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Education Law & Policy
May 12, 2014

Tennessee Promise:

Why Tennessee is making community colleges free and why Illinois should do the same

PART I. INTRODUCTION

In the United States, high school is free. Also free are middle school, elementary school, and kindergarten. Furthermore, universal preschool is strongly advocated for, and it is becoming increasingly clear that free preschool is as necessary for some students as free required schooling.¹ However, currently free education for all in the United States, regardless of socioeconomic status, ends with high school. Perhaps as a result, this is also where classroom education ends for many high school graduates.² Just 77% of U.S. students graduate from a secondary level of education (high school), and about 38% graduate from a post-secondary school (college).³ That means around half of all high school graduates go on to graduate from some form of post-secondary school; further, many students are asking whether college is actually worth its cost.⁴

Some argue that it would be beneficial for the United States to continue to provide a free education to students well past the 12th grade.⁵ Most recently, Tennessee has offered a solution that arguably will change the way United States citizen view education.⁶ Specifically, Tennessee lawmakers have overwhelmingly approved of a bill called “Tennessee Promise,” introduced by

¹ Nancy Folbre, *The Push for Universal Pre-K*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Sept. 30, 2013).

² THE LEARNING CURVE, *Country profiles: United States* (2013), available at <http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com/country-profiles/united-states>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Alison Griswold, *Skipping College Can Cost you \$800,000*, WWW.SLATE.COM (May 5, 2014), http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2014/05/05/is_college_worth_it_a_federal_reserve_study_on_earnings_and_tuition_costs.html.

⁵ Mary Beth Marklein, *Tenn. Governor Hatches Bold Tuition Plan: Free*, USA TODAY (Feb. 4, 2014).

⁶ *Id.*

Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam, which will provide every student in the state with two years of completely free community college.⁷ This seems to be a clear step toward creating a culture where college education takes on the same level of importance as elementary, middle, and high school, and Illinois should follow this trend by adopting similar laws.

In this paper, I will show that “Tennessee Promise” – Tennessee’s law providing free community college to high school graduates – will have a positive impact on the state, and therefore Illinois lawmakers should pass similar legislation. In Part II of this paper I will provide a brief background to college attendance in the United States and specifically in Illinois, the history of community colleges, and the role that community colleges play in the greater picture of “a college education.” In Part III of this paper I will discuss past attempts to reach the same or a similar result as the recent Tennessee legislation, and will explain the path Governor Haslam’s bill has taken. In Part IV of this paper I will analyze the support and criticism of Tennessee’s legislation, and the role that it can play in the world of education. Finally, in Part V of this paper I will conclude by proposing that Illinois follow the example set by Tennessee and provide free community college to its citizens.

PART II. THE CURRENT STATE OF COLLEGE ATTENDANCE IN THE U.S., ILLINOIS

To understand Tennessee’s endeavor, and why its law is one that Illinois should adopt, it is first important to understand the background of higher education pursuits in the United States and, specifically, in Illinois. College attendance in the United States is steadily rising, showing students’ demand for a college education.⁸ Between 2001 and 2011, college enrollment in the

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ U.S. DEP’T OF ED., *Fast Facts*, National Center for Education Statistics, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>.

United States increased 32%.⁹ Of the undergraduate students who graduated high school in 2005 and began pursuing full-time a bachelor's degree at a 4-year college, 59% completed that degree within 6 years.¹⁰ Overall, between 2011 and 2012, the cost at a 4-year institution averaged \$23,066 for tuition, fees, room, and board for full-time undergraduate students.¹¹

Illinois itself is home to 9 public universities spanning 12 campuses, 48 community colleges, 97 not-for-profit colleges and universities, and 35 independent, for-profit institutions.¹² However in 2005, college enrollment throughout the state decreased by approximately 2.3%.¹³ Tuition and fees at Illinois public and private universities and colleges range from \$47,514 at the University of Chicago to \$7,470 at Governors State University.¹⁴ However, public university tuition is rising, and financial aid for students is falling.¹⁵ In fact, in the past 15 years state aid for Illinois public universities has fallen over 27%, turning attention to the less-expensive community colleges in the state.¹⁶

The average full-time community college student in Illinois pays approximately \$2,521 per year for tuition and fees.¹⁷ Still, similar to private universities, community colleges have seen a decrease in numbers in recent years.¹⁸ In 2009, community college enrollment in Illinois

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ U.S. DEP'T OF ED., *Fast Facts*, National Center for Education Statistics, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>.

¹¹ U.S. DEP'T OF ED., *Fast Facts*, National Center for Education Statistics, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>.

¹² ILLINOIS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION, *Colleges and University* (2012), available at <http://www.ibhe.org/Colleges%20and%20Universities/>.

¹³ STATE OF ILLINOIS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION, *Preliminary Fall 2012 Enrollments in Illinois Higher Education Report* (February 2013), available at <http://www.ibhe.org/Reports%20&%20Studies/PDF/2012FallEnrollments.pdf>.

¹⁴ ILLINOIS STUDENT ASSISTANCE COMMISSION, *College Costs* (2014), available at <http://www.isac.org/students/during-college/applying-for-financial-aid/college-costs.html>.

¹⁵ Doug T. Graham, *Students Squeezed as Illinois College Costs Rise, Aid Drops*, DAILY HERALD (March 5, 2013).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE BOARD, *ICCS Information and Facts* (2006), available at <http://www.iccb.state.il.us/facts.html>.

¹⁸ See ILLINOIS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION, *supra* note 12.

increased 6.4%, to 380,025 students,¹⁹ but later in 2012 decreased by 3.8%.²⁰ However, one study found that over 80% of employers in Illinois have hired a community college student, and around 30% of Illinois employees have completed credits at a community college.²¹ Taking classes at an Illinois community college significantly increases one's earnings, and graduates employed full-time averaged more than \$30,000 annually post-graduation.²² Overall, Illinois community colleges are home to two-thirds of all students enrolled in Illinois public higher education.²³

Furthermore, Illinois has goals similar to that of Tennessee, showing why a bill such as Tennessee's is the natural next-step for Illinois. Illinois' goal is to provide 60% of Illinois adults with a college degree or similar certificate by the year 2025.²⁴ Illinois recognizes that community colleges are a big part of making this goal a reality.²⁵ Illinois Chamber of Commerce President Doug Whitley has said, "Our state's high unemployment rate is unacceptable, and we all know it...yet employers all over the state of Illinois have very positive relationships with their local community colleges. We look forward to working with community colleges going forward to continue to train job-ready people."²⁶ Whitley's remarks show willingness in the business community to employ, and value, graduates from community colleges, and not just those graduates of top-tier universities. This mindset, if accepted by high school graduates, coupled with \$0 tuition, could make community colleges even more alluring to Illinois residents.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ See STATE OF ILLINOIS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION, *supra* note 13.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ T.J. Fowler, *Community Colleges on Track to Meet Illinois Goals*, QUAD-CITY TIMES (April 29, 2014), available at http://qctimes.com/news/local/education/community-colleges-on-track-to-meet-illinois-goals/article_fe61719e-c7aa-5872-ab22-8eb4c97e1dd7.html.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

PART III. GOVERNOR BILL HASLAM’S “TENNESSEE PROMISE”

Tennessee cannot necessarily be considered a pioneer in its attempts to offer free higher education to its citizens.²⁷ City University of New York dropped all tuition charges for a short period in 1970.²⁸ This ended in 1976 when the city faced financial strain, and the policy was discontinued after pressure from the federal and state governments, and the financial community attempting to save New York from bankruptcy.²⁹ Similarly, in California community colleges offered free tuition until about 1984.³⁰ California’s system fell in part due to many financial stresses on universities and students, including an increase in student registration fees, which amounted to over \$1,000 per year.³¹ Most recently, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick laid out a plan to have all of the state’s community colleges free by the year 2015.³² This plan also failed due to a failing economy and other financial constraints.³³

Tennessee has now taken on the challenge that many states before it have been unable to see through. In February 2014, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam first introduced a bill called “Tennessee Promise.”³⁴ Governor Haslam’s plan? To provide free community college to *all* high school graduates in the state.³⁵ Put simply, the bill will waive tuition and fees for high school graduates for two years of community college.³⁶ These costs will first be covered by outside sources, such as scholarships and Federal Pell grants, and the bill will cover all remaining

²⁷ See Marklein, *supra* note 5.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ CUNY Matters, *When Tuition of CUNY Was Free, Sort Of*, THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK NEWSWIRE (October 12, 2011).

³⁰ See Marklein, *supra* note 5.

³¹ Robert Lindsey, *California Weighs End of Free College Education*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (December 28, 1982).

³² See Marklein, *supra* note 5.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Duane W. Gang, *Eyes on Tennessee As It Begins Free Community College Plan*, THE TENNESSEAN (April 16, 2014), available at <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2014/04/16/tennessee-lawmakers-approve-free-community-college-plan/7772245/>.

³⁵ Duane W. Gang, *States Keep Eye on Tenn. Free Community College Plan*, USA TODAY (April 16, 2014), available at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/04/16/tenn-free-community-college-plan/7783315/>.

³⁶ *Id.*

costs.³⁷ Funds will be given to state residents with high school diplomas or an equivalent degree, without concern for academic credentials or financial need.³⁸ Tennessee will use proceeds from its lottery to fund a \$300 million endowment, which will begin in the fall of 2015.³⁹ On April 15, 2014, lawmakers approved Tennessee Promise, and Governor Haslam will hold ceremonial bill signings the week of May 12, 2014.⁴⁰ Tennessee will be the only state in the country to charge no tuition or fees to incoming students, with hopes that other states will follow in its footsteps.⁴¹

PART IV. THE GOALS, SUPPORT, AND CRITICISM OF “TENNESSEE PROMISE”

A. THE GOALS OF TENNESSEE PROMISE

Where other states have failed to see to fruition consistent, free higher education, Tennessee arguably has a strong chance of success. Moreover, the goals of Tennessee Promise themselves make it something particularly enticing to many lawmakers throughout the United States. The aim of the program is to improve college graduation rates and build a more educated workforce.⁴² Currently, Tennessee is home to 13 degree-granting community colleges, and 27 Colleges of Applied Technology, which remains one of the United States’ strongest systems of vocational schools and a national leader in graduation rates.⁴³ These programs, which would be included in Tennessee Promise, still result in just 32% of Tennesseans having graduated college.⁴⁴ Further, Tennessee has approximately 1 million adults who have some college credits but never earned a degree or professional certificate.⁴⁵ Governor Haslam hopes that this bill will

³⁷ Richard Perez-Pena, *Tennessee Governor Urges 2 Free Years of Community College and Technical School*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (February 4, 2014).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ See Gang, *supra* note 35.

⁴⁰ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁴¹ See Perez-Pena, *supra* note 37.

⁴² See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁴³ See Perez-Pena, *supra* note 37.

⁴⁴ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁴⁵ See Perez-Pena, *supra* note 37.

allow more citizens to attain degrees, and will generally communicate to families that the state sees education after high school as a priority, persuading families to as well.⁴⁶

Tennessee Promise also has more specific goals. Particularly, Tennessee aims to increase the number of college graduates from 32% to 55% within 10 years of the program's start.⁴⁷ Currently in Tennessee, a year's tuition at a community college averages about \$3,800, with the national average around \$3,300.⁴⁸ Research has found that a mere \$1,000 reduction in tuition increases college enrollment between 2% and 3%.⁴⁹ If this holds true, Tennessee's goal to increase the number of college graduates remains an attainable one. Regardless, a close watch will remain on Tennessee as other lawmakers attempt to determine the success of this program.⁵⁰

B. CRITICISM OF THE LAW

Of course, Tennessee Promise is not without its critics. Perhaps the biggest argument against the bill comes from proponents of traditional 4-year colleges. Such critics argue that this plan will create competition for traditional 4-year colleges.⁵¹ That is, some worry that free college will be much more enticing to students than paying sometimes thousands of dollars for a similar degree, and students will opt for community colleges over traditional 4-year schools.⁵² Similarly, representatives at the 4-year colleges themselves believe this plan will make it difficult for such schools to create socioeconomically diverse classes of students, saying that students

⁴⁶ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁴⁷ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁴⁸ See Perez-Pena, *supra* note 37.

⁴⁹ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ See Gang, *supra* note 35.

⁵² *Id.*

from low-income families will be more likely to choose the \$0 tuition, and 4-year colleges will become full of students almost exclusively from middle and high income families.⁵³

Still other critics take issue with the plan from a more economic standpoint. For example, this plan provides tuition subsidies for students from any income, and an argument has been made against providing support for students from families that do not need it the most.⁵⁴ Moreover, it is said that Tennessee Promise plans to spread resources too thin, which is dangerous with a program that ultimately has no achievement incentives, and could cause it to fail for the same reasons past programs in California and New York did.⁵⁵

C. SUPPORT OF THE LAW

While Tennessee Promise has faced criticism, there are a variety of ways that the bill is supported as well. One argument is that it will help students keep up in a competitive, global environment.⁵⁶ In a country where 42% of 25-34 year olds receive some sort of higher education,⁵⁷ it is perhaps easy to see that putting even more high school graduates on the same level can only enhance their chances to participate in society. Further, taxpayers will benefit from Tennessee Promise because it is ultimately cheaper to send people to community college than to have them be part of the “social safety net,” and getting a college education will allow people who otherwise may not have gone to college stay out of poverty, where statistically speaking it is likely they would find themselves.⁵⁸ Other supporters simply state that it is

⁵³ Laura Edghill, *Can Free Community Colleges Solve America's Education Debt Crisis?*, WORLD NEWS GROUP (April 9, 2014), available at <http://www.worldmag.com/2014/04/can-free-community-colleges-solve-america-s-education-debt-crisis>.

⁵⁴ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ See Edghill, *supra* note 53.

⁵⁷ J.D. LaRock, *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012*, OECD (2012), available at <http://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/CN%20-%20United%20States.pdf>.

⁵⁸ See Edghill, *supra* note 53.

important for society to have a highly educated workforce.⁵⁹ Free community college makes it more likely that students will obtain a higher education, and this can only enhance their impact on society, and keeping college affordable will ultimately increase the number of college graduates.⁶⁰

Others see Tennessee Promise as a step in the natural direction that higher education is taking, and predict that in 10 years, quality higher education will be free.⁶¹ The Council for Economic Education says that student debt currently amounts to over \$1 trillion, and a third of college students drop out with a lot of debt and no degree.⁶² Because of these numbers, American entrepreneur Peter Thiel says that high school students would be better off going straight from high school into a trade or developing a business, and saving their money instead.⁶³ Thiel's focus remains on encouraging students to skip college altogether unless they are able to get into a top school and are guaranteed to be entering into a field that pays well.⁶⁴ In fact, Thiel goes as far to offer a "20 Under 20" fellowship, which gives \$100,000 to high school graduates with a business idea if they agree to skip college and begin working on their idea immediately.⁶⁵ Thiel's way of thinking promotes the idea that free education will be better for students, and shows that United States citizens are at least beginning to think that paying thousands for a traditional 4-year college is not necessarily the best way to get ahead. It is within this line of thinking that Illinois should trend, and Illinois should pass legislation similar to that of Tennessee Promise to enhance the educational opportunities available to the state's citizens.

⁵⁹ See Gang, *supra* note 34.

⁶⁰ See Marklein, *supra* note 5.

⁶¹ Dan Kadlec, *Why College May Be Totally Free Within 10 Years*, TIME MAGAZINE (Oct. 12, 2012).

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

PART V. PROPOSAL

Tennessee Promise will have a positive impact on the state, and Illinois should adopt similar legislation. Though Tennessee Promise has not yet taken effect, and there is therefore not a way to measure its success, many aspects of the bill show that it will prevail where similar measures failed. Unlike in New York, Tennessee is not on the edge of bankruptcy. In California, a main problem was the fees that students were paying; however such fees are covered under Tennessee Promise. Further, funds will only be used to the extent that other scholarships and grants do not already cover tuition and fees, ensuring that the widest amount of resources remain available for students entering community colleges. And, if as predicted there is an increase in enrollment, it is likely that after time Tennessee will see a positive economic impact due to more citizens obtaining employment with higher rates of pay, and participating in the TN economy. Tennessee Promise will afford more high school students the opportunity to go to college and enter the workforce, and will help citizens compete in an ever-growing global world.

Illinois should pass legislation similar to Tennessee Promise. Illinois currently receives around \$2.3 billion per year in lottery sales, and a portion of this already goes to funding public schools in the state.⁶⁶ Illinois has also seen a recent decrease in community college enrollment, but positive results coming from those who do attend community college, such as higher earnings. Further, Illinois has a goal to increase the number of adults with a college degree in the state, similar to the goal of Governor Haslam. Providing 2 years of free community college to its citizens is the next logical step for Illinois. This would help Illinois see an increase in the number of adults with a college degree, would allow Illinois to continue to use lottery earnings to focus on education, and would help promote the idea that one can receive a high-quality education

⁶⁶ Illinois Association of School Boards, *Where Does the Lottery Money Go* (August 2012), available at <http://www.iasb.com/pdf/lottery.pdf>.

from community college. And, even if Illinois is not willing to go as far as Tennessee, the state could still offer \$1,500 to students to attend community college, which would be about half of the current tuition and statistically speaking would still increase enrollment between 2% and 3%. By taking a step such as that of Tennessee, Illinois could truly improve this aspect of education in the state.

The United States seems to be entering a culture where many students realize that college is important, but are not willing to shell out thousands of dollars just for their degree. In such a society, attention is turning toward lower-cost community colleges and what they have to offer. To promote the idea that community college can offer a high-quality education with lucrative job opportunities; states such as Illinois should follow in the footsteps of Tennessee and promote free college to all citizens. Though the first bill of its kind, Tennessee Promise is sure to see positive results over the next 10 years.