

Local educators warily embrace plan for free community college

By DIANE D'AMICO Education Writer | Posted: Friday, January 9, 2015 4:47 pm

President Barack Obama's proposal to make a two-year community college education free to all high school graduates was greeted with enthusiasm but also caution by New Jersey higher education officials who said the state is well-positioned to take advantage of the opportunity but should make sure it is implemented effectively.

Obama announced the proposal Friday at a community college in Tennessee, a state that already offers a similar program. Operation College Promise would require students to attend at least half term and maintain a 2.5 grade point average.

Carousel Icon Graduation

"Community college should be free for those willing to work for it," Obama said, adding that a college degree is the ticket to the middle class. He said no student should be denied access to college because they cannot afford to attend.

"A basic promise of America is that if you work hard you can go ahead," Obama said. "We don't guarantee equal outcomes, but we do expect everyone to get an equal shot."

How much the program will cost and how it will be funded has still not been detailed. Information posted by the White House said the federal government would cover 75 percent of the cost and the states would provide whatever remaining amount would be necessary to eliminate tuition. It does not specifically address whether the costs of books or other expenses would be included.

Darryl Greer, senior fellow for higher education strategic information and governance at Richard Stockton College, said it is a positive sign that the president has made college access a significant priority, but he said there are a lot of questions and details that should be addressed as part of a larger discussion of college and post-secondary education.

He said that while the program sounds great, the goal should not be to encourage all students to attend a community college simply because it's free.

"It's good to help people go to college, but not push them to go," he said, adding that some students might do better with technical training and others will benefit more from a traditional four-year college.

Funding will be a huge issue, and questions have already been raised nationally about whether the program could pull funding from programs such as Pell grants that help low-income students, while benefiting middle-class students who might be able to afford college.

Larry Nespoli, president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, said New Jersey already has programs such as the NJSTAR Scholarship and Tuition Aid Grants, or TAG, that provide scholarships and financial aid.

NJSTARS grew so popular that the state Legislature had to revise their criteria for admissions to keep it sustainable. It began as a program to provide a free community college degree to top high school graduates but has been reduced to covering tuition only for fewer students.

Tuition and fees at a community college in New Jersey averaged \$400 in 2013-14, with the state and county governments contributing to the total cost. The role county governments would play in funding under the new proposal is still unknown. The cost to subsidize tuition and fees just for full-time students would be almost \$370 million based on the 2013-14 list, though many students already get financial aid through Pell grants, TAG or NJSTARS.

In 2010-11, the most recent year available, New Jersey community college students received \$281 million in federal Pell grants, \$4 million in state Tuition Aid Grants, \$5.3 million in NJSTARS scholarships and \$3.8 million in Educational Opportunity Fund grants.

New Jersey also has a NJ Transfer agreement that makes it easier for students who earn a two-year degree to transfer their credits to a four-year college toward a bachelor's degree, which would meet another provision of the Obama plan that the credits be transferable.

"This is a really big deal in our world," Nespoli said. "Fifty years ago, there were no community colleges, and now there are 500 nationally and the president is promoting them."

Nespoli said, however, that there would be more pressure on community colleges to generate better outcomes.

State data show as many as two-thirds of community college students require remedial courses, and two-year graduation rates are in the single digits.

"The completion rates are sobering," Nespoli said. "Just making college free is not good enough. There also has to be accountability."

Capacity also could be an issue. Tennessee reportedly had more than twice the number of applicants than was anticipated for its program. Currently more than 86,000 full-time and 81,000 part-time students attended the 19 New Jersey community colleges in fall 2013. Almost 90,000 students graduate from high school in New Jersey each year, and many adults return to college years after graduation.

Atlantic Cape Community College President Peter Mera said he is excited to work with county and state leaders to see how the initiative could work.

“Certainly such an outcome has the potential to be transformational,” he said.

Paul Shelly, spokesman for the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, said the program should consider the potential impact on four-year colleges. He said he would expect there to still be a strong demand for four-year college programs, but the state colleges might have to plan to accommodate more transfer students for the third and fourth years.

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