

# THE MORAL LIBERAL

## Entitlement Promise in SOTU Speech

March 18, 2015

In his annual State of the Union address, President Barack Obama announced a new federal program called “America’s College Promise.” It is a guarantee to provide students with a tuition-free two-year college education at community or “junior” colleges across the nation. The White House estimates it could cost \$60 billion over ten years. The main means of paying for the new entitlement seems to be tax increases.

Nine million students could be expected to receive a free ride if this plan were to get through Congress. Individual states would be required to provide about one-quarter of the funds for student tuition.

### Handouts Result in High Prices & Low Standards

Heritage Foundation Fellow in Education Lindsey Burke says the America’s College Promise “proposal will serve as little more than a federal handout to the community college system.” She points out that community colleges could readily raise tuition once it is covered by taxpayers. Federal loans and grants to students are already proven to be one reason that the price of a college education has risen so dramatically. America’s College Promise will likely result in higher prices at community colleges.

Burke suggests, “Allow markets in higher education to work by limiting federal subsidies instead of increasing them, and costs will fall for students attending colleges of all types.” (DailySignal.com, 1-9-15)

Sam Houston State University professor of education Dr. D. Patrick Saxon is worried that the “massive amounts of federal dollars at stake” will cause lowered expectations of students. He says:

Language buried in the ‘Building High Quality Community Colleges’ section of the WhiteHouse.gov briefing specifies that high graduation rates are a requirement for a particular type of eligible program. And if the government wants high graduation rates, we might expect that there will be college administrators with palms wide open asking ‘How high?’

Saxon continues, “The pressure to graduate students would be placed squarely at odds with instructors’ commitments to maintain course quality, academic rigor, and teaching standards.” (HechingerReport.org, 1-22-15)

## **Is Community College the Answer?**

Students who graduate from community colleges earn higher wages than those with just a high school diploma, but one goal of two-year colleges should be to increase the number of those who go on to complete a four-year degree.

The Cato Institute reports that: “According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, only 20% of community college students transfer to four-year schools, and only 72% of those will have finished or remained enrolled four years later. So, from what we can tell, we are looking at completion for just around 34% of community college students.”

## **Who is Harmed?**

*Education Week* indicates that funding for America’s College Promise program will come from “raising the top capital gains tax, hiking the amount of inherited money subject to taxes, and placing new fees on financial institutions.” (1-20-15) Taxpayers weren’t asked if they wanted to pay for other people’s children to attend college, but income redistribution would support this program.

Another part of the administration’s funding plan was to punish those parents who have been responsible and anticipated college expenses by contributing to 529 Education Plans for their children. Plan withdrawals are currently tax-free when used for education expenses, but the Obama administration proposed to tax withdrawals from 529 accounts. That money would have been used to pay tuition for students whose parents didn’t plan ahead. Outrage over this strategy seems to have put a halt to the plan this time, but this is just the sort of punishment for self-sufficiency that progressives believe is “fair.”

Truly low-income parents are not able to set aside for college, but they often have college expenses paid. As Lindsey Burke states, “And all of this spending [on America’s College Promise] is unlikely to help low-income students, who already have access to Pell Grants, which likely cover the bulk of their tuition obligations at community colleges.” (Watchdog.org, 1-20-15)

In his speech, Obama said the new federal program aims to “lower the cost of community college — to zero.” There is no clarification of qualifications students need beyond a “C” GPA. No details about accountability, management of the program, or means to measure outcomes were offered in the speech or by White House press releases. Those who ask for such details and a way to ensure this program doesn’t result in skyrocketing community college tuition will surely be accused of wanting to deny a college education to students.

## **Tennessee’s Program is Funded**

The federal America’s College Promise plan is loosely based on the “Tennessee Promise Scholarship Program.” One big difference is that Tennessee has a plan in place to pay for their

program. The aim of the Tennessee Promise is to increase the percentage of state residents with a two-year degree from 30% percent to 55% by 2025. It is funded by a \$360 million endowment from state lottery reserves. Federal money is also used because 56% of the state's community college students receive Pell Grants, averaging \$3,300, leaving only about a \$500 difference for the state to make up for those students. (Watchdog.org, 1-20-15)

### **The Common Core Connection**

Lindsey Burke says that the administration's College Promise proposal "is likely to produce a six-year high school system by removing responsibility from high schools to prepare students to graduate by 12th grade, knowing a 'grade 13' and a 'grade 14' — paid for by taxpayers — await students." She continues, "In fact, the president said as much: 'I want to spread that idea all across America, so that two years of college becomes as free and universal in America as high school is today.'"

The administration's amped up funneling of students into community colleges may be an attempt to cover up the failure of Common Core to educate K-12 students. Jane Robbins and Emmett McGroarty, from the American Principles Project, say America's College Promise may be an early attempt to mask Common Core deficiencies because the problems will be less apparent at two-year colleges.

Jason Zimba, who drafted the Common Core math standards, admitted in 2010 that the standards were not designed to help students succeed in "the colleges their parents aspire to" and instead would prepare them only for "nonselective colleges."

To Robbins and McGroarty, it makes sense that the administration would offer free admission to community colleges. They say, "The next round of the deception game seems to be discouraging students from attending four-year universities, where their academic shortcomings would be more glaring." They believe that community colleges may hide Common Core's failures. They believe Common Core is inadequate, "especially [for] students from families of modest means who couldn't pay for 12 years of tutoring to supplement Common Core." (DailyCaller.com, 1-22-15)

Lindsey Burke concludes:

The president's proposal is another step toward the White House's goal of a 'cradle-to-career' education system, starting with free preschool and now free community college. But the proposal most certainly won't be 'free' for taxpayers, and will continue to further drive-up the cost of higher education.