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555 West Washington Ave, Suite 200
Madison, WI 53703

www.wccf.org

☎ 608-284-0580

✍ 608-284-0583

Already Enrolled:

How Expanding Access to Wisconsin Higher Education Grants to Students Attending Less-Than-Half-Time Would Help More Adults *Complete* Postsecondary Programs

Postsecondary Education is Key to Upgrading Skills and Raising Wages

One of the results of our rapidly changing economy is that employers increasingly need workers with new skills in order to stay competitive. Likewise, workers need higher educational credentials in order to qualify for well-paying, family-supporting jobs than they once did.

Postsecondary programs at the state's technical colleges and universities are the key to addressing this situation – satisfying employers' needs and raising the wages of our workers.

Access to financial aid is critical for these students – both those coming directly from high school as well as returning adult students – in order to continue in and complete the post-secondary programs that pay off so well.

The Wisconsin Higher Education Grant program is the state's main financial aid tool for serving these students – and a change in grant eligibility could make it even more effective. Allowing student temporarily taking just one course (three credits) to qualify for WHEGs could increase the numbers of students persisting in and completing their programs of study.

Why Students Attend Less-Than-Half-Time (LTHT) and What Happens When They Do

WHEG grants, and indeed most financial aid tools, have served traditional students well – those coming straight out of high school, taking a full course load or close to it. This is not the case for many non-traditional students – those returning to school to boost their skills and earn a higher credential.

The working-age adults who enroll in courses at our technical colleges and universities, and who are seeking to obtain a certificate, technical diploma, associates or bachelors degree face a number of unique challenges.

Many adult learners have to juggle their coursework with a number of other commitments. In fact, financial constraints, family commitments, work obligations, or academic conflicts are cited as often forcing these students to drop down to one course at a time. (Academic conflicts can include inconvenient class time, insufficient course offerings, the need to build confidence in academic ability, or demanding classes for which a student believes an additional class would undermine their ability to achieve academic success.)

When they drop down to one class (typically 3 credit hours), they are enrolled on a less-than-half-time basis and the Wisconsin Higher Education Grant is no longer available to them. It is at this point that many adult learners drop out of the programs they are enrolled in and don't return.

Other States are Finding Ways to Meet the Needs of Adult Learners

The changing economy and resulting workforce needs are not unique to Wisconsin. Most states face a similar situation with baby boomers retiring, employers needing more skilled workers, and so on. A number of other states have subsequently recognized how their financial aid tools do not match up with these changes and the needs and experiences of adult learners and have taken steps to remedy the

situation. Below are a few examples of what other states have done along these lines:

- *Illinois' Monetary Award Program* – need-based aid open to less-than-half-time students who do not have a B.A.ⁱⁱ
- *Minnesota State Grants* – available to students taking as few as three credits (and supplemented with postsecondary child care grants, and a state work-study program).ⁱⁱⁱ
- *Georgia HOPE Grant* – pays for up to two years of college, including short-term certificate programs and developmental education, for any Georgia resident (and is available for those taking at least 3 credits).^{iv}
- *Arkansas Workforce Improvement Grant* – need-based aid for adults over 24 pursuing certificate or degrees at public institutions, can take as few as 3 credits.^v

The Illinois reform is a good one to examine because it's been in place for a number of years. Access to their Monetary Award Program (MAP) was expanded to include those students attending less-than-half-time (down to three credits). Financial aid administrators in Illinois have told us they believe it has had a significant impact on keeping adults in the system and enrolled at times when they would otherwise have dropped out of a program entirely (for one or more of the reasons mentioned earlier).

Because the Illinois program has been in place for some time, there have been thorough evaluations of it and the students served by the change.^{vi}

For example, one major question early on was, who was going to be served by the expansion, working adults or young traditional students who want to dabble in every course under the sun, slowly. The profile of students served has alleviated those concerns, as the average impacted MAP recipient is working 28 hours per week, is 30 years old, and is low-income. Their expansion of MAP awards has clearly targeted the low-skilled working adult population it was meant to reach.

How this Reform Focuses on Helping Existing Students Complete Their Studies

Currently in Wisconsin, a student is only eligible for a WHEG grant if they are enrolled in a state-

approved education program. Students are not eligible for aid when simply coming to a college and taking a course or two they may have some interest in. Eligibility is also currently limited to ten semesters. These existing limitations should ease any fears of abuse of the expansion or of the change not reaching the students most interested in and able to complete their programs.

Reform of the WHEGs could also include a provision that limits the expansion of eligibility to students who have previously completed at least one semester of coursework at the half-time status or above (the existing requirement) – thereby focusing even more squarely on helping existing students as they deal with the many real-life challenges that arise.

Conclusion

Funding levels for student financial aid is a perennial discussion. This proposal represents a *design* change to Wisconsin Higher Education Grants that could help existing students persist in and complete their studies. It would also result in a higher rate of return on the state's financial aid investment in these students. Employers' workforce needs will not be met and wages will not rise unless our workers are able to gain new skills and higher educational credentials. Expanding WHEG grants to students temporarily at less-than-half-time status is one small step that will help in that effort.

ⁱ See Administrative Code chapter HEA 5.01, which states: "Part-time students. Wisconsin higher education grants shall be awarded to students who are enrolled as at least half-time students as determined by the institution in which the student is enrolled."

ⁱⁱ More information on the IL program is available at: http://www.collegezone.com/studentzone/416_891.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ More information on the MN program is available at: http://www.mheso.state.mn.us/gPg.cfm?pageID=138&1534-D83A_1933715A=ac60e9364ca8d15

^{iv} More information on the GA program is available at: <http://www.gsfc.org/hope/>

^v More information on the AR program is available on the web at: <http://www.arkansashighered.com/wig.html>

^{vi} See *Monetary Award Program Evaluation: Characteristics, Persistence, and Academic Success of MAP Recipients*, available on the web at: http://www.collegezone.com/media/2005_MAP_Evaluation.pdf