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Trump wants to eliminate federal funding for D.C. tuition aid program

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President Trump wants to cut all federal funding to a tuition aid initiative that helps D.C. residents attend college, putting the future of the popular D.C. Tuition Assistance Grant in jeopardy.

The federal government provides \$40 million for the program, which gives city students — who don't have access to a robust in-state university system — affordable college options. But the fiscal 2019 White House budget released Monday proposes to eliminate the program “because of a lack of a clear federal role for supporting the cost of higher education specifically for District residents.”

Proponents of the tuition program were incensed that Trump would seek to end a program that has helped 26,000 District students attend and graduate from college.

“DCTAG is a successful program that has worked for years to expand educational opportunities for our young people, and it is unfathomable that any leader working to build a safer, stronger and more competitive country would choose to cut a program like this rather than expanding it,” D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) said in a statement.

D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) said she is confident she can maintain full funding for the tuition assistance program.

Bowser urged all current award recipients and students in their final year of high school to continue to apply for the program this year. She noted that students who received an award for the 2017-2018 academic year will receive payments as usual.

“We will continue to work with Congresswoman Norton and Congressional appropriators to ensure full funding for DCTAG is included in the final FY2019 spending bill,” said Bowser, whose office has started the Twitter hashtag #SaveDCTAG.

Norton said in a statement that the two-year budget deal reached last week preempts the White House budget, rendering it “dead on arrival.” The District's only representative in Congress said she wants to assure D.C. parents and students that she does not believe they are in danger of losing funding for the tuition assistance program.

“DCTAG has been funded every year by Republican and Democratic Congresses alike and, unlike Trump this year, Republican presidents as well, since its creation,” Norton said. “This draconian and backward budget shows how out of touch this administration is with reality.”

Even before the White House budget, the 18-year-old program was at risk of losing some of its funding — but nothing quite as drastic as the latest proposal. In November, the Senate Appropriations Committee introduced a spending bill seeking to cut funding by one-fourth. The committee directed the U.S. Government Accountability Office to conduct a review of the program to assess trends in eligibility, enrollment, performance and outcome, and to consider other available resources for the program.

Senators complained that the program failed to live up to expectations because the college graduation rate among award recipients fell below the national average. About 51 percent of participants graduated within six years, compared with 60 percent of students nationwide, according to the Senate appropriations document.

The D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, which oversees the tuition program, says the most recent data show that nearly 56 percent of award recipients who entered college in 2007-2008 graduated within six years. The office said that number is higher than the overall six-year graduation rate for students from D.C. public high schools.

“It strikes me as an odd candidate to target for elimination,” said Neal McCluskey, director of the right-leaning Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute. “Surely there are targets far more ripe for elimination.”

Norton said she has been negotiating with appropriators to maintain the program’s \$40 million funding, an amount she has been able to secure for the past two fiscal years.

Congress spurned proposed cuts to the program in 2013, when the Obama administration considered sacrificing some of its budget.

Through the tuition program, tens of thousands of students have received \$350 million to enroll at 578 colleges. Students can receive as much as \$10,000 a year to attend public universities outside the city, or up to \$2,500 to enroll in a private college in the D.C. metro area or at any historically black college or university across the nation.

The grants are available to all District students — except high-income families — but student advocates say the money makes the biggest difference for low-income residents. The annual family income cap has shifted; it once was \$1 million but, in more recent years, has stood between \$750,000 and \$777,000.

The tuition assistance program has contended with some problems. A 2014 audit identified weak financial controls and management problems at the city agency that administers the program. At the time, officials in the superintendent’s office could not document or explain nearly \$10 million in expenses since 2004. They say the problems documented in the audit have been addressed.