



KATHLEEN VINEHOUT

STATE SENATOR

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Free Tuition for Two-Year and Tech Colleges Means Freedom to Learn by Senator Kathleen Vinehout

“Every Wisconsinite should have access to education or training past high school... To be pursued at whatever point and pace makes sense for individual workers and industries,” wrote researchers at the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) eight years ago.

Long before the current shortage of skilled workers, COWS anticipated the need for additional training. In 2009, the Center teamed up with the Workforce Development Board, Skills2Compete and others to study “Wisconsin’s Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs.”

Middle skill jobs are those jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. The study I quoted above, found “Middle skill jobs still represent the largest share of jobs in Wisconsin – some 54 percent – and the largest share of job openings into the next decade.”

Georgetown University just released a study that found similar conclusions. “Across the nation, good jobs have shifted toward Associate Degree holders and away from workers with a high school diploma or less.”

In response to the demonstrated need, I am proposing free tuition for Wisconsin residents at our Technical Colleges and University of Wisconsin two-year campuses.

Expanding our skilled workforce is the surest way to grow our economy and raise wages. Raising wages in Wisconsin should be a top priority. We are ranked 18th worst in the nation in average wages and salaries.

My proposal, Freedom to Learn, allows students to learn at their own pace and choose their own course of study.

Long ago, I worried about how to pay for college. My only option was a two-year campus. I know firsthand what it’s like to not know how to make ends meet and also go to college. Many see tuition as an insurmountable obstacle. I want to eliminate any hesitation someone might have in pursuing his or her opportunities and dreams.

I want to make it possible for someone who is already working or has family obligations, doesn't have the cash and can't afford to take time off, to get the education and training they want. Freedom to Learn, in allowing students to attend school part-time, and learn at their own pace, goes further than tuition programs in other states.

In 2014, Tennessee became the national leader in eliminating tuition and fees for incoming full-time students. Since then, several states followed including most recently, California.

Like other states, my proposal uses state tax dollars as the last dollar scholarship. This means students apply for financial aid. Free tuition grants kick in after all other federal and state aid are used. Wisconsin already has a similar last dollar free tuition program for our veterans.

My program is modeled after Tennessee. Republican Governor Bill Haslam showed the nation what works. As Tennessee added dollars for tuition, the number of students applying for student loans dropped by 17%. In addition, the number of students enrolled in two-year and tech colleges increased by 30%.

Under the proposal I recently released, the cost of free tuition at two-year and tech colleges is funded by repealing the manufacturing portion of the Manufacturing and Agriculture Tax Credit. This tax credit is one of 43 different tax credits claimed by businesses in the past year. The effect of this specific tax credit is to reduce state taxes owed to near zero.

Corporate profits and corporate cash reserves are at an all-time high, while wages are stagnant. Companies have the money. They don't have the workers. Trading one manufacturer's tax break for a pool of skilled workers is a good exchange.

Freedom to Learn is a great opportunity to invest in the potential of our own Wisconsin workers and grow our economy from the inside out. It makes more sense than trying to lure workers from other states or giving billions to one foreign corporation.