

Powering OHLAP

By World's Editorial Writers
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Stable funding needed for scholarships

State higher education officials continue to search for a stable funding source for the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, which offers free tuition to students with family incomes below \$50,000.

The program is expected to grow by about 3,000 students next fall.

The benefits of the program are unquestionable. The state needs more college graduates and one way to make that happen is to make higher education affordable.

Officials had hoped the new lottery, launched in October 2005, would provide a major portion of OHLAP funding. So far net projections have not materialized. While Oklahoma currently enjoys a robust economy because of taxes from oil and gas revenues, that might not continue.

Full funding for OHLAP would be a boon for the state. Students are eligible for OHLAP if they sign up in the eighth, ninth or 10th grades, take required college preparatory courses, graduate with a 2.5 grade point average and stay out of trouble. While OHLAP is a relatively new program already more than 12,000 college students have received free tuition, with almost 30,000 high school students enrolled. More than half of Oklahoma families qualify for the program. About half the participants are from families with annual incomes under \$25,000. That suggests that the program is doing what it was intended to do.

OHLAP is expected to grow rapidly as more high school students learn about it. Eventually the program will stabilize and become more predictable, and the amount of new money required each year will level off. Meanwhile costs continue to escalate. The good news is that the cost increases mean that more students are pursuing college degrees who otherwise might not have. Many OHLAP participants will become the first in their families to earn four-year degrees.

There's an indisputable correlation between education and income. Oklahoma lags the national averages in annual income and the percentage of its population with a college education.

OHLAP will help deserving low-income students have better lives. Eventually it will help build a better-educated, higher-paid work force and improve the quality of life in Oklahoma.