



SENATE MAJORITY OFFICE

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Senate approves Oregon Promise: Free community college tuition program for students

SB 81 covers \$10 million to help Oregon students attain higher education

SALEM – The Oregon Senate today passed a major piece of higher education legislation, the Oregon Promise tuition waiver program. Senate Bill 81 is the result of years of research to design a way for the state to provide free community college to qualified Oregon students.

“Senate Bill 81 is an Oregon promise,” said Senator Mark Hass (D-Beaverton), chief advocate and architect of the bill. “We’re saying to our young people, if you finish high school, keep up your grades, and stay out of trouble, we promise to provide you with an opportunity to reach the middle class on your own.”

The Oregon Promise tuition waiver program will be administered by the Office of Student Access and Completion of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). The Oregon Promise is a “last-dollar” program, which means that students would first need to apply for and accept certain other available sources of financial aid before becoming eligible for waived tuition. To be eligible for waived tuition for courses taken at an Oregon community college, a student must meet specified criteria including: enrollment in a degree or certificate program, recent graduation from a diploma or GED program, Oregon residency, minimum grade point average, continued academic progress, and acceptance of all available federal and state aid.

The grant amount provided to the student will be calculated after factoring in any available aid or grants the student receives, and after subtracting \$50 to be paid by the student. The remaining unmet tuition cost to the student could be waived, covered under an Oregon Promise grant. Under the program, a grant must be at least \$1,000 or the actual cost of tuition,

and no more than the statewide average community college tuition. Grant amounts can be prorated for part-time students. The total amount of awards is limited to \$10 million per fiscal year, and if funding is not available to provide grants to all eligible students, HECC is authorized to establish the priority by which grants are awarded, which may include preferences for districts and high schools that meet criteria specified by HECC.

“Senate Democrats came into this session committed to taking bold action that improves access to higher education and workforce training for Oregonians,” said Senate Majority Leader Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland). “Today we are taking that bold action. The Oregon Promise is an innovative approach to improving our workforce, leveraging federal funds, and helping young Oregonians build a path to a successful career.”

Upon passage of SB 81, Oregon will become the second state in the nation with a free community college program. Tennessee was first, passing the policy into law a year ago. In Tennessee, 51 percent of those who signed up for free community college were eligible for full Pell grants of more than \$5,700 a year—meaning they will be in community college classes this fall in Tennessee at no cost to the state. In all, about 85 percent of those kids received full or partial grants. Tennessee has quickly become the number one state in the country in Pell Grant recipients.

SB 81 will now go to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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