

# PoliZette

## Cuomo Hints at 2020 Bid with Promises of Free Tuition

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New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has thrown in with the liberal wing of his party and declared he wants to make the Empire State's public colleges free for those coming from families who make \$125,000 or less annually.

In an unmistakable hint at future political ambitions, Cuomo made the proposal at LaGuardia Community College in Queens joined by Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, the former presidential candidate and hero of the progressive base.

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Cuomo's proposal, if implemented by a likely wary state legislature, may be the first of its kind in the nation.

Sanders made “free college” one of the main thrusts of his insurgent Democratic presidential campaign in 2016. Cuomo is now seen as a potential contender to grab the Democratic nomination in 2020 and take on President-Elect Donald Trump.

Cuomo, like Sanders, believes too many colleges — even publicly owned colleges and universities — could be unaffordable to students.

His proposal doesn't allow the one possible benefit to taxpayers — that it would lighten the taxpayer load by making other federal and state grants to students unnecessary. Cuomo said his plan, the Excelsior Scholarship, will supplement existing state and federal loan and grant programs.

That is not quite what Sanders called for.

Sanders said during his 2016 campaign that student loans were overburdening young graduates, and saddling them with a lifetime of debt. He called for free college at publicly owned colleges and universities.

Sanders' platform was to end all tuition at public colleges and universities; end federal "profits" on student loans; cut student-loan interest rates; allow refinancing of student loans at lower rates; have student aid at public colleges and universities meet 100 percent of students' needs; and pay for it all by taxing Wall Street's speculative investments.

In New York's case, the cost may simply be transferred to the taxpayers. New York taxpayers already spend \$1 billion for tuition assistance at approved colleges and universities. Those awards are capped at \$5,165 a year, according to the New York State Higher Education Services' website.

The cost shift could hurt students too, one higher-education expert told LifeZette on Tuesday.

"The idea is demented," said George Leef, director of research for the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy. "It merely shifts the costs and undermines the need for students to strive for whatever education they want."

Bearing some of the costs gives students and parents incentive to think about what is best for the students. Neal McCluskey, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the CATO Institute, said free tuition at public colleges gives incentives to people who may not want or need college, and simply may not know it yet.

McCluskey cited the six-year graduate rates at State University of New York schools. Only 65.7 percent of students graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years, according to SUNY.

At some SUNY branches, it's even lower. A 2013 state report found SUNY-Canton only had a 32.1 percent graduation rate within six years. At SUNY-Potsdam, the six-year graduation rate was 50.7 percent.

McCluskey said that shows that low or free tuition doesn't mean students will succeed.

"There is no evidence that it would be beneficial to send more students to colleges on the taxpayer dime," said McCluskey.

McCluskey said colleges and universities often raise tuition when they see the government providing assistance. But the college-cost complaints of the Left may be overblown. Writing for Forbes last September, Leef rebutted that idea that all colleges are unaffordable.

Leef noted that state-owned community colleges tend to be very affordable, usually with a simple and small Pell grant from the federal government.

"As for four-year institutions, there are many public schools where tuition remains quite affordable," Leef wrote. "The higher education market is like the restaurant market — there are options for all budgets. When people shop around for higher education, almost no one is completely priced out."

One of those four-year options is the public college or university, such as the State University of New York.

The average SUNY tuition for one year is \$6,470. That's well below the \$9,650 national average of in-state tuition at public colleges. And SUNY tuition simply does not compare to one year's price tag at a private four-year university: According to the College Board, the U.S. average is \$33,480 per year.

Leef said Cuomo and Sanders' quest is part of the same flawed argument made for decades: that America needs more college-educated workers.

"America doesn't have a shortage of people with college degrees," Leef wrote. "What it does have is a shortage of jobs that pay well."