

Why Ontario is providing free community college tuition for eligible graduates



By [Neil Nisperos](#),

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ONTARIO >> Cash-strapped Ontario high school students wanting to go on to community college now have access to a residents-only scholarship.

A new program, Ontario's [Community College Promise](#), provides free tuition for up to two consecutive years at any community college in the state of California.

The program's goal is to expand access to higher education for students — and support the local economy, according to city officials.

"This is also an economic development tool," Ontario Councilwoman Debra Dorst-Porada said. "If we can raise our (graduation) rate, then businesses will be more likely to want to come here."

City Manager Al Boling said members of the business community report the available work pool does not have the skills they need.

"To bridge that gap, the city stepped in to provide funding for community college education in order to improve the skill set of our workforce on behalf of our business community," Boling said.

Dorst-Porada said she's excited that the word is getting out to students.

"When I go to the high schools and talk to the kids, they already know about the program," she said. "They're excited they can go to junior college."

This scholarship program is for Ontario residents who enroll as full-time students within six months of graduation from high school.

This year's graduating seniors, who are residents of Ontario, would be the first cadre of students eligible to participate, Boling said.

"Many of our residents choose to attend community colleges outside of the local area," Boling said. "We opened this statement so graduating seniors can choose the community college of their choice."

The scholarship provides for up to two years of tuition for eligible students who do not already qualify for the [California Community Colleges Board of Governors fee waiver program](#).

“Certainly my hope is it’s going to give students who have never had the opportunity to attend college, especially if they’ve had financial problems, and it’s going to offer a trained workforce that makes for great business retention,” said Councilman Alan Wapner.

Qualifications include:

- Must have lived in Ontario for the two-year period prior to high school graduation.
- Must complete and submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA.

Requirements include:

- [Complete and submit the city of Ontario scholarship program application](#) within six months of graduation from high school.
- Complete and submit the FAFSA and submit a new one each academic year that the student is registered/enrolled.
- Maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA in community college coursework.
- Complete community service hours set by Ontario.

The city of Montclair offers a similar program with Chaffey Community College. The Montclair City Council approved a program to pay for the first two years of tuition at Chaffey for students residing in the city. Participants must be enrolled at Montclair High School for four years, complete five hours of community service each year, maintain a 2.0 GPA and successfully graduate from Montclair High.

“We want to give our kids the opportunity to be able to pursue a degree that maybe they didn’t think was possible because of finances,” Marcia Richter, Montclair director of human services, said.

For more information about Ontario’s Community College Promise Program, call 909-395-2005 or go to www.ontarioca.gov/education. For more information about Montclair’s program, go to www.cityofmontclair.org/depts/human_services/motc/program_information.asp