BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION
FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM

PURPOSE

The Commonwealth's "free community college" grant program is subject to the availability of funding and appropriation by the Massachusetts legislature (M.G.L. c. 15A, section 5B).

Free Community College provides financial assistance to full and part-time undergraduate students, who meet the eligibility requirements and are enrolled in and pursuing an approved program of study at one of the Commonwealth's 15 public community colleges. The program is designed to provide last dollar financial assistance to ensure that all community college students have adequate resources to fully cover tuition and fees towards a certificate, associate degree, or other legislatively mandated courses or program at a community college. Certain Free Community College students also receive an additional *Allowance and Support Award* for books and supplies, and other approved costs to mitigate barriers that may impede opportunities for students to enroll in college and complete a program of study.

DEFINITIONS

ELIGIBLE INSTITUTION:
A Massachusetts community college within the public system of higher education as identified in Section 5 of Chapter 15A of the General Laws.

ELIGIBLE PROGRAM*:*
An approved certificate or associate degree program offered at a Massachusetts public community college.

EMT AND PARAMEDIC PROGRAMS:
Courses that meet the initial training requirements for emergency medical technician (EMT) and paramedic certification, pursuant to Item 1596-2501 of Chapter 137 of the Acts of-2026.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

To be eligible for the Free Community College program, a student must:

a) be enrolled in an eligible institution, as defined;

b) (1) be a U.S. Citizen, permanent legal resident, or non-citizen eligible under Title IV regulations and physically reside in Massachusetts for at least one year, as of the start of the enrolled term with an intent to remain in Massachusetts consistent with Board of Higher Education policy; or (2) have an approved eligibility status designated by the Board of Higher Education pursuant to Section 9 of Chapter 15A, as amended by Section 11 of Chapter 28 of the Acts of 2023;

c) complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or, if ineligible to complete the FAFSA, then complete the Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA);

d) comply with financial aid verification requirements;

e) not be in default on any federal or state student loans for attendance at any institution, or owe a refund for any previous state financial aid program;

f) have not earned a bachelor's degree (or the equivalent);

g) enroll, as a matriculated student, on a full-time or part-time basis (minimum of 6 credits, or the equivalent), in eligible undergraduate courses or programs of study leading to a certificate or associate degree; and

h) meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) according to institution's requirements and federal standards.

i) **Provided, however**, a student enrolled in an EMT program or courses that meet the initial training requirements for emergency medical technical and paramedic certification courses is exempt from eligibility requirements outlined in lines f) and g) above.[1]

FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

- Disbursement of funds: Free Community College funding is to be allocated to participating institutions through a formula or process approved by the Commissioner of Higher Education.

- Free Community College funds allocated during an academic year must be committed to students by institutions and expended at the conclusion of the academic year, unless formally requested by the President of the institution and approved by the Commissioner of Higher Education, subject to laws and regulations guiding spending authority.

- The institution is required to report recipient, programmatic, and other data to the Department of Higher Education (DHE) upon request, and no less than on a quarterly basis.

- Institutions shall facilitate access to on-campus support services to students who receive assistance under the Free Community College program, to promote persistence in and completion of their program of study.

[1] Pursuant to Item 1596-2501 of Chapter 9 of the Acts of 2025.

- The institution is responsible for verifying student eligibility to include an accurate determination of whether the student has earned more than one prior associate or a baccalaureate degree (or equivalent), which may include a signed affidavit from the student after all reasonable attempts were made by the student to access prior transcripts.

- Free Community College may be awarded to support summer enrollment, if funds are available.

- Institutions are required, upon request, to submit data to the DHE to demonstrate maintenance of fiscal effort in their commitment to institutional aid to students, while participating in the Free Community College Program.

- The BHE shall annually establish the tuition rates and monitor the fees set by community college Boards of Trustees for compliance with statutory requirements mandated for Massachusetts community colleges participating in Free Community College, M.G.L. c. 15A, Section 5B(c)(1) and (d) and Section 9(i).

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY BY ENROLLMENT INTENSITY AND DEGREE TYPE

Eligible students may be awarded Free Community College funds as follows[2]:

Associate Degree

Full-Time	Maximum of 3 years, 6 semesters for full-time (minimum of 12 enrolled credits per academic term).
Part-Time	Maximum of 5 years, 10 semesters for part-time (6 enrolled credits minimum academic term).

Certificate Program

Full-Time	Maximum of 4 semesters
Part-Time	Maximum of 8 semesters

EMT and Paramedic Programs

Full- and Part-Time	Maximum of 2 semesters

[2] An additional year of assistance may be awarded based on extenuating circumstances, with approval of a written appeal.

AWARD VALUE

Subject to appropriation and the availability of funds, Free Community College is a last-dollar grant awarded to eligible students under the program and shall not exceed the calculated costs of tuition and fees as determined by the institution and published in its annual Cost of Attendance (COA), and approved by the BHE pursuant to M.G.L. c.15A, Section 5B(c)(1), for the academic term during which the award is made.

An additional **Allowance and Support Award** of up to $1,200 for books, supplies, and other approved costs, ***shall*** be awarded to students whose household income is at or below 125 percent of the state median income, or other income level established by the Department.

Free Community College awards (either grants or allowances) expended beyond costs related to tuition and fees, and the allowance for books, supplies, and other costs as defined, must be approved or authorized by the Commissioner of Higher Education, or their designee.

Higher cost certificate or degree programs, which exceed 150% of the institution's average tuition and fee costs, may require annual approval by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE).

AWARD CALCULATION

All students who meet the eligibility requirements and are enrolled in an undergraduate program of study leading to a certificate, associate degree, or other legislatively mandated courses or programs may receive a Free Community College award to cover Financial Unmet Need for costs associated with tuition and fees, as defined and approved by the BHE, for the corresponding academic term or year. The award calculation for an eligible student is as follows:

> ***Free Community College Grant*** = *Tuition and Fees* ***(minus)*** *All Federal and State Grant Aid*

An additional Free Community College **Allowance and Support Award** for books, supplies, and other approved costs is available to Pell-eligible students or those with a Student Aid Index (SAI) at or below $20,000. The maximum Allowance and Support Award in any academic year shall not exceed $1,200 and shall not exceed $600 in any single semester. This award calculation, based on the number of enrolled credits each semester**,** is as follows:

> ***Allowance and Support Award*** = *Cost of Attendance COA* ***(minus)*** *All Federal and State Grant Aid*

12 or more credits	up to $1,200 per academic year; not to exceed $600 per semester

9-11 credits	up to $900 per academic year, not to exceed $450 per semester
6-8 credits	up to $600 per academic year, not to exceed $300 per semester
5 credits or less	up to $400 per academic year, not to exceed $200 per semester

Student eligibility for the **Allowance and Support Award** shall be assessed and determined at the beginning of each semester and the student's semester award amount-shall align with the student's credit hours per semester.

Please note that a student receiving an **Allowance and Support Award** through the Free Community College program **may** receive an additional, second allowance of up to $1,200 through the **MASSGrant Plus**[3] program, subject to the availability of funds, such that total awards may not exceed the amounts included within program allocation letters, and the program eligibility guidelines of the program. Additionally, a student who has previously earned an associate degree may receive financial assistance to complete up to one additional associate degree under the Free Community College program.

AWARD DISBURSEMENT

Participating institutions must verify that each recipient is eligible in accordance with guidelines established for the Free Community College program, and that the student is enrolled in a state approved program or other permitted specialty courses. Further, the institution is required, to the best of its ability, to reasonably verify that the student has not earned a prior bachelor's degree (or equivalent), and/or if the student has earned more than one associate's degree (if applicable), before awarding and disbursing funds.

Institutions are required to refund to the DHE any funds that are deemed to have been improperly awarded and disbursed to recipients who are later determined to be ineligible for the program. Refunds may occur because of adjustments to eligibility for other aid, changes to dependency status, and/or changes to a student's enrollment status. Refunds may also occur if the institution receives payment and becomes aware that a student has withdrawn, dropped below full-time status, taken an approved leave of absence, or otherwise fails to complete the period of enrollment as charged. Free Community College funds may be awarded to support trailing summer enrollment, if funds are available.

[3] Learn more about the state's MASSGrant Plus program by clicking on the following link by clicking here.

ANNUAL REVIEW

The Department of Higher Education is responsible for evaluating the efficacy of the Free Community College program. Institutions that have signed an agreement to participate in the Massachusetts State financial aid programs are required to share data for all students with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE) or its designee, and the Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) for this purpose. The program may be evaluated annually to determine any immediate impact or to determine if adjustments are required for various processes, such as disbursement of funds.

PARTICIPATION AGREEMENT

All institutions receiving funds under the Program Free Community College must have an active Massachusetts State Financial Aid Participation Agreement on file with the Massachusetts Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA).

AUDIT REQUIREMENT

a) It shall be the responsibility of each college to maintain documentation of a recipient student's eligibility for the Free Community College program.

b) The Commissioner shall require each college to furnish annually to the BHE a report detailing specific information regarding recipients of the Free Community College program. OSFA will establish the timeline, specifications, and procedures for this report.

c) All financial books, records and documents pertaining to this Program shall, at all times, be open to inspection, review and audit by the Commissioner, the State Auditor or their authorized representatives who shall have access to the premises wherever such books, records, and documents are for seven years. An institution may retain such records for a period of five years, if approval is received from the Records Conservation Board in accordance with General Laws, Chapter 30, Section 42.