

Free College? Why Clinton's Plan Won't Work

By William Grigsby

Hillary Clinton, buckling to pressure from her left, recently proposed tuition-free college education. Students who attend in-state public colleges and universities, and whose families have incomes less than \$85,000 a year, would qualify for varying levels of assistance. This threshold would rise to \$125,000 by 2021. The students would have to work 10 hours a week. Federal grants, matched by state contributions, would finance the program. Estimates of the cost to the federal government over 10 years range from \$350 billion to \$700 billion.

Though the proposal is still only an outline and lacks important details, it already has at least five serious deficiencies that make it infeasible.

- Because more than a few states will likely choose not to participate, the proposal offers false hope to millions of future students. Tuition at public colleges and universities has

escalated in large part because state legislatures have chosen to shift more of the tuition burden from taxpayers to students and their families.

Under the Clinton plan, states would have to make a policy U-turn. This politically difficult decision would be even harder for financially strapped states. Many legislatures would find it nearly impossible to generate the billions of dollars needed to match federal grants.

- The proposal excludes tens of thousands of students of equal need who are ineligible because they attend private colleges. This number could grow, as needy students are crowded out of public colleges by an influx of applications from well-off students who otherwise would have attended private universities.

- In providing tuition assistance only to students attending public universities, the proposal would seriously weaken the financial and academic strength of most private universities. A few wealthy universities, such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale, could use their large endowments to offer tuition assistance equal to the assistance under the Clinton plan.

Yet most universities lack the resources to do so. They would receive fewer applications, and some would inevitably close.

- Students who attend universities that are large relative to their local communities—such as Penn State in rural Pennsylvania—wouldn't find the employment necessary to fulfill the part-time-job requirement.

- The proposal only tangentially addresses costs. It says participating institutions should try to do something about costs but includes no specific cost-control requirement. It suggests that universities could use technology to lower the costs of instruction, but many schools have been doing this for years. It would be more effective to require colleges to rein in salaries and administrative costs.

In striking only a glancing blow at the cost structure of higher education, the proposal simply shifts the burden of these costs onto taxpayers. Including the added administrative expenses for participating universities and the state and federal governments, the program as proposed would actually increase the cost of a

college education.

Mrs. Clinton's plan also ignores that more attention to the K-12 years can reduce college costs. The president of Bard College, Leon Botstein, suggested in his 1997 book, "Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture," that the final two years of K-12 could be eliminated in favor of an early-college system. Even with a less-radical proposal, college courses could still be introduced into the high-school curriculum.

The foundation for such a shift has already been laid through Advanced Placement courses, which enable high-school students to reduce their college course requirements if they pass these courses with high grades.

The Clinton higher-education proposal, given its myriad flaws, is currently unworkable. A much more broadly framed debate, producing more serious proposals, will be needed to address the rising costs of post-high-school education that so many families face.

Mr. Grigsby is emeritus professor of city and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania.

