
Higher Education Committee

HB 2955

Brief Description: Creating the Washington free to finish college program.

Sponsors: Representatives Hansen, Stanford, Ormsby, Frame and Haler.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the Washington Free to Finish College program (program), which offers grant awards to cover the cost of tuition and fees for eligible students who are 15 credits or less away from completing a postsecondary education degree or credential, but not currently enrolled in a program of study.
- Requires the Office of Student Financial Assistance to report to the Legislature on the impact of the program by December 1, 2017, and every December 1st thereafter.
- Requires a third party evaluation due November 1, 2020, on the impacts, cost of the program, and an assessment of student services provided to students in the program.

Hearing Date: 2/3/16

Staff: Megan Mulvihill (786-7304).

Background:

Recapture Programs.

Programs that try to entice students back to college after the student withdrew with a few credits short of graduating are often referred to as recapture programs. An example of a recapture program was Western Washington University's (Western) Destination Graduation program. The program helped students who dropped out of Western in good academic standing return to Western to graduate by reducing barriers to reentry. The program targeted students who earned at least 140 credits prior to leaving who did not complete their degree elsewhere. Western estimates that since fall of 2007, more than 1,200 students that fit this criteria left before graduating. Many of the reasons given for leaving include health, family, and financial issues. The program helped over 181 students return to Western and complete their degree.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Free Tuition Programs.

In the last couple of years many programs have been introduced to establish a form of free tuition for certain students, mostly focused around free community or technical college. Tennessee and Oregon have both passed versions of these programs, known as promise programs, in which recent high school graduates attending community and technical colleges will receive a grant to cover any remaining tuition costs after grant aid. Minnesota also introduced a pilot program which covers any remaining tuition cost after grant aid for students seeking a credential in a high demand program.

Summary of Bill:

The Washington Free to Finish College program (program) is created. The Office of Student Financial Assistance (Office) must award grants to cover the cost of tuition fees, and services and activities fees, minus any gift aid received, for eligible students. To be eligible, the student needs to:

- be a Washington resident;
- have not previously earned a postsecondary degree or certificate;
- have not been enrolled at an institution of higher education the quarter or semester prior to application;
- have no more than 15 quarter or semester credits remaining in his or her program of study; and
- submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Washington Application for State Financial Aid.

The Office is granted rulemaking authority for the program, and the Office must report to the Legislature regarding the impact of the program by December 1, 2017, and every December 1st thereafter, including:

- the number of applicants;
- the number of students served;
- program costs;
- participant demographics;
- enrollment status, meaning part time versus full time;
- field of study; and
- any other information deemed relevant.

The Office must also contract with a third party to evaluate the program. The evaluation must address the impacts and cost of the program, and assess student support services provided to students in the program. The third party evaluation is due by November 1, 2020.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on 2/1/16.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.