Testimony

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on

Bill 21-55, “Community College for All Scholarship Amendment Act of 2015”

Before the
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole

June 23, 2015
11:00 AM
Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the council. My name is David Baime, and I am senior vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges. AACC represents the nation’s more than 1,100 community and technical colleges. I am pleased to be here today to present my organization’s views about President Obama’s America’s College Promise proposal. I hope that these perspectives will assist you as you consider the District of Columbia’s “Community College for All” scholarship bill.

As you know, the essence of the America’s College Promise is to make community college education free for all qualified students enrolled in high-quality programs. The response of the public and media to this idea has been astonishing and unprecedented, and it’s not hard to see why. Americans from all corners of society are increasingly aware that in order to attain a middle-income lifestyle, some type of postsecondary degree or credential is essential. The public sees college costs rising much faster than either inflation or average incomes, putting families under extreme pressure to ensure that they can finance this vital investment.

These factors underlie the growing trend of students turning to community colleges to secure high-quality higher education at a reasonable price. The average annual community college tuition for a full-time student is less than $3,400, in contrast to more than $9,100 at public four-year institutions. Community colleges are rapidly becoming “first choice” institutions for multiple reasons, including to gain skills that will lead to a good job, to attain the first two years of higher education and then transfer, or to develop basic literacy or language skills. We’re actually seeing the average age of community college students decline as more students matriculate directly out of high school. That said, our leaders know that they need to continuously improve retention and completion, particularly for the millions of students who enroll each year unprepared to do college work.
In a way, though, President Obama’s proposal is about more than community colleges. It reflects the president’s more comprehensive objective, which he stated to Congress at the very beginning of his administration, that every American attains at least some higher education. This goal stems in part from the conviction that a primary driver of America’s economic preeminence in the last century was due to the establishment of a universal public education system that made our population the most educated in the world. Unfortunately, we have lost that edge and are now trying to make up for lost time and lost opportunity. The president’s America’s College Promise proposal is predicated on community colleges serving as the vehicle to redressing this national education deficit. And it’s clear that the message about tuition-free community college would need to be shouted out loudly and clearly to the public, to reach people who might not otherwise be inclined to aspire to college.

One example of the potency of the Promise concept can be seen in Tennessee, where a program to ensure that recent high school graduates can, under specified conditions, attend community college free of charge has resulted in what appears to be a substantial spike in community college enrollments for the upcoming academic year. In the months since the president made his announcement, a variety of individual institutions have launched Promise-type programs, with encouraging results. A growing number of state legislatures are also actively considering legislation.

This broad education attainment goal has a dollars and cents aspect for millions of economically disadvantaged students. The stark reality is that, despite low community college tuitions and the availability of varying amounts of student aid, success at community college, and throughout higher education generally, is strongly correlated with students’ financial circumstances. Almost 40% of all community college students receive a Pell Grant, which is an effective proxy for being low-income. It has long been the case, and is even more so today, that if you are bright and poor, you are much less likely to complete college than if you are rich and not so sharp.
Finally, let me just note a few of the few basic principles that AACC believes should be followed in crafting a Promise-type program. Some of these are reflected in the bill before the City Council and include:

- The program should be “last dollar,” meaning that students should be able to continue to qualify for all currently available student aid.
- Students should be allowed to receive funds until they attain the associate degree, as long as they maintain satisfactory academic progress.
- Funding must be made available on a permanent or safely secured basis to give students and their families assurance of the availability of no-tuition community college.
- A public awareness campaign and intensive counseling for potential students must accompany any new program.

In summary, we would like to state our great enthusiasm both for the president’s proposal and for the fact that the City Council is looking enact to legislation embodying some of its key features. We believe that this approach is a forceful way of helping to close the education achievement gap in this country and thereby benefiting both our society and the citizenry.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.