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Proposed bills would tie higher-ed funding to student performance

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State funding for colleges and universities could become more closely linked to students' performance under a proposal pending in the Illinois General Assembly.

State Sen. Ed Maloney (D-Chicago) — whose district includes parts of Chicago's 19th Ward, Evergreen Park, Oak Lawn, Chicago Ridge and a dozen other southwest suburbs — is in line with a recent trend in higher education funding to encourage colleges and universities to boost graduations and curb the dropouts that often occur around the first or second years at four-year universities.

Maloney called the bill a "budgeting-for-results" approach, which would also factor in time to completion and how schools deal with more financially at-risk and first-generation students in determining state funding.

"I think it will ultimately result in more accountability," he said.

The legislation was born out of a Complete College America conference attended by several Illinois lawmakers and education officials. CCA was established in 2009 to address concerns that the United States was losing its competitive edge in the workforce, with a lower percentage of college grads than many other countries.

Enrollment rates are up 35 percent in the U.S. since 1970, but completion rates have remained flat. One of the main goals is for 60 percent of adults in every state to have some kind of post-secondary degree, the minimum being one year in a "high quality" program that results in a degree or certificate. Currently, 43 percent of Illinois adults between the age of 25 to 34 have a college degree.

One of the main problems, according to Illinois Board of Higher Education Executive Director George Reid, is that many students today face challenges previous generations did not. With tuition rates rising much faster than inflation, more students have to hold down jobs while studying.

"The so-called nontraditional student is becoming the majority," he said. "Our demographics indicate that more students are working and have more responsibilities than ever before."

The state's higher education board has been central in helping draft the measure, which would take effect for the 2013 fiscal year. The bill has cleared a Senate panel, but its future is uncertain. A similar bill has cleared a House panel.

Mark Horstmeyer, spokesman for Moraine Valley Community College said there are questions about the proposals that need to be resolved.

"I can only speak from a community college standpoint, which is that our students have a lot of different needs and different programs and their own personal lives. They aren't like four-year students," Horstmeyer said.

Maloney said the "unique character" of each college or university would be considered, and that four-year

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students are starting to look more like some community college students. As for whether he thought college administrators might be tempted to “dumb down” programs to ensure more graduates and more state funding, he said he did not think that would happen.

“I really don’t see that as a danger,” he said. “I think the integrity of the profession is such that I don’t think that’s going to be an issue.”