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## OBAMA CALLS FOR TWO YEARS OF FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOR ALL STUDENTS

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President Barack Obama on Thursday proposed offering free community college nationwide, in effect extending government-funded education from kindergarten through a two-year degree.

"I'd like to see the first two years of community college free for everyone who is willing to work for it," Mr. Obama said in a video posted Thursday on Facebook. "It's something we can accomplish and it's something that will train our workforce so that we can compete with anybody in the world."

The plan, which would offset some of the \$20 billion in annual tuition received by community colleges, will require legislation in a Republican-controlled Congress that already is at odds with the president over other spending issues. The concept is expected to formally be released in Mr. Obama's 2016 budget proposal, due out in February.

"With no details or information on the cost, this seems more like a talking point than a plan," said Cory Fritz, press secretary to House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio).

The administration declined to release the overall cost of the plan, saying details would be disclosed in coming weeks. Federal funds would cover three-quarters of the average cost of tuition, and states would have some responsibility to provide matching funds under the plan.

Currently, there are approximately eight million U.S. community college students, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Those who attend full time pay an average tuition of \$3,800 a year.

The proposal, which the president is expected to flesh out Friday in a talk at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tenn., is aimed at addressing Americans who look to a college degree as a ticket to the middle class but believe they cannot afford one. At the same time, business leaders are deeply concerned with a skills gap that has left hundreds of thousands of jobs unfilled across the country for lack of qualified workers.

The announcement is part of three-state tour by Mr. Obama aimed at heralding economic growth and highlighting executive actions and legislative proposals that will be included in his State of the Union address Jan. 20.

"This will basically make community college like high school in terms of access," said David Baime, vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges. "This is a proposal of historical proportions and could dramatically increase access to community college."

The proposal faces an uphill battle. The president has twice proposed an \$8 billion college-to-career fund aimed at community colleges and Congress twice declined to approve it. A year ago, Congress quashed a \$6 billion program also aimed at community colleges.

"We think this will be popular with a lot of legislators, but Congress is not in the mode of creating large new programs," said Mr. Baime.

Federal funds for the plan would go only to community-college programs the White House deems effective as determined by whether most students graduate and find employment or transfer to four-year schools. Students also would be required to attend at least half time, maintain a 2.5 grade-point average and "make steady progress" to remain eligible.

Mr. Obama will travel to Knoxville to highlight the Tennessee Promise, a state program that provides free tuition for community college for any high-school senior in Tennessee. It is one of a handful of state- or university-based programs designed to speed time to a degree or make college more affordable, said Jamie Merisotis, president of Lumina Foundation, a nonprofit that works to increase the number of college graduates.

An earlier version of the Tennessee program got its start in 2009 in two counties and spread to 25 more over the next few years. Republican Bill Haslam was a board member of that program and after he was elected governor in November 2010, he created a \$300 million trust funded by the state lottery designed to fund the Tennessee Promise in perpetuity.

Among the state's 65,000 high-school seniors, nearly 58,000 applied for a spot in the first class this September, though officials think fewer than 20,000 will take advantage of it.

The majority of the participants in the earlier versions have been first-generation college students from families with a household income of less than \$50,000, said Krissy DeAlejandro, an executive with the program.

The program also supplies a mentor – the majority are from the business community and 60% are women – who spends at least one hour a month with a student. About 75% of students who start college through the program begin their second year, compared with the national average of 59%, said Ms. DeAlejandro.

"Having a mentor really levels the playing field," said Mr. Krause "It helps first-generation college students navigate the barriers that may intimidate them."