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Local educators respond to Obama's call for free community college

Students would have to be "responsible" to qualify

BY ETHAN FORMAN STAFF WRITER Jan 20, 2015



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J. Scott Applewhite

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DANVERS — One of the most talked-about initiatives of President Barack Obama's State of the Union address is a push to make the first two years of college, "as free and universal as high school."

It's a push to give more students — not all — the skills they need to land jobs requiring 21st century skills without incurring a mountain of debt.

North Shore Community College President Patricia Gentile said she's eager to hear more details of the president's proposal, outlined on the White House's website in the fact sheet "America's College Promise Proposal."

From what Gentile has read, the free tuition would be for some community college students, not for all of them.

"There are criteria we do know already," Gentile said.

The offer of free tuition would not be income-based. A student would have to be "responsible" in order to qualify and stay qualified. A student would also have to attend community college regularly, either full or half-time, make progress toward a degree, and maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average or higher.

Those who do not maintain those criteria would no longer be eligible for the tuition waiver. The free tuition would be for the first two years only.

What this proposal would do is "provide a seamless program to a bachelor's degree," Gentile said.

Already, many students chose to pursue a bachelor's by earning two-year associate's degrees at a community college, which are relatively affordable and provide open admissions. They then take the credits they earn at a community college, and transfer them to a four-year public college or university, cutting the cost of a bachelor's degree.

"We know a lot of folks really struggle to get a higher education," Gentile said, "and it's really about affordability."

Under the proposal, in which a state must participate, community colleges would have to offer programs so that students could transfer to local, public four-year colleges and universities, or offer "occupation training programs with high graduation rates and that lead to degrees and certificates that are in demand among employers," according to The White House.

Students who take courses in high-demand fields, such as nursing or advanced manufacturing, could earn a free associate's degree and exit into the workforce.

"Our understanding," Gentile said, "is it has to be in a high-demand field."

Community College's are relatively affordable compared with public colleges and universities, Gentile said. The 60 credits needed to earn a two-year degree at North Shore Community College can cost \$11,000.

"The idea of the community college, it's democracy's college, and we still have open access," Gentile said.

However, many community college students struggle with this cost and with going to school full-time, which cuts into their ability to earn a living. Students also incur costs to commute and to buy books.

Many North Shore Community College students use community college as a stepping stone to a bachelor's degree. Gentile said about a third of the college's students transfer to four-year public institutions.

Gentile said Obama's proposal may help part-time students, who cut back on schooling to take a job, go full-time.

At Peabody High, Principal Eric Buckley said 21 percent of graduates last year attended a two-year school or community college, and 62 percent attended a four-year college or university.

Buckley did not want to give an opinion on the merits of Obama's proposal, having not see it, but he said it may be something students and parents consider, given the high cost of a college education, with many students saddled with loans when they get out of school.

"As a parent right now, or even as a student taking loans, you have to take a look at the financial piece," Buckley said.

"Clearly, there are a lot of advantages to it," said Salem High Principal Dave Angeramo. He said quite a few students from Salem High attend North Shore Community College or other community colleges, though he did not have figures late Tuesday afternoon. Some students use community college as a route into the work force, "others will use that as a first step" to transfer to a four-year school.

Angeramo said Obama's proposal includes motivations for students to do well and stay in school.

For those going to community college to get a job in a particular field, Gentile said the federal government and the state would designate what those high-demand fields might be to qualify for free tuition. The idea would be to address a shortage of skilled workers.

North Shore Community College works closely with the North Shore Workforce Investment Board, which oversees career centers in Salem and Lynn, and provides oversight for federally funded employment and training services in 19 communities.

Mary Sarris, the executive director of the North Shore WIB, said the organization works "very closely" with North Shore Community College. She said a high-school diploma is not enough for a person to make it in today's economy.

"Sometime in the history of education in America, free public education ended at grade 12," Sarris said. "In general, that is no longer sufficient to prepare people to be educationally self-sufficient, and provide an educated work force for our economy."

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