

# Massachusetts Senate Budget Funds Free Community College For All

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State House News Service

Senate Democrats on Monday unveiled plans to make community college free for all students in Massachusetts, starting in the fall semester of 2024.

The “MassEducate” plan, which will be part of the Senate’s fiscal 2025 budget to be fully unveiled on Tuesday, would invest \$75.5 million to cover tuition and fees for all residents, and offer a stipend to some students of up to \$1,200 for books, supplies and other costs.

The Senate budget will also recommend continuing fiscal 2024 higher education investments, such as \$18 million in free nursing programs at community colleges and \$24 million that the state is currently investing in free community college for residents over 25. In total, the forthcoming budget invests \$117.5 million to make community college free for all.

“I’m thrilled that we have taken access to higher education to the next level, as this initiative will bolster our educated workforce and lay the foundation for generations to come,” Senate Ways and Means Chair Michael Rodrigues said in a statement. “Tuition free community college impacts individuals most in need and whom otherwise would not be afforded this opportunity. It will greatly help to keep our workforce graduates stand ready to meet the challenges of a global economy.”

Rodrigues called the plan affordable, sustainable and equitable.

Free community college would be funded with surtax money, a spokesperson for Senate President Karen Spilka said, and the state just experienced a jolt in tax collections in April that beat projections by more than \$1 billion. The bulk of the overage comes from capital gains tax and surtax revenues, a potentially promising sign for education investments linked to the surtax.

Senators did not attach any income restrictions to the plan to make tuition and fees cost-free, though the \$1,200 book stipends will only be available for students who make, or whose families earn, 125 percent or less of the state's median income.

Spilka's office said community colleges attract a different demographic than four-year colleges in the commonwealth, including more diversity in age and minority backgrounds.

"We know if we want a generation of students to benefit from the terrific programs at our many community colleges across our state, we must remove the barriers to entry – as many or all of them, if possible," Spilka said Monday morning at Middlesex Community College in Lowell.

Executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges Nate Mackinnon, who supports the proposal, previously said making community college free for all is a simple message, and one that would lead to higher enrollment across income brackets. Spilka offered a similar argument on Monday.

"I think you would all agree that free is a lot easier to understand than, 'It will be free if there is the time, support of adults, (and) language capabilities needed to fill out these many complicated forms,'" Spilka said. "Making it simply free will break down the barrier that exists. That is why our plan will cover tuition and fees of every community college student in Massachusetts."

When the Senate president first rolled out the idea in January, reporters asked if the promise of free community college would divert students who otherwise would have gone to four-year institutions to community colleges instead.

"I think in the long term this is going to absolutely be a benefit to the four-year institutions, both state universities and UMass, I think because of that transfer factor," replied Mount Wachusett Community College President James Vander Hooven, who was also at Monday's press conference.

He continued, "We're already seeing a significant increase in students over 25 whose other alternative was to not go to college at all. So there's a pipeline. I'll just speak for myself, the relationship that we have with Fitchburg State at Mount Wachusett Community College – we're at the table all of the time, putting together these transfer pathways for students between community college and state university."

In Lowell on Monday, Francesca Purcell, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said that similar free community college programs in Oregon, Tennessee and Texas initially diverted a "small percentage" of students away from four-year institutions. Still, Purcell said the programs also cause a "larger percentage of students who would not have otherwise considered attending to actually go to college for the first time."

"Our 15 community colleges educate the highest percentage of low-income students in our state's public higher education system, while students who are fortunate enough to come from wealthy families are already mostly going to four-year colleges and universities," she said. "I don't believe there'll be a significant amount of students from wealthy families opting to attend community colleges, but even if some do, the big goal here is to make sure that we are increasing college access and completion, especially for students from low-income backgrounds."

Senate Democrats' higher education proposal marks a departure from the House budget, which allocates \$24 million for MassReconnect but does not fund universal free community college. Gov. Maura Healey had also recommended funding MassReconnect at \$24 million, a \$4 million increase over the current fiscal year for the nascent program.

The funding discrepancy is likely to be hashed out in closed-door budget negotiations this summer, as lawmakers determine the best way to deploy \$1.3 billion in surtax revenues on education and transportation investments. A spokesperson for House Speaker Ron Mariano, asked whether the House is open to considering the Senate's community college pitch, told the News Service, "We'll review."

Spilka signaled her branch's approach could be a boon for growing the state's workforce and preventing residents from leaving Massachusetts.

"By partnering with businesses, community college provides the kinds of hands-on, real-world training that creates the workforce that we so desperately need," Spilka said. "We will be opening the floodgates to employers who are starved for a skilled workforce so Massachusetts keeps the competitive edge that we so very much pride ourselves in. It will help us train the next generation of health care workers, personal care attendants, lab technicians, clean tech workers, early educators and so many others."

The Senate recommends installing annual caps on tuition increases at community colleges, set to an inflation index, with the goal of ensuring "the long-term fiscal sustainability" of MassEducate, Spilka's office said. Lawmakers also want to create a working group tasked with overhauling how funding is awarded to community colleges based on their performance; direct the the Department of Higher Education to improve the process for transferring credits from community colleges to four-year colleges; and establish a

commission to analyze financial aid offered to individuals attending state universities and the UMass system.

The Senate's proposal could help grow an existing transfer program between community colleges and four-year institutions, said Rob McCarron, CEO of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts.

"Nearly two-dozen independent colleges and universities in Massachusetts work with community colleges to provide a seamless and affordable transition to a four-year degree under the Transfer Guarantee Program," McCarron said in a statement to the News Service. "However, as these students graduate from community college and wish to continue their studies at a four-year institution, it's absolutely critical that the state supports their choice to find the school – whether public or private – that best fits their talents, interests and learning styles, and ensure that state financial aid can go with them."

UMass spokespeople did not immediately respond to News Service questions about the Senate's plan, including whether university officials are concerned about any enrollment impacts across the UMass system.

For months, senators have weighed different models to provide free community college, including a \$170 million approach favored by the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges to steer more funding to low-income students.

Paul Craney, spokesperson for the conservative leaning research group Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, told the News Service he cautioned against the investment.

"There is nothing as expensive as making something free," he said. "The cost will inevitably balloon and the taxpayers will forever be obligated to pay for this irresponsible decision. There is nothing more irresponsible than a politician making something 'free' and implying to people that someone else will pay for it. Everyone should have some skin in the game. The

Senate would be irresponsible to pursue this.”

Beyond MassEducate, Senate budget-writers are proposing \$10 million for a new “Student Persistence Fund,” which would flow to community colleges and state universities as they help support low-income students who face obstacles in completing their degrees. The money could cover costs tied to transportation, child care and food insecurity.

Senators also want to invest \$18.3 million in wraparound services for community college students, and increase investment in grants for students who opt directly into four-year colleges, called MASSGrant Plus.

The MASSGrant Plus program, which is meant to cover unmet costs of tuition and mandatory fees for low-income community college students across Massachusetts’ public higher education institutions, was expanded to an \$84 million investment last year. Healey’s administration said a third of all University of Massachusetts students qualify for free tuition with the grant expansion approved last year.

The House sought to maintain that \$80 million additional investment, while the Senate Ways and Means plan would inject an \$21 million into the MASSGrant Plus grants.