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Students registering Tuesday at Bunker Hill Community College face an annual cost of nearly \$5,400.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

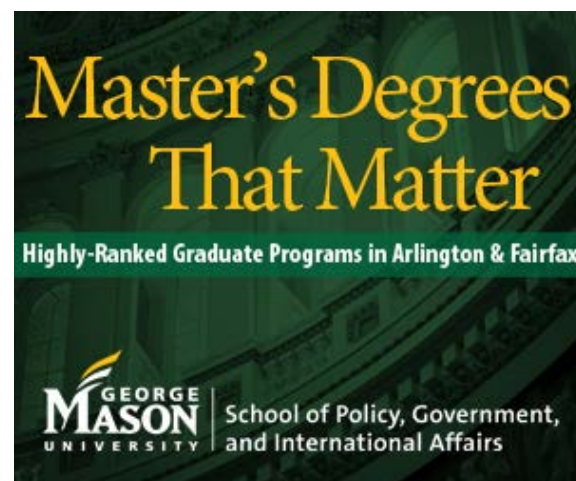
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 21, 2015

Local students, college presidents, and higher education advocates are expressing optimism over President Obama's ambitious proposal to make community college free for many students.

Under the plan, which the president unveiled this month and which was highlighted Tuesday night during his State of the Union speech, community college students would be eligible for the benefit if they attend at least half time, maintain a grade-point average of at least 2.5, and make "steady progress" toward graduating. The proposal, "America's College Promise," would benefit an estimated 9 million students annually.



Justina Guirguis, 22, of Milford, who started her second semester at Bunker Hill Community College on Tuesday, said that if Obama's proposal became a reality, it could transform the lives of prospective students who never enroll in school, and those who



drop out, for financial reasons.

“You would see a lot more students in community college and graduating if it was free,” Guirguis said.

She said she is able to afford her studies thanks to financial aid and working part time. But, she said, “I know a lot of people who didn’t come back this semester because they just didn’t have enough money.”

Questions about the initiative remain, including about how it would be funded when the state faces a projected \$765 million deficit this fiscal year. Under the plan, estimated to cost \$60 billion over a decade, states could have to pay for roughly 25 percent of the cost.

Bunker Hill Community College president Pam Eddinger said she expects the biggest challenge will be garnering enough political support for the funding to implement and sustain the proposal. It is expected to face opposition in the Republican-controlled Congress.

“I don’t think that, philosophically, anyone is going to say ‘That is not a good idea,’ ” Eddinger said. “Universal higher education, at the community college level, is inevitable. Everybody needs some college to remain in the middle class.”

The 15-campus community college network educates about 47 percent of the 300,000 students enrolled in the state’s public higher education system. The average annual cost of attending a community college in Massachusetts is about \$5,375; the national average is \$3,800.

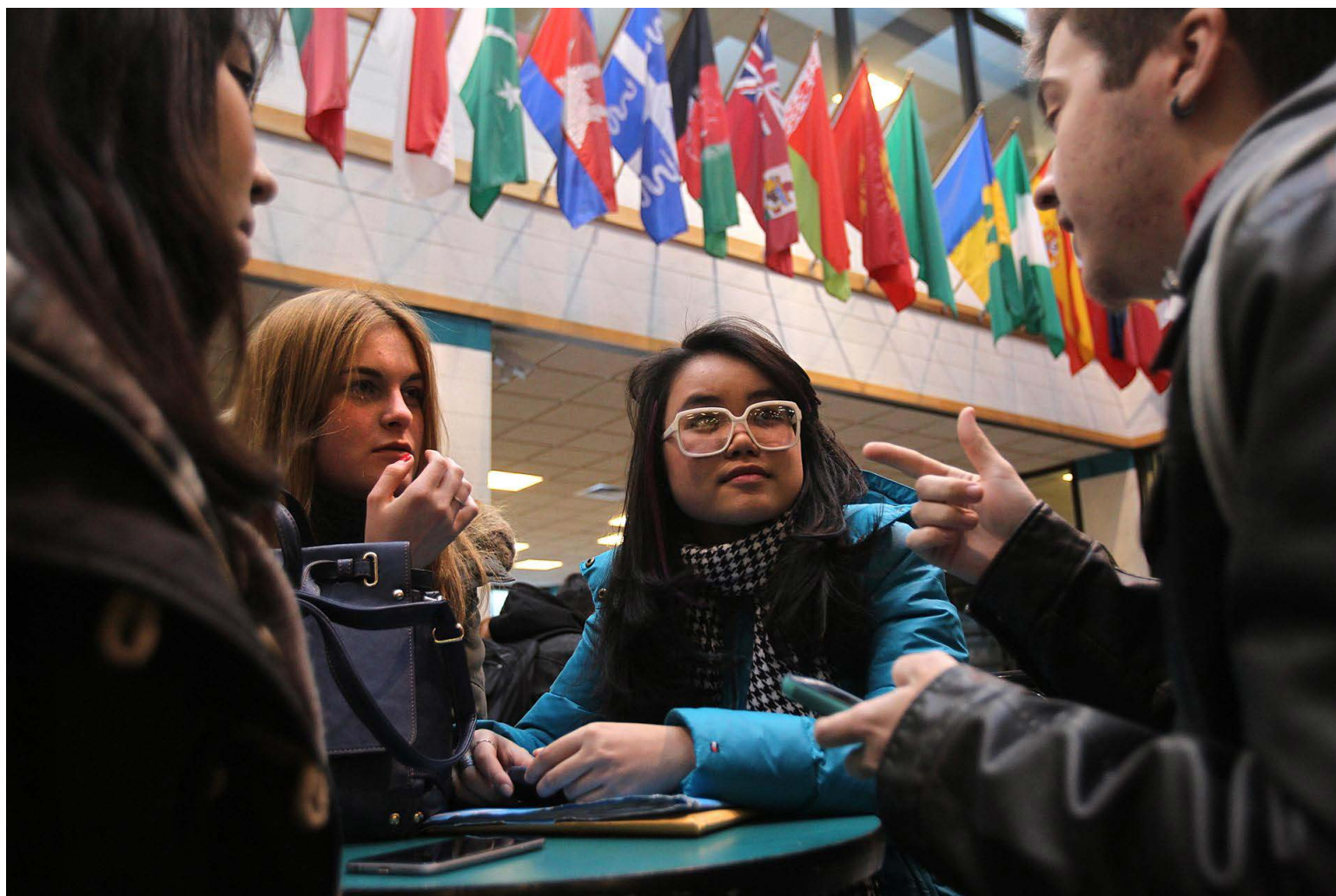
With many details still unknown, Governor Charlie Baker declined to take a position, saying in a statement that he looks forward to reviewing Obama’s proposal “to consider the educational as well as budgetary impact it would have on the Commonwealth.”

Baker has said he wants to make higher education more affordable, and to improve its connections to the workforce.

Many of the state’s community college leaders said they generally back Obama’s proposal and are hopeful it will someday become a reality, but they also want to see more specifics before signing on fully, including what, if any, effect it would have on funding for federal Pell Grant need-based scholarships.

“The biggest question is: If it works, how do we sustain it?” said Lane Glenn, president of Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill. “What happens when the next recession hits? What happens when the next president or Congress makes budget cuts?”

John O'Donnell, president of Massachusetts Bay Community College in Wellesley, said he believes the state eventually will move to this kind of model. “For economic and social justice reasons, it's absolutely necessary,” he said.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Bunker Hill Community College students could benefit from the president's proposal.

In addition to benefiting students, the proposal could provide an important economic boost, supporters said.

Data show graduates from public colleges are more likely to stay and work in Massachusetts than those from private schools. Richard Freeland, the state's higher education commissioner, said he believes the Obama proposal would not only allow more people to enroll in public higher education, but would also increase their likelihood of graduating and of seeking a bachelor's degree.

However, some said they believe the proposal is misguided.

Judah Bellin, a higher education researcher and associate editor at Manhattan Institute, a conservative think

tank, said he's concerned that it could flood community colleges with students without doing enough to increase graduation rates.

"We don't care about having more kids in community college if they're not graduating," he said. "There really has to be some sort of accountability measure."

Obama's proposal was inspired by similar programs in Tennessee and Chicago.

In 2007, then-Governor Deval Patrick proposed making community college free in Massachusetts. But the idea was scrapped a year later amid significant state budget cuts.

State Representative Sean Garballey, an Arlington Democrat, said he plans to refile a measure that would provide scholarships covering one year of tuition and fees to help some low-income students finish their studies at any public college or university in the state.

Amy Blanchette, 31, a single mother from Fall River, could benefit from such a proposal. She works part time to cover living expenses, and for school relies on Pell Grant funding, which paid for all but \$300 of her first semester at Bristol Community College this fall.

However, Blanchette said, she worries whether she will be able to continue to pay for classes when she transfers to University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in two years. "I can barely afford to live right now as it is. My paycheck just goes to groceries and rent," she said.

"Anything we do to give more people the chance to go to college is a great idea . . . people could benefit so much from it."

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"You would see a lot more students in community college graduating if it was free," said Justina GuirGuis, a Bunker Hill student on Obama's plan.

Material from wire services was included in this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele)

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