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## Free Tuition For Community Colleges Could Come At A Cost

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Since President Barack Obama proposed providing community college students with free tuition, New York has entered into negotiations to make that dream a reality, but observers are worried the state is rushing into a commitment it cannot fiscally support.

On Monday, the Post reported Gov. Andrew Cuomo is in discussions with the White House to provide free tuition at the state's community colleges. The federal government would require states to pick up 25 percent of the cost. A source told the Post Cuomo is offering up to \$500 million to support the goal, however other details about the plan are scarce.

"I think everyone would be excited to provide free community college to all of our state's residents and I think it's something that's absolutely needed," Ron Deutsch, director of the Fiscal Policy Institute, said. "But as we say in Albany, whenever a trial balloon is floated, which is what this seems to be, I would suggest that the devil's in the details."

Deutsch said it costs about \$1.9 billion to operate the SUNY community colleges and another \$890 million for CUNY community colleges.

"In reality, the state hasn't even been meeting its [current] commitment [to fund community colleges] and over the years the burden has been placed on students," he said. "So I'd want to make sure any plan that gets put in place not only covers the tuition costs, but also makes sure community colleges aren't left holding the bag for this move."

The Empire Center for Public Policy President E.J. McMahon raised concerns about how the state would fund the \$500 million needed and compared the move to the state's Medicaid program.

"The cost of Medicaid was a tiny fraction of what it turned out to be in a decade," McMahon said. "When you make something free it costs more. It's an old quote. If you think community college is free now, wait until you see what it costs when it's free."

For in-state students, SUNY community college tuition costs \$4,210 annually and CUNY community colleges cost \$4,800 annually.

"The funding question is a huge one. Where Cuomo gets the idea that he has 500 million to throw around is one question," McMahon said. "The other big observation, there are serious questions about whether the community college sector is actually performing as it should."



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Citizens Budget Commission President Carol Kellermann raised concerns about providing free tuition without a needs-based determination or performance measures and what will happen to tuition costs if admissions increase.

"If [tuition isn't raised], that means the operating support that the city and state provide is going to grow, because expenses will grow," she said. "I think part of the intent of doing this would be to make it possible for more people to go, and it would drive up the number of people who could go and it would drive up the costs – you're going to need more classes, you're going to need more space and if you can't get that out of tuition then the state and the city are going to pay for that and those cost are going to go up."

Kellermann suggested that increased funding may be better used helping existing students graduate. A Manhattan Institute report found community colleges suffer from serious flaws and has very low graduation rates. Another study conducted by MDRC, a nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, found only about 20 percent of community college students graduate with an associate's degree within three years.

"More attention needs to be paid on how to get people to graduate," Kellermann, who previously worked at CUNY on a pilot program to increase graduation rates at community colleges, said. "A tuition program that enables some of them to go full-time, which helps them graduate more quickly, would be great. But it has to be planned and thought out carefully so it achieves those objectives."

Deutsch disagrees. He believes providing tuition-free access to community colleges would boost the graduation rates.

"I would argue a lot of people don't graduate because they can't continue to afford to pay for it," he said. "They go into it with great intentions about being able to afford these costs and then after time can't continue to do so. I think that's another example of why additional state aid is needed."

SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher said the national community college graduation statistics are incomplete and often misleading since it does not account for transfer and part-time students and those who attend multiple institutions.

Additionally, SUNY has pledged to increase its completion rate from 90,000 degrees completed in 2014 to 150,000 degrees completed over the next five to 10 years.

Zimpher is also on the advisory board for College Promise, which advocates for free and high-quality community college education.

"It's important for the state to partner with our students and families so that the students don't bear more of the weight," Zimpher said. "So actually investing in the concept of free community college would help the state get back up to where they are investing at least as much as our students. I don't think the country meant for our students to carry more of the burden than our states."