

# The Movement Backing Tuition-Free Community College

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## Why Some Cities and States Are Footing the Bill for Community College

Americans are often expected to have some level of higher education before they enter the workforce. These political leaders are asking: Shouldn't government help them along?

CHICAGO—A surge of innovation in states and cities is building momentum for what could become a seismic shift in American education.

Just as the country came to expect in the decades around World War II that young people would finish at least 12 years of school, more local governments are now working to ensure that students complete at least 14 years. With that change, political leaders in both parties are increasingly acknowledging that if society routinely expects students to obtain at least two years of schooling past high school, government has a responsibility to provide it for them cost-free.

That impulse animates the statewide tuition-free community-college program pioneered under Republican Governor Bill Haslam in Tennessee and replicated under Democratic Governor Kate Brown in Oregon; Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's Star Scholarship, which funds two years of community college for students who complete high school with a B average; and the legislation Governor Andrew Cuomo recently signed into law providing tuition-free access to two- and four-year public colleges in New York for families earning up to \$125,000. The Campaign for Free College Tuition, an organization promoting this movement, expects representatives from up to 18 states to join their conference next month in Denver.

Ben Cannon, executive director of the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, speaks for many devising these initiatives when he insists: "As a state, we generally acknowledge and understand that a high-school education is not enough, and [tuition-free community college] represents an attempt to extend that [public-education] entitlement to 14 years."

Two key factors explain why 14 is becoming the new 12 in education. First, amid anxiety about the economic strains on blue-collar families, the push for expanded post-secondary access reflects a growing recognition of the critical opportunities community colleges give working-class kids.

More children of parents without a four-year college degree attend community college than any other form of post-secondary education, according to calculations by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. That's true for white, African American, and Hispanic students alike. (These figures apply both to students who are financially dependent on their parents and those who are financially independent.) Fully 70 percent of all community-college students are the children of parents without four-year degrees.\*

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The bridge that community colleges provide for working-class kids was evident when I recently met with a group of Chicago Star Scholarship winners. Among them, only one had a parent who had obtained even a two-year degree. Without the scholarship, which covers tuition, books, and fees in the city's community-college system, most of those around the table said they would have struggled to pay for school—if they could afford it at all. "I know a lot of kids in my classes who work two jobs," said scholarship winner Maria Rivera, a first-generation student. "When you have the Star Scholarship ... you can put more effort into your work."

Rivera's experience captures two other Chicago innovations that are expanding post-secondary access. She finished the two-year Harold Washington College here in just three semesters because she completed so many college-level courses in her public high school. (Half of Chicago high-school graduates now leave with some college credit.) And she's now planning on seeking a four-year degree, partly because most local colleges provide large tuition discounts to transferring Star Scholarship students.

Simultaneously, the drive for 14 years of education responds to the growing demand from employers for more skilled workers. In Tennessee, Haslam wants 55 percent of the state's adults (up from about 40 percent now) to obtain some post-secondary credential by 2025. "We're trying to make a quantum leap in terms of our educated and trained populace," said David Wright, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's chief policy officer. "It's an economic-competitiveness issue."

This flurry of local activity has, inevitably, hit some bumps. Because the Oregon and Tennessee programs provide "last dollar" financing after students obtain all available federal aid, they have provoked objections by channeling many of the state dollars to relatively better-off students who don't receive as much federal help. New York's broader program has faced a similar concern that free tuition will lure more upper-middle-class students from private colleges into the public system, displacing minority and lower-income kids who often post lower test scores and grades.

Emanuel recently opened a controversial new front by proposing that, starting in 2020, Chicago should prevent students from graduating high school unless they can demonstrate a specific plan to obtain more education, start a job, or join the military. Emanuel says requiring students to specify their next step beyond 12 years of schooling merely positions them to meet "what's going to be expected of them" in the economy. But [critics worry](#) he is imposing unrealistic demands by insisting all students draft such a road map to graduate.

Above all, the push to routinize at least 14 years of education will require community colleges to improve their own performance. In Tennessee, three-fourths of community-college students don't complete their degree. Chicago's community-college system graduates just 17 percent of its students in three years—and even that's a big improvement [over 7 percent in 2010](#). Without more investment, more community-college access may just exacerbate overcrowding and diminish results, said Anthony Carnevale, the Georgetown Center's director.

Recognizing these challenges, former President Barack Obama wanted to jump-start local innovation by providing matching federal dollars for tuition-free community college nationwide. President Trump has dropped that idea, though Georgetown's data show how much the working-class whites central to his electoral coalition rely on these institutions. If Trump is serious about lifting those he's called "forgotten" Americans, broadening access to community college is the one element of his predecessor's agenda he could most easily slot into his own.