

New California Budget Would Stop Short of 'Debt-Free' College But Takes Smaller Steps on Costs



Friday June 16, 2017

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Three months ago, Democratic legislators unveiled a bold “debt-free college” plan that sought to eliminate the need for nearly 400,000 students to take out loans to finance their University of California and California State degrees.

Now, they’re poised to approve a budget that includes more modest efforts to chip away at the spiraling costs of attending college.

“We didn’t get into this problem overnight and we’re not going to get out of it overnight either,” said Democratic Assemblyman Kevin McCarty, who helped lead the proposal. “This is a long-term conversation ... that I think the Assembly and frankly the Legislature is totally committed to.”

Assembly Democrats had proposed new scholarships—which would supplement existing aid programs—that would offset the cost of room and board, textbooks and other living expenses that tend to be bigger drivers of college costs than tuition. The fully implemented plan would cost \$1.6 billion per year; legislators had suggested phasing in the program over five years, with an initial cost of \$320 million.

The budget doesn’t put any money toward such grants. Instead, it directs the California Student Aid Commission to consider how to consolidate existing scholarships in ways that would lower students’ overall college costs, including non-tuition expenses such as housing and transportation.

There are other nods toward the college affordability issue in the budget. The plan maintains the Middle Class Scholarship—which Gov. Jerry Brown had proposed axing—and allocates \$50 million in grants for community college students to cover living expenses. It also puts \$3 million toward a state-sponsored college savings account, in which the state will match up to \$200 for low-income families who open such accounts for their young children.

Left out of the budget was a proposal to make the first year of community college tuition-free for all full-time students. Democratic Assemblyman Miguel Santiago, who has championed the idea, said he’ll continue to pursue it through his bill, AB 19. The measure currently doesn’t have any funding attached to it but he said he’s seeking ways to repurpose existing community college money.

Santiago called the budget “a step in the right direction” for tackling the high cost of college. “This is going to become a conversation that is important every single year as we go through the budget process, and that hasn’t happened in the past,” he said.