

'I have a future': how Biden's free community college plan could transform education

Advocates argue the proposal would open doors to students who have historically been excluded from higher education and boost the economy



▲ Abdi Yusuf will earn an associates degree and plans to continue to a four-year college, thanks to Seattle Promise, a free tuition program. Photograph: Annabel Clark

Abdi Yusuf's first day of middle school was tough. He was 13 years old, and he and his family had recently fled to Texas from South Africa as refugees. Yusuf had just finished the equivalent of third grade in Cape Town but found himself in eighth grade in the US, and remembers trying to decipher a math worksheet and to find a friend amid a sea of unfamiliar faces.

"That was really hard because in my school in Africa, I always had friends," said Yusuf, now 19.

In high school, his family moved to Seattle and he started to find his footing, even taking a college-level English class in his senior year. Yusuf dreamed of attending college to become a social worker to help refugees like himself, but after skipping so many grades and being uprooted, his grade point average was low. Questions were looming about how he and his mother, who had three other children at home, could afford college.

That's when he was introduced to Seattle Promise, a program fully launched last year that offers free community college tuition to all of the city's high school graduates, along with class guidance, an equity stipend and internship opportunities.

Yusuf enrolled last fall.

"I lost all hope, you know, and because of Seattle Promise, I can go to college now," he said.

The Seattle program is one of at least 350 state and local initiatives across the US launched in recent years offering free tuition and extra support for those attending a community college, which typically consists of a two-year program where students earn an associate's degree and credits toward a bachelor's degree. The programs relieve financial burdens on students and their families and have been shown to increase enrollment and completion.

In April, Joe Biden unveiled a bold proposal that would implement these programs on a national scale as part of his \$1.8tn American Families Plan. Such a plan would remove critical financial barriers and thus fling open the doors to a form of higher education with the largest student body of any type of college and made up of students with some of the greatest economic challenges.

"Community colleges meet students where they are," Biden said at the time. "We can't afford to exclude so many from continuing their education just because they come from certain areas or income brackets."

The plan is expected to increase educational attainment across the US, according to Mark Huelsman, Policy Fellow at Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. The result would be potentially more people entering the labor force with a credential or diploma, or transferring to a four-year school. And given that more than half of Latinx undergraduates and a little less than half of Black undergraduates attend community college, millions of students of color would undoubtedly benefit.

Advocates say the program would also serve to significantly boost the economy. A 2020 report out of Georgetown University found that a national tuition-free program could result in hundreds of billions of dollars in federal and state tax revenue and private after-tax earnings gains.

"These benefits would outweigh the costs of tuition-free-college programs, with yearly tax revenue exceeding the annual cost within the first 10 years after a tuition-free program is implemented," the report stated.

After a year battered by Covid-19, in which community college enrollment fell by more than 11%, many in the education community rejoiced at Biden's plan.

"From an economic, enrollment and certainly an equity standpoint, this could have a powerful impact, and could accelerate our progress in not only getting people back in college, but get them educated, and get them redeployed in an ever-changing economy," said J Noah Brown, president and chief executive of the Association of Community College Trustees.

The proposal calls for free community college for first-time students and adult learners. It also includes a \$62bn grant program to help "strengthen completion and retention rates" and raises the cap on Pell grants, the federal government's need-based grant program for undergraduate students, by \$1,400 a year.

It would be funded primarily through tax hikes on the wealthy. Experts predict it would be an opt-in program: the federal government would cover 75% of tuition while the states that sign on would be responsible for the rest.

In Seattle, community college enrollment has more than doubled and graduation rates have reached twice the national average since the Promise program was launched two years ago. Chancellor Shouan Pan of Seattle Colleges praised Biden's proposal: "It's only going to help more students who are not in the Promise program."

But others, particularly Republican lawmakers, have resisted, condemning the plan as expensive and directed at a form of higher education that in many states is already low-cost or free, and has worse graduation rates than four-year schools.

Lindsey Burke, director for the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation, a [conservative thinktank](#), has criticized the proposal for its \$109bn price tag, saying it would place a financial burden on taxpayers.

During a recent Senate education committee hearing, Senator Richard Burr of North Carolina voiced concerns about rewarding states that have not kept their tuition fees low.

"'Make college free' and 'cancel debt' may be good liberal talking points, but back home in North Carolina we've already made community college very affordable, and in West Virginia and Arizona they've made community college tuition less than the average Pell Grant," the Republican senator said

However, Tennessee - a deeply red state - was one of the first in the US to launch a tuition-free community college program, and has touted its success. James Snider, Tennessee Promise director, said they now receive applications from about 90% of the state's graduating high school class. And after expanding to include adult learners in 2018, they credentialed more than 1,200 students in the program within the first year.

"When our then governor stood up there and essentially said, 'I want to be able to tell kindergarteners that you can go to school for free,' it has power," said Snider. "And it truly has been a powerful statement for our state. It's been a powerful movement for our state."

When asked about Biden's proposal, Snider called it an "excellent idea".

"I think that expanding this across the country can only do good," he added

Community colleges offer adult learners a chance at a degree

Warren Rigby decided to give higher education one more chance, 15 years after dropping out of a four-year college in Pennsylvania because he didn't have adequate financial aid. This time, he tried a community college.

At 35 years old, Rigby enrolled at Hudson County Community College in New Jersey, where he took night classes surrounded by students in similar situations. But taking out loans to pay for the tuition meant adding to the nearly \$27,000 he already owed from his initial stint in higher education. So, he said, it was a relief when in his second year, he qualified for the state's tuition-free college program.

"When you go into higher education, whether it be a college or university, you understand that there's obviously fees that are associated with this," he said. "But what a lot of students don't necessarily realize is how quickly they add up."

He graduated last year and will be starting at a four-year college as a political science major in the fall. He said he hopes to get a job in government so he can help make a difference for other members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Public community college tuition varies widely between states. California and New Mexico have the least expensive tuition, with price tags under \$2,000, while in Vermont the cost tops \$8,600, according to College Board.

But Huelsman cautioned that just because community colleges have relatively low tuition doesn't mean they're low-cost for students.

"There's the cost of living and the cost of childcare and the cost of rent and the cost of books and the cost of supplies and computers, you name it," he said. "All of these indirect costs tend to build up in a way that makes community college actually quite unaffordable for students."

Biden's proposal to remove tuition costs while increasing other aid to students could make college truly affordable, Huelsman said.

The proposal also focuses resources on students that have historically been overlooked.

It opens the free tuition program to the "Dreamers", the hundreds of thousands of young people who were brought to the US unlawfully as children, but are allowed to live in the country legally. While they may study and work, they can't access Pell grants and often don't qualify for institutional aid or even in-state tuition.

Biden's proposal also calls for two years of subsidized tuition for students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) or Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI) whose families earn less than \$125,000.

For students in one of the 35 fully accredited tribal colleges and universities (all of which offer associate's degrees), where the majority of students are very low-income, free tuition could be transformative.

Carrie Billy, president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation, reports that a community college in North Dakota started offering free tuition and saw its enrollment triple.

But she said, given the structure of these institutions, in which the federal government is responsible for operating support, she worries about the financial burden the colleges might bear. .

"We're afraid that with free tuition, our colleges that already have inadequate operating support, can't do bonding and things like that, are then going to be asked to bear a disproportionate share of the tuition costs," she said.

Lezli Baskerville, president of the not-for-profit National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, questioned whether the proposal's plan for HBCUs, TCUs and MSIs is the best method for helping a diverse group of students earn a degree.

"Additional public debate is necessary with regard to creating an entitlement to the first two years of community college for any students who desire to attain a two-year college degree and not doing the same for those desirous of attaining a four-year degree at an HBCU, TCU, or MSI," she told the Guardian in an email.

For Yusuf, the program in Seattle came at just the right time. But it has not been without its challenges. He struggled in math - failing the class twice - and when school went online because of the pandemic, he took the spring quarter off because he didn't feel like he was getting the help he needed.

However, Yusuf said he was eager to return to school in the fall. He plans to transfer to a four-year university after graduation and then he hopes to fulfill his dream to become a social worker.

"Because of Seattle Promise, I feel like I have a long future ahead of me now," Yusuf said. "I get to go to college. I get to get a job that I've always wanted ever since I came here."