

## Free-College Plan

### A Caution

In our last essay, we discussed programs aimed at dramatically reducing the financial burden of college education. Some programs promise generous scholarships to state residents to pursue higher education in that state. The plan in the Democratic Platform would eliminate in-state tuition at public universities for families earning less than \$125,000 per year. There are many reasons to support such plans (discussed in our previous column), which would eliminate problems with our current system that promotes economic inequality and undermines economic mobility.

Because we believe that there is a strong link between democracy and access to an affordable higher education that is an essential part of the American dream, we find plans to make college more affordable, even free, very attractive. However, as with any complex issue, apparent solutions could present us with some unexpected negative consequences. Some of these were discussed recently by Carlson and Supiano (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 2016). One such problem is the effect the plans could have on private colleges.

We would certainly be disappointed if the free-college plan resulted in the closing of private colleges, which currently play an important role in US higher education. These institutions not only do an exceptional job of doing what we advocate—liberal arts education—but they are interwoven into the social and economic fabric of hundreds of small communities across the country. Many of the colleges are over a century old, sometimes older than the communities that grew up around them. It would be a tragedy for our overall higher education system and to many small communities if the free-college plan led to the closing of any small college that is currently viable.

Our hope would be that the free-college plan would lead to more students going to college, which would offset the demographic changes that are already hurting the small private colleges. Currently only about 30% of Americans have 4 year degrees. With college education being more important than ever to today's workforce, it seems like this number should be higher.

It is also heartening that our private colleges and universities are working hard to make their institutions more affordable. According to the *U.S. News and World Report* (Sept. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016) there are currently 66 private colleges and universities that have a large enough endowment to meet the full financial need of their students.

Another unintended consequence is that the free-college plan could actually undermine accessibility. In places around the world where college is free, they may have restricted access based on student performance. Only the very best and brightest get free tuition. I suspect that Americans would be uncomfortable with these standards as it might actually reduce the number of students who get 4 year degrees at a time when such a degree is more important than ever.

Under the proposed Democratic plan, which would give free tuition to students from families making less than \$125,000, one dollar would make a big difference. Under the proposal, Family A has a combined income of \$124,999 and three kids in college with free tuition, and Family B makes one dollar more and they get stuck paying the full tuition bill for all three of their children. We think this plan would benefit from a graduated system to avoid this type of inequity.

Although we believe in the internationalization of our campuses by admitting foreign students, quotas on non-US students or even out-of-state students would have to be created. We can foresee that some universities might try to push for more foreign or out-of-state students, who would pay full tuition, as a revenue-generating scheme. This would not be fair to the state's taxpayers.

If the plan resulted in more students opting for four-year colleges, which we hope occurs, it would be unfortunate if universities dealt with this issue by increasing the number of part-time instructors. Universities should commit to a greater number of tenure-track instructors to maintain the quality of the educational experience and to avoid the ballooning of contingent faculty on campus.

We don't see any of these as reasons are deal breakers for the free-college plan. Rather they are cautions should we have the political will to make it happen.

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[http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/guest-commentary-free-college-plan-a-caution/article\\_91a0498e-a81d-53cb-bde7-3929b8278957.html](http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/guest-commentary-free-college-plan-a-caution/article_91a0498e-a81d-53cb-bde7-3929b8278957.html)