

Push to lower cost of college

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State expands Commonwealth
Commitment to encourage
program's growth

By **DUSTY CHRISTENSEN**
@dustyc123

NORTHAMPTON — Massachusetts is expanding a program that drops the cost of getting a bachelor's degree.

The "Commonwealth Commitment" is for students who start at a state community college and finish at one of the state's public universities.

Only around 100 students have signed up for the program since it was announced in the spring of 2016, but education officials say the expansion of the program, from six majors to more than 40, will now encourage more students to apply.

For eligible students, the program grants a 10 percent rebate on fees and tuition after each completed semester, and freezes those fees and tuition when students enter the program. The administration of Gov. Charlie Baker estimates that the program could save students up to 40 percent off the "typical sticker price" of a traditional bachelor's degree.

Katy Abel, a spokeswoman for the Department of Higher Education, said the Commonwealth Commitment is meant to make college more affordable, while also encouraging students to attend college full time, which she said increases their likelihood of graduating.

"It's trying to give students and families a break on college cost, because we know they need it," Abel said. "We're hoping the numbers of students in the program are going to grow and expand greatly."

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To be eligible, students must attend college full time, maintain a 3.0 grade point average, begin at a state community college, complete their associate's degree in two and a half years, transfer to a state university and finish their bachelor's in two more years.

Abel said the low early numbers for the program were because the Commonwealth Commitment was a pilot program until now, though that fact seemed to have been left out of the initial fanfare and announcements around the program's rollout.

Among the majors now included are early education, computer science, business, communications, criminal justice, and architectural, industrial and graphic design, liberal arts and sciences, and six Massachusetts Maritime Academy programs.

Greenfield Community College President Bob Pura said he's particularly pleased, given his college's strong arts program, to see that all majors offered by the Massachusetts College of Art and Design are now eligible.

"I applaud all of the commonwealth's efforts to increase accessibility, transferability and affordability," he said. "Those are all barriers to our students' success, and so the collective effort to do all that we can to help students succeed is a good effort."

'Free money'

Adam Bouley, 21, is a graduate of Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, and was one of the few students who signed up for the program last year when he began studying business administration at Holyoke Community College.

"I was doing some research on scholarships and ways I can save on my tuition as I'm putting myself through school," Bouley said.



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Adam Bouley, 21, a graduate of Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, was one of the few students who initially signed up for the Commonwealth Commitment program last year when he began studying business administration at Holyoke Community College.

When he stumbled upon the Commonwealth Commitment, he immediately applied. "I was like, 'Oh my God, free money!'"

Bouley, who plans to transfer to the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said that when he receives his rebate at the end of each semester, he puts it straight toward the interest accruing on his student loans.

Like many community college students, Bouley will be working while he gets his degree, putting in 30-hour weeks at West Springfield Federal Credit Union and operating his own custom furniture building and refinishing company, Adam & Company Furniture. The requirement to attend school full time will be a tough balancing act, he said, but he's a goal-oriented person.

"It's hard, but knowing that that degree is going to be worth so much after graduation, it makes it that much easier for me," he said.

That full-time requirement is based on research that says students who go to school part time are less likely to complete their degrees.

"What the Commonwealth Commitment stands for is lowering the costs of attending post-secondary education, and

increasing completion," Christina Royal, Holyoke Community College's president, told the Gazette. When it comes to finishing a degree, she said, "Time is the enemy of completion."

Of course, not everyone can afford to go to school full time, she said. Community colleges fill a role by providing students with flexibility as they navigate the academic waters while also dealing with jobs, families and other obstacles.

Improvements

When asked how the Commonwealth Commitment might be improved, Pura, Greenfield Community College's president, said: "I think a next good step would be to make this even more powerful in terms of its commitment to those who can't afford to go full time yet."

Abel, the Department of Higher Education spokeswoman, said it's too early to say whether the program will ever be expanded to part-time students. But the state, she said, is going to use this year as a way to gauge students' interest in the financial incentives on offer.

"We know that there are going to be a number of students who can't avail themselves of

the program," Abel said. "It could be that in Commonwealth Commitment 2.0, after we've reviewed the success or failure of this year, we'll say, 'How can we expand the program to serve more students?'"

A lot of that will come down to how many students actually realize that the program exists.

Despite his happiness as a student in the program, Bouley said knowledge of it isn't widespread. He met several students in his English class last semester who would have qualified, but had not applied.

"They had no idea about the program, so I filled them in and told them how to apply," he said.

"We just need a little bit more time to tell those stories," John Cook, president of Springfield Technical Community College, said, emphasizing that word-of-mouth will be what draws future students to the program's benefits. "When they hear from others that they know, that they trust and believe, that can really make a difference."

"I think it'll be interesting to see the response from the students in our 15 community colleges now that they have expanded it," Royal said of the Commonwealth Commitment.

In an era of widespread student debt, Royal said she applauds any programs aimed at increasing affordability. At a community college like hers — an ethnically diverse institution where some students are low-income, food insecure or housing insecure — affordability is the most essential point of consideration, she said.

"The student loan and debt crisis is very relevant," she said. "It's really important that we connect that conversation into this."

Dusty Christensen can be reached at dchristensen@gazettenet.com.