

Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program: Some students are falling through cracks

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The Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, or OHLAP, is becoming a real success story. Taxpayer-funded OHLAP scholarships are making it possible for thousands of deserving high school graduates to attend state colleges and universities. They are students who without OHLAP might have to drastically scale back their higher education dreams.



OHLAP provides full-tuition scholarships to state institutions for graduates of Oklahoma high schools who qualify on the basis of family income and high school performance. Established just 15 years ago, the scholarship program, also known as "Oklahoma's Promise," has enrolled 57,000 students from 550 high schools in all 77 counties. The number of scholarships granted has grown from about 1,200 to 15,000 this year, and that number is projected to increase to 17,800 next year.

These numbers are especially heartening in a state that needs more college graduates. Oklahoma's per-capita annual income is about 80 percent of the national average. It is no coincidence that the percentage of Oklahomans with college degrees also is about 80 percent of the national average.

As good as OHLAP is, some cases fall through the cracks.

Consider the case of Michael, a 12th grader at a suburban high school. Michael has earned straight A grades throughout high school. He ranks third in his class and scored 31 on the ACT. He has taken the college-preparatory course of study that is heavy with English, lab science, math, history and foreign language credits. He has avoided alcohol and drug use and stayed out of trouble at school and with the law.

In other words, Michael's high school record more than qualifies him for an OHLAP scholarship. He wants to attend the University of Oklahoma and eventually go to medical school.

The problem is that students must enroll in OHLAP in either the 8th, 9th or 10th grades. When Michael was in the 10th grade his family's income was about \$52,000, which was just barely above the \$50,000 threshold for OHLAP eligibility. He did not qualify for a scholarship.

But his family's situation changed between his 10th- and 12th-grade years. His father, who is on medical disability, was able to contribute less and less to the family income. His mother, the primary breadwinner, was laid off her job and then rehired at a lesser salary.

The family's income now is about \$48,000, which would qualify Michael for OHLAP. The catch is that the law that created OHLAP contains no provision for retroactive enrollment. He didn't meet the family income requirement during the three years students are permitted to apply, so he's out in the cold, regardless of the family's financial situation.

Officials of the State Regents for Higher Education, the agency that administers the program, are sympathetic but their hands are tied. The enrollment procedure is prescribed in state law.

Michael's only recourse is to pursue other, less attractive, financial aids. His ACT score might qualify for a partial tuition waiver at OU, but not a full scholarship.

Maybe it's time for the Legislature to review the OHLAP law. Perhaps the law should be tweaked to provide for retroactive enrollment or a process to waive the rules when special and compelling circumstances such as Michael's exist. There is bound to be other students in situations similar to his, although probably not many.

Changing the law would take some thought. The early enrollment requirement lets students demonstrate that they are holding up their end of the bargain in meeting academic and personal conduct requirements. And in any waiver or retroactivity provision there would have to be safeguards to prevent abuse of the program.

OHLAP is a great program and a great investment in the state's future. There ought to be some way to accommodate well qualified students who find themselves in special circumstances.

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