



Tuition-Free College Programs Are Just Getting Started

Momentum builds for state and local tuition-free programs, but concerns build too.

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March 23, 2017

Like many American high school seniors, Rynon Reyes is looking ahead to college with a mix of apprehension and excitement.

But there's one thing he doesn't have to worry about: tuition.

While their counterparts in most of the rest of the country are already facing the first of what will likely be an endless succession of bills for college, Reyes and his fellow students at Mission Hills High School in this city north of San Diego can get associate's degrees or certificates tuition-free, along with help paying for their textbooks.

"It's a great start" on his way to an eventual career as an orthopedic nurse, says Reyes in the guidance office of the sprawling high school, which is noisy with the sounds of band rehearsal from across a courtyard and batting practice on a baseball field bright beneath the southern California sun.

Having to pay for his entire education by himself, he says, "would have involved me starting off my life with debt."

Thought the idea of free university tuition died with the presidential candidacies of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton? In fact, away from the national spotlight, momentum continues to build and new programs are being launched, propelled by bipartisan public and private-sector support at the state and local levels.

More than 190 free-tuition programs have now begun in 40 states – so many that the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education has produced an interactive map of them. Most involve individual school districts teaming up with nearby colleges and universities and use public money, private contributions or a combination of support, and with varying income and academic requirements, the advocacy organization College Promise says.

"The idea for these free college-type programs started at the local level before percolating to the state level and then to the national level," says Brad Hershbein, an economist at the W.E. Upjohn

Institute for Employment Research who follows the issue. "It's basically gone back to where it started, back to the localities and the states."

Tennessee, Oregon and Minnesota already make community college free statewide for all or some students or in specific high-demand disciplines. The Republican and Democratic governors of three more – Arkansas, New York and Rhode Island – have proposed similar or even broader programs. In all, lawmakers in 23 states are considering free-college legislation, according to the Education Commission of the States.

"It shows it doesn't really take the federal government to make things happen," says Reyes, who as a soon-to-graduate high school student closely followed the discussion of free college during the presidential race.

The trend is likely to continue, predicts at least one observer with only the most pragmatic stake in it: the credit-rating agency Moody's.

Americans like the idea. In a poll conducted after the presidential election by Penn Schoen Berland for the Campaign for Free College Tuition, 73 percent said they favor state-level free-tuition programs for academically qualified students.

Martha Kanter, former U.S. undersecretary of education in the Obama administration and now executive director of The College Promise Campaign, largely credits Sanders.

"Bernie talked to the millennials," Kanter says. "Everyone who's burdened by debt realizes the cost escalation in just getting an education has got to stop."

But experts are warning from the sidelines that, in the complex world of higher education, sometimes even the seemingly best ideas come with unanticipated consequences.

As with the Clinton version of a free-tuition plan, for instance, they point out that wealthy students often stand to benefit – those who would have gone to college even without help. In Oregon, students from families whose earnings are in the top 40 percent got 60 percent of the free-tuition money, the state's Higher Education Coordinating Commission found.

Meanwhile, these observers say, the lowest-income students – already eligible for financial aid to pay for their tuition, but often derailed by other costs not covered by the free-tuition programs, such as food and housing – don't see much help.

That's a particular criticism of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's plan to offer free tuition at public universities to students from families with earnings of up to \$125,000. It wouldn't pay for room, board, fees and other expenses that, at the City University of New York, add an estimated \$10,000 or more a year to the \$6,330 tuition and, at the State University of New York, \$18,160 to the tuition of \$6,470.

"Sometimes books cost more than the course," says Georgina Vega, a student at Palomar College in San Marcos, where Reyes will go tuition-free for up to two years under a new program that debuts in the fall.

As for helping higher-income parents send their kids to school, says Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, "Society isn't gaining anything by paying for people to go to college who would have gone anyway."

While New York's program includes four-year universities, most others extend only to community colleges, encouraging more people to attend those institutions – which the experts point out are already thinly stretched and have much lower graduation rates than four-year public and private, nonprofit colleges and universities.

"There's such a stigma with community college," says Reyes, who gets top grades and has an internship at a hospital.

He experienced this when his high-achieving classmates heading off to four-year universities learned he would be going to a community college, since the free-tuition deal only applies there. "Oh, that's nice for you," they told him disdainfully.

There's some basis for this skepticism. While 69 percent of students at public four-year universities earn degrees within six years, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, only 42 percent of community college students do.

On the upside, say the experts, free tuition may encourage students to seek higher educations who might otherwise have been intimidated by the cost. But limiting it to community colleges encourages them to go to institutions where their chances of success are lower.

A Harvard study found that when Massachusetts offered top students scholarships to public universities, it drew them away from choosing better-funded private or out-of-state public institutions from which they would have been more likely to graduate.

Free college "is such a powerful marketing and messaging strategy to be able to get students who may not have been considering college at all, or who assumed that it was not affordable, to get them in the door," says Judith Scott-Clayton, an associate professor of economics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

But she says, "The low completion rates and relatively low transfer rates at community colleges have been a major source of frustration and concern."

In Tennessee, whose Republican governor pioneered the free community college idea, enrollment in community colleges immediately jumped after five years of declining, while public four-year university enrollment slipped. In Oregon, a free community college program that began in the fall also reversed a decline in community college enrollment, while enrollment at four-year universities dropped slightly.

Still, Kanter says, herself a former chancellor of a community college district in Arizona, community colleges are a good place to experiment with free tuition, at least at first.

"Because community colleges serve almost half of students in the country, they're the logical place to start," she says. "The community college program puts a stake in the ground, to just get more kids past high schools."

That's why Brandi Graham likes it. A classmate of Reyes at Mission Hills, she watched her older brother borrow for college and struggle to make up the difference when the loans were late.

"It's a relief," Graham says of knowing she won't have to pay tuition when she gets to Palomar in the fall.

One reason Moody's gave for predicting free tuition will continue to expand is that it's not only politically popular, but also cheaper than doing such things as increasing budgets for community colleges to provide more advising and support shown to improve graduation rates.

That's because most free-college programs pay only for the often narrow difference between the cost of tuition and the amount of money students already get in scholarships and other kinds of financial aid.

The Tennessee plan this year will cost \$25.3 million, or \$1,090 per student, Moody's estimates. Oregon this year allocated \$10 million, and has so far spent \$653 per student.

Lawmakers seem to have less appetite for the likely more expensive solution of allocating money to help students not only get to college, but through it, Scott-Clayton says.

"There's so much more political traction to free college as opposed to, let's raise funding for community colleges by 10 percent or let's add this many advisers or let's improve our policies so when people transfer their credits actually transfer," she says.

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There are other unexpected objections to free college. Even some students who could benefit from it worry it devalues their degrees. "I'm all for financial assistance, but I don't think that college should entirely be free," says one, Anthony Coad, who is studying computer science at Palomar and hopes to transfer to the University of Southern California. "That's an education I should have to work toward."

McCluskey agrees that students going to college without having to pay may take it less seriously. Research into online courses has found that success rates are higher for the ones that cost money than the ones that don't.

"When people see something that's inexpensive or free, they tend not to be as focused on getting through it," McCluskey says. "We ignore at great risk the importance of people paying for something."

Graduates with degrees also ultimately make more money than people without them, raising the question for some of why taxpayers should have to cover the cost.

In Germany, which has largely eliminated university tuition, a survey showed that half of respondents – when informed that graduates earn 40 percent more than people with only vocational educations – want to bring it back.

"It seems to me fundamentally unfair to say we are going to have someone else pay for you to go to college and then you can earn \$1 million more over your lifetime," McCluskey says. "It's especially unfair for taxpayers who didn't go to college."

Four-year public and private nonprofit colleges and universities also understandably object to the idea, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage. The presidents and provosts of the seven four-year public universities in Oregon have called for the money used for free tuition to be shifted instead into a state financial aid program that gives grants to low-income students go to any public university or college there.

Clinton's free-college plan, under which she proposed eliminating public university tuition nationwide for families with incomes of up to \$125,000, would have increased enrollment at community college and nonselective public universities by between 13 and 31 percent, an analysis by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce found. It said enrollment at private institutions would have fallen by between 7 and 15 percent.

Students who are older than the traditional college age of 18 to 24 also often are left out of these programs, mainly because of requirements based on high school graduation dates, recent grade-point averages and college entrance test scores.

At a time when the supply of high school graduates is falling, and national goals for increasing the number of adults with degrees cannot be met without getting more older Americans to go back to college, the Education Commission of the States found that 18 of the free-tuition policies proposed or enacted by states are restricted by age. (Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam has announced that free tuition there will be expanded to adults rather than only students who have just graduated from high school, starting in 2018.)

Free-college programs keep popping up regardless of the complications. California alone has more than three dozen free-tuition partnerships among community colleges and high schools, a third of them added in the last year, College Promise says. The mayor of San Francisco has separately announced that the city will provide free community college educations to any resident beginning next year.

Even though it came along too late for her to benefit, Madison Picotte, a communications major at Palomar College, is all for this idea.

Picotte pauses on her way to class across the campus, where modular classrooms and construction cranes surrounded by a sea of parking lots attest to breakneck growth.

"Everyone should have a chance to go to college if they want to go," she says.