

University Faculty Senate
Undergraduate Academic Programs and Policies Committee
Wendy Gordon (SUNY Plattsburgh), Chair
Spring 2020 Meeting
SUNY Downstate/SUNY Optometry (SUNY Global)

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT ON THE “FREE FRESHMAN YEAR” PROPOSAL

In Governor Cuomo’s 2020 State-of-the-State address, he announced:

Further Extending Freshman Year for Free Program

At no cost to New York State or students, Governor Cuomo is announcing a new partnership between SUNY and ModernStates.org, a philanthropy that will offer a full library of free online college courses and textbooks for all New Yorkers and will pay the costs for up to 1,000 credit bearing exams for New York veterans and active duty military families who complete Modern States' courses for use at SUNY Empire State College. The credits will be transferable to other SUNY schools.

Modern States offers state-of-the-art courses taught by college professors in all 33 subjects for which there is a credit-bearing CLEP - or College Level Examination Program -- exam from the College Board. The Modern States program has 180,000 registered users to date, and has paid for approximately 30,000 exams for New Yorkers and for students around the world. The Governor's initiative will help further extend the Freshman Year for Free opportunity to New York's military veterans, active duty military families, and all other students and lifelong learners, allowing them to earn up to one full year of college credit tuition free.

<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-35th-proposal-2020-state-state-addressing-veteran-and-law-enforcement>

This proposal came as a surprise to the Faculty of Empire State; it was not discussed with Faculty Governance. However, the proposal put forward by the Governor does not substantially change anything that is currently done at Empire, where CLEP and other Prior Learning Assessments are routinely accepted (as they are on most SUNY campuses). The change here is that New York veterans and active duty military families will not be required to pay for the Assessments; the cost of those are covered by the non-profit Modern States.

Further, in this context the program name, “Freshman Year for Free” is misleading. Military and former military students who currently enroll at SUNY Empire usually enter their program with significant credits earned before or during their enlistment, frequently with a complete Associate’s degree. They are more likely to use the Modern States program to satisfy a few outstanding general education requirements, not to replace an entire General Education Program.

The Governor’s statement that, following CLEP credit being granted by Empire, “the credit will be transferable to other SUNY schools,” is an oversimplification of the case. SUNY campuses generally accept CLEP, AP, IB, and other Prior Learning Assessments for credit, each campus and each program setting their own standards for what scores will be accepted or credit or as evidence of competency. When credit is granted – by Empire or any SUNY institution – for any PLA, that fact is clearly noted on the transcript and on the DegreeWorks audit. When students apply for transfer to a different SUNY

campus, the receiving campus is enabled to evaluate the test score and determine if it is acceptable. There is no confusion over whether the credit was obtained through PLA or in a course-based setting.

An unintended effect of this announcement by Governor Cuomo was to bring new Faculty attention to Modern States.org and the CLEP exams more generally, which raised two significant questions:

- 1) Given the ongoing development of General Education Student Learning Outcomes at campuses and system-wide, do CLEP and other PLA – when used to complete a significant portion of first-year coursework – enable students to meet the expected Student Learning Outcomes?
 - a. “Free Freshman Year” is based on an assemblage of MOOCs from a variety of well-known institutions. By its nature, it is not a formal “program” of general education, as SUNY is mandated by Middle States to provide.
 - b. Perhaps more significantly, SUNY faculty design their individual campus general education programs to acculturate new students to the college setting and to train them in analytical and communicative skills that are of vital importance to success in higher-level coursework. We do not know to what extent PLAs prepare students for success in these areas.
- 2) The Excelsior Scholarship program is intended for use by students (first-time/full-time or transfers) who are just beginning or have been continuously enrolled in college whose family incomes fall within particular parameters. Are students who make use of the Modern States “Free Freshman Year” program (regardless of whether they are the veteran/military population targeted by the Governor’s announcement) eligible for Excelsior? Are they somehow shortchanging themselves on future aid by taking advantage of the “Free Freshman Year?”
 - a. A conversation with the SUNY Plattsburgh Financial Aid Office (which has been assiduous in compliance with Excelsior regulations) established that students who have *never formally enrolled in college before* are eligible for Excelsior scholarships regardless of the number of credits they bring in from Prior Learning Assessments. High school graduates who choose to complete credits through Modern States before enrolling in college are not jeopardizing their future Excelsior participation.
 - b. Similarly, veterans or active duty military who have never matriculated in college could complete some or all of the “Free Freshman Year” without excluding themselves from Excelsior eligibility.
 - c. As explained above, most veterans who enroll at SUNY Empire do so with prior college experience and (due to their service or other factors) have not been continuously enrolled and therefore do not qualify for Excelsior regardless of credits obtained through Modern States.

Conclusions

In the opinion of the committee, Governor Cuomo’s plan does not significantly change current practice at SUNY Empire or elsewhere in SUNY. The plan does not obligate campuses to accept credit for PLAs accepted by Empire that they would not otherwise accept. Neither the Governor’s plan nor the Modern States “Free Freshman Year” program more generally puts students in financial jeopardy by limiting their future access to Excelsior Scholarships.

However, the question of whether a PLA-based first year of college results in students who meet current General Education Learning Outcomes is a significant one. As SUNY is engaging in the first significant revision to General Education requirements in two decades, faculty should be involved in ensuring that students with significant PLA credit are meeting System-mandated Student Learning Outcomes. Similarly, individual campuses would be well advised to review their own policies regarding all PLA instruments and determine whether exams and scores accepted for credit are appropriate for that campus's own Learning Outcomes.