

Gov. Healey proposes free community college for qualifying state residents

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WORCESTER, Mass. - Gov. Maura Healey announced Wednesday a plan to cover the cost of community college in Massachusetts for anyone 25 and older who doesn't already have a degree.

The \$20 million MassReconnect Program has been included in Healey's 2024 budget proposal, and would cover would cover tuition, fees, books and supplies, while also providing students with career counseling and other services.

"They need to be able to complete and finish their education, and there are any number of barriers that get in the way," Healey said. "From food, gas, housing, childcare, clothing, you name it."

For two decades, tuition and fees have been steadily rising at the state's 15 community colleges, while enrollment has decreased. Julia Casavant, a student at Quinsigamond Community College, said she decided to enroll after a four-year school she was attending in Boston became too expensive.

"The prices were insane," Casavant said. "Even trying to find room and dorm in the heart of Boston is really crazy, it's so expensive."

But although community colleges are more affordable in comparison, they've seen a 52% increase in tuition and fees since 2000, according to a report from the Hildreth Institute.

"I think if it's made free for a lot of people, even older people who want to pursue an education, that would be very beneficial because more people getting educated will lead to more positive changes in the community," Casavant said.

An estimated 1.8 million Massachusetts residents would be eligible for MassReconnect, including 700,000 people who already earned some college credits, but weren't able to keep going. Local community colleges believe it could provide the boost they need to get back in the classroom.

"Those students who had dreams of going to college, had hopes, but life got in the way," said QCC President Luis Pedraja. "They got sidetracked, had families to take care of, got too expensive. This will allow them to go to community college and cover the cost."

Healey also proposed a nearly 30% increase to the Community College Success Fund, which provides grants to improve outcomes for students who are low income, first generation, a minority, disabled or LGBTQ+.

Adam Klepetar, VP for Student Affairs and Enrollment at Berkshire Community College, believes the proposed program and additional funding represent a step in the right direction.

"The cost of education, even at a community college which I think is the most affordable, can be prohibitive for the most at need and marginalized folks in our community and I think this is a step that's going to really help them," Klepetar said.

Healey's full Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Proposal can be viewed [here](#).