University faculty, administrators work on rules for Title IX complaints

By Ashley Jost

Thursday, January 8, 2015 at 2:00 pm

University of Missouri System administrators and MU faculty spent much of Wednesday morning hammering out rules to establish evidence standards and create multiple channels for resolving sexual discrimination and assault allegations against faculty members.

During a special meeting, the MU Faculty Council discussed drafts of changes to the Collected Rules and Regulations, the UM System’s governing document, addressing what happens when a faculty member is accused of gender discrimination or sexual assault under Title IX.

Dennis Miller, MU professor, faculty council executive member and member of the intercampus faculty council for the UM System, led the discussion Wednesday with the help of university lawyer Marsha Fischer and Hank Foley, UM System vice president and MU vice chancellor.

The proposals would add specific, uniform procedures to the complaint resolution process.

Miller said the proposed rules were based on guidance from the Office of Civil Rights and consultation with UM System lawyers. Miller and faculty members said other schools they studied were either still crafting their rules or hadn’t even started that process.

One change sets out guidelines for resolving cases against a faculty member, which could come from a student, a staff member or another faculty member.

When a person files a complaint against a faculty member, the provost or a designee commissions an investigation. The investigator reports back to the provost, who then writes a summary resolution that is presented to the two parties involved, Miller said.

The provost could find no violation or refer the case to mediation, a hearing with an administrator or a hearing in front of a three-person panel. The panel decides whether or not a violation occurred according to a preponderance of evidence.
The resolution must happen within 60 days, according to the rule changes. That timeframe is a guideline passed down by the federal government, Fischer said, though the Office of Civil Rights does allow proceedings to go over the 60-day limit with justification.

“I think” the Office of Civil Rights “is going to learn a lot about academia that it doesn’t know right now,” Foley said.

The council was also briefed on changes to two existing rules related to tenure and “dismissal of cause,” or the firing of faculty, to align with the new process.

Final changes to the policies will be made using input from faculty meetings before a Feb. 5 Board of Curators vote, Miller said.

“We’re going to add a provision to the final rule that indicates the president has the ability to make changes to these policies without board approval,” Miller said. “Since these policies were developed and vetted very quickly, this gives us a chance to make more changes as necessary.”

Faculty across the UM System won a battle of sorts by having a hand in creating these procedures. Initially, the university’s consultant, the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management, didn’t want faculty involvement because of the amount of training required of panel participants, the time commitment to be involved in hearing panels and because it could create an uncomfortable situation if a student has to discuss a situation with a hearing panel that includes a professor they might later have in class.

“Faculty members must be involved in processes when a faculty member is accused,” Miller said to the council Wednesday.

Student didn’t have much input on the rule changes.

“We talked about having students on the hearing panel because that’s the only place where a student could be involved, but I’m not sure it would be appropriate,” Miller said. “With the amount of training required to be on the panel and the fact students are here for three or four years and we don’t want to train them as freshmen or even second years, you’d be training someone just in time for them to graduate.”

Hallie Thompson, president of the MU Graduate Professional Council, the student government group that oversees all graduate and professional students, said the student representative on the Board of Curators, Tracy Mulderig, sought input from student government leaders, who had concerns about students not being involved in the hearing process.

“That’s definitely a weakness,” Thompson said. “We’re fighting against something that’s a precedent across the country.”

Thompson said that since the discussion about these policies will be ongoing, she hopes students can engage with the discussion when more changes are made.
As a parent and scholar who has studied materialism for much of her professional life, Marsha Richins had long pondered the following question: Does dangling goods in front of children as a reward for good behavior or yanking them away as a form of punishment contribute to materialism when those kids grow up?

After half a decade studying the matter as a marketing professor at the Robert J. Trulaske Sr. College of Business at the University of Missouri, she says she believes that there’s a connection. Ms. Richins and Lan Nguyen Chaplin, an assistant professor of business administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago, are publishing a paper saying so in The Journal of Consumer Research in April.

Most of us get that materialism isn’t ideal, and research over the years has tied it to gambling, debt, marriage conflict and decreased happiness, among other things. So Ms. Richins was surprised to find that few people seemed to have looked into the potential drawbacks of what she and her colleague refer to as “material parenting.”

Plenty of research exists that shows that material rewards for things like good grades tend to reduce intrinsic motivation. But that shouldn’t be a reason not to study their use any further. “To me, it’s a big oversight, because parents reward kids all of the time,” Ms. Richins said. “You can’t just say that we’re not going to study it.”

And so she and Ms. Chaplin did, using retrospective surveys of adults answering questions about their current money habits and the tactics their parents used in rewarding and disciplining them.

They found that when parents use material objects to reward children for good behavior or performance (or take them away when they’re bad), those children grow up to be adults who associate buying and owning nice things with success and accomplishment. If you get material rewards as a child, you will believe, more than other adults, “that products are important to the construction and expression of the self,” they wrote.

As always with academic research, proving causality is difficult. Other parenting behaviors (and choices parents make about where to raise their children in the first place) can have plenty of impact too. Still, the research raises practical questions for parents who don’t want their children to grow up thinking the most important things in life are things. If putting toys, gadgets, money and the like at the center of both rewards and punishment leads to too much emphasis on those things, what’s a good alternative?
“I think it’s probably time, attention and communication,” Ms. Richins said. “Providing encouragement, comfort and having fun. Spending time is the best present you can give them.”

But what we do about punishments? We take things away because it’s a great way of getting children’s attention and it often makes them compliant. I suggested that the moral of the study might well be to take away privileges, not objects, as a form of punishment. Ms. Richins worried about the limitations of this solution, given that many privileges have to do with more intermittent experiences or the ability to use valued objects, say driving a car. Still, good old-fashioned grounding would seem to fit here, even if it means missing an important party or trip. Or maybe especially if it means missing big events.

The paper does not address the kinds of inoculations that might keep kids from becoming materialistic in the first place (though there is some evidence elsewhere that certain interventions can bring already materialistic kids back in line). And the authors expressed doubt in the paper that parents inclined to use desired objects to shape behavior would use any preventive measures anyway, noting that “it is difficult to imagine a tractable strategy aimed at changing ingrained parenting practices.”

That perspective seems too negative to me. After all, we’ve moved away from spanking and back toward more breast-feeding in recent decades. Surely we can shift away from material rewards and punishments and back toward praise and enthusiasm when our children accomplish something.

One possibility that we agreed on was Ms. Richins’s suggestion that parents who insist on continuing to reward their children with some material items also rely more heavily on the power of gratitude, a trait that researchers have linked to all sorts of good outcomes. A book called “Making Grateful Kids” has plenty of tactics for getting started. After all, children who truly appreciate what they have stand a pretty good chance of growing up to be adults who don’t want all that much more.

**iPhones are like comfort blankets and owners struggle mentally without them nearby**

Being separated from your smartphone causes anxiety and negatively impacts your ability to perform mental tasks like crosswords.
An experiment conducted by the University of Missouri-Columbia has found how iPhone owners suffer "serious psychological and physiological effects" including poor performances on cognitive tests like word searches when their phone isn't close by.

Researchers behind the experiment have concluded that iPhone users "should avoid parting with their phones during daily situations that involve a great deal of attention, such as taking tests, sitting in conferences or meetings, or completing important work assignments," as it could result in "poorer cognitive performance".

Lead author of the study, Russell Clayton, a doctoral candidate at the MU School of Journalism, said the results of the study also suggest that "iPhones are capable of becoming an extension of ourselves such that when separated, we experience a lessening of 'self' and a negative physiological state."

It was found that iPhone users unable to answer their ringing handset while solving simple word search puzzles experienced increased heart rate and blood pressure, plus feelings of anxiety and unpleasantness. Performance (the number of words found in the puzzle) also decreased compared to when their iPhones were nearby.

The experiment was carried out by telling the participants they were testing a new wireless blood pressure monitor. Participants completed the first puzzle with their iPhones nearby, but were then asked to hand over the phone due to "Bluetooth interference" with the monitor; their phones were placed at the other side of the room and another puzzle was handed out.

While working on the puzzle, researchers called the participants' iPhones and it was found that when they couldn't answer it, because it was out of reach, they had a "significant" increase in anxiety, heart rate and blood pressure, plus a significant decrease in puzzle performance.

University of Missouri is recognized for community engagement

Thursday, January 8, 2015 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri was recognized by the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching for its work in the community after being reclassified as a “community engagement campus” for 2015.
The campus has received the recognition every year since 2010, MU spokesman Jeff Sossamon said.

According to a news release, this designation is given to higher education institutions who engage with their communities “for the exchange of knowledge and resources.”

“Mizzou students, faculty and staff participate in a wide range of outreach efforts, including partnerships with schools, communities and businesses across the state,” MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said in the release.

Among the university’s outreach programs is Tiger Pantry, a food pantry that serves MU students and employees, Small Business and Technology Development Centers and the Adult Day Connection, among others. MU officials documented their outreach efforts to qualify for this designation.

The Chronicle of Higher Education

January 9, 2015

Higher-Ed Groups Seek a More-Complete Picture of Post-College Outcomes

By Madeline Will

NO MU MENTION

Three major higher-education groups on Thursday introduced a framework that seeks to guide public discussions of the value of a college education, at a time when many institutions are facing heightened scrutiny over their cost and how well their graduates do.

The effort, known as the Post-Collegiate Outcomes Initiative, is a project of the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. The groups’ framework divides student outcomes into four overlapping categories: public and private, and economic and "human capital." Public, "human capital" outcomes of college could include activities such as giving to charity, volunteering, and voting. Personal, "human capital" outcomes could include career satisfaction and advancement.

Some metrics, like employment and reliance on social services, are considered as both personal and public economic outcomes.
The associations were part of the group that in 2013 introduced the Student Achievement Measure, which was presented to colleges as an alternative to the federal government’s oft-criticized method of calculating students’ college-completion rates, which leaves out part-time and transfer students.

Like that measure, the Post-Collegiate Outcomes Initiative is financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is part of the commitment that the associations made at the White House’s Opportunity, in December, where they pledged to provide more-accurate and more-comprehensive measures of student outcomes. The groups’ effort also seeks "consistent and meaningful measurement tools" for reporting such outcomes.

The effort comes on the heels of the Education Department’s release, in December, of a framework for a college-ratings plan. The plan seeks to hold institutions accountable for the outcomes of their graduates, and to give students more information about which colleges to attend. Some educators have worried that the plan will punish institutions that serve low-income students; others have complained that the data that could be used in the ratings are flawed.

Broadening the Conversation

Kent A. Phillippe, director of the Post-Collegiate Outcomes Initiative and associate vice president for research and student success at the American Association of Community Colleges, said in an interview following the rollout of the framework here that while it was not a response to the department’s metrics, it will offer a broader perspective of postcollegiate outcomes.

National conversations about earnings and gainful employment, Mr. Phillippe said, "crystallized the importance of doing this at this time."

The idea, he said, is not necessarily to hold any one institution accountable, but rather to broaden the national conversation about what the value of higher education looks like.

Not all of the data points listed in the framework are available now. And Ronnie L. Booth, co-chairman of the initiative’s oversight committee and president of Tri-County Technical College, in South Carolina, said it’s important to note that every measure in the framework might not be appropriate for every institution.

Considering context for each institution is important too, he said. Factors such as students’ location and major or career choice can affect salary.

"Even things like voter participation—a lot of that’s regional-based, a lot of that’s based on the local culture," Mr. Booth said. "It may or may not be related to higher education."

In the next few months, the group plans to refine the framework and continue seeking different perspectives.

For instance, groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation were included in discussions to represent employers’ perspectives.
In a panel discussion here, Sandra Kinney, vice president for institutional research and planning for the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, said using the framework had already helped break down "higher-education silos" in her state.

The next steps and the initiative’s policy recommendations will be released by late March, Mr. Phillippe said.

January 9, 2015

Behind the Statistics on Campus Rape

Research is more nuanced than easy numbers imply

By Marc Parry

NO MU MENTION

When journalists and politicians talk about campus rape—as they have frequently over the past several months—they tend to pluck numbers out of context. Studies done on one or two campuses are said to represent the country. Estimates become facts.

The reality is that measuring sexual violence remains a challenge. Survey participants are asked to disclose to researchers information they may not want to admit to themselves. Perpetrators may balk at acknowledging behavior they know to be criminal.

What’s more, scholars in different fields clash over how to study the subject. Some fret about the emphasis on measuring crime, whereas colleges must face a broader spectrum of sexual misconduct.

How do we know what we know? And where do we need more research? Here’s a closer look at several assertions informing the conversation about campus rape.

That figure opened a report from a White House task force on sexual assault and has since been widely quoted. But the number comes from a study that wasn’t designed to yield a national estimate.
The initial impetus for the research was narrower: measuring the prevalence of drug-facilitated sexual assault. To do that, the study’s lead author, Christopher P. Krebs, had to start broadly, identifying victims and the nature of their assaults.

Mr. Krebs, a senior research social scientist at RTI International, a nonprofit research group, surveyed 5,446 undergraduate women at two large public universities. Among the findings: 19.8 percent of women, says Mr. Krebs, "will experience a completed sexual assault while they’re in college." That number (the source of the "one in five" figure) includes a range of behaviors, from groping to intercourse.

The figure has faced criticism. Some fault its inclusion of lesser offenses. Mr. Krebs replies by offering a number that omits them: One in seven female undergraduates will be a rape victim in college, meaning "penetration that was unwanted and that they did not consent to."

Others say the small study can’t be the basis for a national rate. As one critic told the Tampa Bay Times, "This ‘one in five’ statistic shouldn’t just be taken with a grain of salt, but the entire shaker."

Such talk is "hyperbole," argues Mary P. Koss, a veteran sexual-assault researcher and professor of public health at the University of Arizona. Mr. Krebs’s findings are "not out of line with what is reported by other studies," she says. "To take a body of research where there is some range of confidence around the estimates," she says, "and to imply that it is basically worthless information that can’t be trusted—it makes good controversy, but it’s not a scientifically rational thing to say."

• **Most rapes are committed by serial predators.**

So writes David Lisak, a clinical psychologist whose work has become another touchstone in the dialogue about campus rape. Mr. Lisak seeks to correct the conventional view of college rapists: that they are essentially decent men who would never commit such acts were it not for boozing and poor communication.

In a study published in 2002, Mr. Lisak surveyed 1,882 men at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Roughly 6 percent acknowledged committing acts that met the definition of rape. But what stunned Mr. Lisak was the nature of those offenders: Of the 120 rapists, 76 of them, or 63 percent, reported committing more than one rape. Those serial predators averaged six rapes each.

That has serious potential implications for colleges. Mr. Lisak, a retired associate professor of psychology at UMass-Boston, argues that each reported sexual assault should generate an investigation of both the incident and the alleged attacker, to see whether evidence exists that he committed other offenses.

Mr. Lisak did his research at a commuter campus that caters to working students who skew older than those at a traditional residential college. In part because of that, a Slate analysis concluded his study "cannot fairly be said to describe the behavior of the majority of young men who find
themselves accused."

But drawing on his reading of related research on rape perpetrators, inside and outside academe, Mr. Lisak says that he strongly suspects his findings are generalizable. To what extent, he does not know.

- Fraternity men are three times as likely as other male students to rape.

That statistic appeared in Rolling Stone’s notorious article about an alleged gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity house. One source for the assertion is work by John D. Foubert, a rape-prevention advocate and professor of higher education and student affairs at Oklahoma State University.

For a study published in 2007, Mr. Foubert surveyed 565 first-year men at a public university in the Southeast. His main goal was to test whether a rape-prevention program changed students’ behavior over an academic year.

Mr. Foubert found that 8 percent of men who joined fraternities committed some act of sexual assault during the year, compared with 2.5 percent of nonfraternity members. (On average, the men who did and did not join fraternities had committed the same number of sexual assaults before they arrived at college.)

"Something about the fraternity experience," Mr. Foubert concludes, "must be leading to this increase in sexual violence."

Such studies might imply one solution to the problem: Shut down frats. Ms. Koss cautions that people too quickly seize on that as an "easy answer." Yes, fraternity men report higher rape rates. But "men are multifaceted," she says.

"If you do an analysis," she says, "where you say, OK, now after we’ve taken account for how much they drink, and after we’ve taken account of what kind of peer group they’re in, and the amount of peer support they get for impersonal sex and objectifying women and pursuing sex at all costs—now, does fraternity membership predict the rape rate? No. The biggest predictors of the rape rate are peer support and alcohol use."

- College women are at greater risk of sexual assault than are their non-college-bound peers.

That’s presented as a fact on the website of Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, who in July introduced a bill to combat campus sexual assaults.

But a recent study challenged the idea, reporting that college women are less likely than nonstudents to be attacked. Among women 18 to 24, the rate of rape and other sexual assault was 1.2 times higher for nonstudents than for students, according to that federal study.

What explains the discrepancy? The senator’s source is a 2005 report by the National Institute of Justice. The Chronicle asked one of that report’s authors, Bonnie S. Fisher, to describe the
specific data used to assert that students face more risk. Ms. Fisher, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Cincinnati, could not immediately do so.

"That was probably our current state of knowledge or belief at that time," given the research available, Ms. Fisher says. She adds, "You’re really missing the bigger issue, which is that individuals age 18 to 24" have "among the highest rate of rape and sexual assault."

Scholars point to several aspects of the rape problem on campuses that need more research. The perpetrators, for one thing, says Mr. Krebs, of RTI International. Researchers are good at surveying victims. But they know too little, he says, about the men who carry out sexual assaults: who the attackers are, how they think, and how to change their behavior.

Another area for more research: campus climate. Is sexual harassment common at certain colleges? Are attitudes toward women more negative? The goal is to measure whether such attitudes and behaviors translate into more sexual assault, says Mr. Krebs, who plans to study campus climate as part of a large survey he is developing with partners including the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the White House. Knowing that information could help colleges try to change students’ behavior.

Still, Ms. Koss worries about the influence of crime-oriented approaches. She cites a controversial survey planned by the Association of American Universities.
"Sexual assault is a multidisciplinary field," Ms. Koss says. "And yet the measurement of it seems to be, in this initiative, concentrated in the hands of criminologists. Which means that the health perspective and the psychological perspective is not being heard."

She adds, "In the literature within other disciplines, we look at sexual victimization as being a continuum that starts with lower-severity things"—catcalls and surreptitious videotaping, for example—"and at the very extreme end is rape."

(Ms. Fisher, who is working on the AAU survey, says the project strives for a "balanced" approach that draws on multiple disciplines.)

Another concern is that the public focus on sexual assault may make it harder to collect data.

That’s because the ability to study perpetrators "is predicated on students’ really not understanding that we’re asking questions about rape," Mr. Lisak says. (Surveys avoid words like "rape"; students feel they are simply describing sexual experiences.) Given the publicity, Mr. Lisak fears many more will grasp that researchers are inquiring about rape—and refrain from answering honestly.
Obama proposes plan to make community college free for everyone

By KIMBERLY HEFLING AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON — The White House on Thursday announced a proposal that President Barack Obama said would make community college "free for everybody who is willing to work for it." But administration officials provided no details about the program's costs or where the money would come to pay for it.

Obama planned to formally announce the plan Friday at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee. He gave a preview in a videotaped message shot aboard Air Force One and posted on Facebook.

"It's not just for kids," Obama said. "We also have to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to constantly train themselves for better jobs, better wages, better benefits."

Obama provided few specifics, and White House and Education Department officials on a conference call with reporters Thursday evening said the funding details would come out later with the president's budget.

The White House did say that if all states participated, that nine million students could benefit — saving on average $3,800 in tuition per year for a full-time student. That means the program could cost in the billions of dollars. In a Republican-led Congress, the proposal likely faces a tough legislative fight to be passed.

"With no details or information on the cost, this seems more like a talking point than a plan," said Cory Fritz, press secretary for House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

Under the proposal, participating students would be expected to maintain a modest grade point average and participating schools would have to meet certain academic requirements. States would opt in to the program and put up a fraction of the funding.

"Put simply, what I'd like to do is to see the first two years of community college free for everybody who is willing to work for it," the president said.

David Baime, vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges, called the plan an "extraordinary" investment. He said the essence of the proposal is to reduce the cost of attending community college and "that is a concept that we heartily endorse."

Last year, Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam signed into law a scholarship program using lottery funding that provides free community and technical college tuition for two years to the state's high school graduates.
The scholarship program faced opposition in Tennessee from some of the state's private colleges and legislators concerned that the program could potentially divert students and scholarship dollars from four-year schools. Haslam has said the program will increase the pool of students going to college.

The White House said its proposal was inspired by the Tennessee plan and another similar program in Chicago.

January 8, 2015

Obama Proposes Free Community College for Millions of Students

By Katherine Mangan

Millions of students nationwide could be eligible for two years of free community-college tuition under a proposal that President Obama will outline on Friday during an appearance at Pellissippi State Community College, in Tennessee.

The proposal, which would require approval by the Republican-controlled Congress and would carry an unspecified price tag, calls for the federal government to pick up the tab for about three-quarters of students’ tuition costs. Participating states would kick in the rest, and if all of them joined in, about nine million students could benefit each year, with full-time students saving an average of $3,800 in tuition per year.

The America’s College Promise plan, as the proposal has been dubbed, is modeled after the Tennessee Promise, a program that will use lottery money to cover community-college tuition for all of that state’s high-school seniors, starting this fall. Nine out of 10 of Tennessee’s graduating seniors have applied to the program—more than twice as many as initially expected. State officials predict that 12,000 to 16,000 of them will end up enrolling in two-year colleges.

Obama-administration officials gave a preview of the White House plan during a call with reporters Thursday evening, shortly after the president gave a sneak peak in a video shot aboard Air Force One and posted on Facebook.

"What I’d like to do is see the first two years of community college free for everybody who’s willing to work for it," Mr. Obama said. "It’s something we can accomplish and something that will train our work force so we can compete with anyone in the world."
Within minutes, reactions began pouring in, ranging from the view that the proposal amounts to a "potential game changer" for higher education to the warning that it could be a "wolf in sheep’s clothing" because it might not benefit those who need it most.

The plan is just as significant as the move, nearly a century ago, to make high school free and open to all, according to Cecilia Muñoz, the White House’s domestic-policy director. Asked repeatedly for details on how much the program would cost the federal government, Ms. Muñoz said the information would be released later, with the president’s 2016 budget plan.

"It is a significant proposal, and states will have to take the lead," she said. "We don’t expect it to happen overnight."

Asked about the likelihood that Congress would approve such an expensive proposal, Ms. Muñoz said Tennessee, with its Republican governor, Bill Haslam, is proof that the program has bipartisan appeal. A similar program has been started in Chicago.

The program is needed at a time when the United States has lost the distinction of having the most educated work force in the world, she said. By 2020, about 35 percent of job openings will require at least a bachelor’s degree and 30 percent will require some college or an associate degree, she added.

**Academic Standards**

"Today, more than ever, Americans need more knowledge and skills to meet the demands of a growing global economy without having to take on decades of debt before they even embark on their career," the White House said in a fact sheet released on Thursday. The nation’s roughly 1,100 community colleges, which educate about 40 percent of American college students, are the best place to start, it said.

To participate, students would have to attend at least half time, maintain a 2.5 grade-point average while in college, and make steady progress toward completing their program. The money could only be used for academic programs that fully transfer to public four-year colleges or to job-training programs that have high graduation rates and also lead to degrees and certificates in high-demand fields.

States would have to continue their existing higher-education spending, coordinate efforts among schools and colleges to reduce the need for remediation, and allocate "a significant portion of funding based on performance," and not just enrollment.

"This proposal will require everyone to do their part: Community colleges must strengthen their programs and increase the number of students who graduate, states must invest more in higher education and training, and students must take responsibility for their education, earn good grades, and stay on track to graduate," the fact sheet states.
Praise and Concerns

Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education, called the plan "a potential game changer that could encourage millions more students to consider, apply, and enroll in postsecondary education."

It is hard to predict, though, how a policy that has worked well in Tennessee would translate to the national stage, she said. "There is still much we do not know about the details of this ambitious plan, such as institutional eligibility criteria and the requirements that would be imposed on states that want to participate."

Morley Winograd, who leads the Campaign for Free College Tuition, a nonprofit group that promotes similar programs across the country, released a written statement saying the plan "would transform the nation’s higher-education system and help countless families make the American dream a reality for their children," cutting the cost of a four-year college degree in half for many students.

Others questioned whether the proposal would do enough to help low-income Americans. The Institute for College Access and Success, an education-advocacy group known as Ticas, said plans for free community-college tuition often amount to "a wolf in sheep’s clothing."

"While well intentioned and politically popular, these plans are regressive and inefficient," it said.

But after releasing a statement late Thursday lambasting the White House proposal, Ticas updated its statement early Friday to say it had just learned that the proposal outlined on Thursday differed from the Tennessee plan and others that are "last dollar" scholarships, paying only the portion of tuition not covered by other financial aid. Those plans tend to benefit students who can already afford to pay for college.

The White House proposal "provides additional federal funding to states that make key reforms, including not charging tuition or fees at community colleges," the updated statement says. "It is aimed squarely at stopping state disinvestment in public colleges, which is crucial to making college more affordable. Also, unlike the Tennessee Promise, low-income students could benefit."

Still, it said, "making tuition free for all students regardless of their income is a missed opportunity to focus resources on the students who need aid the most."

Advocates for four-year colleges have also questioned whether such plans could cut into enrollments that are already sagging due to the decreasing number of high-school-age students.

The Association of Community College Trustees said it welcomed the proposal and looked forward to more details: "Due to state disinvestment in higher education, any proposal that seeks to increase resources is greatly appreciated."

David S. Baime, senior vice president for government relations and research for the American Association of Community Colleges, said it’s clear the proposal "will face tough sledding in Congress. But we also know that there is strong support across the board for the colleges and the
students who rely on them. The fact that the colleges focus on employment opportunities is also a political plus."

Making College a ‘Viable Option’

A Tennessee educator who’s gotten a close look at that state’s program said she was surprised, and pleased, to see a proposal to expand the idea nationally before the first students had even enrolled in her state.

"Eliminating the cost barrier makes college a viable option to many students who otherwise wouldn’t have considered it," said Angela Boatman, an assistant professor of public policy and higher education at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College of Education and Human Development. Ms. Boatman, who is mentoring five high-school seniors who have applied through the state’s program, is an expert on community colleges and barriers to college success.

On Friday the president will also propose a new fund that would expand technical-training programs to help low-wage workers quickly gain the skills they need to get jobs in growing fields such as energy, information technology, and advanced manufacturing.