

## ISSUE ANALYSIS FREE TUITION

### Issue Analysis: Free Tuition

When it comes to the concept of free tuition programs, the opinions on the matter are mixed. Many feel that, while a challenge, free tuition is a “complicated but necessary progression of education in America” (Patton, 2016, p. 1). This is due in part to the fact that student loan debt has reached over one trillion dollars, frightening many and leading others to question the value of higher education (Cubberley, 2015). When looking at opening the gates of higher education to a larger population, “removing the barrier of tuition would go a long way in providing greater access and opportunity” (Cubberly, 2015, p. 21). However, some feel that waiving tuition is not enough to solve access problems. These individuals feel that “by limiting the award to tuition and fees, these programs will not address other costs of attendance, including room and board, books, supplies, transportation, childcare and foregone earnings” (Perna, Leigh & Carroll, 2018, p. 1750). These barriers of access will continue to exist. However, others still feel strongly against these programs. Looking at results from programs already in existence, the statistics are bleak. According to one source, “nationwide, only 39% of students who first enrolled in a community college in fall 2010 completed a degree at any 2-year or 4-year institution within 6 years” (Perna, Leigh & Carroll, 2018, p. 1751). In other words, while these programs are incentivizing students to walk through the doors of colleges initially, they are not keeping them there, and therefore some see this as a waste of taxpayer money. As Patton (2016) so bluntly stated, “while enrollment figures are rising, some believe such programs can’t be sustained or that the focus should shift from helping students to institutions” (p. 31). Starting college is half a fix, but free-tuition “must be paired with a college reform model like guided pathways, which offers students a structured roadmap for obtaining a degree” (Patton, 2016, p.

33). With such varying opinions on the matter, it is no wonder free-tuition programs are such a hot topic of debate today.

Today, “26 states and the District of Columbia have enacted some form of free college legislation” (Perna, Leigh & Carroll, 2018, p. 1740), with many more following suit. While these programs do not all look alike, they all address the disparity that is the rising cost of higher education programs, and individuals’ lack of the means to afford them. Just this past week, Maryland governor Larry Hogan moved to “provide up to \$5,000 in scholarships to students whose families earn less than \$125,000 a year and adults earning less than \$90,000 annually,” with the stipulation that the state will provide this funding only after other aid is taken into consideration (Smith, 2018, para. 2). Programs like this address the issue that many find in state governments just handing out free money to students, by requiring them to apply for aid elsewhere first.

Another state that worked in a similar way to provide stipulations to its free tuition policy is Ohio. Through this program, the state addressed the problem of students dropping out after one year under a free-tuition program. This seems to be a trend, with “more two-year colleges shifting focus from student access to completion” (Smith, 2018, para. 2) in order to present the program as “less like a freebie and more like a reward” (Smith, 2018, para. 6). This program, like many others, has been implemented in attempts to increase graduation rates of those taking part in free-tuition programs. As an analysis by Civitas Learning recently showed, “one in five community college students left college without a degree despite completing 75 percent or more of the credit threshold” (Smith, 2018, para. 13), revealing that the problem goes much deeper than students not being able to pay for their tuition. This problem is shown through existing free-tuition programs, such as the Tennessee Promise program, which is one of the longest-lasting

programs in existence in the United States. While in Tennessee “program participants exhibited substantial gains in college enrollment over matched peers,” continuation on to a four-year school and graduation from said school was low (Carruthers & Fox, 2016, p. 108). Ultimately, as further free-tuition programs come into existence, the main question will continue to be what the best policy is for these funds, and how we can incentivize students to carry on to completion.

## References

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