



Free Community College Proposal Gets Thumbs-Up — at Least on Facebook

By Dian Schaffhauser

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President Obama chose a 9,700-student community college in Tennessee to make a dual proposal that he'll be taking to Congress in a couple of weeks: first, that students receive free community college; and second, that government help expand technical training programs by giving grants to those programs that show success.

Obama was joined at [Pellissippi State Community College](#) in Knoxville by Vice President Joe Biden as well as Jill Biden, who currently teaches as an adjunct English professor at [Northern Virginia Community College](#).

The choice of Tennessee as the site for the announcements wasn't coincidental. The state has been piloting a similar initiative, [Tennessee Promise](#), which will formally launch statewide in fall 2015. There, that program provides "last dollar" scholarships that pay tuition and fees not already covered by other funding and can be used at any of the state's 13 community colleges or 27 colleges of applied technology. Qualified students have to maintain a 2.0 grade point average and complete eight hours of community service during each term they're enrolled.

The White House idea is similar but without the volunteerism stipulation. The so-named "America's College Promise" will fund three-quarters of the average cost of community college for students who attend school at least half time, maintain a 2.5 GPA and show steady progress toward completing a program.

The colleges, for their part, will be expected to offer programs that will allow the student to transfer all credits to local four-year colleges and universities or job training with high graduation rates. Those schools must also adopt institutional reforms to improve their student outcomes.

The remaining funding is expected to come from state sources, the president said. "It's not a free lunch. But for those willing to do the work, and for states and local communities that want to be a part of this, it can be a game-changer."

"For millions of Americans, community colleges are essential pathways to the middle class because they're local, they're flexible. They work for people who work full-time. They work for parents who have to raise kids full-time. They work for folks who have gone as far as their skills will take them and want to earn new ones, but don't have the capacity to just suddenly go study for four years and not work. Community colleges work for veterans transitioning back into civilian life. Whether you're the first in your family to go to college, or coming back to school after many years away, community colleges find a place for you. And you can get a great education," the President said in his speech. "Community colleges should be free for those willing to work for it — because in America, a quality education cannot be a privilege that is reserved for a few. I think it's a right for everybody who's willing to work for it."

According to the White House, if all 50 states chose to implement the community college proposal, it could save a full-time student roughly \$3,800 in tuition each year on average and reach about nine million students.

Obama's proposed new "American Technical Training Fund" will help finance development and expansion of programs that meet several criteria: They have strong employer partnerships and offer work-based learning opportunities, provide accelerated training, and accommodate part-time work. Those programs could exist within current community colleges or other institutions. He said the program would start off by funding creation of up to 100 centers. Small grants would be applied to pilots; larger grants would be used to expand programs that have proven their effectiveness.

Initial response to the programs was positive — at least among the general public. A video on the [White House Facebook page](#) had received 300,000 "likes" in the first 24 hours.

"Free-tuition for all has the potential to alter not only postsecondary education participation rates but also postsecondary education program completion rates," said John Levin, a professor in the [Graduate School of Education](#) at the [University of California, Riverside](#). "The Obama graduation initiative will move forward if community college students can be relieved of economic hardships."

"The President's proposal represents an immense potential investment in community colleges and in the talent needed to drive economic growth and increase social mobility across the United States," added Josh Wyner, executive director of the [Aspen Institute College Excellence Program](#) and author of the book, [What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success](#). "At the same time, the proposal makes clear that states, community colleges and students themselves must do their part to ensure that the unprecedented access this proposal offers is not hollow — that the 9 million students who stand to benefit from free community college actually learn, graduate and attain the jobs and further education to which they aspire."

However, not everybody was favorable. Several public statements suggested that the program would turn into a government boondoggle rewarding a group of institutions that overall show poor outcomes.

"The completion data for community colleges simply don't justify the estimated \$34 billion price tag of this initiative," noted Neal McCluskey, associate director for the think tank [Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom](#).

"The President's plan is rooted in noble intentions. He wants to get more high-achieving students to take advantage of community colleges, a relatively cheap educational option, in order to bolster our workforce. It is certainly true that college-educated students do better than their non-college-educated peers," stated Judah Bellin, higher education researcher for nonprofit think tank [Manhattan Institute for Policy Research](#), in a statement. "However, making community college free for these students will likely have little to no impact on their success. Compared to every higher-education sector, community colleges exhibit the lowest graduation rates. Furthermore, only about 20 percent of community college students actually transfer to four-year institutions. It's not clear how simply making it easier for more students to attend these schools will improve outcomes."

Obama will formally make the proposals to Congress on January 20 as part of his annual State of the Union address.