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Low-income Utahns are a step closer to free community college.

For students with federal Pell grants, Salt Lake Community College will cover the remainder of tuition and fees, the school announced Thursday.

Freshmen will be eligible starting in fall 2016, but only after hashing out a two-year degree plan with an adviser.

The college believes up to 5,000 of its students — many of whom receive full scholarships from SLCC — qualify for the federal grants but don't apply for them. The school hopes the program will persuade them to fill out the paperwork. Having the feds shoulder some of that tuition cost would help the school spread more of its own money to more students.

"Students have skin in the game," SLCC President Denece Huftalin said at a news conference at the Capitol. "If we're going to meet your need, you've got to come full time."

The college is using existing scholarship money for the program, but it expects to be able to additional students by paying only for the gaps where need-based federal aid falls short, instead of the whole tab.

The goal of the program, Huftalin told a room of about 100 people, is to "lay out a financial path for students and their families" to make sure students who start school can graduate without taking on debt.

The Rev. France Davis, vice chairman of the Utah Board of Regents, said the new program would help low-income Utahns avoid being "shackled" to exorbitant loan payments.

SLCC also hopes the program will entice more students to fill out the applications for federal financial aid.

As many as 14,000 SLCC students qualify for at least \$500 a year in Pell grants, which do not need to be repaid. For the 2015-2016 school year, said spokesman Joy Tlou, 9,100 SLCC students received an average of \$2,850 from the federal award, which is set aside for students pursuing a bachelor's degree.

The college estimates that those 14,000 Utahns — about half of its total student body — could eventually attend without paying any money under the program.



The White House in recent years [has pushed free community college](#) as one way to curb student debt and meet job demands in markets such as health care, energy and information technology. Mounting loan payments, President Barack Obama has noted, have forced many to abandon studies before graduating. But critics [have called on the federal government](#) to update and reform local colleges first, saying colleges should make their degrees more valuable before offering them for free.

"We're already doing that," said Huftalin, who notes the school's new Westpointe Center near Salt Lake City International Airport caters to growing aviation technology and manufacturing.

Makayla Johnson, who is studying to complete the second of two SLCC associate degrees, said the new program "is fantastic," even though she is too far along in her American Sign Language coursework to qualify. Pell grants cover almost all of Johnson's and her husband's tuition, at \$2,000 a semester.

According to the Utah System of Higher Education, about 41,000 students across Utah's eight public colleges receive the grants.

But many in the Beehive State decide not to apply. Only about a third of Utah high school seniors complete the federal financial application, putting the state dead last in the nation for its rate of FAFSA completion, according to a report [released last year](#) by the National Center for Educational Statistics and Department of Education.

"They see it as welfare," said Cristi Millard, SLCC financial aid director.

Six in 10 students at SLCC's Salt Lake City and Taylorsville campuses receive aid from the state, feds or the college.