

Miami Herald

President Obama's free tuition plan faces tough sell in Florida

BY KATHLEEN MCGRORY - KMCGRORY@MIAMIHERALD.COM

01/09/2015 8:12 PM | Updated: 01/10/2015 6:07 PM



President Barack Obama speaks at Pellissippi State Community College, Friday, Jan. 9, 2015, in Knoxville, Tenn., about new initiatives to help more Americans go to college. CAROLYN KASTER / AP

President Barack Obama on Friday made a pitch to provide free community college tuition nationwide to high-performing students — a proposal that Gov. Rick Scott and the Republican-dominated Legislature say may be too expensive for Florida.

“The idea of making community college more obtainable to people is great,” said Florida Senate Higher Education Committee Chairwoman Kelli Stargel, R-Lakeland, noting that Florida already has several programs aimed at making higher education more affordable. “Unfortunately, the cost is a large barrier.”

Republican Gov. Rick Scott had yet to see the details of the plan, but he had concerns about strings that may be attached, his office said.

"In the long run, the President would likely save college students more money by holding the line on the rising cost of undergraduate and graduate school tuition instead of creating another government program," said Scott in a statement.

Scott has fought against tuition hikes and challenged colleges to create \$10,000 bachelor's degrees.

Obama's plan seeks to provide full community college tuition for students who maintain a 2.5 GPA or better. He envisions many of those students going on to earn four-year degrees.

The overall goal, Obama said, is to make two years of college "as free and universal as high school is today."

"In America, quality education cannot be a privilege that is reserved for a few," he said in a speech at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Participating colleges would have to work to improve student outcomes. And participating states would have to shoulder one-quarter of the cost. The federal government would pick up the rest.

The White House estimates that the program would cost \$60 billion over 10 years. The cost for Florida is not known.

Similar initiatives have been successful at Miami Dade College, which leads all other public colleges nationwide in enrollment, according to its website.

Since 2002, Miami Dade College has offered free tuition to students accepted into its Honors College.

The college further expanded access in 2010 by creating the American Dream Scholarship. The award is available to all students who graduate from a Miami-Dade high school with a minimum 3.0 GPA, and covers all tuition and fees once other scholarships have been applied.

The program is funded by private donations.

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón on Friday praised Obama's plan, which would further expand the number of MDC students eligible for free tuition.

"The president's proposal — coupled with our commitment as a community college to increase completions through better advisement, more streamlined academic programs, and novel modalities for developmental education — will truly help get our nation back to the world's top position in educational attainment," Padrón said in a statement.

Broward College President J. David Armstrong, Jr. was equally as enthusiastic.

"The America's College Promise proposal President Obama outlined [Friday] provides unprecedented access and opportunity for all to attend the first two years of college and earn a certificate or associate's degree since it directly addresses economic barriers for those seeking the American Dream," he said. "By boosting college enrollment, we are investing in Americans, developing workforce skills that will benefit them today and developing a workforce for the jobs of tomorrow."

But there are significant challenges ahead, both at the national and state levels.

Republican lawmakers in Washington already have begun expressing concerns about the estimated price tag.

Skepticism was widespread among some legislators in Florida, who would have to approve state spending on the program.

Stargel, who chairs the Senate Higher Education Committee, said she rarely hears constituents complain about the cost of community college. She noted that already Florida lets high-school students earn college credit, and provides publicly funded scholarships for top performers.

Florida also guarantees community college graduates admission into four-year institutions.

"The bigger challenges for us in Florida are things like preparing students in algebra I, which is a graduation requirement, and dropout prevention," Stargel said.

Republican Sen. Don Gaetz, who chairs the Education Appropriation Subcommittee, said he was "intrigued" by Obama's idea. But he said he would prefer a program that encourages students to earn industry certification and prioritizes financial need. "If we are in a position to provide free education and training beyond K-12, the people who ought to get the first benefits are those who have less income and resources," he said.

Rep. Erik Fresen, who oversees education spending in the lower chamber, raised separate concerns about the state's already complex college funding formula.

"I applaud [Obama] for committing to affordability and access to higher education," said Fresen, R-Miami. "But I think his goal would be better accomplished by expanding [need-based] Pell Grant opportunities, and allowing that to be the federal government's role."

Obama's proposal also would create programs to help low-wage workers obtain the skills needed for jobs in high-demand industries.