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Early Commitment Financial Aid Programs: Promises, Practices, and Policies

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Pathways to College Network

Student financial assistance has long been a means to promote access to postsecondary education and attainment of college degrees. Numerous types of financial aid programs have proliferated over the years, including a relatively new concept that specifically targets high-risk, low-income students, focusing not just on getting them to go to college but also increasing the chance of their earning a degree. "Early commitment" financial aid programs are designed to provide economically disadvantaged students in middle school and early high school with a guarantee of financial aid for postsecondary education if they meet certain requirements, including successful completion of a rigorous college-prep curriculum. Since affordability and academic preparation are considered the greatest barriers to higher education for low-income students, early commitment initiatives seek to provide a solution to both problems. This paper looks at different types of early commitment programs, summarizes relevant research, and suggests guidelines for future programs. Finally, this paper suggests a few guidelines for state leaders considering new early commitment programs, based on existing models and available research: (1) "Be clear about program goals and expectations" to ensure the program design clearly reflects the three core criteria suggested earlier; (2) "Consider linking early notification and qualification" for other federal programs, such as Medicaid or free and reduced-fee school lunch programs, to establish reliable eligibility; (3) "Provide for fiscal sustainability" by forecasting future demand and persistence; (4) "Require periodic assessment" to increase understanding of a program's impact; (5) "Invest in support and outreach programs," including academic and general college preparation, marketing, parent participation, and other support services; and (6) "Explore public-private partnerships" as a means of co-sponsorship of initiatives by government, business, foundations, and communities. Appended are: (1) Program Pledges or Requirements; (2) Selected Program Profiles from the Pathways to College Network. (Contains 54 endnotes.)

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