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Obama proposes tuition free education at community colleges

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Proclaiming that "the United States is coming back," President Obama unveiled an ambitious proposal Friday that would allow millions of students to get a community college education tuition-free.

The president's speech, while welcomed by several local community college leaders and students as well as some national education advocates, provided few details about how the program would work, including how it would be funded. Obama said he would submit the idea to Congress in coming weeks as part of his new budget.

"Opening the door of higher education shouldn't be a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. It is an American issue," Obama said Friday at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tenn.

"It sounds like a potentially great plan for all students seeking a degree," said Rana Elmehadem, a pre-pharmacy student at Camden County College.

Political and education observers, however, predicted that the administration could have a tough time winning support in the Republican-controlled Congress for a program a White House official said would cost \$60 billion over 10 years.

And many had big questions on funding, including the impact on Pell grants, a major source of aid for low-income students.

"Everybody's wondering how we're going to pay [for Obama's proposal] and what the reception will be on the part of the Republicans, but any help our students could get would be very welcome," said Jerry Parker, president of Delaware Community College, which also serves Chester County.

The White House official said Friday evening that the federal portion of the scholarship would be funding separate from Pell grants. Students would still be able to apply for Pell grants for other expenses, the official said.

Some groups, such as the conservative Manhattan Institute and the libertarian Cato Institute, questioned the value of bolstering community college enrollment given the schools' low completion rates, an issue many of the colleges acknowledge and are working to address.

Obama's proposed "America's College Promise" is a nod to Tennessee Promise, a program that pays for community college tuition in that state.

Closer to home, the NJ STARS program pays community college tuition for high-performing state high school graduates who can prove they are ready for college.

According to information provided by the White House, students in the president's proposed program - an estimated nine million - would have to attend school at least half time, maintain at least a 2.5 grade-point average, and continue to make progress toward earning their degree. There was no mention of income limitations.

The federal government would pay three-quarters of the cost for academic or qualified occupational training programs, and participating states would pick up the balance.

"Two years of college would become as free and universal as high school is today," Obama said in his speech.

That part of the proposal was finding support locally.

"It's a good way to help kids get started with college," said Matthew Monroe, 21, a biology student at Atlantic Cape Community College. "It can be pricey."

"The whole thing sounds great to me," said fellow student Valencia Miller, 22, who hopes to become a dental hygienist. "I can use all the help I can."

Lisbeth Perez, 21, a biology student, said: "It's expensive and not easy to scrape the money together."

Local community college presidents said they believed such a program would increase access to higher education.

"I think this opens up [college] to an entirely new population of students who otherwise would not have considered going to college," said Donald "Guy" Generals Jr., president of Community College of Philadelphia.

More than 3,000 students were unable to attend in the last year because they did not qualify for financial aid despite the relatively low tuition and fees of about \$2,555 per semester, he said.

Parker, of DCC, said that students were showing up in record numbers to register for the spring semester, but that "hundreds of students, maybe thousands," had to be turned away because they couldn't pay.

National Education Association president Lily Eskelsen Garcia applauded the proposal's intent to make college more affordable and said he hoped Congress could work with the administration on the program.

Josh Wyner, vice president and executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, voiced support of the proposal's call for accountability and performance on the part of state, colleges, and students.

Others, including officials with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, expressed reservations and called for further study of the proposal's impact on state colleges - institutions that also graduate students with associate's degrees - and whether this plan would yield the best results for low-income students.

Tom Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, said Obama's proposal focused attention on community colleges and invested in students. But he said it did not appear likely to help colleges work on changes needed to help students succeed. Among those are reducing the high percentages of community college students in remedial education and improving degree- and program-completion rates.

Over the last year, the 19 schools that make up the New Jersey Council of County Colleges and high schools around the state have been working on a pilot program to try to get more high school students so they will not require remedial classes in higher education.

The day of Obama's announcement, they were attending a conference about their efforts, which are continuing.

Raymond Yannuzzi, president of Camden County College and one of the conference participants, called Obama's proposal "definitely a good thing."