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POLITICS | ELECTION 2016

Bernie Sanders's Free Tuition Failed a Cost Test in Past

Cities and states couldn't afford programs of the type championed by the Democratic presidential candidate



Democrat Bernie Sanders attended Brooklyn College in New York, shown above in the mid-1950s, for free as a freshman in 1959. PHOTO: A. E. FRENCH/GETTY IMAGES

By **BOB DAVIS**

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WASHINGTON—Eighteen-year-old Bernie Sanders didn't pay tuition for his freshman year at Brooklyn College in 1959, nor did another 8,000 undergraduates.

New York City's public colleges didn't charge tuition back then for students who attended full-time during the day. Students at University of California campuses and a number of other colleges around the country had a similar deal back then. Although free tuition helped tens of thousands of working-class students afford bachelor degrees, the policy was eventually scrapped as costs escalated.

Now, Mr. Sanders wants to reinstate free tuition, but on a scale that dwarfs anything that came before. Public colleges should be like public high schools, the Vermont Democrat argues: no charge for instruction.

“In 2016, in many respects, a college degree is the equivalent of what a high-school degree was 50 or 60 years ago, in terms of going out and getting a good job,” Mr. Sanders said on MSNBC earlier this month.

The tuition proposal is one of the reasons Mr. Sanders's presidential bid has a big following on campuses, though his plan has been derided by his opponents as pie-in-the-sky or wasteful. Earlier this month, after the MSNBC session, the campaign of Democratic rival Hillary Clinton put out a press release headlined “Millionaires don't need free college.” She said any tuition assistance should be targeted to the poor or middle class.

A look at the history of the free-tuition movement gives a sense of what is politically feasible today, as families struggle with \$1.2 trillion of student debt and difficulty affording college at all. Free-tuition colleges flourished at a time when student enrollment was small “and there was great optimism and interest in supporting higher education” among state lawmakers, said University of California at Berkeley education researcher John Aubrey Douglass.

Not charging for instruction was less a matter of ideology than practicality, say economic and education historians. As the industrial revolution reshaped 19th and early 20th century America, city and state legislatures sought to increase the number of teachers, engineers, agricultural experts and other professionals who could help local industries and farms.

The University of California dates to 1868 and initially focused on agriculture, mining and medicine. The City University of New York started as the Free Academy of New York in 1849, which educated immigrants, and morphed into a broader university. For many years, the State University of New York's “normal” schools, which trained future teachers, also didn't charge tuition.

Even those state colleges that had tuition charged minimal amounts. In 1933, the average in-state undergraduate tuition, plus fees, was about \$1,100 in today's dollars, according estimates by Harvard University economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz. By 2015, the College Board said, in-state tuition in four-year public colleges had jumped to \$9,410.

State colleges could charge so little because relatively few people went to

college. In 1959, when Mr. Sanders studied at Brooklyn College, 2.2 million students attended public colleges nationally, the Education Department estimates. Enrollment now is 15.3 million. The cost of educating so many more students outstripped the willingness—or ability—of city and state legislatures to pay the tab.

The City University of New York started charging for tuition in 1976 after the city teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, and the university ran out of money.

The city's finances had become a shambles, said a study by the New York Fed in 1976, because of a huge increase in spending on social services as the city's manufacturing sector collapsed and its middle class exodus accelerated. Social Services jumped to 23% of the city's budget in 1975 from 13% in 1965. Spending on education—at all levels—also took a bigger bite out of city finances.

In 1975, undergraduate enrollment at Brooklyn College, one of CUNY's largest campuses, had grown to 30,000 undergraduates, far more than when Mr. Sanders attended college there.

The University of California dropped free tuition in a less dramatic fashion. Over time, it charged students increasingly high “fees”—about \$2,800 in 1975, adjusted for inflation—until it finally embraced the term “tuition” during the economic downturn of the early 1990s, said Mr. Douglass. Undergraduate enrollment at that college tripled between 1960 and 1990 to 125,000 students.

In both New York and California, free tuition packed a powerful political punch and was only discarded under economic duress. Even during New York City's financial crisis, the city initially rejected termination of free tuition, wrote Judith Glazer Raymo, an emeritus professor at Long Island University, in a history of free tuition.

“The struggle to adopt tuition might jeopardize support from middle-class students” who might go elsewhere if they had to pay, she wrote.

That broad base of support is a big reason Mr. Sanders wants universal free tuition at state schools instead of targeting middle- and lower-income students. Think of Social Security, said Warren Gunnels, Mr. Sanders's policy director.

“It's not important that Bill Gates gets a Social Security check,” he said. If you limit the program, “after a while, people complain that it's just a welfare program” and political support evaporates, he said.

But making the program universal drives up costs, which the Sanders campaign estimates at \$750 billion over 10 years.

Mr. Sanders would pay for that by taxing the sales of securities, a plan that would be bound to encounter fierce resistance from Wall Street. Economists argue that such a tax would depress stock prices somewhat and drive up interest rates on bonds.

For Mr. Gunnels, the combination of free tuition and a financial transaction tax is part of what Mr. Sanders calls the “political revolution” necessary to bring about change.

“When the Senate and House hold a vote, [a President Sanders] would be able to look out at the mall and see one million or two million college students marching,” Mr. Gunnels said.

Nothing like that was needed to bring free tuition into existence early on—and student protests weren’t sufficient to stop the programs from eventually being scrapped. Free tuition was replaced with the current system, and that system has helped produce a vast increase in enrollment, an expansion of state university facilities, and heavy student debt.

Returning to free tuition, even if it were possible, would create its own problems, argued Roger Geiger, a Pennsylvania State University education professor. Free tuition would explode enrollment at state schools that are already having trouble handling current enrollment.

Weak liberal arts colleges would be forced out of business by low-cost competition and elite ones would depend even more on wealthier students who could afford to pay tuition. “This would cause more inequality,” he said, the opposite of what Mr. Sanders seeks.

No way, responds Mr. Gunnels, the Sanders policy chief. With millions of students scrambling to pay college loans, he said, “the idea that making public colleges and universities tuition-free would somehow increase inequality is absurd.”

As for Mr. Sanders, he finished his undergraduate degree at the private University of Chicago, one of the nation’s most elite schools. His campaign declined to comment on his college decisions and how they were paid for.

Shortly after he graduated, the school doubled its tuition to help pay for a building spree at the university and a big increase in enrollment.

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