



September 22, 2021

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT Free Community College

PRO POINTS

- **Democrats are working to pass a \$3.5 trillion social spending bill that builds off of the Biden administration’s American Families Plan, a proposal to fund child care, free pre-K, and curb carbon emissions. The sweeping legislation would commit \$45.5 billion to making two years of community college free.**
- **The \$45.5 billion figure — over five years — is lower than President Joe Biden’s initial pitch of \$109 billion over 10 years for the nationwide program.**
- **Community colleges, which serve a large population of low-income students and students of color, saw enrollment plummet the most compared to other institutions during the pandemic.**
- **Democratic lawmakers introduced several bills on free college before Biden unveiled his plan. Some of the proposals would’ve gone further than the White House, including measures aimed at making four-year colleges free for many Americans.**

HOW WE GOT HERE

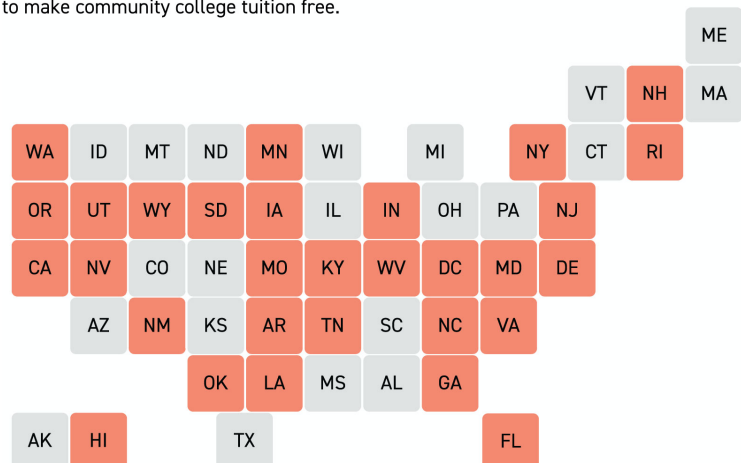
Tennessee became the first state to make community college free in 2014, and then-President Barack Obama followed up the next year with a proposal promoting something similar for every American. “If a state with Republican leadership is doing this, and a city with Democratic leadership is doing this, then how about we all do it?” Obama said at the time.

Six years later, Congress is in the midst of crafting legislation that would make two years of community college free nationwide. The proposal, based on Obama’s America’s College Promise plan, was the cornerstone of President Joe Biden’s higher education pitch on the campaign trail. Biden unveiled his American Families Plan three months into his presidency, saying the goal is to cultivate the “best-educated generation in U.S. history” by adding two years of free community college and two years of universal pre-K.

Democrats are now cobbling together the Build Back Better Act, the \$3.5 trillion social spending plan that would direct \$111 billion toward lowering the cost of higher education — and \$45.5 billion over five years to realize two years of tuition-free community college. The program is designed as a federal-state partnership that would allocate money to states each year using a formula initially based on the nationwide median of tuition and fees at community colleges. To be eligible for the program, states would have to agree to eliminate tuition and fees for all in-state students at their community colleges.

States lead the way on free community college

Twenty-nine states and Washington, D.C. have state-administered promise programs to make community college tuition free.



Source: College Promise



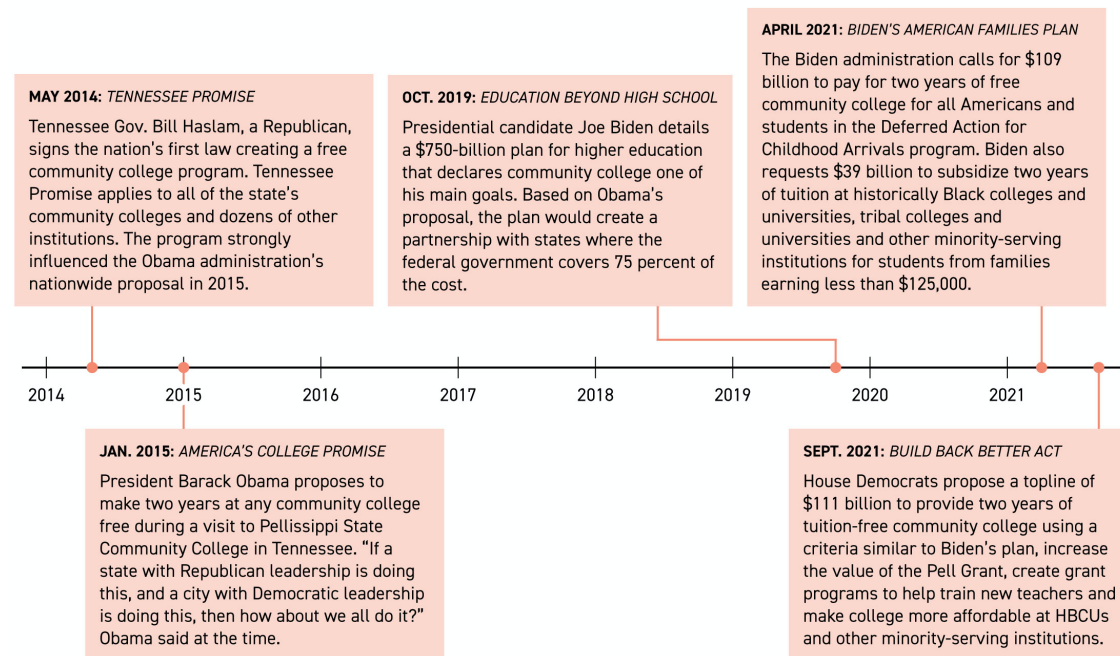
WHAT'S NEXT

Higher education groups are still pressing for more money in the Democratic spending bill. They are urging the Senate to include Sen. Martin Heinrich's College Completion Fund Act, which would authorize the Education Department to disburse \$62 billion over the next 10 years for "evidence-based strategies to help college students stay engaged in their education and complete their degrees." The pot of money for the grant program was initially proposed in Biden's American Families Plan with an emphasis on community colleges but was steeply pared down to \$9 billion in the reconciliation bill crafted by House Democrats.

The Build Back Better Act is still subject to considerable political haggling among Democrats and has several steps to complete before it goes to the House floor. Passing the bill in the Senate is more perilous as some moderate Democrats are already threatening to tank the proposal over its cost and whether the House will pass its infrastructure bill by a Sept. 27 deadline.

Key moments in the push for free community college

Democrats in Congress are on their way to making community college free nationwide. The plan stems from several proposals that have come over the past seven years.



Source: POLITICO reporting

POWER PLAYERS

- **Sens. Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema:** The two moderate Democrats have spent the last several weeks voicing their disapproval of the massive spending bill and, in the 50-50 Senate, hold the power to shape — or kill — the legislation. Manchin, of West Virginia, has called on Democrats to slow the process, while Sinema, of Arizona, has said she'll reject the bill if House Democrats don't first pass a separate infrastructure bill.
- **Martha Kanter:** An undersecretary of education under Barack Obama, Kanter has led the movement for free community college across the nation through her nonpartisan group College Promise.