Tuition-Free Program

CT STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Operational Manual

Connecticut State Community College

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Contents

I. Program Overview

The purpose of this policy manual is to set forth the BOR's policies related to the implementation of the Tuition-Free Program (formerly known as the Pledge to Advance Connecticut (PACT), which is hereby established in accordance with Public Act 19-117, sections 362-364. This document describes the policies and procedures that the community colleges under the Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU) system shall use in its administration of the Tuition-Free Program. This policy manual does not preclude the establishment of administrative procedures necessary to carry out the Program described here.

Pursuant to Public Act 19-117, Section 362, the Board of Regents for Higher Education (BOR) is required to create a debt-free community college program. Under this law, the BOR holds a responsibility to establish a last-dollar scholarship program to make awards to qualifying students each semester, and to adopt the rules, procedures, and forms necessary to implement the Program. Such rules, procedures, and forms were adopted on December 19, 2019 by the BOR.

Subsequent to the initial passing of Public Act 119-117, Section 119, the Connecticut General Assembly, with the support of Governor Ned Lamont, has provided for expansion of the Tuition-Free program under Public Act 22-118 and 23-204.

The goals of the Tuition-Free program are to:

1. Mitigate excess debt for students and families;
2. Increase student enrollment within the community college sector;
3. Support student retention efforts across the system; and
4. Support on-time credential completion.

II. Program Benefits to Students

Beginning in Fall 2020, Connecticut's Tuition-Free Program allows Connecticut residents who meet certain eligibility criteria to attend Connecticut State Community College for free of mandatory tuition and fees related to an eligible program of study. Awards are only applicable to the fall and winter/spring semesters and are available regardless of family income level. State law specifically excludes summer coursework from free tuition eligibility.

A. Awards

Tuition-Free program awards are made as a last dollar award, after all other sources of federal, state, and institutional financial aid grants are expended. As of Fall 2024, the awards are designated as the Mary Ann Handley Awards. For the purpose of awarding the Program, student loans, work-study programs of any type, and financial assistance dedicated to expenses beyond tuition and fees are not considered to be financial aid.

For students who qualify for the Tuition-Free program, a semester award is equal to the unpaid portion, if any, of a qualifying student's eligible institutional costs after subtracting their financial

aid, or a minimum award of $500 for a full-time student or $300 for a part-time student. Any excess credit balance on the student's account resulting from a tuition-free award shall be refunded in accordance with existing BOR policies and procedures.

B. Eligible Institutional Costs

The following institutional costs are eligible to be covered by the Tuition-Free Program:

- Tuition
- Extension Fees
- College Service Fees
- Student Activity Fees
- Transportation Fees
- Mandatory Usage Fees, including Clinical Program Fees, Advanced Manufacturing Lab Fees, Supplemental Course Fees, and Material Fees

Institutional costs not listed above are not eligible to be covered by the Tuition-Free Program. Examples of costs not eligible to be covered under the program include, but are not limited to:

- Textbooks and Supplies
- Tier II Educational Extension Fees, including Academic Evaluation Fees, Portfolio Assessment Fees, Proctoring Fees, CT-CCNP Student Assessment Fees, and Nursing Media Fees.
- Tier II Auxiliary Activity Fees, including Late Registration Fees, ID Replacement Fees, Parking Access Card Replacement Fees, Returned Check Fees, Late Payment Fees, Installment Plan Fees, DSST Fees and CLEP Service Fees.

III. Academic Program Requirements

Tuition-Free awards may be applied to any degree or certificate program identified by the college as eligible for Title IV funding. Funding may not be applied to non-credit academic programs or programs deemed ineligible for participation in the Title IV programs. Academic program eligibility is defined in accordance with the college's active Program Participation Agreement (PPA) and Eligibility and Certification Approval Report (ECAR) validated by the U.S. Department of Education. In the case of academic programs that include both credit and non-credit requirements, all required credits and fees shall be eligible for assistance under the Tuition-Free Program. Developmental coursework is also eligible for assistance under the Tuition-Free Program.

A Tuition-Free award is available to qualifying students for the first 72 credit hours earned from Connecticut State Community College.

IV. Eligibility Requirements

A. Initial Eligibility

The Tuition-Free Program is available to students who meet the following criteria:

1. **In-State Residency**. Connecticut residents per [Connecticut General Statutes §10a-29](#).

2. **High School Graduate**. Students must have graduated from high school (public, nonpublic, or home schooled) or equivalency (including GED, HiSET, and TASC).

3. **Enrollment**. Students must enroll as at least a part-time student (6 or more credits) for the first time at any Connecticut State Community College campus. Students previously enrolled at any college or university prior to Fall 2020 are ineligible for Program participation, except for coursework completed prior to high school graduation or non-credit coursework.

   a. For the following fall semester, students must be registered as part-time and have completed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by the census date to be considered for a Tuition-Free award. Fall award eligibility will be made on a fund-available basis.

   b. For winter/spring enrollment, students must be registered as part-time and have completed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by the census date for consideration for a Tuition-Free award. Award eligibility will be made on a fund-available basis.

   c. Tuition-Free enrollment status will be finalized at the census date for the term. Should a qualifying student who is enrolled at a part-time rate drop to less than half-time (fewer than 6 credits) prior to the semester census, their Tuition-Free award shall be rescinded.

   d. Winter session enrollment shall be considered part of spring semester enrollment for the purpose of achieving part-time status and will count toward the 72 earned credit hour timeframe. All summer session enrollment shall be excluded from determining part-time status for award eligibility but will count toward the 72 earned credit hour aggregate limit on eligibility.

   e. Developmental coursework shall be applied toward the part-time enrollment requirement.

   f. All registered courses must fulfill a requirement in the student's declared program of study.

4. **Eligible Program.** Students must be enrolled in an academic program that meets the requirements in Section III of this policy.

5. **FAFSA**. Students must complete a FAFSA. A completed FAFSA is defined as one that fully determines a student's eligibility for a Federal Pell Grant, including an Official Student Aid Index.

6. **Complete All Requirements**. Students must satisfy all financial aid and Tuition-Free program requirements by the census date for the term

7. **Accepted All Financial Aid Grants -or- is a Transitional Program Student.** Transitional program students are Connecticut residents per Connecticut General Statutes §10a-29, have not graduated from high school, and are enrolled in one or more courses in a transitional program at Connecticut State Community College. Transitional program students are not eligible for Title IV financial aid but are required to meet the regular program eligibility requirements.

B. Returning Qualifying Students

In order to remain eligible in the Tuition-Free Program, returning students must continue to meet the following eligibility criteria, including all part-time enrollment and filing a FAFSA:

1. **Complete a Renewal FAFSA**. A completed Renewal FAFSA is defined as one that fully determines a student's eligibility for a Federal Pell Grant, including an Official Student Aid Index. The completed FAFSA is used to offer federal, state, and often institutional aid. The student must accept all financial aid grants.

2. **Complete All Requirements**. Students must satisfy all financial aid and Tuition-Free program requirements by the census date for the term.

3. **Part-Time Enrollment**. Students must be enrolled part-time (6 or more credits) at Connecticut State Community College. All registered courses must fulfill a requirement in the student's declared program of study.

4. **Satisfactory Academic Progress**. Students must meet the satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policy for determining financial aid eligibility, as approved by the BOR.

C. Removal of Students from the Program

Students shall be removed from participation in the Program upon failure to continually meet any of the eligibility requirements.

Examples of such instances include, but are not limited to, failing to file a FAFSA, failing to complete FAFSA verification requirements, not meeting the satisfactory academic progress requirements, enrolling less than half-time in any fall or spring semester, college enrollment prior to the Fall 2020 semester, or moving out of state.

V. Student Appeals

The Tuition-Free Program requires students to enroll on a minimum part-time basis in fall and/or spring semesters to complete an eligible degree or certificate program. Should an extenuating circumstance occur that prevents an otherwise qualifying student from meeting the part-time enrollment requirement, an appeal process is available for consideration toward regaining Program eligibility.

Appeals related to the Tuition-Free Program shall be reviewed by an Appeals Committee at the student's attending campus on a weekly basis, or as needed based on volume.

A. Consideration for Appeals

The following extenuating circumstances may be considered by the Appeals Committee.

- Documented medical emergency
- Documented personal emergency
- Selective admission programs that require less than half-time enrollment (fewer than 6 credits)
- Less than half-time enrollment in final semester of program

B. Appeal Process

All appeals must include an appeal form that can be submitted electronically to the Financial Aid Office using the Student Document Upload, located on the Financial Aid card in the **myCTState** portal. This form shall include instructions for submitting an appeal, and any relevant information regarding notification to the student of the outcome. Appeals must be submitted by the enrollment census date each semester (the 21st day after the first day of class) for consideration.

Each appeal must contain supporting documentation to substantiate the appeal. This may include:

- A medical professional's note
- Hospital discharge documentation
- Obituary or death certificate
- Verification of a program-specific less than half-time enrollment
- Verification of a student's final semester in their program
- Other documentation on a case-by-case basis

C. Final Appeals

A final appeal of the decision of the Appeals Committee may be made to the Director of Financial Aid, or designee. The decision of that official shall be final.

VI. Students with Disabilities

Otherwise qualifying students with documented disabilities that are unable to satisfy the part-time enrollment requirement and are seeking participation in the Tuition-Free Program must contact the college's designated disability services coordinator. Based on an individualized assessment and existing disability accommodation policies and procedures, the college's designated disability services coordinator will work with the student and the student's academic advisor to determine the maximum number of credit hours that are feasible for the qualifying student with a disability(ies) to complete in a covered semester. The college's designated disability services coordinator is responsible for evaluating and documenting the outcome of the requested accommodations for eligibility in the Program.

VII. Payments and Refunds

Students who are recipients of a Tuition-Free award shall have the award disbursed to their account in accordance with the regular disbursement schedule of all other financial aid awards.

Students who have paid for fall and/or spring semester tuition and required fees and then receive a Tuition-Free award, including students who receive a minimum award, shall be entitled to a refund of their excess credit balance. Any available credit balance on the student's account resulting from a Tuition-Free award shall be refunded in accordance with existing BOR policy.

Tuition-Free awards shall only be made if funds are available and may be pro-rated or reduced if there is insufficient funding to make full awards to all eligible students.

VIII. Treatment of Previous College Credit

All Tuition-Free program participants must be enrolled at least part-time to receive funding. Credits accepted from previous institutions, such as credits earned in a dual-enrollment program prior to high school graduation, or credits earned at another college are not applicable toward each semester's part-time enrollment status. All transfer credits and credits earned at Connecticut State Community College shall count toward the 72 earned credit hour limitation.

IX. Reporting, Program Compliance, and Evaluation

A. Reporting

The Connecticut State Community College Central Office shall be responsible for semiannual reporting (November 1 and March 1) on the Tuition-Free Program to the Connecticut General Assembly. The following data must be included:

1. The number of qualifying students enrolled each semester
2. The number of qualifying students receiving minimum awards
3. The number of qualifying students receiving non-minimum awards
4. The average number of credit hours a qualifying student has enrolled

5. The average number of credit hours a qualifying student has completed
6. The average award made to qualifying students eligible for a non-minimum award
7. Completion rates of qualifying students by degree or certificate program
8. Demographic information about qualifying students
9. Information about retention and completion by qualifying students

B. Program Compliance

During the reporting process, the Associate Vice President for Financial Aid Services & Title IV Compliance, or designee, will perform quality assurance reviews as a means to determine all Program funds were applied in accordance with state law and all related policies adopted by the BOR.

Students found to have received a Tuition-Free award because of an error by the College shall have the award rescinded from their account and replaced with institutional funds at no detriment to the student.

C. Evaluation

On an annual basis, the Connecticut State Community College Central Office will review the outcomes of the Program to evaluate its effectiveness.

In addition, within one year of Program operation and periodically thereafter, the Connecticut State Community College Central Office shall review the utilization of institutional aid with respect to its impact on affordability and access for various groups of students, including low-income students, minority students, and other groups for whom achievement gaps have been identified within the system. That review shall include policy recommendations to the BOR, as needed.

Appendix A: Program Calendar

The following activity schedule is designed to assist in overall operation of the Tuition-Free program:

May	Outreach activities; fund appropriation made
June	Outreach activities
July	Outreach activities
August	Awarding
September	Award finalization and disbursement for fall registration
October	Outreach activities
November	Program Reporting; FAFSA Month preparation
December	FAFSA Month
January	Awarding
February	Award finalization and disbursement for winter/spring registration
March	Program reporting; Outreach activities
April	Outreach activities