



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on June 8, 2015

Proposed Federal Tuition-free Community College Likely to Be a Bust

Buried in the fine print of President Obama's State of the Union speech last January [was an idea](#) that the federal government should make community college tuition-free. It's loosely based on a Tennessee program [that seems to be working](#) without federal funding or intervention.



The federal program would add \$6 billion to the government's already bloated educational assistance programs, which already run \$70 billion (not counting the \$100+ billion in student loans) every year. Anything for the kids, it seems, and according to promoters, the taxpayers won't feel a thing.

According to the federal program, an estimated nine million students attending community colleges could avoid up to \$3,800 a year in tuition, with three-quarters of the largesse coming from Uncle Sam and the balance put up, under federal mandates, by the states. In his speech, Obama called community colleges "essential pathways to the middle class," adding,

They work for people who work full-time. They work for parents who have to raise kids full-time. They work for folks who have gone as far as their [current] skills will take them and want to earn new ones, but don't have the capacity to just suddenly go study for four years and not work.

How exactly federal subsidies would entice community college students to work harder was missing from the president's "America's College Promise" proposal. At present, only 20 percent of full-time students at community colleges earn an associate's degree within three years — and it's supposed to take only two.

The plan is based roughly on a state program in Tennessee called "Tennessee Promise," which is having early success. That program evolved out of a privately funded initiative that began in 2008 in Knoxville called "Knox Achieves," which offers students attending Pellissippi State Community College free tuition, along with mentoring of their progress by local volunteers. It provides "last dollar" help after the student has raised all he can through Pell grants, loans, scholarships, and personal efforts.

In May 2014, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam signed into law the Tennessee Promise, which is funded out of lottery proceeds. It offers free tuition to any of the state's 13 community colleges or 27 colleges of applied technology.

In its first year, Knox Achieves sent 496 students off to college without tuition worries. But word got around, and about 58,000 students (an estimated 90 percent of Tennessee's senior high-school class) have applied for free tuition under the new state-wide program. There are 9,200 volunteer mentors who are being matched with those receiving free tuition. They work to keep the students accountable through regular counseling and planning sessions. If the students fail to meet certain minimum



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standards of performance, the mentoring stops and so does the money.

At present, Tennessee is earmarking some \$360 million of lottery money to the program, but, as DeWayne Matthews of the Lumina Foundation noted, “It’s not just about money. All of the ... research points in the direction that [mentoring] is what really ultimately does make the difference.”

Tennessee Promise is already working to keep the students in school: 70 percent of students in the program are staying in school for at least year, compared to just half before the launch of the program. Almost 30 percent of them graduate within three years compared to just 11 percent before it became active.

But this could change if Obama’s “America College Promise” gets traction in Congress. It wouldn’t take long for federal monies extracted from that seemingly endless and limitless flow of federal tax dollars to change the character of the effort and ruin what appears initially to be working well in Tennessee. For starters, of course, any federal involvement in education is unconstitutional on its face. But beyond that, federal money always comes with federal strings — one of the primary ones being that the states have to ante-up their share, whether they want to or not. And federal “guidelines” (think Common Core) would no doubt direct the agendas being taught in a politically correct direction.

It also involves the free market principle that when something is made cheaper, more of it will be demanded. The estimated \$6 billion price tag in 10 years could be vastly larger.

In addition, it’s another attempt to extend the Obama administration’s program to provide “cradle-to-career” education, starting with pre-school and extending through middle and high schools, on into post-high-school learning. The president’s program would in essence turn a four-year high-school education into six years.

Being mandatory rather than voluntary, Obama’s proposal would distort further the whole educational financing industry. When *The Economist* magazine looked at his scheme, it noted that “it could have perverse effects. States might cut direct funding to community colleges and put all their cash into aid for students, since this would attract three federal dollars for every one [the state] spends.”

Further, it would reduce the incentive of colleges to be efficient in efforts to keep their costs down. With free money flowing to their students, what incentive would there be? Federal programs have already pushed tuition costs higher, and this would just add to that pressure.

Even the Huffington Post had trouble swallowing Obama’s idea. As contributor Steve Siebold (a noted “critical thinking” expert) observed,

The national debt now exceeds \$18 trillion and continues to spiral out of control. Here’s a critical thinking news flash for the President: we’re broke!

Not only that, but free money de-emphasizes personal responsibility and increases the mentality of dependency and the expectation of something for nothing, according to Siebold:

Beyond the economics of it, what message are we sending students? Handing them free education on a platter reinforces entitlement. They think, “I can have it for nothing and don’t have to work for it.” What kind of lesson is that? What values does that teach?

Free tuition appears to be having the desired effect in Tennessee, where local controls are in place, accountability through mentoring is demanded, and students who fail to perform are cut off. But get the federal government involved — using taxpayer monies, mandates, and strings — and one can reasonably expect opposite results: more spending, lower performance, poorer quality education, and



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more dependency.

Come to think of it, hasn't that been Obama's purpose all along?

At present, Congress has decided not to inflict "America's College Promise" on the American people. For the moment. But expect it to be a Democrat talking point in the run-up to the 2016 election.

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