

New perks for class of 2021: free tuition first year, no remedial classes

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It's possible next fall's first-year Bakersfield College students will not have to pay tuition their first year.

Henry A. Barrios / The Californian

When first-year college students head to class next fall, it's possible they'll be required to take no remedial courses and pay no tuition their first year, the result of two pieces of legislation signed last week by Gov. Jerry Brown.

The legislative bills, AB 19 and AB 705, are part of an effort to entice more Californians to enroll in community college and transfer quickly, speeding the pace of graduation to meet workforce demands.

California Community Colleges Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley said the legislation, known as the California College Promise, took "an enormous step forward" in making college more accessible to first-time students.

"The California College Promise will help foster a stronger culture of college participation that will enhance upward social mobility in California," Oakley said. "We look forward to working with the governor and legislature on providing funding to support the California College Promise and additional financial aid to offset the non-tuition costs that create barriers to college attendance for students with financial need."

But AB 19, which promises free tuition for first-year students enrolling in more than 12 units of classes – roughly \$1,100 for two semesters – has some hurdles. The bill depends upon the governor finding money in the state budget.

State Department of Finance officials have not pinpointed an exact amount, but estimate it would need between \$30 million and \$50 million to carry out the legislation, said H.D. Palmer, deputy director of external affairs for the department.

The department opposed the legislation this year, saying that because it awards dollars to students without requiring them to demonstrate need, it was inconsistent with the administration's goals to provide aid to the neediest students.

Palmer wouldn't say with certainty whether that money would be allocated.

"It's simply premature," Palmer said. "I'm not going to make a definitive commitment at this point other than saying the bill has been signed and we've got to continue to finish up our work developing next year's budget."

But college officials say the need is great.

Roughly 56 percent of Bakersfield College's 34,249 students last year qualified for the Board of Governor's Fee Waiver, and another 6,549 students qualified at Cerro Coso and Porterville colleges – about 52 percent of total enrollment. That waiver is available to students who have demonstrated financial need.

Meanwhile, AB 705, known as the Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act of 2012, requires community colleges “maximize the probability that the student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe.”

That legislation also requires that colleges determine placement of students in remedial classes based on high school coursework, grades and grade point average, instead of the old system: standardized placement tests.

Students could only be placed in remedial coursework if they are “highly unlikely to succeed in transfer-level coursework,” a policy praised locally by Bakersfield College President Sonya Christian.

“By honoring the work that our incoming students have already successfully completed in high school, we are making them eligible for financial aid eligibility; these students are now able to move forward more quickly and decisively in their program,” she said.

She doesn't think the elimination of remedial courses drops the standards for college students, and she wants colleges to evaluate students based on multiple measures that better assess their abilities.

“The testing we used to place students below college level was a very poor measure of their skills,” said Janet Fulks, a BC biology professor who sits on a statewide Multiple Measures workgroup used to help inform the legislation. “Using a single test does not ensure standards or quality, it causes us to place students far below their ability in most cases.”

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