

CATHY A bill is heading to Governor Walz's desk that would provide free tuition to public colleges and universities in Minnesota to students whose families earn less than \$80,000 a year. The bill passed in a Senate vote yesterday, 34 to 30. To hear more about what the bill could mean for Minnesota students and their families, NPR's Capitol Reporter Brian Bakst is with us. Hey, Brian.

BRIAN BAKST: Hi, Cathy.

CATHY So this has been called the free tuition bill, right? But funding is obviously coming from somewhere. How much money are we talking about here?

BRIAN BAKST: Yeah. Technically, they're calling this the North Star Promise Program. And folks say it's not necessarily free tuition, it's a top off program. So if you have other grants or financial aid that you're getting, this would get you the last mile. And it's about \$120 million in the first budget to get this program going.

It's going to cost about \$50 million per year after that. So it affects roughly 15,000 students, according to state officials, who attend public institutions. And the average award, they say, is going to be about \$3,100.

CATHY OK. So by the way, the \$80,000 a year cutoff, how was that number reached?

BRIAN BAKST: I haven't followed every twist and turn, but just take this number as just a benchmark here. The median household income in Minnesota in 2021 was about \$77,000, according to the Census Bureau. So that might have something to do with it.

CATHY OK. So the Minnesota state system evidently will have a tuition freeze under this bill. How about the U of M?

BRIAN BAKST: Well, the state is not in a position to tell the university to freeze tuition, order the university to freeze tuition, because they have constitutional autonomy. But they're pretty much prodding them to hold tuition down. They say that there will be tuition increases probably at the University of Minnesota schools, depending on which campus of smaller amounts in the past. But the state did come forward with some money to help Minsky to plug a hole for keeping tuition flat for the next couple of years.

CATHY Say, during the debate on this bill, what were opponents saying?

BRIAN BAKST: They were saying that this money would have been better off being put in the state grant program, which is already kind of a needs based program that is both available to public college students and private college students. They said that the cost for this could grow or create an incentive where maybe if you're just around that \$80,000 income mark, you might not work as much or you might take a different job so you can qualify.

The supporters of that say that there's no evidence that that's happened in other places and that you still have your own bills to pay. So cutting off your income in order to qualify doesn't necessarily make sense. But they are worried that this kind of moves Minnesota toward a socialist style, that's the words that they were using in some of the debate.

CATHY When would the tuition free program go into effect?
WURZER:

BRIAN BAKST: Yeah, the first eligible students would be in the 2024-25 academic year. They'd have to be moving toward a bachelor's degree. They'd have to have a certain level of coursework and satisfactory academic progress.

So you can't just go to school and slough off. You're going to have to actually keep your nose to the grindstone in order to maintain eligibility for this.

CATHY All right. Brian Bakst, thanks.
WURZER:

BRIAN BAKST: You're welcome, Cathy.

CATHY Brian's one of our political reporters. We wanted to talk to someone right now who's affected by this new bill. John
WURZER: Runnigen is a student at the Fergus Falls Community and Technical College and is the Student President of Lead Minnesota. That's a group dedicated to breaking down barriers for two year college students.

He will qualify for tuition free college if that education bill is signed by the governor. And we're pleased that John Runnigen is joining us right now. Hey, John. Thank you.

JOHN Yeah, thank you for this opportunity. Glad to be here.
RUNNINGEN:

CATHY Say, tell me a little bit about yourself. What's your education history?
WURZER:

JOHN So I born and raised in Fergus Falls, live on a farm here in rural Minnesota. I went through the education system
RUNNINGEN: in Fergus. Went through the high school, then I decided to go to M State, where I have four degrees at M State. I just graduated last Thursday, actually, from M State. So now I'm looking at transferring to MSU Moorhead to become a social studies teacher.

CATHY Wow. Good for you. Congratulations. Hey, what would this bill, then, mean to you going forward when you get up
WURZER: to Moorhead?

JOHN Yeah. This bill literally means that I can continue my education. I was faced with a barrier right now where I don't
RUNNINGEN: have the financial needs or necessities to be able to afford to go to MSU Moorhead to become a teacher. So this bill actually gives me this opportunity to see that more college is an option for me. And I can go and receive my bachelor's.

CATHY What about other students that you know?
WURZER:

JOHN I think the main thing that I've seen throughout my time at M State and through my time as president of LeadMN,
RUNNINGEN: this bill shows that college is for everyone in Minnesota, and that this gives an opportunity for those individuals who didn't perceive college as an affordable option, that they finally have this opportunity that they can grow as an individual, go out and get a degree, and help in the workforce.

CATHY WURZER: Of course, we have this tuition program now, it appears, that will go into effect once the governor signs it. But colleges and universities have a ton of fees, right? And I know that you were meeting this morning with the Minnesota State Vice Chancellor, Bill Maki, I believe-- Muh-kay. What did you talk to him about?

JOHN RUNNINGEN: We were just discussing the process for the overall fees. We just wanted to make sure that the fees process was also being talked to by students and that students had a voice at the table to discuss where these fees were going and making sure that the process was being as applicable as the system thought it was.

CATHY WURZER: And as you know, this week, a new chancellor was named for the Minnesota state system, Scott Olson who comes from Winona. What kind of leadership are you hoping to see from him in this new role of his as new chancellor, especially when it comes to helping low income students in the system?

JOHN RUNNINGEN: Yeah, absolutely. I think that he is going to be able to step into this role very well as somebody that's been in the system itself. I want to see representation at the table by community and technical college students. I think too often or not that we are kind of left out of the conversation.

And that involves mainly low income students, since community colleges represent the nontraditional students and the nontraditional path, usually. So I just want to make sure that we have a spot at the table and that our voices and concerns are addressed equally as our counterparts at the university system.

CATHY WURZER: All right. John, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much. And by the way, congratulations on your graduation and your path forward.

JOHN RUNNINGEN: Thank you. Thank you for this opportunity.

CATHY WURZER: John Runningen is Student President of LeadMN and a student at Fergus Falls Community and Technical College.