

Opinion

COMMENTARY

Cuomo's 'free college' plan? Not so fast, Mr. Governor.

Richard Guarasci and James O'Keefe *Guest Columnists*

Wagner College and St. John's University strongly support scholarships and other initiatives that put college degrees within reach of more New Yorkers. That's why we have joined forces with the College of Staten Island in a program called 30 Thousand Degrees, in which we partner with public schools on the Island to prepare their students for college.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has put forward an initiative designed to make it easier for New Yorkers to afford college.

The Excelsior Scholarship, as he calls it, would cover the remaining tuition costs for students enrolled in the New York state and city college systems after their other grants are applied.

Students from families earning up to \$125,000 a year would qualify.

But that doesn't mean those students would get a free college education at the SUNY or CUNY college of their choice. Far from it.

Tuition accounts for only a quarter of the total cost of earning a degree in the SUNY and CUNY systems; the rest goes for room, board, books and supplies, which are not covered at all by the Excelsior Scholarship.

It is these costs, rather than tuition, that keep students from completing work on their degrees.

And to whom would the Excelsior Scholarship provide free tuition? Not those who need financial support the most.

The benefits extended by the Excelsior Scholarship are already covered for students whose families earn up to

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\$80,000 through New York state's longstanding Tuition Assistance Program (or TAP) and the federal Pell Grant program — meaning that the Excelsior Scholarship's benefits would go almost exclusively to families in the \$80,000 to \$125,000 annual income range.

And who would not benefit from Cuomo's "free tuition" plan? New York State residents attending independent, nonprofit colleges and universities in the Empire State, which produce more than half of all bachelor's degrees (51 percent) and the overwhelming majority of graduate degrees (72 percent of master's, 79 percent of doctoral and first professional degrees) earned each year in New York state.

The historic partnership between New York state's public and private colleges, supported for years by TAP, has made the residents of New York state among the best-educated in the nation. The Excelsior Scholarship would diminish that partnership.

In fact, a Georgetown University study of a similar free-tuition proposal, published last summer, suggests that the Excelsior Scholarship could result in a decline in enrollment at New York state's private colleges of between 7 and 15 percent — a loss for the Empire State that the SUNY and CUNY systems are hardly prepared to make up.

We salute the underlying intention of Cuomo's "free tuition" proposal, but we believe the interests of New York families with college-bound students would be better served by taking the resources that would have been dedicated to the Excelsior Scholarship and, instead: enhance the Tuition Assistance Program, which supports college educations for New Yorkers at the institutions of their choice; raise the TAP income limit to \$125,000; allow TAP funds to be used for room and board, books and fees, and make graduate students eligible for TAP funds, as they were in the past.

These simple adjustments to the governor's proposal would give his initiative maximum impact among those who need help the most, with the costs that most affect their degree aspirations, using the full array of higher education resources available to them throughout the Empire State.

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