



Early Commitment of Financial Aid Initiative

Overview

Goal

Over the next 3 to 5 years, Pathways will lead a national effort to increase the number of states and communities that establish programs that provide an early commitment of financial aid for underserved students. Building on work underway as part of the Communications Campaign project, the Pathways to College Network will provide national leadership to engage state policy and education leaders in considering early commitment of financial aid as a major strategy to increase the number of underserved students who are prepared to go to college, enroll, and succeed in higher education.

Rationale

One of the four action items for Pathways is to “encourage early financial aid commitments and early notification programs for underserved students.” Early commitment financial aid programs take various forms. State-wide programs are usually established through legislation and are supported with state appropriations; the two most established programs are the Indiana 21st Century Scholars Program and the Oklahoma Promise (formerly the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program – OHLAP). A variation on the state-wide approach is a new program, the Wisconsin Covenant. This program is not legislated nor supported by state appropriations; it was established by Governor Jim Doyle and is funded through an initial endowment from the Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation to create the Wisconsin Covenant Foundation. This base funding will be used to challenge Wisconsin businesses and philanthropists to make similar contributions to the Covenant and provide grants to students. A third potential model involves Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) or matched savings accounts established to support education beyond high school. Other models may emerge as the project unfolds.

This is an issue that Pathways has demonstrated leadership on with publication in 2005 of *Early Commitment Financial Aid Programs: Promises, Practices, and Policies*. We are well positioned to escalate this work and move forward on all three Pathways’ tracks: research, policy, and practice to promote actions that provide low-income students with an early assurance of having the funds necessary to pay for college. The Communications Campaign, currently funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, provides a platform during 2008 and early 2009 to initiate a more comprehensive initiative.

Objectives

1. To reduce the knowledge gaps on issues concerning early commitment financial aid programs by conducting selected research efforts and publishing papers, briefs, and reports.
2. To inform policymakers and policy shapers about alternative early commitment strategies and the strengths, weaknesses, and status of such programs.
3. To establish the Pathways to College Network as the national resource for information and technical assistance concerning early commitment financial aid programs.
4. To inform practitioners about early commitment programs and their role in increasing access and success for low-income and underrepresented students.

Activities

- Develop a series of briefing reports for policymakers describing at least three models (early commitment, early notification, and early savings) for providing early assurance of funding. (Include examples and profiles of students who have benefited.)
- Promote models through briefings with policymakers, conference presentations, op/ed pieces, journal articles, etc.
- Provide technical assistance to states interested in establishing an early commitment program.
- Convene a “newsworthy” Early Commitment Financial Aid Summit that brings together a broad group of stakeholders, in conjunction with PCN partners and collaborators.

Outcomes

- At least five states will have begun exploring the value of establishing an early commitment financial aid program.
- At least five major studies, reports, or articles will have been published on early commitment programs to support policy and/or practice.
- At least five presentations will have been made annually on this initiative.

Potential Partners

- National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- National Governors Association
- Institute for Higher Education Policy

Funding

As a multi-year national project with activities involving research, policy, and practice, the Early Commitment Financial Aid Initiative will require support from multiple funders. TERI will continue to provide infrastructure support for personnel and facilities. Pathways staff is building a project budget.