
Regional

How to make higher public education free

Before the Civil War, a politician and education reformer named Horace Mann implemented the idea of free elementary and secondary education in Massachusetts, an idea that was later mimicked by the rest of the country.

Recently, President Obama proposed a plan to make community and technical college education free for all. The plan, called "America's College Promise," would deliver free tuition to students who go to school at least half time and maintain a 2.5 grade point average while making progress toward a degree.

Under the plan, states would have to provide about a quarter of the costs of the program, maintain existing education spending and work to reduce the need for remedial classes and repeated courses.

Colleges with participating students would have to offer academic programs that fully transfer to four-year colleges or job training programs with high graduation rates.

Is this program feasible?

The United States is sliding in its performance worldwide when it comes to higher education. Ten nations now fare better than us in the percentage of the adult population with a college degree. This statistic, along with the crippling debt that students now bear because of the escalating cost of college, has made the situation untenable. To make things even worse, several studies show that the sectors of our population most affected by this situation are low-income students and minorities, many of which are from first-generation immigrant families.

Because of this there is a growing movement for making higher education free, led by organizations such as

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

The Campaign for Free College Tuition and Complete College America. Even books published recently have been devoted to specific proposals on how to achieve that goal, such as Robert Samuels's "Why Public Higher Education Should Be Free."

Some have already put in practice several of these proposals. Last year, Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam successfully pushed through legislation that allows for students in his state to apply for the Tennessee Promise scholarship. Beginning with the class of 2015, this program will offer two-year tuition-free education at a community college or technical school.

The way the program works is by providing full tuition and fees coverage after a student has applied to federal programs such as Pell Grants. The money comes from the lottery reserves that are used to create an endowment. Haslam, a Republican, has made clear that no tax dollars are used for this initiative.

The White House proposal contains many of the elements of the Tennessee program and Obama chose to unveil his program in the Volunteer State.

Oregon will be discussing similar legislation this year and analogous programs such as Michigan Education Trust (MET), the Missouri A+ Schools Program and another in Chicago are already in place.

Even some private institutions have been providing free higher education. At least eight U.S. private

colleges, such as Berea College in Kentucky, have moved ahead with this idea in a structure similar to Tennessee's.

There are even examples of public-private partnerships, such as the Kalamazoo Promise, a pledge by a group of anonymous donors to pay for up to 100 percent of tuition at any of Michigan's state institutions of higher education for graduates of the public high schools of the city of Kalamazoo.

Several European countries, such as Germany, and even developing nations like Chile, already offer tuition-free higher education. As innovative and daring as the president's proposal seems, it is neither revolutionary nor entirely new. Yet, there is no question that the proposal by the Obama administration will be controversial.

Obama's plan is projected to cost \$60 billion over 10 years. It sounds like a lot, but really isn't. The average yearly price tag is \$6 billion, which is less than 1 percent of the U.S. military budget.

More importantly, the plan does not call for new taxes to pay for it.

To begin with, community and technical colleges that serve about 45 percent of the undergraduates of this country already receive about \$9.1 billion annually from the federal government. Although we don't have all of the administration's financial details, we do know that by reallocating federal money that now funds other educational programs (such as tuition tax breaks) further revenue could be generated.

Like in any other major societal program there will be winners and losers. Among the winners, in

addition to the students themselves, will be community colleges, as long as they keep their physical and human infrastructure ready to receive the influx of new students.

Among the losers will be the private, for-profit institutions of higher education. These institutions enroll about 10 percent of post-secondary students, but use about 25 percent of federal student aid. And they are the main responsible party for student debt. While they serve mostly low-income students, they depend on those students taking out more loans than anybody. The median debt for students at the for-profits is \$33,000 versus \$22,000 at public institutions and \$18,000 at private, non-profit ones.

Public, four-years institutions could also lose given that they will not have as high of enrollments for the first two years and that some states may divert their resources to fund community colleges. Further, they do not have the support of a powerful lobby behind them as do the for-profit institutions.

It is time for the leadership of higher education institutions to stop passing down budget cuts to students in the form of higher tuition and fees, to faculty by reducing their numbers and support for their academic activities and to staff in the form of layoffs. They need to start working with their boards for creative solutions. That is what is needed for the United States to keep its position of leadership in the world.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>