

Merit awards make college affordable

Scholarships help keep best students in-state

By Dennis Cauchon

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — Jared Jones' father wanted him to attend New York University.

"Trouble was, he didn't have a good plan to come up with the \$45,000 to pay for it," says Jones, 19, of Volga, W.Va.

Jones' life changed when he qualified for a new state scholarship that makes in-state tuition free for any student who earns a B average or better in high school and a 21 out of a possible 36 on the ACT college entrance exam. Now, Jones is a PROMISE scholar at West Virginia University, the top public school in his state. "I'd be in the Army if it wasn't for this scholarship," he says.

State-financed merit scholarships are the fastest-growing type of financial aid for college. The awards have played a key role in slashing the average cost of a public university education by 32% since 1998.

The merit scholarship boom began when Georgia created HOPE scholarships in 1993 to pay full in-state tuition for all students who earned a B average in high school. Since then, 800,000 Georgia students have received \$2.3 billion in HOPE scholarships.

Similar programs have started in 13 other states. The awards range from \$2,000 in Missouri to full tuition in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, New Mexico, South Carolina and West Virginia.

"These scholarships work wonders in states struggling to keep the best kids at home," says former West Virginia governor Gaston Caperton, now president of the College Board, which oversees college entrance exams.

Merit scholarships are enormously popular because so many people benefit. HOPE scholarship requirements are loose enough that 52% of Georgia high school graduates qualified this year. At the University of Georgia, 98% of in-state freshmen are HOPE scholars and pay no tuition.

Tennessee starts a \$200-million-per-year, lottery-funded program this fall to give \$3,000 scholarships to 65,000 students. In 2003, 41 states awarded \$1.2 billion in merit aid, up 118% from 1998. Merit aid is unpopular among some academics who study tuition costs. They say rewarding the best students, who tend to be affluent, diverts aid from the needy.

Sarah Lovell, 19, daughter of a Food and Drug Administration toxicologist, already had decided to attend West Virginia University, and her family was going to pay. "The PROMISE scholarship was a nice bonus," she says. The savings will help her parents pay for the college educations of three siblings.

Others say merit scholarships help the needy by bringing more aid into the system. West Virginia University received \$8 million in PROMISE grants this year compared with nothing two years ago. The money comes from the lottery and an amusements tax. Need-based state grants have increased slightly to \$4 million a year.

"PROMISE grants have freed up money for other needy students," says Brenda Thompson, assistant vice president for student affairs at West Virginia University. PROMISE scholarships enable students to borrow less and work fewer hours at part-time jobs.

Casey Jackson, 19, of Westover, W.Va., hopes to graduate with no debt. Without

the PROMISE scholarship, he planned to study out-of-state and borrow up to \$100,000.

One surprise benefit is academic, not financial. "People worked their butts off senior year to get these scholarships," Jones says.

The portion of West Virginia high school graduates attending college rose 3 percentage points to 59% in the first year of the PROMISE program.

Jeremy Curtis, 19, of Morgantown, tells of a close friend who had good grades but not the required 21 on the ACT. She took the test three times and scored 20 each time. "Her mother is dead, and her father retired. She couldn't do college without the scholarship," he says. Instead of college, she works two jobs.

Students lose their PROMISE scholarships if their grade point average falls below 2.75 during freshman year or 3.0 after that.

"I'm not going to lie. I would have had more fun and studied less if it wasn't for this scholarship," says Amanda Coates, 19, of Oak Hill, W.Va.

Coates cares for her disabled mother. Her father is dead. She worked 32 hours a week as a telemarketer in her first semester and 16 hours a week second semester. "The scholarship has put me in tune with the priorities of what college is about," she says. "For me, there's a lot at stake."

Objectives

- ▶ Read the article “Merit awards make college affordable”
- ▶ Recount information from the article
- ▶ Have students assess their interest in state merit awards
- ▶ Prepare for the ACT by answering questions from the ACT organization
- ▶ Have students self-evaluate their readiness for the ACT

Preparation

- ▶ A copy of the article “Merit awards make college affordable”
- ▶ The site <http://www.act.org/aap/pdf/preparing.pdf> has a free 80-page booklet from ACT on how to prepare for the ACT, including a sample test with scoring. You will need copies of pages 14, 28, 34-35, and 46-47 for each student, as well as pages 60-62 for the scoring key. If you would like to provide the entire booklet for each student, call ACT at 319/337-1270 to request them.
- ▶ Check to make sure your guidance office has applications for local scholarships including any merit awards your state may offer.

Read the article and answer discussion questions (15 minutes)

1. As of the writing of this article, how many states had merit scholarships?
2. What were two requirements to qualify for the West Virginia merit award?
3. How did having these scholarships help students stay focused while in college?
4. Would you be interested in attending college in-state if you received a \$2000 merit award? How about a merit award for your full tuition?
5. What requirements do you think you would need to meet to qualify for a state merit award?

ACT Prep Test (25 minutes)

One of the requirements for West Virginia’s merit program, and for many college entrance applications, is to take the ACT test. ACT has sample tests so you can get an idea of what kinds of questions they ask. You’re going to take a sample test today. There are four parts and each section is timed. The test will only be 24 questions long. The actual test is 215 questions, and you have five hours to complete it.

The first section is the English section. You’ll read a paragraph and be asked a few questions about the grammar. You’ll need to choose which option best fits English grammar rules. There are five questions to answer. You’ll have three minutes.

- ▶ Teacher: Be sure to time the test. After three minutes, tell students to stop. Then begin the next section.

The second section is math. You’ll have four minutes to answer four math questions. Make sure you answer only questions 17-20.

- ▶ Teacher: Time the test. When time is up, tell students to stop. Then begin the next section.

The third section is a reading section. You will read part of a short story and then answer a few questions about what you’ve read. The purpose is to see how well you comprehended what you read. There are 10 questions in this section. You will have 9 minutes.

- ▶ Teacher: After 9 minutes, tell students to stop. Then begin the next section.

The fourth and final section is the science section. You’ll have 6 minutes to read the information and answer five questions. When time is up, we’ll go over the answers together.

- ▶ Teacher: After this final section is done, go to the debrief section.

Debrief/Application Questions (20 minutes)

Go over the answers together. As you do, have students keep track of which ones they got right. Teacher, see the appropriate answer sheets for each section. After reviewing the answers, discuss the questions below.

1. What did you think of the questions? Easy? Hard?
2. Did you feel like you had at least covered this information in school even if you didn’t remember all of it?
3. Which section was the trickiest for you? Why?
4. If this had been the actual ACT, do you think you would have been prepared? Why?
5. What steps could you take to prepare for the actual ACT?
6. Besides scholarships, list reasons why it is financially beneficial to do well in school and on college entrance exams like the ACT.

Note: If you do want more practice for free, the ACT website has other practice questions you can answer (<http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/index.html>). And, if you are interested in seeing what local and state scholarships are available and what is required, you can visit your school’s guidance office and pick up copies. You can never start too early!