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[Tim Hacker/ Tribune]

Mesa Community College

Students walk between classes on the Mesa Community College campus, Friday, Sept. 6, 2013 in Mesa. [Tim Hacker/ Tribune]

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Posted: Wednesday, February 11, 2015 5:15 am

By Eric Mungenast, Tribune

President Barack Obama's proposal to provide free education for some community college students has gained the support from the head of the network of colleges in Maricopa County.

Obama outlined his plan during his State of the Union speech on Jan. 20 to provide free community college to students enrolled at least half time and who have a GPA of 2.5 or greater. He cited policies in Tennessee – known as the Tennessee Promise – and Chicago that allow students to attend those colleges for free.

"I want to spread that idea all across America, so that two years of college becomes as free and universal in America as high school is today," he said.

Any action on Obama's proposal requires approval from Congress, although Maricopa Community Colleges Chancellor Rufus Gasper said in an email he "welcomed" the president's proposal. Gasper, who oversees a series of campuses that include Mesa, Chandler-Gilbert, Gateway, and Paradise Valley community colleges, said cutting the costs of college would up access to post-secondary education for students.

The free tuition plan wouldn't hurt the community colleges coffers either, as Gasper said the federal government would pay 75 percent of the tuition for those students, while

the state would kick in the remaining 25 percent under the proposal.

"It is likely that it would increase the number of students attending community colleges," he said.

The other factor he mentioned was the opportunity to compensate for a possible loss of financial

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aid from the state, as Gov. Doug Ducey's proposed budget includes cuts to higher education in the state.

"We've seen our share of state funding decreased to one percent, and we're facing a 50-percent cut in that amount this year," he said.

The cost of education also happens to be one of the motivating factors in a student's decision to attend a community college in the first place, Glasper said. Statistics from the American Association of Community College list the current average tuition for an in-district public community college at \$3,327 a year, which is a little less than \$6,000 a year cheaper than an in-state public four-year school.

Mark Kulik, a guidance counselor at Desert Vista High School in Ahwatukee, said financials do play a role in the decision-making process, but, as Glasper said as well, there are other factors. Kulik, whose school sends approximately 20 percent of its graduates to community colleges each year, said students might be looking for more information about the benefits of community colleges.

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"They're all a little bit different and they're finding the best match for themselves," he said.

Fellow guidance counselor Jennifer Murphy, who serves as the department chair at Williams Field High School in Gilbert, said via email her school will discuss both the two-year and four-year options for students to find out what works best for them. She said the community college can be "invaluable" because of the financial benefits, smaller class sizes and more direct contact with teachers. She added students can complete core classes at a school like Chandler-Gilbert Community College and transfer those credits to Arizona State University.

Despite benefits like those for students, Murphy said she's torn on Obama's proposal.

"On one side of the coin, as a high school counselor, you watch students disregard a free public education and it is only until they are responsible for some form of payment that they actually take ownership and responsibility for their performance," she said. "On the other side of the coin, I see many students who have the ability, drive, and desire to succeed at the college level but finances become the largest issue limiting their options."

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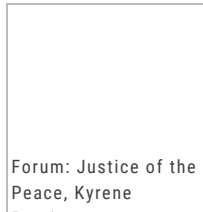
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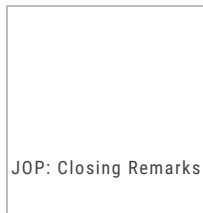
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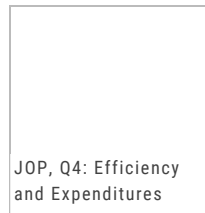
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