

Tuition-free community college can be a reality in Los Angeles: Scott Svonkin

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Los Angeles Community College District should work to make tuition free for all qualifying students, writes board President Scott Svonkin. (File photo)

By Scott Svonkin

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As the presidential debates have shown, the candidates are being tested about their views on making college more affordable. President Obama helped galvanize the debate by introducing a plan in February for two years of tuition-free community college education for students who maintain a 2.5 GPA.

Unfortunately, the president's plan or any similar plan is not likely to be approved in a gridlocked Washington anytime soon.

Make no mistake: I wholeheartedly support President Obama's plan that calls for the federal government to cover 75 percent of the revenues community colleges would lose by going tuition-free.

But I also believe that if Washington can't make college affordability initiatives a reality, then states and local communities must do the job.

The exciting news is that a growing number of states (Tennessee, Oregon and Minnesota) and local communities (in Pennsylvania and Illinois) are already moving to implement the spirit, if not the letter, of President Obama's plan.

As president of the Los Angeles Community College District Board of Trustees, I believe it's time for LACCD to join this movement.

Actually tuition-free education is not new to California. Three decades ago, the state began offering tuition waivers to low-income community college students. About 5.2 million California students have benefited from the program, saving the average full-time student nearly \$600 per semester.

But California's generous program does not reach all students. At our nine Los Angeles community college campuses, 60 percent of our full and part-time students receive fee waivers. A survey by LACCD's institutional research office revealed the families of 89 percent of our students made less than \$59,000 a year. In fact, 56 percent of our students said their family income was less than \$30,000.

Clearly the vast majority — not just 60 percent — of LACCD's student body come from economically challenged conditions.

I believe this discrepancy is due to the daunting paperwork students must file to prove fee waiver eligibility. That red-tape is especially troublesome, I believe, for students who are the first in their families to attend college or come from recent-immigrant families. Something else to consider: 49 percent of LACCD students said "financial factors" were a moderate or major problem impeding their academic performance. Why? Possibly because more than half our students have off-campus jobs; 39 percent told us they were working 20-plus hours a week. Research tells us scholastic performance suffers when students work more than 10-15 hours a week, and that the need to work often causes students to drop out before attaining a certificate or degree.

It's time for the LACCD Board of Trustees and boards of our sister community college districts to work with business, philanthropy and government to find the resources to cover tuition and fees for all in-state students who are maintaining a 2.5 GPA. Let's lift at least some of the burden from the shoulders of working students so they can work less hours and study more.

LACCD's current fee-waiver program costs LACCD \$87 million in revenues; I believe an expanded fee-waiver program would be well worth the extra cost. Dealing with this issue is urgent.

By 2018, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, 63 percent of 46.8 million new and replacement job openings in our nation will require some college education. But the scary part is that only 40 percent of U.S. adults ages 25-64 will be prepared to work in those jobs, the Georgetown researchers estimated. And the numbers don't get better in out-years either.

To me it's clear: LACCD must join the movement inspired by the president and expand our local efforts to provide a tuition-free community college opportunity for all our students.

Scott Svonkin is president of the Los Angeles Community College District and serves on the nonpartisan National Advisory Board of the College Promise Campaign.