



Obama's math doesn't add up on free tuition, critics say

By [Brian Hughes](#)

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President Obama's plan to provide free tuition to community college students has landed with a thud among number crunchers, who argue that overburdened states cannot afford to fund the White House idea.

As a political strategy, "free tuition" is as appealing a message as Obama could devise heading into his final two years in office. But when pressed on funding the measure, it gets messier for the White House.

Even if Obama had the backing of Republicans to spend \$60 billion in federal funds on the education program — he doesn't — the White House still would have a money problem.

States would be on the hook for \$20 billion over the next decade to send students to community college, even at a time when statehouses are funding a shrinking share of their higher education programs.

"I don't know how states would pay for this," said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. "The assumption is states are willing to shell out more money if they can get additional federal dollars. But they'll either have to raise taxes or slash spending somewhere else."

Obama predicts that up to 9 million Americans could attend community college without paying tuition, saving them \$3,800 a year.

Yet it took nearly 24 hours after Obama previewed the proposal for the White House to say [how much the program would cost](#). And the White House has yet to outline how the president would pay for the initiative, promising details when his budget comes out next month.

The rollout of the community college plan reminds many education observers of Obama's previous proposal for universal pre-school. The president framed that measure as one that would garner bipartisan support, but it died on Capitol Hill over funding doubts — the president wanted the plan paid for by higher cigarette taxes.

Obama's free tuition push is likely to suffer a similar fate in a Republican-controlled Congress.

The president insists his sales pitch is hardly radical, saying it mirrors the successful "Tennessee Promise" program in that state.

"We thought, why not just build on what works," Obama said in Knoxville Friday.

"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," he added.

The major difference is that Tennessee Promise is funded through lottery proceeds. No such funding mechanism at the federal level has bipartisan support.

"Make no mistake, the president is proposing yet another multi-billion dollar federal program that will compete with existing programs for limited taxpayer dollars," said Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee. "And the president forgot to mention those students and families facing higher college costs because many states are already stretched too thin."

Aside from cost concerns, there is also the question of whether the plan would be the best investment for bolstering higher education.

Roughly one in five first-time community college students complete a two-year degree within three years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Obama's defenders, however, argue that such statistics show precisely why the government should spend more money on community colleges.

"It engages the states, builds on the Pell program rather than undercuts it, and focuses on our economic needs for two-year degrees," said Sara Goldrick-Rab, a professor of educational policy and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "The president's proposal would be simpler, more transparent and quite likely more effective than today's complicated financial aid system."

Yet, detractors counter that Obama and his supporters are guilty of false advertising.

"It's way too good to be true, that you can just miraculously provide free community college," McCluskey said. "This is a huge cost for taxpayers to pick up. There's really nothing about this that is good."