

Only three percent of students have received Governor Cuomo's "free tuition" scholarship for New York public universities

By Josh Varlin
6 September 2018

As college students throughout New York state return to school, a report has revealed that the state's much-vaunted Excelsior Scholarship, which was advertised as providing free tuition at all of New York's public universities to "middle-class" families, was awarded to only 3.2 percent of undergraduates in the 2017-2018 academic year. An even smaller percentage of community college students and students in New York City—one of the most expensive cities in the world—received the scholarship.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the *New York Times* all initially hailed the scholarship, with Sanders, who claimed to be a socialist during the 2016 Democratic Party primary campaign, calling it "revolutionary." The fact that only 20,086 out of 633,543 undergraduate students received the scholarship demonstrates that the scholarship was mostly an electoral stunt designed to appease students' anger over student loan debt.

The Center for an Urban Future (CUF), a think tank analyzing inequality and economic mobility, based its report on data from the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), the City University of New York Office of Institutional Research and the State University of New York.

An extremely limited number of New York students are eligible for the Excelsior Scholarship. Students must be attending a school in the State University of New York (SUNY) or City University of New York (CUNY) systems, be taking at least 30 credits per year, cannot have had gaps in their education, must finish their degree within five years, and must come from families with annual incomes below \$110,000. Last

year the maximum income was \$100,000, and next year the maximum will be \$125,000, where it is scheduled to remain.

Additionally, students receiving the scholarship must remain in New York state at least as many years as they receive the scholarship, or they will have to repay the award.

The Excelsior Scholarship is a "last dollar" scholarship, meaning that if a student's tuition is already covered by federal Pell Grants or the state Tuition Assistance Program—as is the case with many of the lowest-income students—they are not eligible. It also only applies to tuition, and cannot be used for room and board, fees or books, which are about double the tuition for SUNY students living on-campus.

Even though the SUNY and CUNY systems are the second- and third- largest public higher education systems in the United States, respectively, with about 700,000 students in all, the state received less than 64,000 applications, 68 percent of which it denied.

Of the rejected applications, 83 percent were rejected for "not sufficient credits." Not only is 30 credits per year more than the federal minimum for being a full-time student, but it is practically impossible for students who need to work part- or even full-time to make ends meet while going to school.

While a 3.2 percent figure for undergraduates receiving the scholarship is already low, a further breakdown of the numbers reveals a picture that is even more dismal. The CUF report notes that "barely 4,000 of the 242,000 students attending public [four-year] colleges and [two-year] community colleges in New York City have benefited from New York's Excelsior Scholarship program."

At four community colleges in New York City, “100 or fewer students have received an Excelsior award.” Out of almost 100,000 students in CUNY’s community colleges, only 820 received an Excelsior Scholarship. Students at SUNY Albany, Binghamton, Stony Brook and the University at Buffalo *each* received more scholarships, with a total enrollment of only 65,545 between them.

The implementation of the Excelsior Scholarship has also come under fire. College financial aid officials and students say that HESC, which administers the scholarship on New York state’s behalf, has failed to answer their questions about the scholarship or let them know in a timely manner if they have received the award.

According to the Albany-based *Times Union*, at a recent conference call of college financial aid officers that included HESC officials and journalists, an Erie County Community College financial aid officer, “speaking on behalf of a statewide association of such officials,” said, “We have gone months without formal written guidance.”

Albany’s response was to blame financial aid officers, with Cuomo spokesman Don Kaplan saying, “It is shocking that financial aid officers do not yet understand this program.” According to a SUNY official, financial aid officers have since been directed not to speak with the press about the scholarship.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted the limited nature of a “free tuition” scholarship, even if implemented without strings attached, when Cuomo first proposed the Excelsior Scholarship:

For nearly 130 years [CUNY] was tuition-free, and in the first half of the 20th century was sometimes called the “Harvard of the proletariat.” Tuition was imposed for the first time during the financial crisis and near-bankruptcy of the city in 1976. ... The destruction of tuition-free education in 1976 was one of the initial elements in what has become four decades of social counterrevolution.

At the time of the scholarship’s implementation, we noted that “officials acknowledged that as few as 32,000 students might take advantage of the program.” Even this figure was an overestimation by 50 percent.

The *New York Times*, which hailed Cuomo’s proposal in 2017, has not written on the CUF report as of this writing. The limited participation in the

Excelsior Scholarship, with every obstacle put up to prevent students from working-class backgrounds from receiving it, is an embarrassing exposure of the Democratic Party, as some of its representatives attempt to burnish their “progressive” credentials before the midterm elections.

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