

March 6, 2016

The Salt Lake Tribune

Editorial: SLCC's free-tuition plan will make Utah smarter

First Published Mar 06 2016 08:33AM · Last Updated Mar 06 2016 08:33 am

This is how you do it.

Salt Lake Community College President Deneece Huftalin has pieced together two free years of college for up to 14,000 Utahns. Her efforts are made all the more impressive by the fact that she's doing it without asking Utahns for more tax money.

Instead, she is resetting the school's existing resources to make better use of Pell grants, the federal student aid that students don't have to pay back. Essentially just two things are required to receive a Pell grant: a high school diploma or GED and a moderate family income (or individual income if the student is over 24). Then, to maintain the grants, the students have to have satisfactory success.

And success is exactly the threshold that Utah should have for keeping students in college. It shouldn't be whether they can keep paying tuition. If they can be successful, we are almost certain to get back whatever subsidy we can give them.

In the pursuit of Gov. Gary Herbert's pledge to have two-thirds of Utah adults with post-secondary degrees by 2020, Huftalin's move is among the most important. Her college, more than any other Utah institution, has the role of producing college graduates from families who have never had them. And for many of those graduates, the two-year SLCC degrees will lead to four-year degrees elsewhere.

This free offer is not just a handout. The bargain Huftalin is making with her students also addresses a nagging issue for all Utah colleges: taking too much time to graduate, or not graduating at all. To get the carrot of free tuition and fees, the students will face a stick. They must pursue a two-year degree, and they must go full-time to get through in two years. No dawdling.

The other hallmark of this plan addresses another Utah uniqueness: We don't apply for federal aid as much as residents in other states do. Utahns carry the lowest student debt load in the nation, and that's a good thing. The credit for that goes both to debt-shy Utahns and to Utah higher education's efforts to keep college affordable.

But a consequence of that is, in passing up student loans, Utahns often also pass up Pell grants. The grants, which have been around since 1972, are the federal government's commitment to college education as an investment that will be paid back in future earnings, not in student loan payments.

By redirecting existing scholarship money to add to the Pell grants, Huftalin is able to make her free-college pledge to Utahns who have the desire and the ability but not the means for higher education. It is leveraging private and public dollars and the hard work of the next generation.

That is the Utah way.