FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE TUITION

Community colleges support the core principles of President Obama’s America’s College Promise proposal because it stands to increase community college student access and success, which would have substantial economic and social benefits for our nation. Despite relatively low tuitions, financial obstacles continue to present significant barriers to degree attainment. Approximately one-third of all community college students work full-time in order to generate the financial recursos necessary to attend school, as well as support themselves and often their families.

Enactment of a proposal to dramatically lower or eliminate community college tuition will also encourage students who otherwise would not enroll in community college, or any college, to aspire to do so. Establishing this program could ultimately make college as accessible as high school.

The resources proposed for the program are proportionate to its potential impact and current federal education expenditures. On average, the program would represent less than 10% of the annual budget of the Department of Education (ED), which comprises less than 3% of all annual federal expenditures. Making community college education significantly more affordable is an appropriate federal priority, and consistent with the existing federal student aid programs.

Congress should constructively engage in a conversation regarding the President’s proposal, and the role of community colleges in supporting educational attainment. Community college students need and deserve further support. The President’s proposal is complex and far-reaching, and many of its details have not been released, but there are many avenues to achieving its goals.

In order for any program of this nature to be effective, legislation should have the following characteristics:

- Financing must be realistic and reliable. The program cannot succeed if its resources are subject to significant fluctuation. Stable federal financing also will be necessary to draw state partners.
- Program eligibility/participation must also be stable. In the absence of this predictability, students and institutions will not be able to adequately plan for their education.
- As proposed by the President, the program must be “first dollar,” reducing tuition and allowing students to use federal student financial aid and other student aid to cover the costs of books, supplies, equipment, and transportation.
- Clear standards for program eligibility are essential. The legislation should include accurate measurements of community college performance, which currently are lacking in federal law, and ensure that these are also incorporated into the Higher Education Act.
- Some portion of program funds must be made available to colleges to provide services to help students succeed. This includes academic counseling and support.
- States must be required to maintain current levels of funding support for higher education and student financial aid programs.
- Current standards of satisfactory academic progress should be applied to the program to establish consistency for students and program administrators.