

# Elizabeth Warren wants to eliminate tuition at public colleges. Is that a good idea?

UC sandiegouniontribune.com/news/education/story/2019-04-24/elizabeth-warren-wants-to-eliminate-tuition-at-public-colleges-is-that-a-good-idea  
The Associated Press

April 24, 2019



Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., is proposing to eliminate tuition at the nation's public colleges and universities, an idea that's reminiscent of what higher education was like in California during a transformational period of the 1960s and 1970s, educators say.

It also raises a question: Would a free education compel even more undergraduates to flock to the state's already crowded public institutions, including UC San Diego, which is spending billions on expansion?

Warren, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for president, also wants to cancel most student loan debt. The ideas are contained in a \$1.25 trillion plan that draws some basic details from other candidates, notably Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

It's possible the plan will emerge as an issue in the 2020 presidential primary in California, which is home to 2.3 million college students. For in-state students, a full academic year of tuition, fees, housing, food and related expenses at UCLA costs \$35,000, roughly the price of a 2019

Mercedes-Benz CLA sedan.

Warren proposes to pay for undergraduate tuition at two- and four-year public schools by having the federal government and states split the costs, a notion that presupposes political harmony and a strong economy. The offer would be open to students whose family income is less than \$125,000.

It could create a competitive disadvantage for private schools, which serve about 25 percent of the nation's college students. Students might find themselves deciding between a public school like San Diego State University, where tuition would be zero under Warren's plan, and a private school like the University of San Diego, where tuition is about \$50,000.

"It's hard to compete with free," said Tom Herrinton, vice provost at USD. "It'd be better to structure this like Cal Grants, where students would be given money and determine where they want to spend it."

There's a good chance Warren's proposal may never come to pass. The senator is one of about 20 candidates competing for the opportunity to run against President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee.

But if the idea takes hold in California, it would affect 114 public community colleges, 23 California State University campuses, and nine undergraduate University of California campuses. Their collective enrollment rivals that of the entire United Kingdom.

"This would open a lot of doors for a lot of people," said Will Fritz, who is about to graduate from SDSU. "The public doesn't always consider what it's like for a student to be poor and try to earn a degree."

### **Past as Prologue?**

Compared to current standards, earning a college degree in California used to be cheap. And it was that way by design.

Faced with a post-World War II baby boom, the state created the Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960, assigning roles to the community colleges, state colleges and University of California.

The UC would accept the top 12.5 percent of graduating high school students, the CSU would take the top 33.3 percent, and the community colleges would take anyone who could benefit from an education.

The key words were accessibility and affordability.

At first, the UC and CSU didn't collect tuition. They charged modest fees instead. But things changed after Ronald Reagan was elected governor in 1966. He pushed hard for tuition in the UC because he felt it was the financially responsible thing to do. Historians say Reagan also was

motivated by his dislike of the social activism at UC Berkeley.

Eventually, “educational” fees evolved into real tuition, which remained low for years. It shot up in the 1990s. It jumped again in the 2000s as the state cut education funding and increased tuition to deal with budget problems. The cost of college was largely shifted to students.

In 2009 alone, the UC raised tuition 32 percent to cope with the Great Recession.

Educators say that such increases greatly contributed to the current student loan debt crisis. The federal government estimates that more than 44 million people owe about \$1.52 trillion in college loans.

### **Coping with costs**

Sanders pushed hard to eliminate public college tuition during his 2016 presidential run, influencing both Hillary Clinton and Warren.

The issue resonates with parents, who’ve seen tuition at a four-year public institutions roughly triple, to \$9,970, over the past 30 years, according to the College Board.

Financial aid also has increased. About 60 percent of today’s CSU students and more than half in the UC do not pay tuition, the systems say. Most are from low and middle-income families.

But even with that help, more than 70 percent of all students graduate from college with loan debt, says the federal government. At UC San Diego, the typical debt after undergraduate graduation is \$17,500.

Eliminating tuition would be beneficial. But it would primarily benefit upper income students, says the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan think tank in San Francisco. The reason: on average, richer undergraduates don’t have to borrow as much money, if any.

Warren also proposes to raise money to help cover non-tuition costs, like rent, housing and books. And that’s where many could use relief.

“A lot of these students are low-income and they find it tough to pay for housing,” said Hans Johnson, a higher education expert with the PPIC.

He noted that it can be especially tough on students at schools like UC San Diego, which is located in a region with high rental prices. An off-campus studio apartment in La Jolla averages \$1,480 a month, according to CoreLogic, a real estate tracker. A one-bedroom unit averages \$1,999.

The UC and CSU have been experiencing record enrollment growth. UC San Diego alone added almost 11,000 students in the past decade.

The two systems collectively turned away 40,000 eligible students last year. And the pressure is building. About 431,000 high school seniors will graduate in California this year. Roughly half will

be eligible to attend either the UC or CSU. The number will rise to about 449,000 in 2024, then drop, says the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Eliminating tuition could lead to an additional “short term burst in the percentage of student who would consider going to college because it would be so affordable.”

That would be expensive.

“The increase in demand, supported by more taxpayer funding, would lead to more hiring of teachers, building of facilities, and spending on school supplies and services,” said Lynn Reaser, an economist at Point Loma Nazarene University.

“This will lead to higher costs. Until the expansion is completed, there will be even more students who are turned down for admission, with various criteria used to ration the available slots.”

Reaser added the tuition-free plan “could hurt demand for many private institutions unless the quality of public colleges and universities begins to deteriorate because of large increases in enrollment.

“Private universities and colleges also would be hurt by the upward pressure on teacher salaries and other education resources.”

A 2017 study by California’s non-partisan Legislative Analyst’s Office says that there is “significant capacity available at UC and CSU” for growth, with existing and planned expansion.

But there are already capacity problems at CSU’s San Diego, Fullerton, Fresno, Long Beach, San Jose and San Luis Obispo campuses.

The question is: Will systems like the CSU spend millions more for buildings, laboratories and teachers?

J. Luke Wood isn’t sure. But the professor of education at SDSU knows that eliminating tuition wouldn’t be a panacea.

“It would benefit some students, mostly those who are middle income,” Wood said. “But the most effective way of producing more college graduates would be by having the state and federal government invest more. What we need to do is help those who are low income.”