

# Yes, You can Afford College

## Cascade Connections by Dr. Karin Edwards



When someone from an under-represented background is considering whether to attend college, a number of factors come to bear on that decision. Am I prepared for college? Are there people like me? Will I feel welcomed and supported? Will I have enough time to focus on my studies? Can I balance college with all of my other responsibilities?

And, most importantly, can I afford it?

Fortunately for us here in Oregon, we have taken steps to ensure that the answer to that last question is "yes." When Gov. Kate Brown signed the Oregon Promise into law in 2015, it effectively removed cost as a barrier to entry into higher education. Any student who qualifies for the Oregon Promise can attend most in-state community colleges tuition-free.

Unfortunately, though, too few students of color are taking advantage of this promise.

Of the more than 7,000 Oregonians who received Oregon Promise funds for the 2016-17 academic year, only 88 were African American (1.3 percent of the total); 68 were of Native American descent (1.0 percent); and 277 were Asian American (3.9 percent). All three of these groups are represented in Oregon Promise in smaller proportions than in the general population. In fact, among all communities of color, only Hispanics and self-identified multiracial people participated in the program at rates surpassing their portion of the general population.

For a program designed specifically to help people from disadvantaged populations, this is a problem.

There are likely a host of reasons why more people of color aren't taking advantage of this opportunity – too many for me to address in this column. But whatever the reason, the answer is the same: If you qualify for the program, sign up, get registered for classes, and start your journey into higher education. It's that simple.

Now, you may have heard that the state Legislature wasn't able to fully fund the Oregon Promise during the recent legislative session – and that's true. The likely result will be that program grants won't be available to students from wealthier families, but for most students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, that won't be a problem.

**You're eligible for the Oregon Promise if you meet the following criteria:**

- Be a recent Oregon high school graduate or GED recipient
- Document a 2.5 cumulative high school GPA or higher; or a GED score of 145 or higher on each test
- Plan to attend at least half-time at an Oregon community college within 6 months of high school graduation or GED completion
- Be an Oregon resident for at least 12 months prior to attendance
- File a FAFSA or ORSAA application and list at least one Ore-

gon community college

- Have no more than 90 college credits completed or attempted

Taking part in Oregon Promise is simple. But it's one thing to discuss attending college in the abstract, and quite another to connect college – and the Oregon Promise -- with a gainful career. Take Portland Community College's Welding Technology Program, based out of the college's Swan Island Trades Center, for example. In two years, a student can earn an Associate of Applied Science degree in Welding Technology; and in less than one year, a student can attain a certification in general welding, flux-core arc welding, gas metal arc welding, gas tungsten arc welding, pipe welding, or shielded metal arc welding.

Under the Oregon Promise, all of these outcomes are available to qualified students tuition-free. And what does this mean to a student's future? The Oregon Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the state is in the midst of a welding job boom, with the number of welder positions expected to be 15 percent higher by 2020 than it was in 2010.

That's a gainful career. That's a living-wage occupation. That's an incredibly versatile skill set that someone could put to work virtually anywhere. And it doesn't stop at welding. PCC has literally dozens of programs that can prepare you for a good career, or help you on your way to a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, or even more.

That's the Oregon Promise, and that's how PCC can help make it a reality. I encourage more students of color to take advantage of this opportunity and take the State of Oregon up on its promise.

*Dr. Karin Edwards is president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus. To learn more about the Oregon Promise program, visit [oregonstudentaid.gov](http://oregonstudentaid.gov). To learn more about PCC, visit [pcc.edu](http://pcc.edu).*



**Career Connections** – Congratulations to Portland's own Gabriel Romero, Jennifer Truong, Kelly Han, Laloni Wilson, and Peter Za, chosen for Bank of America's Student Leaders eight-week, paid internship program, a program which recognizes community-minded high school students and connects them to employment, professional development and service opportunities.

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