



Cuomo's free tuition bill will likely see 'tweaks'

By Rick Karlin
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Gov. Andrew Cuomo's former state operations director and one of the architects of his Free College Tuition plan on Monday said the program would likely see 'tweaks' in any number of areas including the eligibility levels that would apply and maybe how it would impact the state's large private college sector, which isn't included at this point.

"We figured there would be tweaks," Jim Malatras, who is now president of the Rockefeller Institute, said of Cuomo's plan to offer free State University of New York or City University of New York tuition to students whose families have adjusted gross incomes of up to \$125,000.

Among the details that may change during final budget negotiations: A possible cost differential for families in various regions of the state, as well as accommodations that might have to be made for SUNY/CUNY staff and classroom space if they get an increased number of applications and students who are lured in by the free tuition deal.

His remarks came during a symposium titled "The Hidden Cost of 'Free' / Higher Ed Tuition Policy and Affordability."

As hinted at by the title, the event, sponsored by the Empire Center, raised more than a few questions about the \$163 million proposal.

The geographic differential was brought up by E.J. McMahon, the Empire Center's research director, who noted that a family with \$125,000 income may have a lot more money to

spend in a relatively low-cost community such as upstate Auburn, as compared to the same family in Long Island where housing prices and taxes are far higher.

Another question centered on how the program will help with other expenses such as room and board for low income students. The proposal only addresses tuition costs, for which there is already lots of help for needy students.

"This does nothing for the people who are the neediest," said Beth Akers, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute think tank and co-author of "Game of Loans: The Rhetoric and Reality of Student Debt."

Then there is New York's large private college and university sector, which Mary Beth Labate, president of the Commission on Independent Colleges & Universities, said could be harmed by the program since it could make SUNY and CUNY schools appear more attractive financially.

"There is no such thing as free, said Labate who is also a former state budget director.

She cited a study predicting that the tuition plan could cause private schools in the Capital Region to lose 4,351 students, which would lead to the loss of 2,646 jobs in those schools.

Statewide, private schools could lose more than 50,000 students with 44,693 jobs vanishing, she said.

"The enrollment shift could be devastating," said Labate.

The forum came as lawmakers and Cuomo are preparing serious negotiations toward the April 1 deadline for the 2017-18 state budget.

As a result, various parties to the tuition plan began weighing in this week. Senate Democrats, for instance, want to expand the existing Tuition Assistance Plan, or TAP program, which is the largest existing student aid program. And they'd like to raise to \$150,000 the income eligibility threshold.

At the same time, SUNY and CUNY campus presidents came out in favor of the governor's plan saying it would help a wider range of families afford college.

There were lots of twists and details that came up during Monday's talk.

Speakers, for instance, noted that private schools get 42 percent of students from other

states, while SUNY and CUNY get just 8 percent from outside the New York border.

Malatras noted that one feature unique to this plan is the requirement that students take 15, rather than 12, credits to qualify for the assistance.

"If you're going to a four-year school, graduate in four years," he said. "If you're going to a two-year school, graduate in two years."

SUNY's four-year campuses currently charge \$6,470 in tuition while CUNY is at \$6,330.