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By DIANE D'AMICO, Education Writer



Anthony Smedile

Stockton College graduate Judith Alton, of Egg Harbor Township, sends a message on her mortarboard during graduation at Stockton, Saturday, May 07, 2011.

In an effort to control costs and improve graduation rates, state legislators on Thursday introduced a package of 20 bills that would require New Jersey public colleges to do more to help students graduate on time and with less debt.

Assembly Higher Education Committee Chairwoman Celeste Riley, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, said the bills represent best practices compiled during visits to colleges and meetings over the past two years.

The bills address six areas: student readiness for college, completion rates, cost, data collection, college accountability and creating student pathways to success.

Co-sponsor Joseph Cryan, D-Union, said they expect a lot of discussion and debate. Hearings will be scheduled 5.5.30ecsareaaareae areaea5.5.3.hpo Tg.h5.2{ ic-5.nh5.2po}0021 keep a student's tuition and fees the same for a maximum of 10 consecutive semesters, rather than potentially increasing each year. Another bill would provide an income-tax deduction for student-loan interest.

Colleges would be pressured to improve graduation rates. One bill would allow for the closing of a four-year public college that did not have a six-year graduation rate of at least 50 percent. William Paterson, Kean and New Jersey City universities are currently at or below that rate.

Higher education officials applauded the state interest in higher education but said the proposals would require discussion, and pointed out that some are already being done. They also want more discussion on the state's role in supporting the proposals financially.

Assembly higher education bills

COLLEGE READINESS

A2800 requires high school students to be assessed using college placement cut scores to determine their readiness for college-level course work and the commissioner of education to develop plans to improve college and career counseling for students.

COLLEGE COMPLETION

A2801 provides that no more than 120 credits will be required for a bachelor's degree awarded by a public institution and no more than 60 credits for an associate degree.

A2802 establishes a statewide reverse transfer agreement under which at least 30 credits that a student earns toward a bachelor's degree at a four-year public institution are transferrable to any county college for credit toward an associate degree to help encourage re-enrollment and degree completion and

help a student know their time and money were not wasted.

A2803 would mandate transparency by requiring four-year public institutions to provide information on their website regarding cost of attendance, graduation rates and information on faculty. Four-year public and independent institutions would also be required to report on their website the number of students required to take remedial instruction and the graduation rates for those students.

A2804 mandates that county college presidents develop a plan to graduate 33 percent of students by 2020 to help increase graduation rates.

“What’s encouraging is that we’ve already been working on some of these issues since 2008,” said Jacob Farbman, spokesman for the New Jersey Council of County Colleges.

Specific county college proposals include improving the graduation rate to at least 33 percent, establishing an N.J. School Counts Scholarship program modeled after one at Cumberland County College and setting up reverse transfer agreements that would guarantee students in a four-year college could transfer credits to a two-year college.

Atlantic Cape Community College President Peter Mora said his school is addressing student readiness and completion through its Student Success Initiative. Atlantic Cape and Richard Stockton College also established a dual-degree transfer agreement in 2012 that allows students to earn credits from both colleges.

Paul Shelly, spokesman for the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, or NJASCU, said he would be concerned about possible unintended consequences if the bills could limit access to college for some students.

“It’s a big package of bills,” he said. “And the public is concerned about affordability and debt. But we will have to look at each bill’s impact.”

Darryl Greer, senior higher education strategic information and governance fellow at Stockton’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, said the issues in the bills are already being discussed statewide and nationally. He commended the sponsors for taking on a huge issue but said discussions should be held to see just how those issues are addressed.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a packet of bills as comprehensive as this,” said Greer, a former director of NJASCU. “And they are headed in the right direction. But I hope they are open to the idea that some things can be accomplished without legislation.”

He said the Legislature must also address what the state’s role will be in funding higher education in the future.

“We have to identify the responsibilities of all parties, the state, the colleges and the students and their families,” Greer said. He cited the tuition freeze bill as an example of a situation where the state role is crucial.

“If the state can’t appropriate more than a year at a time, then the colleges can’t plan either,” he said.

A2811 prohibits four-year public and independent institutions from requiring students to purchase meal plans.

DATA COLLECTION

A2812 requires the development of a longitudinal statewide data system capable of retaining individual-level information starting when a student enrolls in preschool through entry into the work force to better inform education and labor policies.

ACCOUNTABILITY

A676 directs the secretary of higher education to establish performance-based funding plans for public institutions of higher education.

A2813 requires the closing of a four-year public institution that fails to achieve a six-year graduation rate of at least 50 percent for full-time undergraduate students.

A2814 directs the secretary of higher education to revoke a proprietary school's license to award academic degrees if the school fails to achieve a six-year graduation rate of at least 75 percent for full-time students enrolled in a four-year degree program.

A2815 requires the N.J. Educational Facilities Authority to annually prepare a report on debt held by public institutions of higher education.

A2816 directs the state auditor to conduct an audit of fees charged by public institutions of higher education to tell how these fees are being distributed and how they are benefiting the college student.

PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

A2817 requires institutions participating in dual enrollment programs to charge a reduced tuition rate to high school students participating in the program.

A2818 requires undergraduate students enrolled in a four-year degree program to file a degree plan with the institution by the completion of 45 credit hours of course work and requires degree-seeking county college students to file a degree plan upon entering the institution. Also requires public institutions of higher education to develop pathway systems that establish graduation progress benchmarks for each major.

A copy of each bill is available at https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/12717665/Riley_B

A separate bill sponsored by Senate President Stephen Sweeney would set up a College Affordability Task Force to look at options to control college costs, including a "pay-it-forward" proposal that would let students pay for college after they graduate by paying back a portion of their income. The task force bill passed the state Legislature last year but was vetoed by Gov. Chris Christie as being duplicative of work already being done by other state agencies and state colleges. The bill was reintroduced this year.

Greer said he looks forward to public hearings on the bills.

"This is a good conversation to have," he said. "We should talk about who gets to go to college and how do we help them pay for it."

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