

N. Mexico in race for tuition-free college

EDUCATION | States scramble to come up with their own initiatives.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — As universities across the United States face steep enrollment declines, New Mexico's government is embarking on an experiment to fight that trend: tuition-free higher education for all state residents.

After President Joe Biden's plan for universal free community college failed to gain traction in Congress, New Mexico, one of the nation's poorest states, has emerged with perhaps the most ambitious plans as states scramble to come up with their own initiatives.

A new state law approved in a rare show of bipartisanship allocates almost 1% of the state's budget toward covering tuition and fees at public colleges and universities, community colleges and tribal colleges. All state residents, from new high school graduates to adults enrolling part time, will be eligible regardless of family income.

The program is also open to immigrants regardless of their immigration status.

Some legislators and other critics question whether there should have been income caps and whether the state, newly flush with oil and gas revenue, can secure longterm funding to support the program beyond its first year. The legislation, which seeks to treat college as a public resource similar to

primary and secondary education, takes effect in July.

Although nearly half the states have embraced similar initiatives that seek to cover at least some tuition expenses for some students, New Mexico's law goes further by covering tuition and fees before other scholarships and sources of financial aid are applied, enabling students to use those other funds for expenses such as lodging, food or child care.

"The New Mexico program is very close to ideal," said Michael Dannenberg, vice president of strategic initiatives and higher education policy at the nonprofit advocacy group Education Reform Now. Considering the state's income levels and available resources, he added that New Mexico's program is among the most generous in the country.

Dannenberg emphasized that New Mexico is going beyond what larger, more prosperous states like Washington and Tennessee have done. Programs in other states often limit tuition assistance to community colleges, exclude some residents because of family income or impose conditions requiring students to work part time.

Some supporters and critics of the New Mexico law warn that it could be more of a trial run than established practice. Building on earlier tuition-assistance programs, the measure allocates \$75 million during the 2023 fiscal year, of which \$63 million comes from pandemic relief funds. Beyond its first year, legislators will need to draw funds from other sources to keep the program going.

Even so, prominent backers in both parties express confidence that the program is here to stay in a state where Hispanic and Native American residents together account for more than 60% of the population. In a sign

that consensus on tuition-free college is building around New Mexico, a group of Republicans in the Democratic-controlled Legislature crossed party lines to support the measure.

Simplified

State Sen. Cliff Pirtle, a Republican, said he was confident the program would receive legislative funding well into the future. He voted for the legislation, he said, largely because of the need to help adults who have halted studies for economic reasons.

Additionally, citing the law's expansive approach to covering tuition at a wide array of institutions, he said that the state needed people to get training in areas like nursing, truck driving and maintenance of electricity systems.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat, floated the free-college proposal in 2019.

When the pandemic disrupted negotiations over the program, she directed officials to overhaul the proposal to make it easier for potential recipients to grasp.

Stephanie Rodriguez, New Mexico's secretary of higher education, said the governor told people crafting the measure to "make it as simple and all-encompassing as possible for a student, their parent or guardian to navigate — and we heard that."

Legislators simplified the program while increasing its funding to \$75 million — nearly 1% of the state's overall budget of \$8.5 billion — from initial estimates of \$25 million to \$35 million. With the aim of reducing student

debt, they also focused on allowing students to capitalize on other scholarships without having to scramble to cover the cost of attendance.

The program is unusually inclusive, covering tuition for people in prison and immigrants in the country illegally, as well as Native Americans from tribal nations whose boundaries extend into neighboring states, meaning someone from the Navajo Nation in Arizona can be considered a New Mexico resident for tuition purposes.

Recent economic shifts in New Mexico, which has long dealt with entrenched poverty, also made more funding available. New Mexico now ranks as the second-largest oil producing state in the country behind Texas.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine upended global energy markets, efforts to boost domestic oil production are nurturing another boom in New Mexico's oil fields.

In the Permian Basin, which New Mexico shares with Texas, output is expected to surge 70,000 barrels a day to a record 5.208 million barrels a day in April.

"We build the budget on \$60-a-barrel oil," Lujan Grisham said, noting that oil prices have recently been hovering around \$100 a barrel.

She argued that oil royalties, along with resurgent tourism and hospitality industries, could serve as pillars to bolster college access for years to come.

Taking into account the state's population of about 2.1 million, she added, "New Mexico has more education resources, frankly, than any state in the nation."

Enrollment crisis

The program's opponents express concern about whether the plans are sustainable, citing volatile oil prices and the governor's efforts to ramp up renewable energy sources in a bid to decrease fossilfuel consumption. State Sen. David Gallegos, a Republican, said he had voted against the measure out of concern that recipients would get their degrees and use their training for jobs out of state.

"If they go through college, graduate and leave for Texas or elsewhere, we lose that investment," Gallegos said.

Other states are assembling their own programs: The University of Texas System created a \$300 million endowment in February that expands tuition assistance for thousands of students. Michigan provides free college to residents who were essential workers during the pandemic, while also covering tuition at community colleges for people 25 or older.

Reflecting challenges before and during the pandemic, some initiatives have not produced the desired results. Even after California recently expanded free-tuition opportunities, enrollment at its community colleges fell nearly 15% in 2021 from a year earlier.

The push for tuition-free higher education comes amid a broader enrollment crisis in the United States. Total undergraduate enrollment fell by 6.6% from 2019 to 2021, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Public colleges and universities in New Mexico are not insulated from those forces. The University of New Mexico, which was founded in 1889 before New Mexico gained statehood, saw its enrollment in Albuquerque fall

by 4,580 students, from 26,218 in 2017 to 21,638 in 2021.

“The timing of this, in some ways, is very fortuitous,” said James Holloway, provost of the University of New Mexico, noting how many students had abandoned their studies during the pandemic. Holloway, a professor of nuclear engineering, added that the program would make the university more competitive in attracting students weighing offers from out-of-state colleges and universities.