

More Access Means More Enrollment for Maine Community Colleges

A recent report shows a surge in enrollment across Maine Community College System campuses from 2022 to 2023 and credits the state's Free College Scholarship program.

By [Jessica Blake](#)

The Maine Community College System's new scholarship program is proving there is power in the word "free."

Maine Community College System

Nearly half of the students enrolled at Maine Community College System campuses during the 2022–23 academic year took part in the state's [Free College Scholarship program](#).

According to [a recent report](#), more than 6,550 out of approximately 14,200 students attending one of the seven MCCS institutions were enrolled through the state initiative, which [launched just months before](#) classes began in fall 2022.

Ryan Morgan, CEO of the Campaign for Free College Tuition, was thrilled but not surprised by the program's success. He said it was designed to be "as accessible as possible" for the target population—students who earned a high school degree or GED during the pandemic and experienced dramatic disruptions to their education as they entered the workforce.

"The more accessible the program is, by definition, the more interest there is and the higher enrollment is going to be," Morgan said.

And it's paying off. Although the Maine Free College Scholarship wasn't the only factor in increased enrollment, MCCS administrators attribute much of the

12 percent growth in fall 2022 and 16 percent jump in fall 2023 to the new scholarship program.

National data suggest most community colleges have had a [far more modest comeback](#) from their pandemic enrollment woes than those in the Maine system—two-year colleges nationally saw [an average of just 0.5 percent](#) enrollment growth between spring 2022 and 2023. A similar free college program introduced in New Mexico in 2020 only led to a 7 percent enrollment increase in its first year.

But enrollment in Maine has skyrocketed and even exceeded pre-pandemic levels, reaching 19,477 students in fall 2023. Some MCCS institutions now have [more students than they can fit on campus](#). Central Maine Community College, for example, had to lease out an entire hotel to house some of its students.

Morgan and others believe the program is on track to gain longer-term support from the state because of the impressive results.

“All signs point in the right direction for the governor and state Legislature to renew the program,” he said.

‘Re-Bolstering’ a Generation

Although [a growing number](#) of states across the country have [introduced free community college programs](#) to counter [declining enrollment rates](#) and [workforce shortages](#), Maine’s is one of a few programs specifically aimed at traditional-age college students rather than returning adult learners.

First proposed [in February 2022](#), the program was backed by \$20 million in state funding and had [bipartisan support](#). It guaranteed that any Maine resident who had or was scheduled to graduate high school between 2020 and 2023 could pursue a two-year degree or one-year certification without paying a dime for tuition.

MCCS president David Daigler believes getting recent high school graduates whose lives were most disrupted by the pandemic into college will have ripple effects on the state’s economy.

Maine has the [oldest population in the nation](#), with a median age of 45.1, and for every 10 workers ages 60 to 64 who are exiting the workforce, there are only seven students ages 15 to 19 who will soon enter it. The proportion of students who opted out of college rose from an average of about 40 percent to 50 percent during the pandemic, Daigler said. The percentage of young men was even higher, with rates as high as 60 percent.

But Daigler said the Free College Scholarship is “re-bolstering” the next generation.

Enrollment in skills-based programs shot up 300 percent, from 3,000 students in 2021–22 to 12,000 in 2022–23, according to the report. And the percentage of students enrolling in trade occupation programs climbed from 71 percent to 81 percent.

“The modern workforce requires skills,” he said. “When you get those skills that come through a community college, you’ve now got an opportunity to make a difference, not just for your family, not just for yourself. That continues generation after generation.”

Some University of Maine System faculty and administrators fear the free college program is [pulling students away](#) from the state’s public four-year campuses—which experienced a 5 percent decrease in enrollment from fall 2021 to 2022. But advocates of the Free College Scholarship believe that while the program may be a factor in declining enrollment in the university system, it’s not the only factor. Others include [general demographic shifts](#) and [doubts about the value of college](#). Supporters of the program also hope it will open the door for more transfers to four-year colleges.

Even Daigler had initial hesitations about introducing a free college program, especially because MCCS already had the lowest tuition in New England. But he got fully onboard after seeing such positive outcomes.

“I personally am a convert,” he said. “When we lift a person’s income, we also increase the income taxes that they pay and reduce their need for public assistance ... This is a positive investment. It’s not just a social good.”

Hopes for a Permanent Program

The program was already granted a preliminary extension with an additional \$15 million of state funding [in July 2023](#) to extend the benefits to students graduating as late as 2025.

Education advocates hope the scholarship will be made permanent.

Piet Lammert, longtime public high school counselor and the founder of DiriGo!, an independent college application consulting business, credits the scholarship for changing the perception of community college. Although many students already receive financial aid to help pay for college from other state, federal and third-party grants, he believes there is power in the word “free.”

“A lot of the kids that enrolled because of the Free College Scholarship would have qualified for Pell Grants anyway, and it would have been free for them regardless,” Lammert said. “But this new sense that college was immediately accessible, regardless of income, got people in the door that wouldn’t have gone before.”

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center confirm Lammert’s observations. Nearly 11.5 percent of the MCCS students enrolled through the free college program in 2022 had graduated from high school in 2020 or 2021 and worked for at least a year before going to college.

Lammert said public perceptions of community college as “less than” a four-year university, combined with hesitation about affordability, were keeping students from enrolling. But making the scholarship permanent would allow students and parents alike to count on community college as a viable, credible, surefire post-high school option.

“When you put your kiddo on the school bus to pre-K that very first day, if you know that the state has got you covered through grade 14 ... that’s so empowering,” he said.

Governor Janet Mills, who sponsored the Free College Scholarship, is pleased by the first year’s report.

“In just two short years, our initiative has empowered thousands of young people to earn a degree or a certificate and put them on the path to a good-paying job, creating new economic opportunities and brighter futures for Maine students,”

she said in an email. “Maine is strengthening our workforce and ensuring that the cost of higher education is not a barrier to success.”

But Heather Johnson, Maine’s commissioner of economic and community development, said although the governor’s cabinet is “really encouraged” by the recent report, it is “hard to know” at this point if the free college program will be expanded further.

She added that data on student outcomes in the workforce will be telling—the first class of two-year free college learners are scheduled to graduate in May.

“That will be helpful as well in adding to the data that is showing the positive momentum of this program,” she said. “But historically, we have absolutely seen the value of these programs both in productivity per worker as well as wage growth.”

“The administration will try to work closely with the community college system and the Legislature to determine what that path forward could be,” she added.