

### **Article of the Week (AoW) Directions**

1. Mark your confusion – either highlighting or underlining.
2. Mark up the text. Annotate the article with comments, questions, inferences, etc. You can use a variety of sentences, phrases, and symbols to show your thinking.
3. Write a developed paragraph response to one of the prompts below.

## **The nuts and bolts of Obama's community college plan**

Source: Jason Song/LA Times/January 14, 2015

The rumors started early last week.

President Obama had been outlining his goals for the last two years of his presidency and had long been interested in improving students' access to college. The president was scheduled to go to Knoxville, Tenn., on Friday. Observers connected the dots and speculated that he would announce a national version of the Volunteer State's program to guarantee high school graduates free tuition to community college.

On Thursday, in a brief Facebook video, Obama did just that, saying he wanted to see "the first two years of community college free for everybody who is willing to work for it." He offered few details.

The pace of questions — both wonky and practical — picked up, and Obama officials began filling in the blanks. Somewhat.

How much would the plan cost? (The White House wouldn't say on Thursday, but later estimated that it could cost up to \$60 billion over a decade). Would the president invoke executive privilege to make his plan a reality? (No, Congress and then the states would have to approve it). Surely not all students would be eligible, right? (Only those meeting certain criteria, such as maintaining a 2.5 grade point average, would qualify for the tuition breaks).

And how can students and colleges spend the money? Just tuition, or for books and other educational needs, wondered Debbie Cochrane, the executive director of the Institute for College Access & Success, a nonprofit education advocacy program in Oakland.

"There was very little detail," said John Levin, a professor of higher education at UC Riverside. Cochrane and other education advocates were concerned that Obama's proposal would earmark the aid solely for tuition that isn't covered by other programs and wouldn't help with expenses such as housing and books.

In Tennessee, poorer students may not get help from the state because their tuition is already paid for by other federal grants. Critics say this policy benefits middle-class students who don't qualify for financial aid while doing little to help the less affluent.

"One of the major problems with the Tennessee plan ... is that the 'promise' isn't actually much of a promise at all," Cochrane wrote last week in a blog post titled: "Why 'Free Community College' Is a Wolf in Sheep's Clothing."

But when the White House released more details of the proposal — the federal government would pay 75% of the costs for community college with states picking up the rest — Cochrane saw that the federal plan was more flexible. Students who qualified for the program could have their tuition paid for and then use financial aid like Pell Grants to pay for other educational expenses.

"It's much better than the Tennessee plan," Cochrane said.

It's unclear if a Republican-controlled Congress will go along with Obama's plan, although members of both parties might be hesitant to vote against a program that could have broad appeal outside Washington.

The distinction between Obama's proposal and the Tennessee Promise is especially important in California, which has the lowest community college tuition in the country but a high cost of living. As Gary Krauss, the president of Ascending Lights, a Lincoln Heights nonprofit that mentors community college students, said: "The big costs are books and transportation."

Officials with California's community college system, the nation's largest, said they were looking forward to working with the White House as "the proposal takes shape." Gov. Jerry Brown, who proposed investing \$8.1 billion in the community college system in his latest budget, has not considered how the state might fund the federal proposal, a spokesman said.

The federal money potentially could be used for educational resources, such as additional counseling, that could help students graduate faster by making sure they are not taking courses they don't need, Krauss said.

"That's as valuable, if not more, than breaks in tuition," Krauss said. Most of the poorest community college students pay little, if anything, to attend a two-year campus because of financial aid, he said, but many struggle to learn how to navigate the system.

As for Cochrane, she updated her blog post praising parts of the White House proposal. She was still critical of the plan to offer free tuition for all, arguing that aid should be concentrated on those who need it the most, but did offer some praise.

"It is aimed squarely at stopping state disinvestment in public colleges, which is crucial to making college more affordable," she wrote.

**Respond to one of the following prompts. Use the a separate sheet of paper.**

1. Do you support the proposal for free community college across the country? Why or why not?
2. If this policy happened, would you take advantage of the free two years of community college? How could it help you? Explain.
3. Select a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph and respond to it.