



Over 60% of Americans back tuition-free college

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Tuition and fees at a four-year public university averaged \$9,410 this past academic year. Now a majority of Americans want to cut that price down to zero.

Sixty-two percent of Americans said that they support making public college tuition free for anyone who wants to attend, according to a survey by Bankrate, which polled 1,000 people in late July. The overall margin of sampling error was plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Tuition-free college was more popular with millennials than baby boomers. Seventy-seven percent of people ages 18 to 29 supported tuition-free college while roughly half of people 50 and older did.

"The older you are, the less likely you were to support it," said Steve Pounds, a Bankrate analyst.

Campaign issue

The rising cost of college has become a campaign issue this year.

Last month, Hillary Clinton unveiled a higher education plan that would eliminate tuition for families with incomes up to \$125,000 at in-state public colleges and universities. The Democratic Party presidential nominee borrowed heavily from the plan of her primary rival, Bernie Sanders, who wanted to make public college free for everyone.

Donald Trump said last week he will announce his plan for dealing with rising college costs this month.

Sam Clovis, policy director for Trump's campaign, rejected the idea that debt-free public college would be a part of that proposal. "How do you pay for that? It's absurd on its surface," Clovis told Inside Higher Ed in May.

Subsidies for low-income students

Even among people who oppose tuition-free public college, 1 in 4 said that it would be acceptable to offer that benefit to families who earn \$50,000 or less, according to the Bankrate survey.

"There is no such thing as 'free,'" said Neal McCluskey, director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. "What students don't pay in tuition for the education from which they benefit, someone else has to pay."

Low-income students receive more help from taxpayers to pay for college than higher-income students, according to a recent analysis by the Brookings Institution.

Whether tuition-free college becomes a reality, state governments are already spending more on public colleges and universities. State support for higher education is up 4.1 percent this year, according to the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University.

"The biggest challenge with state funding for higher education is not just increasing it, but making it consistent," said Ben Miller, senior director of post-secondary education at the liberal Center for American Progress Action Fund. State governments tend to support higher education when the economy is strong and cut back when the economy weakens, he said.