

College officials say free tuition good idea, unlikely

by Nathan Woosley

College is expensive. Tuition costs continue to rise and many students are burdened with mountains of debt. What if community college was free though? Paid for by taxpayers the same as high school. If federal and state lawmakers are successful, it could be the new reality.

Recently at the State of the Union address, President Obama proposed that all community college be "As free and universal as high school." Under the proposal, the federal government would pay for 75 percent of college tuition with states picking up the remainder of the tab, if they choose to opt in.

The proposal also requires that states better align their community college programs with high school programs so as to avoid remedial classes. The program will also mandate better student support and advising services. Jim Huckestein, vice president of college services at Clackamas Community College said, "The college is already working on many of those programs ... with the increase in students and mandatory improvements, we need a comprehensive plan that covers more than just tuition."

The proposed program would be eligible to all students with a GPA of 2.5 or higher who stay on track to graduate and remain in school at least part-time. With the current political climate and a Republican congress, the proposal may remain just that, a proposal.

Political science instructor at CCC James Hite seemed hesitant when asked how likely it is that the federal bill pass, "Not a very good chance, though it's a good idea theoretically. Financing will be an issue." The question regarding how the \$60 billion program would be funded still remains as the Obama plan has yet to outline how it would be paid. Not to mention the proposal wouldn't cover textbooks or many of the other costs associated with community college.

Although Obama's proposal for free community college may remain just a talking point, don't rule out free college just yet.

The likelihood of state covered tuition remains a real possibility, due in part to a relatively small \$25 million cost. Under the Oregon plan proposed



President Barack Obama greets students at his State of the Union address in January.

by senate education chairman Mark Hass, students would still receive all existing state and federal grants, pay \$50 per class and leave the state to pick up the remainder of the bill. The plan would not cover boarding or other expenses.

Hite still isn't convinced. When asked if he thought the state had a better chance of passing the bill he said, "The state is pretty broke and not very good at funding programs like this."

Huckestein had similar feelings on the bill, "The state has very limited ways it can pay for it. One way is to shift the cost to those who can afford community college with a tuition increase."

However the idea that community college could be paid by state institutions is not a wild or even untested idea. Recently Tennessee implemented a plan to pay for all graduated high school students tuition in a very similar plan to the Oregon proposal.

Still, many doubts about the program remain. Dave Hunt, board member at CCC and former member of the Oregon House of Representatives said, "[The program is] well-intentioned but misguided. We should focus on making school more affordable for lower income families, but students still need to have some skin in the game."

For now free community college remains a dream for many Americans unable to attend due to tuition costs. With a growing competitive global economy though, we may soon have to face the realization that competing for a job without post-secondary education is just not possible.