

Tuition-Free Programs are Real

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By Fiona Tapp

Along with “guilt-free desserts” and finding a coupon for something you were already going to buy, tuition-free college sound just a little too good to be true.

But it’s real: more and more educational institutions, especially community colleges, are absorbing entire program costs for qualifying students.

The idea started gaining traction in 2015 when President Obama floated the idea of free community college for “responsible” students. Those students would need to undertake community volunteer duties, maintain a good GPA, and work with a learning mentor.

The idea has gained momentum since then. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders both repeated the proposal during the 2016 election campaign. Now New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Montana, Minnesota, Kentucky, Arkansas, Nevada, and Tennessee all offer promise programs which cover all costs after other scholarships and grants have been applied.

Although these may seem like new initiatives, some schools have made accessibility for all students part of their mandate for well over a century. Berea College, in Kentucky, abolished fees way back in in 1892.

“Every admitted student is given what we call a Tuition Promise Scholarship, meaning no student or their family pays for tuition, which amounts to well over \$100,000 for four years,” Berea spokesperson Tim Jordan said.

Part of the program requires students to work for 10 hours per week in the school’s Labor Program. Here students learn specific job skills and develop a strong work ethic, but they also help to support the college in a number of practical ways.

Berea believes that helping the local community achieve their scholastic goals is of paramount importance. The average household income for Berea students is just \$29,000, putting a traditional college education out of the reach of most residents.

Providing education for all does cause some problems for the school administration, as Tim Jordan explained. “One of the annual challenges for Berea is meeting the budget gap between what endowment earnings and grants cover,” He said. “That means Berea must raise between \$5-6 million in contributions every year.”

This is an area the Webb Institute in Glen Cove, NY, also highlighted – although they counteract that with an impressive record of alumni contributions.

“We currently have the highest donation rate in the country – 73 percent of our alumni donated last year,” Webb’s Admissions Director Lauren Carballo said. “I believe this also speaks volumes about how our alumni feel about Webb, which many call their second home.”

A major feature of most of these tuition-free programs is the expectation that a student will volunteer their time or take a part-time job. This echoes President Obama’s statement regarding “responsible students” and exemplifies how a college should be interested in more than just the academic education of young people.

Real world work experience and philanthropy offer students the chance to mature, develop life skills and have valuable experiences to include on their resumes, thereby further improving their career prospects.

Mike Famighette, Director of Full-Time MBA Programs at Isenberg School of Management explains how the program works at his school.

“All students admitted into the Full-time MBA at the Isenberg School of Management receive a fellowship. In exchange for 10 hours of work per week, at Isenberg and/or UMass Amherst, students receive a tuition waiver and a waiver

or reduction of most fees. The out-of-pocket costs for our students are just under \$2,000 for the first year and just under \$1,600 for the second year. Students here earn almost \$10,000 each year for their work, which is paid on a bi-weekly basis,” he told College Choice.

It may be true that there is no such thing as a free lunch, but these colleges are proving that a free education may just be within reach, especially for responsible students.

These students then go on to become committed and generous alumni, as Mike Famighette explains, “Our students are aware of the value they receive, and I think when they’re in a position to help the next generation of students, they will be the ones to step up.”