

Low-Cost B.A. Starting Slowly in Two States

New York Times – Education Section

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Published: October 18, 2013

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — With tuition, [student loan](#) debt and default rates all spiraling higher, what’s not to love about a \$10,000 bachelor’s degree?

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John Van Beekum for The New York Times

Maggie Biegelsen and Luis Santiago, at Broward College in Davie, Fla., want to teach math.

In the last two years, two Republican governors — Rick Perry in Texas and Rick Scott in Florida — have challenged their states’ public colleges to develop bachelor’s degrees costing no more than \$10,000, less than a third of the average sticker price for tuition and fees at a four-year public college. Governor Perry said he hoped 10 percent of the state’s degrees would meet that goal with online learning and new efficiencies. Governor Scott sought low-cost degrees in high-demand fields.

Democrats were critical of both announcements, calling the idea a gimmick that would lead to a watered down “Walmartization” of higher education. Meanwhile, in California, a Republican legislator has called for a pilot program there.

Now the \$10,000 degrees are available in Florida and Texas — but not for many students, not for many majors and not on the flagship campuses. The original goal was that the degrees would use new teaching techniques and technologies to bring down costs; so far, many of the programs are unchanged.

In Florida, the two dozen former community colleges that offer both associate and baccalaureate degrees all volunteered to meet the \$10,000 challenge, but several programs are not yet under way. The state universities are not in the program.

Broward College, which has 67,000 students, is offering the low-cost baccalaureate in its four smallest bachelor’s programs — middle-school math education, middle-school science

education, information technology, and global trade and logistics — and seeking a total of 80 students. Even that may be a stretch.

To qualify, students must have a grade-point average of at least 3.0 and be Florida residents, in college for the first time, and committed to continuous enrollment. But most Broward students drop out before completing a two-year degree. And among those who earn an associate degree, many transfer for their final two years, or have no interest in the targeted majors.

“This isn’t going to be for the masses,” said J. David Armstrong, Broward’s president, adding that it would be impossible to offer thousands of low-cost degrees unless the state funded the program.

Broward designed its programs to confront the dropout problem that plagues community colleges nationwide. Posters on campus exhort students to “Finish What You Start,” and to that end, the savings in the affordable degree programs will come in the form of a free last semester. (Broward received no extra money for the program and is paying for it with pre-existing tuition waivers.)

“I know some places are using front-end incentives, but we’re using the money as a carrot at the back end, to incent students to complete,” Mr. Armstrong said.

Randy Hanna, the chancellor of the Florida College System, said that whatever the numbers, the program is an important addition to the system’s efforts to promote college access.

In fact, the Florida system is already among the cheapest in the nation, with tuition and fees averaging \$13,264 for a four-year degree.

Miami Dade College, the biggest in the system, is offering eight \$10,000 bachelor’s degree programs to students who graduate from a local high school, enroll full-time and have a grade-point average of at least 3.0. So far, they have drawn 62 students.

Despite the governors’ calls for new efficiencies, most of the affordable programs, at least so far, involve re-pricing — but not rethinking — degree programs, according to Daniel J. Hurley, a policy analyst at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Furthermore, he said, whatever the official price, once federal and state aid is taken into account, most students at the Florida colleges already end up paying less than \$10,000 for their degrees.

Nationally, tuition and fees at a public university cost in-state students about \$9,000 a year, or \$36,000 for a four-year degree. Private universities’ average tuition is \$30,000 a year, or \$120,000 for a degree. Room and board add about another \$9,000 a year.

In Texas, 13 institutions now offer \$10,000 degrees. But so far, most of them are based on students’ amassing college credits while they are still in high school, or at a community college, whose tuition may not be included in the total. Books are generally not included, either.

“There’s been an evolution,” said Dominic Chavez, a spokesman for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, acknowledging that the first round of programs did not exactly reach the \$10,000 goal.

But that is changing, he said. In partnership with the faculty at South Texas College and Texas A&M University-Commerce, the state is building from scratch a degree in organizational leadership that uses online resources and a competency-based approach, in which students get credit for demonstrating what they know rather than how many courses they take.

“It will cost \$6,000-\$13,000, and be a model to show other institutions that you can create an affordable pathway at your institution,” Mr. Chavez said.

Mr. Chavez said Texas would use the approaches another Republican governor, Scott Walker, is trying in Wisconsin’s new self-paced, competency-based Flexible Option degrees for working adults — an effort President Obama praised in his August push for greater affordability.

But many academic leaders, including Hunter R. Rawlings III, president of the Association of American Universities, still have qualms about the political quest for cheaper degrees.

“It’s at the lower end of the scale, treating higher ed as a commodity, and I think that’s a bad thing, because education is so different from making widgets,” Mr. Rawlings said. “It does sound a bit like Walmart.”

On Broward’s Davie campus, news of the low-cost degree option is just now spreading, but even in an education class where most students plan to be teachers, there was not much interest. Several students said that financial aid covers much of their tuition, so any small savings would not sway them from longstanding plans to teach elementary school.

But two were signing up. Luis Santiago, who planned to be a history teacher, had already been accepted to complete his degree at the University of Central Florida, where tuition is twice as much as Broward’s. He now wants to stay at Broward for an affordable middle-school math degree.

“I like math, and I know there’s a critical need for math and science teachers,” Mr. Santiago said. “And it would be so expensive to go to U.C.F.”

His classmate Maggie Biegelsen, 57, who started college after raising three daughters, will also pursue the \$10,000 math-teacher degree.

“I never planned to become a math teacher,” she said. “At the start, I had to take remedial math classes, but then I met a professor who encouraged me to stick with the math, and helped me, and next thing I know I’m hearing about the shortage of math teachers, and now Broward offers this program.”

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