

Candidate Guidebook

HOW CANDIDATES CAN RUN AND WIN ON
FREE COLLEGE TUITION IN 2022



Campaign for Free College Tuition

Free Tuition for the Win

Free college tuition is the most popular and effective public policy any candidate for state office can advocate. If your state doesn't currently have any program for free college tuition, your advocacy will find favor with voters in overwhelming numbers. If it already has such a program, advocating for its expansion to make more potential students eligible or to increase the number of years of free college tuition your state will offer, will also be popular. And, as we demonstrate in this report, you can campaign on the idea confident that should your initiative become law, the program will produce results that will continue to make it popular in your re-election campaign.

What's in this report?

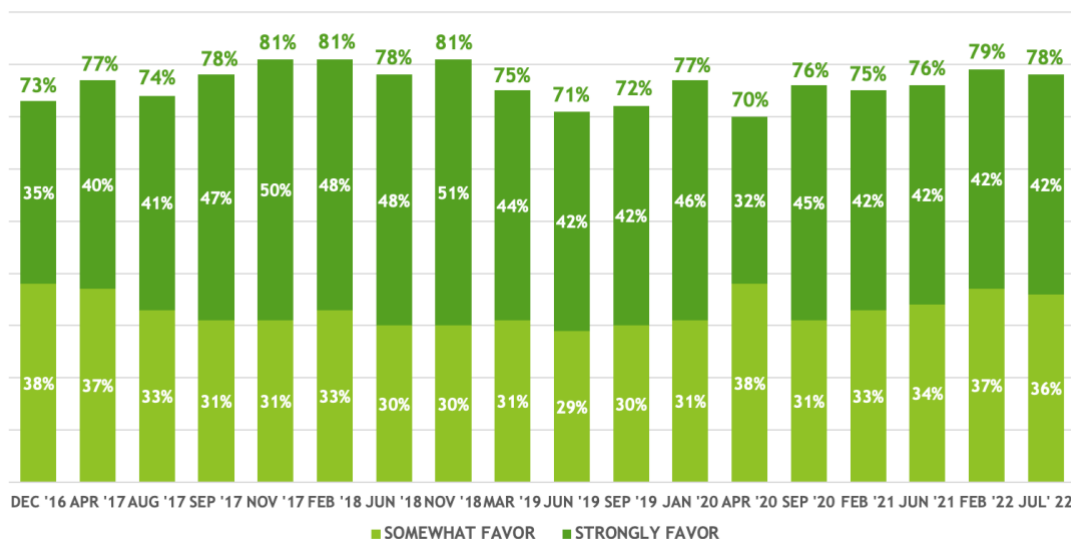
- ✓ DIY: How to build and present a plan for free tuition for your state in your campaign.
- ✓ Exclusive Polling Research: More than 75 percent of Americans support free college tuition.
- ✓ Testimonials: State elected officials from around the country who have run and won on free college tuition.
- ✓ Answers to Tough Questions: Why should tuition be free and who will pay for it?

About this Report

Free Tuition for the Win is a report for candidates running for state elected office by The Campaign for Free College Tuition. In our research, we solicited the input and feedback of candidates, campaign managers, experts in higher education policy, students, and more. The Campaign for Free College Tuition is a national, bipartisan nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to making college tuition free in all fifty states. For additional resources as you build your free tuition plan or just to learn more, check out our detailed policy briefing book, [available free on our website](#), or get in touch with us directly.

Polling: Free Tuition by the Numbers

“Do you favor or oppose your state providing free tuition at public universities or colleges for anyone who is academically qualified?”



Campaign for Free College Tuition

MEMO TO CANDIDATES

TO: Candidates for Governor and State Offices in 2022

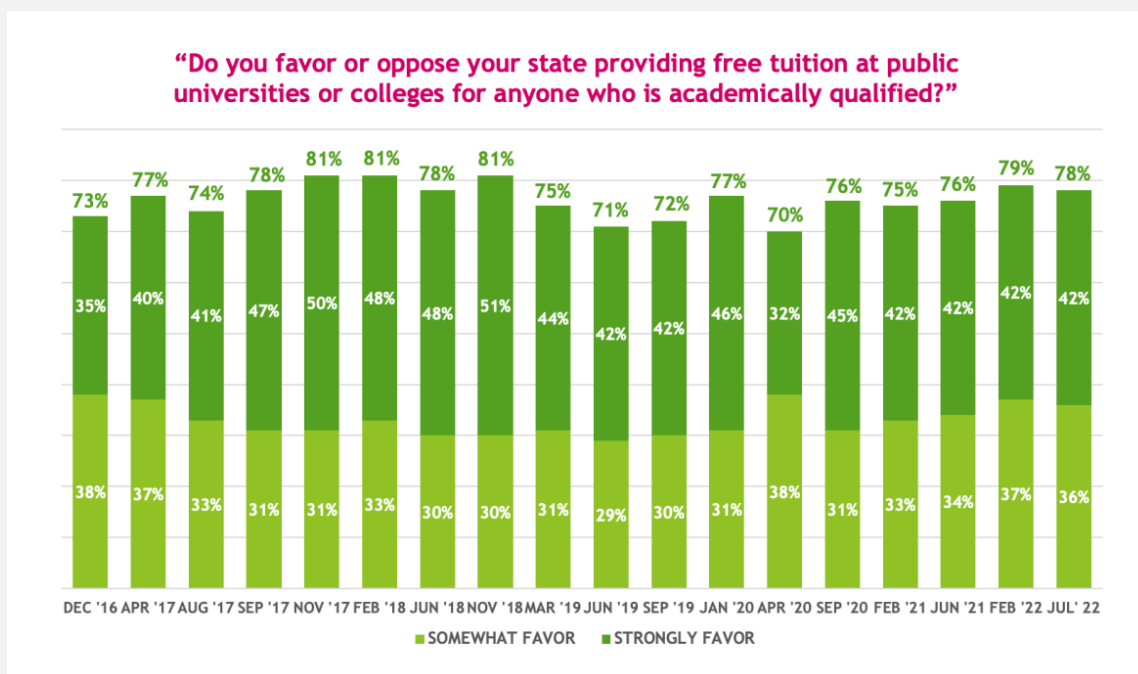
FROM: Jack MacKenzie, President, The CollegeAPP; Senior Research Advisor, CFCT

CC: Other Interested Parties

The 2022 mid-term elections promise to offer voters stark contrasts in over-arching philosophies regarding the role of government in people’s lives, the state of the economy, and the definition of citizen and patriot. While these macro, somewhat nationally fueled issues have the chance to overwhelm campaigns and the electorate, there is a bipartisan business and economic development issue that can give local and statewide candidates a chance to own a positive, solution-oriented proposal. That issue is tuition-free skills training and college education for the people in your state.

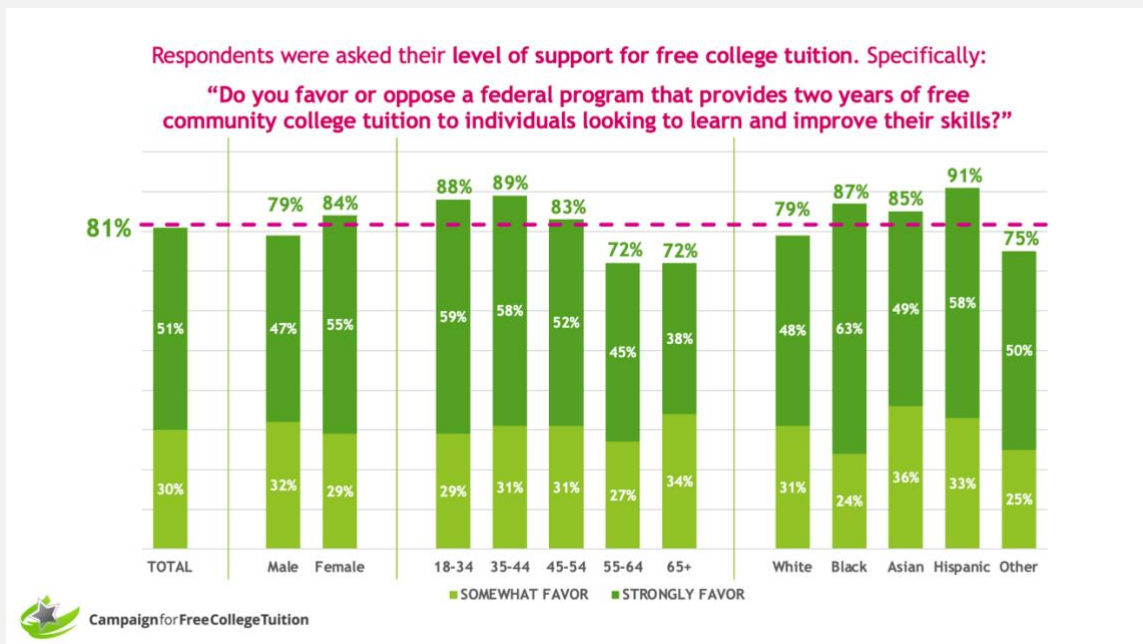
CFCT has conducted polling on a variety of questions around the role of state government in education and training access and cost since 2016. The level of support is not only currently strong, but has remained strong over time. Keep in mind, these polls have been conducted while Republicans controlled the levers of government as well as when Democrats have. They've been conducted through presidential impeachments and a global pandemic. During that time, a majority of Americans have consistently agreed that having a state support free tuition to public colleges and universities along with free skills-training for adults is a solid, popular policy whether you are a Republican, Democrat or Independent; whether you are male or female and, amazingly, whether you are a 20-year-old new voter or a 60-something at or near retirement-age voter.

FREE COLLEGE AS A CAMPAIGN ISSUE



CFCT's most recent polling was conducted in July 2022 and shows a near high-water mark of support from the full reach of the political spectrum. 64% of Republicans either strongly or somewhat support their state providing free college tuition to those who are academically qualified. Self-identified Democrats in the poll support the idea at 88% and three out of every four Independent voters support the policy.

While support is strongest amongst younger citizens, 62% of people over the age of 55 support the idea on its face, even without specific messaging that can both solidify and increase support (see our polling insights on messaging later in this memo).



Free tuition and skill training has also become a gender-neutral issue as more and more men have embraced the policy over the years. In fact, while women out pace men by 5% points in their strong support for the issue, men and women are tied among those who strongly and somewhat support the issue.

Potentially more important to candidates is whether free tuition is a motivating issue for voters. The answer is yes. In the same July 2022 survey, 51% of all respondents said they would be more likely to support a candidate who supported free community college tuition, while only 17% said they would be less likely to support that candidate. And if you include those for whom it would not change their opinion of the candidate (30%) the net positive for a candidate (Net +64%) is likely unmatched by any other meaningful policy issue a candidate could propose.

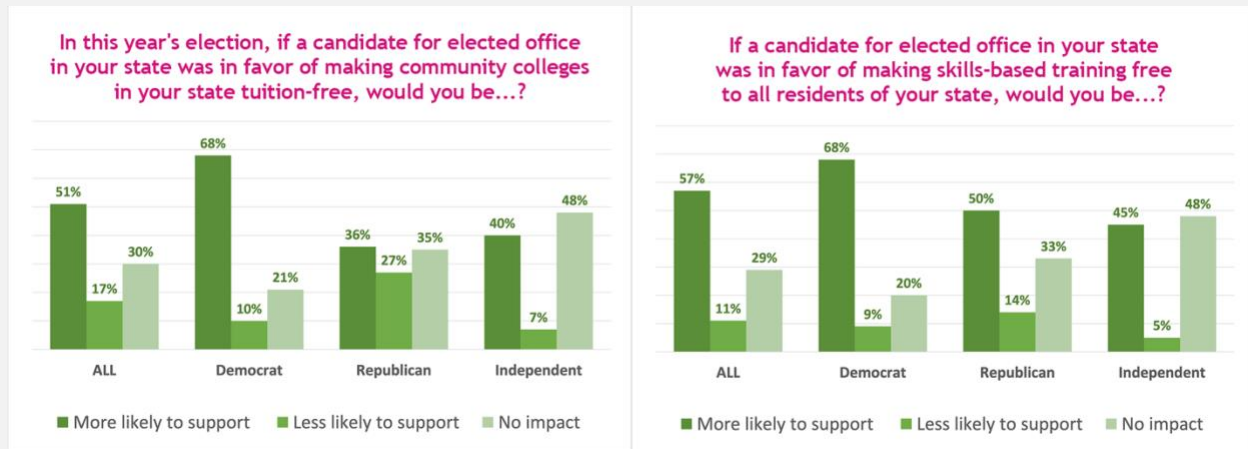
The gap grows when respondents consider supporting candidates with free skills-training for state residents on their slate of issues. 57% are more likely to support those candidates and another 29% wouldn’t change their mind while only 11% would be less likely to support that candidate (Net +75%).

MESSAGING

In addition to providing the confidence to consider a free skills and tuition plan, the CFCT data also provides strategic insight into various messaging options within the broad overall concept.

Self-identified Democrats are more likely to support candidates backing free community college tuition and skills-based training at the same high level – 68% more likely to support candidates who champion either iteration of the policy.

By contrast, Republicans favor the concept of skills-training, saying they would be 50% more likely to support a candidate with that policy. 36% say they are more likely to support a candidate who favors free community college. Independents also tend to favor skills-based training to free community college by a modest but statistically significant margin (45% to 40%).



There are more nuanced opportunities with various constituencies.

Younger voters 18-34 years of age, who are beginning to flex their political muscles as not only registered voters but also voters who are increasingly turning out, favor free community college over skills-training (59% to 54%). That sentiment flips when respondents turn 35 years of age and older. Those Americans are more likely to support the free skills training by a 10-point margin (57%-47%). It is worth noting that neither positioning would be troublesome for a candidate, but there are marginal opportunities to use specific positioning with certain age groups. Adding context to this differential, 57% of respondents age 18-34 indicate they intend to enroll in education or training in the next two years, so free tuition would be considered a policy many might benefit from personally.

Intent to enroll goes down as the age of the respondent increases, but overall, nearly a third of this national sample (32%) say they do intend to enroll in education and training, with older cohorts rewarding candidates who embrace free upskilling and reskilling benefits.

POSITIONING

CFCT polling has been tracking the most persuasive messaging around these concepts for the past six years. Interestingly, and comforting for any candidate, is the fact that Americans from all walks of life have responded positively to about the same positioning over that span of time.

The most widely and universally embraced positioning of a free college and/or free skill training initiative is:

Lack of money shouldn't keep qualified students from going to college, and my state government should help.

This statement has consistently been considered the most persuasive argument in favor of free college. A few things to note. "Qualified students" is an important phrase within this statement. Respondents want to know that the people who are partaking in a state-sponsored free college program are academically qualified. It is also important to recognize that "lack of money" does not necessarily mean only low-income people. Positioning around the complication and expense of everyday life makes college education out of reach for so many families and potential students, not just those who otherwise would be considered low-income or poor. There is also positioning power in the last phrase: "and my state government should help." There is both ownership (my state government) and role of government (should help) included in this phrase. It is nearly impossible to disagree with the phrase and CFCT polling shows that very few people do. In our last polling on this issue 64% of Republicans and 92% of Democrats found this statement a persuasive argument in favor of the issue.

Most Effective Messaging

Lack of money shouldn't keep qualified students from going to college, and my state government should help

Democrats: 92% Persuasive

Republicans: 64% Persuasive

Free college tuition will strengthen our nation by giving people the skills they need to provide for their families.

Democrats: 91% Persuasive

Republicans: 63% Persuasive

College graduates get better, higher paying jobs helping our economy grow.

Democrats: 87% Persuasive

Republicans: 63% Persuasive

Very closely aligned with that polling are the following two broad positioning statements:

Free college tuition will strengthen our nation by giving people the skills they need to provide for their families.

- 91% of Democrats and 63% of Republicans find this statement persuasive

and

College graduates get better, higher paying jobs helping our economy grow.

- 87% of Democrats and 63% of Republicans find this statement persuasive

Interestingly, both of these phrases include the “common good” of strengthening our nation and helping the economy grow.

POLICY AND POSITIONING TO AVOID

One of the mistakes many candidates make in creating a tuition free college proposal is to impose limits on who is eligible. Many proposed programs have included age or income caps on proposed programs. Neither idea has been embraced in our surveys. Instead, universality by age and income enjoys significantly stronger support than programs with limitations.

Free Tuition 101

Why you should fight for free college tuition

Free college tuition is a powerful solution to a major problem facing our country.

Our economy is at a tipping point. Workers and families are struggling. Jobs that once provided a reliable path to the middle class are threatened by automation and stagnating wages.

The new economic reality means higher education—whether it’s a technical credential, an Associate’s degree, or a Bachelor’s degree—is essential to earning a good job. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show Americans with college degrees accounted for all the net new jobs created over the last decade. In stark contrast, the number of Americans with high school diplomas or less who were employed has fallen by nearly three million since The Great Recession.

Unfortunately, in 41 states, lawmakers are spending less per postsecondary student today than before the Great Recession.¹ Students are – in many cases – being asked to make up the difference through increased tuition and fees.

According to the College Board, average tuition and fees tripled at public four-year and more than doubled at public two-year and private nonprofit four-year institutions between 1989-90 and 2019-20 after adjusting for inflation.² But when local and state governments make college tuition free, good things happen.

In the first year of the Tennessee Promise, enrollment in the state’s community colleges increased by 24.7% and by 20% in their colleges of applied technology (TCAT). The percentage of black students increased from 14% to 19% and the share of Hispanic students went up from 4% to 5%.

In Rhode Island, where then Governor Gina Raimondo made free college tuition a centerpiece of her policy agenda in 2017, enrollment at the Community College of Rhode Island increased by 47 percent in the first year students could attend without paying tuition.³ According to the Community College of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Promise has had a particularly positive impact on the enrollment of both low-income students and students of color.

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-higher-education-funding-cuts-have-pushed-costs-to-students>

² <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing/highlights>

³ <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170921/ccri-enrollments-up-47-under-new-free-tuition-program>

According to the findings of a UNLV survey on the implementation of the first year of the Nevada Promise Scholarship (NPS), 57% of student respondents said the Promise Scholarship influenced their decision to attend college. In addition, 69% of Hispanic NPS applicants and 68% of first-generation NPS applicants said the Promise program influenced their decision to attend college.⁴

These are just a few examples of why free college tuition is not just good politics, but also the right thing to do for students and their families. Keep digging into this report for more on how to run and win on free college tuition in 2020.

⁴ https://www.leg.state.nv.us/App/NELIS/REL/80th2019/ExhibitDocument/OpenExhibitDocument?exhibitId=38602&fileName=SB350_Presentation_Nevada%20Promise%20Scholarship_Dr.%20E.%20Lee%20Bernick.pdf

The Case for Free Tuition

How to make the case for free college tuition

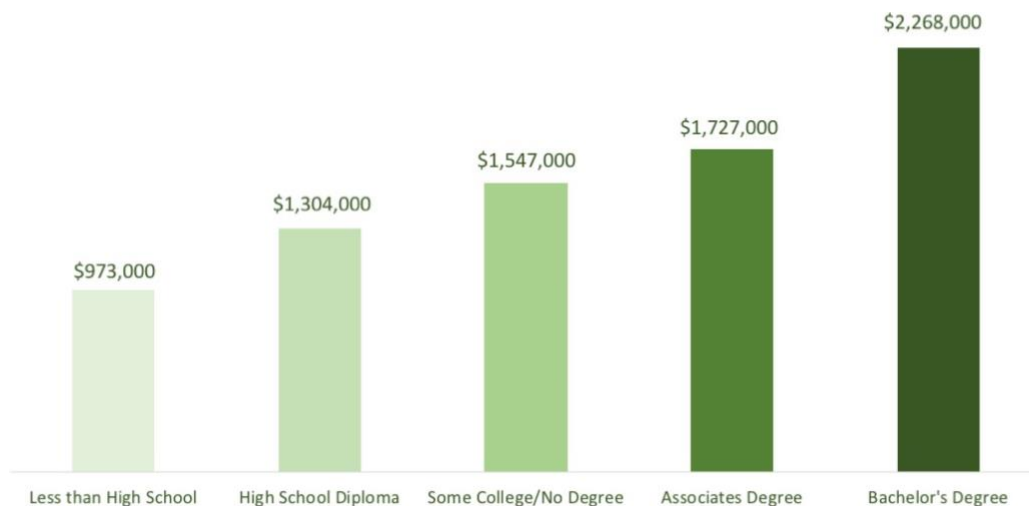
The Economic Case: The Road to the American Dream Runs Through College

Free college tuition is an important investment in the American economy as well as its future. A college degree or a high quality postsecondary certificate is now required to compete in the 21st century economy. At all levels, a college education adds to workers' lifetime earnings, and protects them from economic shocks such as a recession or transitions resulting from automation. By making public colleges and universities tuition-free, we can help more Americans earn a college degree and live the American Dream.

If we don't, the results from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission study of their 2007 cohort of high school freshman suggests a much bleaker economic future for those who go to work directly out of high school. Those Tennessee high school students had only a \$9,030 annual income and only a 16% chance of earning above the minimum wage.

How College Attainment Improves Earnings over a Lifetime (Georgetown CEW)⁵

Median Lifetime Earnings by Highest Educational Attainment
2009 Dollars



⁵ <https://cew.georgetown.edu/>

The Educational Case: Free Tuition Helps Students Succeed

When educators and lawmakers build strong free tuition programs, they can increase college graduation rates and reduce average student loan debt. Free college tuition is enabling more students to go to college tuition free in blue, red and purple states all across the country. It is estimated that one out of every four high school graduates now has the opportunity to go to community college tuition free when they graduate. Over one million students are already attending college tuition free. Even more students will succeed when state lawmakers make public colleges and universities tuition-free.

The Ethical Case: Free Public Higher Education is a Universal Right

Free college tuition opens the door for every student to earn a college degree and pursue their dreams. Each and every student deserves the opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills that they need to contribute to our democracy, economy, and society—and in the 21st century that means a college degree. A student's effort and talent, not their income and wealth, should determine their success in college and beyond. Furthermore, higher education is a public good that benefits all of us. By making public colleges and universities tuition free, we can uphold our obligation to future generations to make sure they have better opportunities than generations past.

Answering Tough Questions

How to address common concerns about free college tuition

Nothing is “free.” Who is really going to pay for it?

Free college tuition is an investment. Making public colleges and universities free will mean more college graduates with less student debt, a stronger economy, a better educated citizenry, and a broader tax base to support future generations of students. Additionally, the federal government will help pay for it. Because recipients of free college tuition “last dollar” programs are required to complete an application for a Federal Pell Grant (FASFA) to pay for their tuition, every state that has enacted such programs has seen a dramatic rise in the number of students applying for and receiving a Pell Grant, generating money the state does not have to use to make their tuition free. This new influx of federal dollars helps to offset the cost of educating each new student.

Unallocated funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) – enacted in March 2021 – may offer another funding source to allow your state’s residents to get the short-term certificates and associate degrees they need for success. Five states – Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, South Carolina and Vermont – have established free college tuition programs utilizing federal COVID-19 relief funds.

Tuition is only a part of the problem. What about non-tuition costs?

College tuition is not really free if students become homeless, hungry, or fall tens of thousands of dollars into debt just to earn a degree. Free tuition programs should be accompanied by other reforms such as incenting the use of Open Educational Resources (OER), which provide high quality, zero cost textbooks to students. Programs that offer supplemental resources for students to help cover other costs of attending college (COA) such as room and board, can also be integrated into the support services colleges should be offering their students, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend college. Innovative design elements, such as Nevada’s and Tennessee’s mentoring programs, and New Jersey’s planning grants help ensure students receive adequate support and counseling to graduate.

Won’t free college tuition just create a government subsidy for rich kids?

In 2022, New Mexico’s Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham convinced both Democrats and Republicans in her legislature to enact the most comprehensive, inclusive tuition free college program in the country. When some legislators sought to exclude students from families with higher incomes, opposition to the idea came from [both sides of the aisle](#). Republican State

Senator Pirtle, argued, “As a conservative, I don’t think people should be left out of something based on their income. Taxpayers supporting this program should be allowed to also benefit from it.” University of New Mexico Provost James Holloway argued “free primary and secondary education is seen as a public good no matter what walk of life you come from. Higher education should be viewed in the same light.”

What is the demand for free college tuition?

In 2021, Michigan’s Democratic Governor, Gretchen Whitmer, won the support of her Republican led legislature to pass and fund two new initiatives to make the state’s community colleges tuition free. The first, Future for Frontliners, provided that benefit to those designated as essential workers during the pandemic. More than 120,000 people applied before the yearend deadline and, by June of 2021, [16,000 of those applicants](#) had completed their first semester of community college. That program was then supplemented by an even more ambitious program, [Michigan Reconnect](#), which made community college tuition free for anyone over 25 who wanted to earn an associate degree. A total of 159,000 people applied and were accepted for the two programs together. By the spring of 2022, 41,000 Michiganders of all ages were enrolled in community colleges tuition free.

What is the partisan makeup of states with free college tuition programs?

On the state level, Tennessee, which has a Republican governor and legislature, and Oregon, with a Democratic Governor and legislature, were the first to implement state-wide Promise Programs. Since then, red, blue, and purple states around the nation have enacted the policy with overwhelming bipartisan support. In 2019, Mitch Carmichael, the President of the West Virginia State Senate, gained unanimous support from the state’s Republican majority legislature to make community colleges tuition free for certain courses of study that would help create a more skilled workforce. Similarly, in the Democratic-controlled State of Connecticut, the leaders of the legislature’s Joint Higher Education Committee – State Representative Greg Haddad and State Senator Will Haskell – spearheaded the passage of legislation making their community colleges tuition free starting in the Fall of 2020.

Who supports free college tuition?

Everyone. In the 18 times Campaign for Free College Tuition polled on free college tuition since December 2016, overall support of state programs making public colleges tuition-free has ranged from 70 to 81 percent. In a July 2022 poll, tuition-free college was embraced across all political and demographic lines as evidenced by 62 percent of Republicans, 76 percent of Independents and 88 percent of Democrats supporting their state providing free college tuition to academically qualified students.

States are Leading the Way on Free College Tuition



“My administration is working with students and higher education leaders across our state and nation to propose a solution that makes free college a reality for any New Mexican, regardless of their age or income ... These efforts not only improve lives and open doors; they're also critical to meeting our workforce needs now and into the future.”

New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham (D), Co-Chair of the CFCT Advisory Board
CFCT Webinar for State Leaders | October 8, 2021

“Haslam saw [free college] as the quickest, most surefire way to get people – especially those who had never considered college – talking about it. It had to make a splash – even if it meant running up against political resistance from his own party.”

“We wanted it to be an easy thing to sell and describe,” Haslam said. **“If I say, ‘Well, it’s free unless your income’s above this level,’ or, ‘it’s free unless you make a 2.5 GPA’ ... Free was an easy discussion so we could say, ‘If you walk across that high school stage, then you could go to college free.’ And that was a conversation we wanted people to have around their dinner tables.”**

Former Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam (R) on the Tennessee Promise in [The Red State that Loves Free College](#)

Politico | January 16, 2019

“All Michiganders deserve a pathway to a good-paying job, whether they choose to pursue a college degree, technical certificate, or an apprenticeship. Michigan Reconnect will connect thousands of Michiganders to good-paying jobs and connect businesses with the talent they need to thrive in their communities.”

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (D)

Virtual News Conference | February 2, 2021

“With the strong bipartisan support of the Legislature, we are ensuring that high school students whose aspirations for higher education were impacted by the pandemic have the opportunity to get a tuition free education and enter Maine’s workforce with a reliable, good-paying, and in-demand job. From nursing and surgical tech programs, like those I toured today at EMCC, to construction and commercial driving and more, students will be able to obtain the skills and credentials they need to help solve Maine’s biggest workforce challenges. I want young people to know that the future belongs to them, and that we will help you embrace it.”

Maine Governor Janet Mills (D) discussing tuition free community college at Eastern Maine Community College in Bangor.

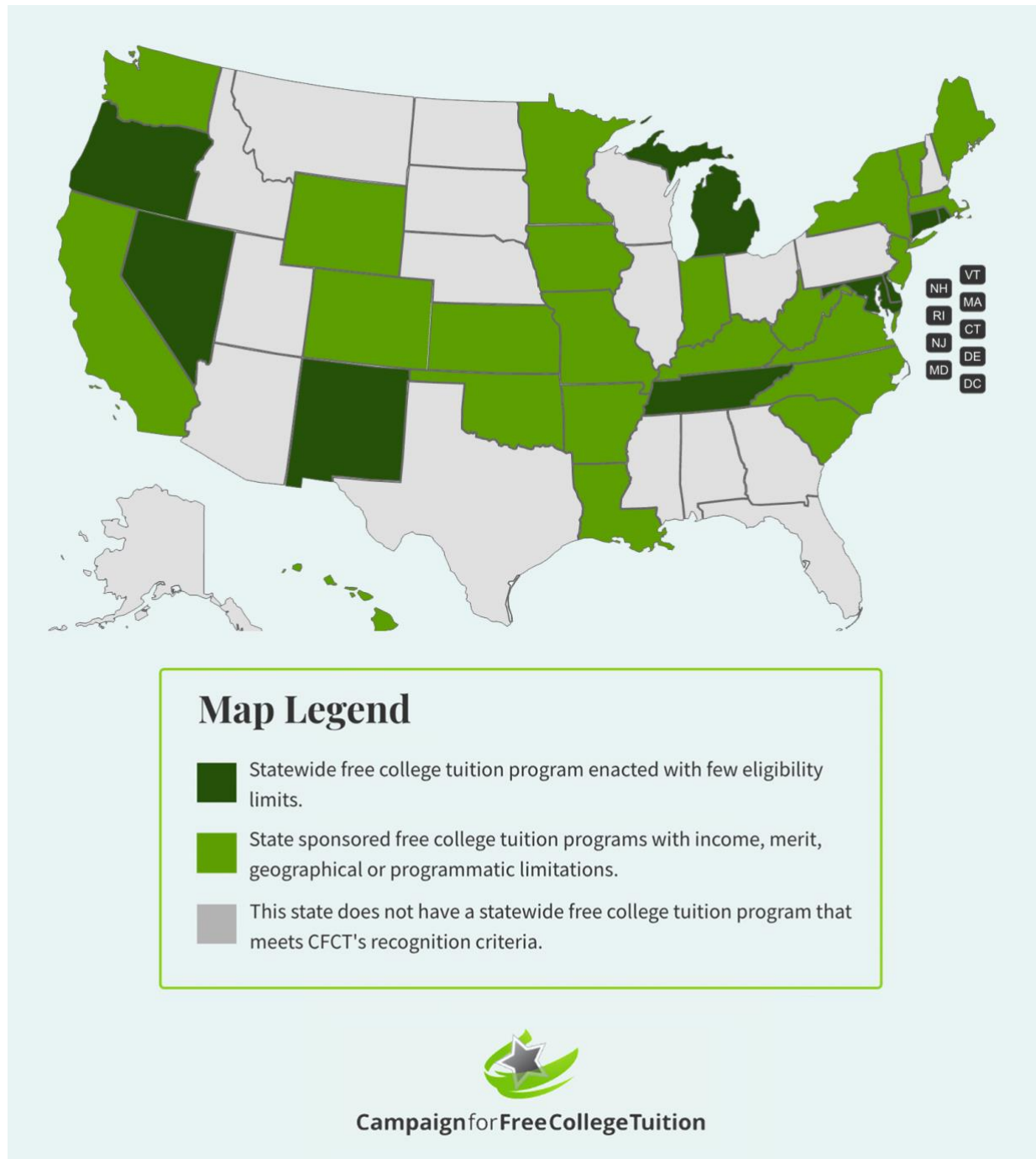
News Release | May 31, 2022

“Senate Bill 1 provides an innovative, cost-effective method of assisting traditional and nontraditional students with ‘last dollar in’ financial support for obtaining an associate’s degree or advanced training certification for careers in high demand within our state. With that focus, this program will catapult West Virginia to national prominence in the area of workforce training by providing our citizens with an opportunity to gain or enhance a skill set that can be put to use right away.”

[Op-ed](#) by former West Virginia Senate President Mitch Carmichael on 2019 legislation establishing the West Virginia Invests Grant Program

Charleston Gazette-Mail | April 25, 2019

Our Momentum



So far, 32 states on our momentum map are green! This unprecedented level of activity makes it clear that free college is gaining strong momentum as a smart bipartisan policy that works to improve educational opportunity and enjoys broad bipartisan support.

Now It's Your Turn

What it takes to build a free college tuition plan in five easy steps

- 1. START WITH STUDENTS:** Leverage this opportunity to build real relationships with students by asking them what they need and how you can help. Go beyond the usual suspects (e.g., party-affiliated clubs) in your outreach, so that you cast a wide net and hear diverse perspectives. What you learn will play an important role in shaping your approach to free tuition, and strategy for youth engagement during the campaign.
- 2. CONSIDER YOUR CONTEXT:** Local challenges call for local solutions. You know your state better than anyone, and you should use that knowledge to design a solid free tuition plan. Whether you need more skilled manufacturing workers or more people with Bachelor's degrees, free college tuition is a powerful tool for enrolling more students, revitalizing colleges, and solving local challenges.
- 3. KEEP IT SIMPLE, MAKE IT FREE:** Students place a high value on financial certainty in making decisions about higher education. Research findings suggest that straightforward, zero-tuition programs substantially expand enrollments among low-income students. Another study showed, 90% of students who believed they could afford to pay for college and had a parent that graduated from college were enrolled in college within three years of graduating high school. The simpler and more universal your program is, the easier it is to communicate and the greater the likelihood your message will be heard.
- 4. ASK FOR FEEDBACK:** Once you have chosen a plan, ask for feedback from key stakeholders such as campaign supporters, educators, parents, and students. The purpose of this feedback is not to address each and every concern about the proposal, but to test the idea with close supporters and constituencies. If necessary, use this "dry run" to tweak your plan as needed and plan your roll out.
- 5. MAKE A SPLASH:** Across the country, support for free college tuition is earning headlines. Organize an event, press conference, and social media moment to announce your support for free college tuition to maximize the reach and impact of your work. Incorporating students' voices into the announcement will help validate your proposal and energize young supporters around your campaign.