

COLLEGE COSTS & 3 OTHERS

Excelsior Scholarship added 4,000 recipients in second year

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The on-time graduation rate at SUNY and CUNY community colleges for students receiving the Excelsior Scholarship was 30 percent, compared to 11 percent for non-Excelsior students, according to preliminary state data. | Flickr

ALBANY — Some 24,000 students received New York's Excelsior Scholarship in the program's second year, an increase of roughly 4,000 recipients, according to statistics released on Tuesday.

The program took effect at the beginning of the 2017-18 academic year, and the state has set a target of 30,000 scholarship recipients by the end of the current academic year. In a written statement, Gov. Andrew Cuomo called the numbers an "impressive start" for the high-profile program.

The 2019-2020 school year is the first in which the scholarship has been fully phased in and is available to students from families making up to \$125,00 a year. The eligibility threshold was \$100,000 in its first year and \$110,000 last year.

The scholarship is a last-dollar program that kicks in after the application of federal Pell and state TAP grants. It does not cover other education-related costs, such as housing, books or mandatory fees, and it requires students to compete 30 credits per academic year. Upon graduation, they must continue to reside in New York for as many years as they received the award. Otherwise it converts to a loan.

The eligibility requirements have been criticized for excluding those who, for whatever reason, cannot take 30 credits per year. Insufficient credits led to more [40,000 application denials](#) in the program's first year, according to a 2018 report by the Center for an Urban Future.

"Excelsior is flawed, but it is definitely a step toward accessibility," Fred Kowal, president of the United University Professors, which represents SUNY faculty and staff, told POLITICO.

The Cuomo administration argues that it is logical to ask Excelsior recipients to stay in New York after graduation so the state can benefit from the investment in their education, and the 30-credit requirement ensures that students stay on track to graduate.

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"This program is far more than free-tuition for New York's future leaders — it is a college completion and degree attainment program," Cuomo said in a release. "We now know that with Excelsior, students stay on track academically to achieve their degree in two or four years, and completing college in this time frame translates into substantial savings for middle-class students and their families."

Previous data from SUNY and CUNY has shown a [higher retention rate](#) among Excelsior recipients than among those who do not receive the scholarship.

Some state lawmakers have raised concerns about the [potential for an “Excelsior gap”](#) as SUNY and CUNY schools increase tuition rates while the money for those covered by Excelsior remains fixed.

State officials estimate that more than 210,000 students will attend SUNY or CUNY schools tuition-free by year’s end. That figure includes students who receive other forms of financial assistance as well as the Excelsior Scholarship.

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