
Local Free Community College Plans May Be Template for U.S.

CHICAGO — An economic engine. A jumpstart for lower-income students. A partnership with businesses to groom a workforce. The idea of free community college has been touted as all these, by President Barack Obama, Democratic presidential candidates, and some Republicans.

The idea is to curb student debt and boost employment by removing cost barriers. Educators are split on its merits, with some worrying the push could divert students away from four-year schools. And some proposals could cost taxpayers tens of billions of dollars, and may still leave students with debt.

But thousands of high school graduates have just started community college for free, with the first batch enrolled in independent first-year programs in Tennessee, Chicago and soon Oregon doing so under different price tags and philosophies — offering templates of how a federal program might look and potential glitches.

"My family wasn't going to be able to support me financially," said 19-year-old aspiring doctor Michelle Rodriguez, who's taking classes for free in Chicago after concluding that even with in-state tuition and a scholarship a state university would be tough. "I'm the oldest. I'm the first generation to go to college."

Tennessee is at the forefront, with over 15,000 students enrolled in what's characterized as a jobs program. Chicago has just under 1,000 recent graduates in its City Colleges plan, with a push toward getting students into four-year schools at a discount. Oregon is accepting applications for next fall, with as many as 10,000 applicants expected. Other states are watching and considering their own programs.

Cost is bound to be a contentious issue, especially with strapped state and municipal budgets.

The Chicago's Star Scholarship — a signature Mayor Rahm Emanuel initiative — is the most generous. Beyond tuition, it picks up books and transportation. "All I have to worry about is ordering my books on time, getting my homework on time and studying," Rodriguez said. The price tops $3 million for the inaugural class.

Tennessee, which this year relies on roughly $12 million from lottery funds, is a "last dollar program" — paying what federal aid doesn't cover, with an average of $1,165 a person. Related costs are up to students. For now, Oregon has set aside $10 million, and will cover up to the average tuition of $3,500 annually per student.

Obama has floated a $60 billion nationwide plan calling for two years of free community college available to most anyone with a family income under $200,000 who can keep a 2.5 grade point average.

Republicans criticized the cost, and at least one presidential candidate, New Jersey Gov. Chris

Christie, has said it's a bad concept. But Republican Jeb Bush likes the general idea and has supported Tennessee Promise. Democrats Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders both have proposed affordable college plans, and Sanders has introduced legislation to make four-year public universities free.

Using public dollars for such programs is relatively new. Organizers studied plans utilizing private dollars as a model. Graduates from Kalamazoo, Michigan, have had free tuition available at some public colleges for a decade. Philanthropists have run a similar Knoxville, Tennessee, fund since 2008.

Still, Democratic state Sen. Mark Hass, who pushed the Oregon Promise, had a hard time convincing his own party of benefits. He went to the economics.

"To make a business case out of it, you look at the social costs that some of those people would likely incur on the way to poverty," he said. "A year of community college is a lot less than a lifetime on food stamps."

GOP-led Tennessee, which has all 13 of its community colleges participating, saw an 18 percent enrollment bump at technical colleges, according to Mike Krause, executive director of Tennessee Promise.

"This is a jobs conversation," he said.

With most students in Tennessee and Chicago just finishing their first semesters, it's early for data on dropouts, higher degrees or job placement. Education experts, though, say the Tennessee and Oregon models could still leave students with debt.

"Students from low-income families, even when getting their tuition paid for, still have substantial shares of their cost of attendance to cover," said Debbie Cochrane, research director at the nonprofit Institute for College Access & Success. "They're not borrowing for tuition. They're borrowing for costs beyond tuition."

That organization says 69 percent of 2014 college graduates left school with outstanding student loans, which averaged $28,950.

Octavia Coaks, an 18-year-old in Chicago, said she feels lucky that her parents, a nursing assistant and railroad engineer, don't have to borrow more.

"I have a sister in college, they're (already) taking out loans. I don't want to put that kind of burden on them," said Coaks, who wants to study forensic science.

Setting the qualification parameters is one way to define the program. Unlike Obama's plan, the state and Chicago programs are limited to recent graduates.

Tennessee has no grade requirement. Oregon will require a 2.5 average. Chicago requires a 3.0 GPA.

City Colleges of Chicago Chancellor Cheryl Hyman said that level is a signal students "have the persistence and dedication to their studies needed to succeed in college."

Some researchers worry the program could divert students, at least initially, from four-year schools.

"Typically, students who have a 3.0 are already going to go to college," said Sara Goldrick-Rab, a

University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who studies such programs. “It doesn’t usually change who goes to college, it might change where they go.”

But many in the Chicago program say they’re trying to complete general requirements and then transfer. A dozen Chicago-area colleges say they’ll offer scholarships to Star Scholars. Chicago graduate Oscar Sanchez, 18, says he’s inspired by his older classmates in community college.

“If they’re putting that much effort, why can’t I?” he said.

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