

California's new 'free college' law for community colleges covers more than tuition

Colleges spend their portion of state funds to cover range of student expenses, not necessarily tuition

After California lawmakers passed a law in 2017 that some of its backers touted as making community college tuition-free, David Loverin heard from a lot of families eager to take advantage of it.

When legislators and the media began focusing on the law, "they started promoting it as free college," said Loverin, director of financial aid at College of the Sequoias, a community college in Visalia, south of Fresno. "But when you went back to the actual bill, it wasn't really written that way. So a lot of families are coming to us saying 'free college, free college' and we're like, no, not really."

That's because the law, AB 19, known as the California College Promise program, allocated \$46 million to the state's 114 community colleges with the idea of helping students cover some of their costs, not necessarily tuition.

The law in fact was originally written to just provide free tuition to first-time, full-time students who don't receive the state's tuition waiver for low-income students. Tuition costs \$46 a unit, or \$1,380 per year for students taking a full load of 30 units. After lobbying from the community college system and others, the final version morphed to give colleges wide latitude to use funds provided by the law to help students cover a range of costs: from free tuition for students who don't qualify as low-income to receive the state's tuition waiver to free laptops and textbook vouchers.

And it turns out colleges took that latitude and ran with it last year, spending their portion of the state funds in myriad ways.

For more information, contact the Community College you are interested in attending to get all the details for enrollment.

The California College Promise Grant, a tuition waiver for low-income students; and dozens of local promise programs that are funded by donors and provide tuition or other aid to some students. That's in addition to numerous other state financial aid offerings.