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OPINION

New Jersey's free community college program should expand | Opinion

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Donald A. Borden, for the Inquirer



CAMDEN COUNTY COLLEGE



It's been said that no institution can be all things for all people. Community colleges offer a contrast to that opinion. In addition to providing transfer options to four-year colleges and universities through associate's degrees, community colleges offer myriad work and occupational training options that can lead to careers in almost any field.

New Jersey's community colleges are the largest provider of higher education in the state, with 325,000 students annually enrolled in credit and noncredit courses and customized training. That is why the recognition by both Gov. Phil Murphy and the Legislature of the value of community colleges is so critically important to the most at-risk students in our state. This semester, schools across New Jersey have welcomed the first round of around 13,000 qualifying students to attend college free of tuition since Murphy's administration announced its pilot program last September. Already, it's opening the door for students who otherwise could not afford a college education.

Many students at my institution, Camden County College, either remained or re-enrolled because they qualified for the Community College Opportunity Grant. If not for this funding, many of these students could not continue their education. At Camden County College, 286 students took advantage of this program and attended tuition-free. With this support they remain on track to complete their academic programs and find gainful employment, which can only benefit New Jersey's economy.

The Community College Opportunity Grant pilot effort is an important start. Murphy's current proposed budget includes resources to expand this program to all community colleges for the entire academic year.

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New Jersey should build on these initial efforts and expand this opportunity to more students. Currently, the program is limited to students in households earning less than \$45,000 per year. Many more students who have similar needs do not have access to this opportunity because they do not fall below the \$45,000 income threshold. In addition, [six of the state's 19 community colleges](#) were not chosen to participate in the initial phase of this program. This resulted in many extremely needy students across the state being left out of the equation. As the governor's proposal is being presented for the upcoming year, dependent part-time students living in a home making \$45,000 or less annually will no longer qualify for this program. These students are often in greater need than an independent student who qualifies under the same economic limit.

The first round of this grant also provided \$250,000 for all 19 community colleges to conduct outreach, enroll students, and counsel and provide support to those who are most at-risk. These dollars were cut from the current proposal, yet they are critically important to providing the vital protections to help students stay on track for successful completion. They also allow each of the community colleges to expand this assistance to students who may not receive fiscal benefits from the grant, but still require support, advisement, and mentoring. If completion is a primary concern, resources to help students along the way are critically important to this process.

New Jersey needs a highly skilled workforce. The secretary of higher education has set a goal of 65 percent of residents' holding a post-secondary credential by 2025. The expansion of the Community College Opportunity Grant to raise the limit of median household income levels, continue to support part-time students, and maintain the funding to support these students is critically important to this goal. These dollars can carve a path toward a post-high-school credential, leading to a living-wage job without crushing student debt, for thousands of students from middle-class, working families.

To quote from a [recent opinion article](#) in the New York Times: “It is astonishing that no rigorous research has established the minimum amount of money required to make community colleges successful, given their critical potential to increase social mobility for millions of students. Higher education, which is, after all, in the business of research, needs to figure out what it will take to support community college students, who have so much to contribute to our society, if only we would let them.”

It’s time for us to recognize the long-term benefits for all of the residents of New Jersey by supporting the success of our most economically challenged students.

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