

# New state scholarship program makes college more affordable

## Students who meet qualifications will receive free tuition at state universities in New York

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Attending college will become a bit more manageable for many New Yorkers — especially for those in the middle class — after the state legislature passed the 2018 state budget, which included the Excelsior Scholarship, making New York home to the nation's first accessible college program. The scholarship program, one that received full support from New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D), will provide free college tuition to students who qualify.

"With this budget, New York has the nation's first accessible college program," Cuomo said in a statement. "It's a different model. Today, college is what high school was — it should always be an option even if you can't afford it. The Excelsior Scholarship will make college accessible to thousands of working and middle class students and shows the difference that government can make. There is no child who will go to sleep tonight and say, I have great dreams, but I don't believe I'll be able to get a college education because parents can't afford it. With this program, every child will have the opportunity that education provides."

According to the state's website, there are potentially 940,000 middle-class families and individuals who can benefit from the program in New York. On Long Island, it is estimated there are 112,890 families with college-age students and 55.6 percent may be eligible.

To qualify for the Excelsior Scholarship, a student must be enrolled in a CUNY or SUNY two- or four-year college full-time, which is 30 credits or more, and complete their education within the allotted time. There is also a household federal adjusted gross income limit starting at \$100,000 in the fall of 2017. In 2018 the limit will increase to \$110,000 and will reach \$125,00 in 2019.

The scholarship only covers tuition, and students are still required to pay room and board and any additional fees that the institution charges. Also, students who receive a need-based Pell Grant

or New York Tuition Assistance grant must use these funds before receiving any money from the Excelsior Scholarship.

In Suffolk County, those who attend Stony Brook University or Suffolk Community College may be able to take advantage of the new scholarship. Tuition for Stony Brook University costs \$6,470 a year, while Suffolk Community College is \$4,770. For those who live on campus at Stony Brook, the cost for rooming there can be approximately \$8,090; however, costs can vary depending on housing options.

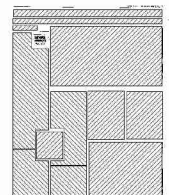
Like most scholarships, students will need to maintain a satisfactory grade point average; however, unlike other scholarships, after graduating from college, the student must sign a contract with the NYS Higher Education Services Corporation agreeing to remain working in the state for the same amount of years they received the scholarship. If a former award recipient does not remain in the state, the award will turn into a loan.

Representatives from local educational institutions said it's still too early to predict how the scholarship will affect students.

"The story of the Excelsior Scholarship will be told once the program is fully implemented, and the impact measured," Shaun L. McKay, Suffolk County Community College president, said in an email. "We are hopeful that Excelsior will increase opportunity and accessibility for Suffolk's students."

Drew Biondo, director of communications at Suffolk County Community College, said it can be difficult to predict the outcome of such a program. It is estimated at this point that 2,500 or less of 27,000 current students at SCCC will benefit from the program, even though he stressed that number was a rough estimate due to not having financial information on all students, only those who have filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form.

He said he roughly estimates about 60



percent of students at the community college are enrolled part time, which means they would be ineligible for the scholarship. While Excelsior may enable some to attend full time in the future for the first time, there are others who due to childcare needs or working full time may not be able to increase the number of classes they take. There is also the potential of students deciding to attend a four-year school instead if more financial aid is offered to them, meaning the school's enrollment could decline.

Lauren Sheprow, Stony Brook University's media relations officer, said the NYS HESC is still working on the eligibility guidelines, so it's hard to say how many students will benefit from the program at the university.

While they may not have all the numbers yet, university President Samuel Stanley believes it is a step in the right direction to help those pursuing a college education.

"The governor's Excelsior Scholarship proposal is a good deal for family pocketbooks, and an affirmative recognition of the academic excellence in New York public higher education," Stanley said in a statement. "The visionary focus on both access and completion is positive for New York, for our students and for employers. At the same time, we are able to maintain the quality of our students' academic experience thanks to the four-year predictable tuition plan."

State Assemblyman Steve Englebright (D-Setauket) expressed concerns about the new program but at the same time has faith that it will work out well with some adjustments.

"I'm a little concerned about it because of the inflexibility of some of the requirements for eligibility," Englebright said.

He said there may be cases where students may not be able to attend school full time or consecutively due to sickness or a death in the family or a class is simply not available.

"There's no forgiveness of the human condition into the requirements, and I am concerned about it," Englebright said.

He said he has hope in the program, because he knows that the governor wants it to work, and many college presidents are making the program a priority.

"It's a good idea conceptually, and all new programs have kinks in them," he said. "I'd like to see a little more flexibility built in that favors the enhancement of the student experience and makes the program less threatened to students should there be problems like the ones I described."

## 'The governor's Excelsior Scholarship proposal is a good deal for family pocketbooks ...'

— Samuel Stanley



Photo above from Stony Brook University; photo below from Suffolk County Community College

Some students at local SUNY schools such as Stony Brook University, above, and Suffolk County Community College, below, soon will have help paying for tuition.

