February 18, 2015

Tennessee's Task: Turn 'Free Community College' From a Rallying Cry Into a Success

Angela Lewis Foster, Chattanooga Times Free Press, AP Images

Gov. William E. Haslam, shown talking with students during a visit to a high school in Red Bank, Tenn., last summer, has set a goal of having 55 percent of Tennesseeans hold a college credential by 2025. The Tennessee Promise could help reach that goal, by encouraging more of the state's high-school graduates to go on to college.

By Eric Kelderman

Columbia, Tenn.

Amanda Raven Smith wants to go to college. But she doesn't want to have the same experience as her father, who spent decades paying off student loans for a degree he couldn't afford to finish.

"I had been planning on it," she said, "but didn't have a way to do the funding."

So on a Thursday evening in January, Ms. Smith, a senior at Columbia Central High School, in Maury County, Tenn., was one of some 600 students who attended a meeting at the school. The objective: to learn about the Tennessee Promise, the

program guaranteeing that the state will cover tuition and required fees for two years of community or technical college for Ms. Smith and every other graduating high-school senior in the state.

The meeting here in Columbia, the seat of Maury County, was one of more than 300 events held last month to explain the ins and outs of a program that has become a phenomenon across the state. Nearly 90 percent of high-school seniors in Tennessee applied, and more than 9,000 adults have volunteered to serve as mentors for those applicants.

It's a large-scale experiment, and higher-education experts and policy makers across the nation will be watching to see if the lure of tuition-free college attracts students—and keeps them in college long enough to complete a degree or vocational program.

The early results are encouraging, but they're far from a guarantee of success. While two-year colleges are bracing for enrollment increases, more students in classrooms won't necessarily translate into an increase in college completions—the real goal of the Promise.

If enrollments increase too much, community colleges may struggle with the cost of adding enough instructors. An influx of students who are unprepared for the rigors of college learning may lead to more dropouts along the way. And some students still may not have enough financial support to attend full time (a requirement of the program) without working, hampering their academic progress.

Still, the state's guarantee has opened up the possibility of college to students like Ms. Smith, who have long assumed that college was too expensive for them.

"I really am excited," she said. "It's one of those things that's really out of the blue."

A State Volunteers

Tennessee is trying to solve the problem for which every state in the nation is seeking a solution: how to increase the percentage of residents with some sort of college degree or work-force certificate.

Gov. William E. Haslam, a Republican, has set a goal of having 55 percent of Tennesseeans hold a college credential by 2025. Like many other states, Tennessee has taken steps to improve college-completion rates. But to reach the governor's goal, the Volunteer State also has to increase the proportion of high-school graduates who attend college.

To achieve that goal, the governor proposed the Tennessee Promise, which was based on a smaller effort begun in 2008 by a nonprofit group in Knoxville when the governor was mayor of that city.

The response to the state's offer has surpassed expectations and caught the attention of policy makers across the country. Lawmakers and higher-education leaders in other states have been in touch with officials in Tennessee, and President Obama even traveled to the state to announce his own proposal to provide free community college on a national level.

Enthusiasm for the program runs high at Columbia Central High, where the meeting is a combination of a college-recruiting fair and a pep rally. Around 4:30 p.m., as students and parents start to stream into the school, staff members direct them into the gymnasium for information packets and free pizza.

Within an hour, the main floor of the auditorium is crammed with students from four high schools, their parents, and volunteer mentors from across Maury County, about 30 miles south of Nashville.

A representative of Tennessee Achieves, the nonprofit group that inspired the statewide program, quizzes students on the basic requirements, including filling out their forms for federal student aid, applying to colleges, meeting with their mentors

again in March, and completing eight hours of volunteer service. Admissions counselors from local community and technical colleges also speak, promoting their programs of study.

Then everyone marches to the cafeteria, where mentors sit at numbered tables and talk briefly with groups of six to 10 students assigned to that mentor.

The mentors are an eclectic lot, reflecting how widely the state's residents have embraced the Promise. They've been recruited from Chambers of Commerce, Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, churches, local governments, schools, and community colleges. The mentors' duties are simple—just to follow up with the students and nudge them, if necessary, to meet the program's requirements. But they also provide a personal connection to the college-enrollment process, in some cases for students whose own parents did not earn a college degree.

Crystal Estes, a kindergarten teacher in Columbia who signed up to be a mentor, said she wanted to share the value of her own experience: two years at Columbia State Community College and two more at Middle Tennessee State University, from which she graduated in 2012. Her older sister also spent two years at a community college before finishing her bachelor's degree, she said.

Adrienne Shelton, a school counselor from Lewisburg, a half-hour drive from Columbia, also signed up to be a mentor.

"Most of the parents in our community did not go to college," said Ms. Shelton, who works at a small school with about 650 students from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade. "I decided to do this for the kids at our school."

Little Money, Big Message

As of late January, it was too early to know how much state money, if any, each of the students would receive through the Tennessee Promise.

State officials estimate that the average Tennessee Promise student will receive a little less than $1,000 per year. In fact, many students who sign up for the program will not get any money through the program because they are eligible for a full Pell Grant of $5,700—nearly $2,000 more than the cost of full-time tuition at a community-college in Tennessee.

The Tennessee Promise is a "last dollar" scholarship, which means that the state will cover only the tuition costs left after a student applies for other forms of financial aid, such as a Pell Grant or the state's Hope Scholarship, which has a minimum grade-point-average requirement.

That last-dollar approach keeps the cost of the Promise relatively low and politically palatable in a conservative state whose lawmakers are stingy about government spending. The money also comes from state lottery proceeds, not tax dollars—another detail that makes the program easier for legislators to swallow.

The small amount of money is meant to send a big message, said Governor Haslam during an interview in his office. For most families, "the funding gap is not that big, but they don't know that," he said. "We want to push down that barrier."

Ms. Shelton said school counselors had been pushing families to fill out the federal-aid forms for years, often to no avail. The difference now, she said, is that counselors can use the catchphrase that community college is free.

"It's a guarantee," she said.

How Much Will 'Free' Cost?

Many of the students who showed up for the meeting at Columbia Central High could end up enrolling at nearby Columbia State Community College, which serves one of the poorest counties in the state, as well as one of the wealthiest.

Like the state's other community colleges, Columbia State has embraced the Tennessee Promise with promotional events on its campus, including days set aside to

help students fill out federal student-aid forms and a breakfast meeting for mentors. Nearly 50 faculty and staff members have even volunteered to mentor students, said Janet F. Smith, president of the college.

But the program could be a mixed blessing for the institution, which now enrolls about 5,100 students. By late January, the college had already received more than 1,100 applications—some 700 more than it had received at the same time a year ago, college officials said.

The college projects that enrollment this fall will increase by 1,300 students, most of them signed up through the Tennessee Promise, President Smith said. To accommodate those students, who must attend full time, the college will probably have to add class times in the mornings and late afternoons, and will have to hire as many as six new full-time faculty members.

The new hires will cost about $500,000, Ms. Smith said; that money will have to come from the college's contingency funds. Because most of the state's higher-education appropriation is awarded for outcomes such as credit and degree completions, the college won't get any direct state money for the increased enrollment.

In his statehouse office, Governor Haslam said he was "intently watching the impact on the community colleges, whether they are more vulnerable" because of the enrollment increases.

The governor's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year does include the full amount requested by the state's higher-education commission. He is also proposing $260-million for building projects at colleges across the state, which could provide extra classroom space for some community colleges.

A more difficult question is whether the Promise will attract the "right" kind of students: those who would not otherwise have gone to college.

At Columbia Central High School, students gave a wide variety of responses when asked whether the program had made a difference in their college plans.

For some, the Promise is only a backup plan. Jordan Bennett, a high-school senior from Mount Pleasant, Tenn., signed up for the program before he found out that he had been accepted at Bethel University and awarded a band scholarship. He attended last month's meeting just to find out if he could use the state money at the private college. (The money can be used at both public and private colleges in the state, but only to pay tuition for an associate degree. The athletic-training program that Mr. Bennett wants to pursue doesn't qualify.)

"I'm going to Bethel even if I can't use the money," he said.

For Dylan Green, also from Mount Pleasant, the money is a sure way to a solid job. "I was going to try to go to college, but I didn't know how I was going to pay for it," said Mr. Green, who plans to learn machine tooling at a technical college while living at home.

For Tametra Claybourne, from Columbia, the program is a steppingstone to a career—she's hoping to study respiratory therapy at Columbia State. "I want it for myself," she said. "I want to be successful."

Even with her tuition paid, though, she will have to cover some living expenses, like her car insurance and phone. "Without the Promise, I would still go," she said. But the free-college plan has changed the calculus for her: "I don't want to go into debt."

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