

## **Proposal for free community college faces chopping block as \$3.5 trillion reconciliation bill moves forward**

By Hilary Burns, Higher Education Editor, The Business Journals, October 18, 2021

After years of buildup and advocacy, the proposal for free community college appears to be in danger. President Joe Biden said during a trip to Connecticut Friday that he doubts “whether we’ll get the entire funding for community colleges,” affirming the fears of many higher-ed leaders.

“But I’m not going to give up on community colleges as long as I’m president,” Biden added before his Air Force One departure on Friday. Biden originally called for \$109 billion for two years of free community college “so that every student has the ability to obtain a degree or certificate,” as part of his American Families Plan.

Higher-ed experts and community college leaders have expressed concerns to The Business Journals in recent weeks that tuition-free community college would not make the cut as policymakers debate cuts to Biden's \$3.5 trillion spending plan. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said recently that she was “very disappointed” that the original \$3.5 trillion package is being trimmed down, but said she remains optimistic.

“It definitely feels very at risk today,” said Kevin Carey, vice president for education policy and knowledge management at Washington, D.C., thinktank New America, and author of *The End of College: Creating the Future of Learning and the University of Everywhere*.

Dropping free community college means missing a rare opportunity to build a “better system,” Carey added. Advocates argue the program could broaden opportunities to millions of low-income, first-generation and historically underrepresented students and help reskill employees to relieve labor shortages.

“I feel as though community colleges are the on-ramp to the middle class, especially in rural communities,” said Tom Downs, coordinator of the Community and Technical College Consortium. “I was really surprised (to hear it's at risk), especially when you have the First Lady of the United States (with community colleges) as part of her identity.”

About 985 state-owned community colleges in all 50 states serving about 9.4 million students would qualify for the program, according to analysis from the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. To cover tuition costs, states will on average have to increase their investment by 12% or \$387 per full-time equivalent student in the first year of the program, depending on the state's community college tuition costs. Some states, including Massachusetts, take issue with the details of the proposal, citing the increased costs of living and operating in certain parts of the country.

Kathy Ulibarri, executive director of New Mexico Independent Community Colleges, which has had statewide free community college programs in place for several years, said a federal program would help increase access to all eligible students. At least 20 states currently offer free community college programs today. A federal program could help ensure students can access education after high school, regardless of where they live.

“Often the resources that are available at the state level aren't sufficient to cover the tuition and fees for as many students who would qualify,” Ulibarri said. “Often it's first-come, first-served until the money runs out.”

One factor that might have contributed to free community college being dropped in priority is the fact that many four-year colleges and universities, which higher-ed experts say have more lobbying power in the Capitol than two-year schools, did not advocate for free community college, Carey said. The Business Journals previously reported that many private college presidents take issue with the free community college plan, advocating instead for Biden’s proposal to expand the Federal Pell Grant Program, because those funds can be used at any institution to pay for tuition.

“The whole Washington, D.C., class of politicians, staffers, bureaucrats, members of the media, people who work for think tanks like me, are all essentially graduates of more elite four-year colleges,” Carey said. “They look nothing like sort of America as a whole. All of these other programs have interest groups that are lined up behind them, pushing hard. I don't know that (four-year schools) are lobbying against it, but not lobbying for it can have the same effect.”