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America's College Promise: How Free Access Will Impact College Infrastructure

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In early 2015, President Barack Obama gave a speech expressing his desire to take the Tennessee Promise project nationwide with America's College Promise, a proposal that would grant free access to community colleges. The proposal has met with a great deal of excitement, and most of the discussion around America's College Promise has been centered on the potential impact on the economy, the willingness of states to collaborate and the feasibility at a federal level. One discussion that has yet to hit the front pages, however, is how colleges would adapt to the increased enrollments. In this interview, Lenore Rodicio shares her thoughts on the value of the proposal and discusses the considerations college leaders will have to make to prepare for such a shift.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What impact will the President's call for free access to community college have on the public perception of colleges?

LR: Although we've made great strides over the past few years to really change the image of community colleges from a last resort to really a first choice, many still have that negative perception of what community colleges



The free community college proposal has turned the spotlight on two-year colleges, but there are significant infrastructural questions college leaders need to consider.

actually do.

By bringing more attention to community colleges, which the President has been doing for some time now, we're really starting to take a deeper look at what it is that colleges do and how we can transform lives and, more importantly, ensure that the work that we do stays within the community.

Evo: Why is guaranteeing access in this way important?

LR: Guaranteeing access is not so much important for the colleges themselves but for the students. It's become a real viable pathway to education for students who are not quite sure what to do after high school and also for returning adults who want to continue their education. A lot of times, for both groups, they'll get bogged down trying to figure out how are they going to pay for college. Even the

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thought of having to go through that process sometimes turns them off from enrolling.

This gives everyone a second chance. If the President's proposal is implemented in the way that it's currently mapped out, the Pell Grant would still remain intact and provide additional funding that students could then use for things like living expenses and textbooks. It really changes the game in terms of financing.

Evo: One of the most common counterpoints to the President's proposal is the notion of expanding the Pell Grant program to create additional access. Why is creating free access more important than expanding Pell grants?

LR: It's a balance. This way it's something that's guaranteed, similar to K-12 education. It's a commitment more than anything else from our federal and state government that education is important and that a postsecondary education shouldn't be something that's optional or only available to a few. The success of every single individual in attaining some sort of postsecondary education has a huge impact, not only on that individual's wellbeing and their future economic status but on the economic status of the community in which they reside.

Evo: On the infrastructural side, how would colleges adapt to the increased demand for services,

classrooms and everything else that goes along with guaranteeing access to the college?

LR: It's very difficult to predict because we don't have any data on how many students could potentially take this opportunity for free college. Based on last year's enrollment, we're looking at about 52,000 students that potentially could have been eligible for free access, based on the parameters that we have presented in the President's plan. That's a significant number of individuals. In assuming that additional students might take the opportunity to enroll, we're looking at even larger numbers of students. It is going to take some creativity on our part.

We'll have to take a very hard look at our processes and possibly expand and tighten up our offerings. We'll also have to look at novel ways to deliver material. We've had some success with blended courses where part of the material is delivered online and the part that requires in-depth conversations is delivered face-to-face. I would see us using a lot more of those modalities in the future if we had increased demand by students to take our courses.

We will also have to continue to work well with our local partners in the community—with our high school system, for example—to sometimes offer courses at offsite locations, which tend to work particularly well for working adults.

Evo: How important is it for service providers and vendors to be able

to partner with institutions to meet their needs on those fronts?

LR: It's going to be crucial. It's going to require an all-hands-on-deck mentality from our partners in the community as well as the vendors that work with us to provide services. We will also need support from our elected officials to really help make this work.

What's most critical to us is that we don't sacrifice quality for quantity and there's always a concern when you begin to expand the number of students that are coming to your door. As a set of institutions, community colleges have been extremely creative and have a top-notch faculty dedicated to teaching as well as staff dedicated to supporting the students. They are always coming up with new and novel ways to meet increased demand and free access will be no exception to that.

Evo: What responsibility do state and federal government bodies have in ensuring colleges are prepared to handle the increased demand?

LR: One of the key things here is to really take a step back and take a look at the funding for community colleges in general and determine whether or not the funding that's currently in place is really meeting the needs of the very crucial service that we offer to our students. A lot of it gets overlooked because there's a focus on K-12, the university system

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and the other social services offered. We need to sit down, roll up our sleeves together and really take a look at what's needed in order to make this work.

The greatest tragedy that could emerge from this is a decrease in funding from the state. We need to be careful that that doesn't occur because in the long run we're really going to need assistance from state and federal governments to support the infrastructure to make the experience worthwhile for the students.

If we're not providing them with the quality of education and services that they need because of lack of funding then we have to question why we're bringing them in at all.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the challenges that colleges could face and how colleges can adapt to those challenges?

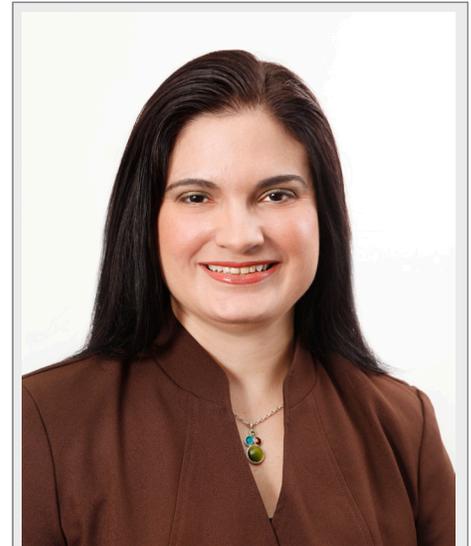
LR: A lot of times when we think about the increased demand and additional students, we often focus on the classroom—do we have enough classrooms, do we have enough faculty to support them—but we also have to take a look at the support services that we offer to our students.

In the end, it's not just a matter of bringing in additional tuition dollars, it's really taking a look at the services that we provide, fine-tuning them to make ourselves as

efficient as possible, and ensuring that we maintain the same level of financial support from the state and the federal government in order to advance our mission. This interview has been edited for length.

Key Takeaways

- *The President's free college access proposal is putting the importance of college in the spotlight, but the success of the concept requires sustained support from the federal and state governments.*
- *Vendors will need to play a leading role in ensuring colleges have the critical tools necessary to handle an increased student population.*
- *Colleges nationwide need to fine-tune their processes to ensure they are operating as efficiently and effectively as possible in the event of this concept becoming reality.*



AUTHOR PROFILE

Current Position and Past Experience

Lenore Rodicio is currently Provost of Academic and Student Affairs for Miami Dade College (MDC). Dr. Rodicio previously served as Vice Provost for Student Achievement at MDC, and led a nationally recognized planning and implementation process to redesign the student experience at MDC from early connections with potential students through degree completion. In collaboration with key partners such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Achieving the Dream, Lumina and Kresge, the planning process brought together faculty, staff and administrators across all campuses to analyze the current state of student success and completion at MDC and to implement comprehensive solutions to improve completion rates. A key component of this initiative was the development of program pathways that prepared students within their major program of study, while maintaining a strong commitment to general education in the curriculum.

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