

Obama's free community college plan 'huge deal' for N.J.



Essex County College's commencement in Newark. Friday May, 30, 2014(Patti Sapone/The Star-Ledger)



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President Barack Obama's plan to give qualifying students a free community college education is a "huge deal" for New Jersey, even though the state already has a similar program in place, schools representatives say.

Obama on Friday formally announced his ["America's College Promise Proposal,"](#) which would allow students to attend community college tuition free for two years as long as they maintain a 2.5 GPA and make steady progress toward completing their program.

The proposal, which requires approval from federal lawmakers and participation from states, would expand on [New Jersey's NJ STARS program.](#)



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NJ Stars, a two-year tuition free program, is open to only the top 15 percent of graduates from each high school. Obama's proposal is open to anyone, including adults of all ages.

"It's a huge deal," said Lawrence Nespoli, president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges. "To have the president of country, the leader of the free world, highlighting so very prominently community colleges, in and of itself is just a big deal."

New Jersey's 19 community colleges serve about 1,000,000 students each year, including many who are the first in their family to attend college or come from economically disadvantaged areas, Nespoli said.

He expects those schools would see a growth in enrollment under Obama's plan and believes schools are equipped to handle it, since enrollment across the schools had declined over the past few years, he said.

However, the proposal, which will reportedly cost \$60 billion over 10 years, may face opposition among Republican lawmakers. And there's no guarantee New Jersey would participate — states are supposed to cover a quarter of the cost, with the federal government providing the rest.

Gov. Chris Christie's office said it had no response.

'The promise of America'

Obama, during a speech Friday at a community college in Tennessee, said the proposal is based on the ideal of everyone in America getting "a fair shot."

"It shouldn't matter what your last name is, or what we look like, what family we were born into or how we worship," he said. "What matters is effort and merit, and that's the promise of America."

Obama's proposal is inspired by state programs like one in Tennessee that drew applications from nearly 90 percent of graduating high school seniors, according to the White House.

Under Obama's plan, an estimated 9 million students could benefit and a full-time community college student could save an average of \$3,800 in tuition per year, according to a White House news release.

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Greer also fears that the allure of free community college could steer some students to the wrong school. Those seeking four-year degrees may be better off starting at four-year schools, he said.

“One shouldn’t push students into two-year colleges if they have aspirations and have the capacity, beyond just affordability issues, to start at a four-year school,” Greer said. “They should start where it is best for them regarding preparation, academic support, and price and cost.”

Klein shared those concerns and said funding for Obama’s proposal will be a major question.

New Jersey has reduced its funding for higher education over the past decade, he said.

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