

Free City: Reclaiming the Promise of Free, Public Higher Education in San Francisco

Free City: What is it?

- **Free City will make community college free again—like it was before 1984**, when the state promised community colleges would be free for “all who can benefit.” (Who do you know who has benefited from a community college education?)
- Our city will **cover enrollment fees for all City College of San Francisco students who live or work at least half-time in San Francisco**.
- Students whose tuition is already covered by financial aid will **receive additional support to offset educational costs such as textbooks and transportation**—up to \$1000 per year.

Who is it for? Who will it help?

- CCSF serves a diverse range of students: workers in need of training and re-training, low-income and immigrant communities, veterans and the disabled, lifelong learners, first-generation college attendees, full- and part-time students in need of second—and third—chances, as well as students transferring to four-year institutions.
- Free City will **serve more than 20,000 students**, including parents and the unemployed reentering the workforce, recent high school graduates, seniors, caregivers, and many of SF’s low-income students pursuing their dreams.
- Expanding the school-to-college pipeline is essential, but many at CCSF are not traditional students and are arriving at (or returning to) college later in life. Free City would support students of all ages, recognizing that a more educated populace benefits all our communities.
- The majority of CCSF students qualify for financial aid, but in an era of skyrocketing student debt in one of the most expensive cities in the world, students often face choices between enrollment and rent, between textbooks and groceries. We don’t want students to have to weigh those tradeoffs.
- New state mandates are pushing out struggling low-income students with faltering GPAs, placing the burden of tuition on them unless and until they can raise their grade point average. But as one counselor helping such students reported, “how can I be expected to dig my way out of this [GPA] hole if I don’t have the money to buy the shovel?”

Why now?

- It’s a smart trend! President Obama unveiled a proposal for free community college in 2015, and

both Democratic presidential candidates say they’ll make community college free, with Sanders calling for all public colleges and universities to be “free for all” and Clinton calling for “debt free” higher education. Already three states (Oregon, Tennessee, and Minnesota) have free community college programs—with many more programs under consideration. City and regional plans for tuition-free community college are now announced almost weekly; Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti announced a plan just last week (4/14/16)!

- We know the costs of education for students and their families are skyrocketing; students graduating from university average \$35,000 in student loans. The cumulative student loan debt, more than \$1 trillion and exempted from bankruptcy proceedings, is far greater than the nation’s credit-card debt. College should not be a debt sentence! But even though our community colleges are our most affordable and cost-effective higher education providers, the day-to-day costs of accessing education are growing, especially in a city as expensive as this one.
- Along with the increasing privatization of education, costs are growing even at public institutions. Textbooks alone are sometimes more than tuition, making education unattainable even as it becomes more necessary to participate in the economy.
- San Francisco can expand access to higher education, providing enormous hope and opportunity and making the city more affordable, even while enhancing its public health and growing its future economy.
- Now that the accreditation crisis is ending, Free City will also help students return to City College as part of a larger strategy to restore and sustain it. Though the education at CCSF was never in question, many students were scared away by the accreditation news—and data at surrounding colleges demonstrates that most did not go elsewhere, opting out of higher education instead. While other Bay Area community colleges have seen enrollment drops, especially after fees went up several times over 5 years, those drops average about 7%, while CCSF has dropped more than 30%. The difference is the accreditor’s threat of closure, which created destabilization at the college and confusion in SF—and is now widely understood to have been misguided, at best.)
- Access to education, particularly for communities of color and low-income communities, is essential not

just for helping young people and their families to earn more secure incomes and a foothold into the middle class, but also to create stronger, more empowered, more imaginative, sustainable, and democratic communities.

- San Francisco has the ability to make the city more livable for all its residents and workers, to reclaim the California Master Plan for Higher Education locally, and to restore its community college to its broad, accessible mission.

What will it cost—how will we pay for it?

- What it is worth to provide an affordable pathway to higher education for 20,000 students? Free City will cost San Francisco less than \$13 million annually.
- Free City will be publicly funded. Educating our present and future is a public responsibility, and if the state is not able or willing to reclaim that responsibility, our city can. When we turn public education over to the private sector and private money, we lose our commitment to invest in public education for the public good.
- Public funds should be used for the public good. A small tax on personal luxuries for a few of the most privileged, such as Supervisor Jane Kim's "mansion tax" on the November ballot, could ensure continued support for our city's many students. The Ultra Luxury Housing Fee would increase by a quarter percent, the transfer tax paid on buildings and luxury homes and condos that sell for more than \$5 million. And we would be the first city in California to create a new 3% bracket for sales over \$25 million. We can't stop people from coming to SF and creating a market for luxury homes—but we can make sure that the market forces that incentivize building luxury homes also help protect San Francisco and contribute to building more affordable homes to keep San Franciscans here. (New York's Mansion Tax, by comparison, is a 1% surcharge paid by the buyer on residential sales of more than \$1M.) This proposal, if approved by voters, will generate over \$29M per year.

How will it work? How can I help?

- Proposed by San Francisco Supervisor Jane Kim, Free City is still in the planning stages. The program will launch for January 2017, with a possible early pilot under discussion for the fall, though fall classes start enrolling next week.
- Supervisor Kim's Free City proposal has the support of fellow supervisors, students, labor and community groups, and college stakeholders including faculty and their union (AFT 2121). Do you want to help? You can 1) endorse Free City and Supervisor Kim's office and AFT 2121 know (ivy.lee@sfgov.org) and aft@aft2121.org; 2) provide feedback, suggestions, and questions (to those same emails); 3) communicate with your district supervisor about how Free City will benefit your community and its students.