that help readers reach the kind of information most relevant to their queries. Additionally, a list of frequently asked questions and videos help personalize the sites. Resources for schools include posters and fliers in both English and Spanish.

In addition to the online information and communications that OSHRE provides, participating colleges and universities may have personnel dedicated to work with Oklahoma's Promise students, targeted services for these students, and publications like frequently-asked questions that are easily accessible on the web. For example, Oklahoma State University offers a campus tour for Promise students and has featured several OSU Promise students in the university's magazine. Oklahoma City Community College provides a concise information sheet about the program. Close collaboration between the program administrative offices and other entities—the department of public instruction, the department of social services, higher education institutions, and community-based organizations—is a hallmark of successful efforts with statewide Promise programs.

Two emerging trends in the state's and the program's demographics have important implications for the Promise program. First, a population shift from rural to urban is well underway—Oklahoma's Promise high school graduates are increasingly coming from urban areas. In 2009, 63 percent of Oklahoma's Promise high school graduates were from rural areas; that proportion had dropped to 54 percent by 2017. Consequently, many eligible students may be attending schools where their exposure to the program is different. Second, the decline in the percentage of the population earning less than \$50,000 has prompted policymakers to increase income-eligibility thresholds. This change will mean that a group of Oklahoma families will now be eligible that have not been in prior years. These trends may require different marketing strategies and more extensive and intensive program marketing efforts by K-12 and higher education.

Administration of Program Awards. The Associate Vice Chancellor for Scholarships & Grants at the State Regents office provides an effective point of contact for schools, families, students and others. Having this senior-level position within the Regents office sends a valuable signal about the importance of Oklahoma’s Promise. For accountability purposes, the office coordinates data collection and reporting by compiling and disseminating a wide range of information on the program, such as the program’s year-end report. The office’s web pages support access to annual reports and other programmatic information.

Marketing and communication activities as well as the administration of program awards are essential components of Oklahoma’s Promise, and the combined efforts of the State Regents and the State Department of Education have established a strong operational base for the program. Although the marketing and communications structure in place for the program is working, its effectiveness in recent years may be reduced due to limited financial support.

This review was unable to adequately gauge the effectiveness of other structural elements, particularly the central role of school counselors in identifying qualified students, promoting the program with students and their families, and following up as students move from fifth grade into middle and high school. A more intensive study with numerous interviews with school and State Department of Education personnel, as well as with students and families, is needed to determine how effective high school counselors have been at achieving buy-in and engagement from teachers, students and parents. Given the changing demographics in the state, it becomes even more important to ensure that the target populations are being well served. Most important, it not clear how many or what percentage of income-eligible students do not enroll in the program. Some percentage do not meet other program enrollment requirements—they are not residents, U.S. citizens, or lawfully present in the U.S.—while others may not know about the program, or they may not have their family’s support to join the program. Without better information on why more income-eligible students do not enroll in the program, it is very difficult to increase the percentage who do enroll.

5. To what extent has a program award coordinated effectively and efficiently with other financial aid that a participating student may receive?

The financial support that Oklahoma’s Promise provides for tuition expenses is a critical part of a student’s overall cost of attendance. Because undergraduate students also face mandatory fees as well as other costs of attendance, for low-income students it is especially important that other financial aid — such as Pell Grants and additional state and institutional aid — help cover these expenses.

Recent cost-of-attendance data help illustrate the importance of the Promise program. In 2016-17, the average annual Promise scholarship for students at research universities was \$4,469; non-tuition costs represented \$14,739 or 76 percent of the average cost of attendance for full-time undergraduate resident students living on campus. At regional universities, the average annual Promise award was \$4,305; non-tuition expenses accounted for 64 percent (\$8,901) of the average cost of attendance. For community colleges students, the average annual scholarship

was \$1,842, while non-tuition costs at community colleges accounted for \$8,342 or 74 percent of the cost of attendance.

Close and timely coordination with other financial aid that a student may receive plays a key role in retention and completion. One source of additional financial aid comes from coordination between Promise awards and other state financial aid programs, especially those that are means tested such as Oklahoma's Tuition Assistance Grant for students at eligible Oklahoma institutions (including technology centers), and the Tuition Equalization Grant for eligible students at Oklahoma non-for-profit, private or independent institutions.

OSRHE reports that some Promise students receive additional financial aid from their institution or its foundation to offset attendance costs; these efforts represent an important piece of coordinated efforts to benefit Oklahoma's Promise students. During FY16, 34 percent of Promise students also received an institution tuition waiver and 39 percent received an institutionally-funded scholarship or grant or one funded by an institution foundation. Oklahoma's Promise students may have received an award from more than one of these categories. These data suggest that nearly two-thirds of Promise students did not receive aid from these sources.

The Regents' *FY 2016-17 Tuition Impact Analysis Report* provides several examples of how institutions offer additional financial support to Oklahoma's Promise students. For example, a program at Rose State College will pay the fees for any Promise student who does not have another source of financial aid to cover these expenses. Rogers State University's Hillcat Promise ensures that students receive funding to cover tuition, mandatory fees, and up to \$1,000 annually to help pay for other expenses such as books and housing. Oklahoma's Promise students may also receive grant and scholarship aid from community-based foundations or from private groups or other entities, but this information is not available.

Colleges and universities are faced with difficult decisions on how to award their institutional aid, and they are often reluctant to disclose how these funds are distributed. These decisions often play out in awards used to recruit new students versus awards to retain enrolled students from one year to the next. The implications may be different when recruiting Oklahoma's Promise students than they are for students who enroll with strong academic backgrounds and high secondary school GPAs. Since receiving institutional aid is often the only way low-income students can remain enrolled, ensuring that Promise recipients are a top priority in the distribution of institutional aid would be a significant investment in their success.

In summary, while an in-depth analysis of how Oklahoma's Promise awards have been coordinated with other financial aid was not possible in the scope of this report, information available from the OSRHE staff and interviews with staff and institutional representatives suggest that multiple efforts are in place to support Oklahoma's Promise students when additional financial aid is needed to cover costs of attendance. As described above, opportunities for this assistance are available through other state financial aid programs and from individual institutional programs. Although information on the effectiveness of these efforts in retaining students to graduation and the amounts provided through these supplemental sources has not been quantified, OSRHE reports that many institutions continue to help students discover all sources of available assistance and are committed to assisting students so that no student eligible for admission will be denied access because of the cost of attendance.

6. Findings, Observations and Recommendations

For this review of Oklahoma’s Promise, the Southern Regional Education Board was charged with evaluating the program’s effectiveness in meeting program and State System goals, program structure, outcomes, administration and collaboration with other financial aid awards. The breadth and complexity of the program—covering students from fifth grade through college completion—is considerable, and the program’s importance to the people and the businesses of Oklahoma is significant. Oklahoma clearly acts on the understanding that supporting students from low-income families to prepare for, enter, and complete college is imperative.

Overall, SREB found Oklahoma’s Promise to be a sound and effective example of how a state can invest valuable resources in its students and see a strong return on that investment. The following observations and recommendations are offered as additional opportunities to improve on a very successful and unique statewide financial assistance program for students from low-income families. SREB thanks Chancellor Glen Johnson, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, and his staff, notably Mr. Bryce Fair, Associate Vice Chancellor for Scholarships and Grants, for their time and for providing information and insights on the program. SREB also expresses its appreciation to those individuals who consented to telephone interviews.

Recommendations:

- 1. The state should continue to support Oklahoma’s Promise at a level where all eligible students are served.** The success of the Promise program over a quarter of a century has created an opportunity for income-eligible families to receive state financial assistance if their children prepare academically and meet conduct requirements. The Oklahoma legislature has generously funded the program so that all eligible students have been awarded every year, and the program’s return on investment is documented through the performance of Promise students as they complete high school, continue their postsecondary studies, and enter the workforce. The benefits to the students, their families, the state, and its businesses generated by this program make it one of the premier student support initiatives in the nation.
- 2. In Oklahoma’s Promise Year-End Report and other relevant publications, the State Regents should explain how the program contributes to achievement of the State Regents’ educational attainment goal.** It is impressive that Oklahoma’s Promise students earned at least 16 percent of associate and baccalaureate degrees awarded in recent years. Clearly, the Promise Program is making a significant impact on increasing college completion rates, achieving the educational attainment goal, and encouraging students from limited financial resources to aspire to go to college and prepare themselves academically to be successful. As a group, Oklahoma’s Promise students outperform non-Promise students on nearly every measure from high school through college and into the Oklahoma workforce and have advanced both the program goal and the State Regents’ completion goal.

- 3. To increase the percentage of income-eligible students who enroll in Oklahoma’s Promise by 10th grade, the State Regents should strengthen current activities that have demonstrated good results and pursue additional promising strategies.** The success of the Promise program underscores the importance of attracting as many students in the target population as possible. Currently, OSRHE estimates that approximately half of financially-eligible students enrolled in Oklahoma’s Promise in the 2017 graduating class. One option is recommended by the Task Force on the Future of Higher Education: that State Regents should develop enhanced marketing strategies for OKcollegestart.org. Developing innovative and comprehensive initiatives with the state’s business sector may also produce effective strategies to reach and engage parents and their employers while broadening understanding and support of the program.

Additionally, the State Regents might consider establishing a special group, such as a Promise Partners team, in school districts with higher numbers of potentially eligible students who do not participate. A Promise team would include coordinators from area postsecondary institutions, Promise students in college and high school, designated school contacts, and representatives from relevant community-based organizations and businesses. The charge to local Promise teams might include frequent and more intensive outreach to eligible families with children in elementary school and middle grades, as well as mentoring and advising for students who enroll in the program in middle grades and early high school to support persistence and completion of program requirements prior to high school graduation. State funding, perhaps matched by business groups, would provide a resource base for this effort.

The recommendation of the Task Force on the Future of Higher Education for funding to implement predictive analytics on a systemwide basis would inform the Promise Program as well. When combined with a comprehensive data pipeline across K-12 and postsecondary education as suggested by the Task Force, predictive analytics can “greatly enhance the ability to determine factors that predict student success.”

- 4. The State Regents and the State Department of Education should conduct a study of the effectiveness of current marketing and administrative activities for Oklahoma’s Promise.** As noted previously, roughly half of financially-eligible students were enrolled in the program’s 2017 graduating class. Little is known to explain why more income-eligible students do not enroll. A joint study would help the state agencies understand to what extent the target student and family population identified in statute are aware of the program and if administrative components such as school contacts, teacher engagement in promoting the program, and participation by postsecondary institutions are effective. It also is important to understand how student enrollments are affected by insufficient resources to provide adequate marketing of the Promise program. Family awareness of the program when their children are in elementary and middle school is essential. While there are many reasons why income-eligible families decide not to take advantage of the program, lack of knowledge that the program exists may be a chief reason.

The increase in income-eligibility thresholds over the next several years will mean that a different group of Oklahoma families will now be eligible that have not been in prior years. Additionally, Promise high school graduates are increasingly coming from urban areas. In 2009, 63 percent of Oklahoma’s Promise high school graduates were from rural areas; that proportion had dropped to 54 percent by 2017. This population shift, together with the higher income thresholds, are important changes that will require more extensive and intensive program marketing efforts by K-12 and higher education.

- 5. The State Regents, in collaboration with postsecondary institutions participating in the Oklahoma’s Promise program, should conduct a study of students who enroll in college but do not persist to identify causes and make recommendations on how to increase the college completion rates of these students.** Many signs of progress among Oklahoma’s Promise students are strong: college-going rates of Promise students who complete program requirements are very high — nearly double that of non-Promise students; their freshman GPA of at least 2.0 is also high; freshman-to-sophomore persistence rates are well above non-Promise student persistence rates; and full-time enrollment is well over 90 percent. However, five-year completion rates are at 41 percent, with six-year completion rates at 45 percent, and there does not appear to be a comprehensive effort to collect data at the institutional level on Promise recipients who leave the institution. Since the Oklahoma’s Promise award is valid for five years, it would be instructive to have a more complete understanding of why Promise students do not make it to completion within five years. A study of this nature would greatly benefit from the data pipeline recommended by the Task Force on the Future of Higher Education. As the Task Force noted, “The ability to link student level K-12 and postsecondary data would greatly enhance the ability to determine factors that predict student success.”

- 6. The State Regents and the State Department of Education should promote concurrent enrollment for Oklahoma’s Promise students who are in their senior year of high school.** The percentage of Promise students completing program requirements before high school graduation is at an all-time high of nearly 72 percent, and increasing the use of concurrent enrollment by Oklahoma’s Promise students has the potential of moving this percentage higher. Current data suggest that Promise students who qualify for the scholarship are more likely than other students to take concurrent enrollment classes. Among all students in the high school graduating class of 2016, 36 percent of Promise students who qualified for the scholarship took at least one concurrent enrollment course; in comparison, 15 percent of all other students in that graduating class took a concurrent enrollment course (including those students who were not eligible to participate in the program and those who were enrolled in the program but did not qualify for the scholarship). Similar findings were reported for the class of 2015.

Successful completion of concurrent courses may help Promise students by improving their retention to graduation in high school, encouraging them to take college-level courses before they move on to college, and possibly saving them money on tuition expenses in college. Oklahoma’s concurrent enrollment tuition waiver program has a proven track record. Strengthening the program with full funding as recommended by the

Task Force on the Future of Higher Education would be good for Oklahoma’s Promise students, and it would require high school teachers and counselors as well as postsecondary advisors and faculty working together to encourage Oklahoma’s Promise students to take advantage of concurrent enrollment courses. Because concurrent enrollment is designed for students while they are finishing high school, funds from Oklahoma’s Promise program should not be used to support Promise students taking these courses. Additionally, the Task Force on the Future of Higher Education recommends that the State Regents “continue to work with the Oklahoma State Department of Education to develop a robust, comprehensive data pipeline” in order to know how Oklahoma’s Promise students currently use concurrent enrollment and where additional enrollment is advisable.

7. **The State Regents, in collaboration with participating postsecondary institutions, should report annually on all types and amounts of financial aid that Oklahoma’s Promise students receive.** In addition to the state awards to Promise students, many institutions draw on their institutional financial aid and other sources to supplement the state award. Reporting also should include the level and amount of loans that Oklahoma’s Promise students accumulate during enrollment. Loan levels and amounts may help the State Regents, policymakers, and institutions better understand the extent to which the Promise award, and other aid students receive, covers the cost of attendance, and when and how loans may be impacting completion rates. The State Regents should use student-level financial aid data now being collected to analyze the extent of total financial aid that Promise students receive. Those institutions that invest their financial aid resources in need-based aid to support Oklahoma’s Promise students should be recognized for their commitment. All institutions with Promise recipients should consider prioritizing their institutional aid awards so that Promise students have sufficient funds to cover, at a minimum, their cost of attendance.