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Chicago's City Colleges will wipe out debt of former students who return, Mayor Lori Lightfoot announces in push to boost post-COVID recovery

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By SOPHIE SHERRY
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About 21,000 former students of City Colleges of Chicago could benefit from a new debt forgiveness program the mayor announced Tuesday. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

Aiming to boost Chicago's post-COVID-19 economic recovery, Mayor Lori Lightfoot launched a new initiative Tuesday that will allow thousands of former City Colleges students to return to school, complete their degrees and clear their debt.

The "Fresh Start" program will offer more than 21,000 students who left school in the last 10 years in good standing the opportunity to return and finish their degrees or certificates debt-free, as soon as this fall. The mayor's office estimates this group of former students currently holds \$17.7 million in debt.

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At a press conference Tuesday afternoon at Harold Washington College to announce the program, City Colleges Chancellor Juan Salgado said too often student debt stands in the way of achieving career aspirations and economic growth.

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“A college credential is pivotal to work for success, we all know that,” Salgado said, “especially during economic downturns.”

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This program is the next step in citywide commitment to ensure all residents, regardless of circumstances, have access to the resources needed for upward mobility, Lightfoot said during Tuesday’s press conference.

“No Chicagoan should be forced to fall so far behind while pursuing the very thing that can propel them to a stable middle-class lifestyle and out of poverty,” Lightfoot said. “When they’re not able to excel we all lose.”

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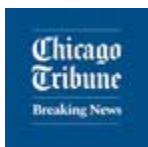
Lightfoot and Salgado were joined by Latil Willis, a former student at Harold Washington College who said she was forced to drop out due to financial hardship.

Willis was working and attending school during the fall of 2018 when she quickly became overwhelmed. She ultimately decided to drop her classes, but missed the tuition refund deadline and began accumulating debt.

“I have always dreamed of earning my business degree and having a career in fashion,” Willis said Tuesday. “It was difficult for me to realize that I might not ever be able to do so.”

When Willis learned about the Fresh Start program, she said she was “beyond excited” and feels more motivated than ever before.

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“I want to set an example for my 4-month-old son so that he can see me go to college and know that it’s possible for him as well,” Willis said.

City Colleges of Chicago, a network of community colleges, will play an important role in addressing the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus, according to the mayor’s office, as the schools help prepare students for many high in-demand fields, such as transportation, distribution, logistics and healthcare.

Of these 21,000 students who qualify for the program, 51% percent are Black and 34% are Latino, according to the mayor’s offices. Many are just one course or one semester away from completing their degrees.

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Students who return to City Colleges, through Fresh Start, will have half of their outstanding debt cleared if they remain enrolled and make satisfactory academic progress in their first term. The rest of their college debt will be forgiven upon completion of their degree program.

To participate in the program, students will

need to enroll in at least one credit course at a City college and pay a one-time non-refundable reinstatement fee of \$75.

Returning students will also be required to meet with an advisor to set academic goals and a financial counselor to develop a credit action plan. Before August 1, eligible students will also need to complete the FAFSA and satisfy new term payment arrangements.

The Fresh Start program will run from through 2023. The City Colleges of Chicago system has seven campuses — Daley, Harold Washington, Kennedy-King, Malcolm X, Olive-Hardy, Truman and Wright — as well as six satellite sites.



Sophie Sherry

CONTACT



Sophie Sherry is an intern with the quick response team. She recently graduated from The University of Michigan where she majored in public policy. Before The Chicago Tribune, Sophie interned at CNN, Michigan

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