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May 11, 2007

Rise in standards doesn't cut number of Promise scholars

by Jessica M. Karmasek

The number of Promise scholarships being handed out this year didn't drop despite the governing board's decision again to raise the required college entrance exam scores. Gov. Joe Manchin this week began visiting counties to hand out scholarship certificates to graduating high school seniors.

Receiving the award is about the same number of students who won scholarships last year.

Meanwhile, many of the second class of Promise scholars are finishing their fourth year of college and preparing to attend their own graduation ceremonies.

About half of the students who started college in 2003 had retained it through this semester by maintaining a 3.0 grade point average and accumulating 30 credit hours per year.

The retention rate was about the same last year, when the first crop of Promise scholars reached the four-year mark.

Tracking those graduates is a different story, said Jack Toney, the new director of state financial aid programs at the Higher Education Policy Commission, who replaced Lisa DeFrank-Cole, former executive director of the Promise program.

When former Gov. Bob Wise asked for funding for the Promise scholarship in 2001 and when lawmakers approved it, many said they intended for it to help keep young adults in the state. Many said they also hoped to raise the caliber of the state's work force to boost the economy.

But a Marshall University study showed that only about 50 percent of graduates who received the scholarship either acquired employment in the state or planned to stay here.

The remaining half said in their surveys that better opportunities existed elsewhere and jobs in their fields weren't available in West Virginia.

So far 3,395 high school seniors have been notified they will receive the scholarship, which covers full tuition and the state's public colleges and universities and provides similar amounts for those attending the state's private colleges.

Because of the appeals process, the number could grow.

The governor visited Logan, Wyoming and Braxton counties this week to hand out scholarship certificates. He'll be in Mineral and Hampshire next week, said Lara Ramsburg, his spokeswoman. Visits to other counties are yet to be scheduled.

Daniel Crockett, director of student and educational services at the state's Higher Education Policy Commission, said there wouldn't be a final count until fall. Students have until then to accept, he said.

But the recent numbers are significantly below those of the program's first couple of years.

Officials are trying to stem the burgeoning cost of the program and have increased test score requirements several times since the program began in 2002.

In 2006, the number of students awarded the scholarship was 3,319, and the number who accepted was 2,836. In 2005, the numbers were 3,457 and 2,891; in 2004, 4,075 and 3,495; in 2003, 4,401 and 3,797; and in 2002, the first year the scholarship was given out, 4,073 and 3,497.

Toney points to the changes in eligibility criteria over the years as a major factor in the decreasing number of students awarded.

The scholarship program, which is funded by video lottery revenue, is expected to cost more than \$40 million a year by fall 2008 and could reach \$50 million in 2010.

In July 2006, Promise board members voted to increase standards, saying students must earn an ACT composite score of 22 or a SAT combination score of 1,020.

Students previously qualified if they had a 3.0 grade point average in high school and earned a composite score of 21 on the ACT or 1,000 on the SAT.

Promise also requires minimum ACT scores of 20 in reading, math, science and English, and SAT scores of at least 490 in verbal and 480 in math.

The current standards maintain the high school GPA standard, but increase the ACT composite score to 22 and the minimum SAT combination score in critical reading and math to 1,020. Requirements on ACT subscores and individual SAT verbal and math scores remain the same.

In 2002, Promise's inaugural year, students also had to earn a composite score of 21 on the ACT and have a 3.0 grade point average.

In 2004, eligibility standards were tightened for the first time to limit costs. In addition to a 3.0 GPA and a 21 composite score on the ACT, students also had to post at least a 19 on each ACT component.

In July 2004, the criteria got even stricter. Students had to attain at least a 20 on each ACT component -- the current ACT subscore requirement.

But the changing criteria aren't the only factor in the decreasing number of students awarded the scholarship, Toney said.

He also points to the college-going rate.

"It could just be the college-going rate in those particular years where we see decreases were lower," Toney said.

The number of high school students graduating also could be a factor.

"But certainly the change in criteria would be the primary factor," Toney said.

He acknowledges that tracking them is proving difficult.

He points to results of the Marshall study, which was released in January. According to the results, nearly all Promise Scholarship recipients would have attended college, most likely in West Virginia, even if they hadn't received the scholarship money.

Ninety-seven percent of students who received the scholarship said they would have pursued postsecondary education, and 71 percent of those recipients would have enrolled in a West Virginia school if they hadn't received the scholarship.

The study concluded that the program might be ineffective in terms of reaching students who might not have otherwise gone to college.

Marshall University, in conjunction with Promise Scholarship officials, surveyed 1,183 students who were among the scholarship's first graduating class last year.

Toney said there are other reasons for graduates to leave the state.

"It's not just because of jobs or salaries, but they're joining family elsewhere or want to live closer to family or they simply want to live in a different environment," he said.

A data exchange with the Bureau of Employment Programs was to be set up to determine if Promise scholars are, in fact, working in West Virginia.

Toney, who just started in his position May 1, could not say if or when that was done, or if surveys would be sent out to graduates later this year.

"I think this is something that will be better measured over time, but not in the immediate hereafter," he said. "I just don't think it's that important at this point. It's just too soon."

He points to the growing number of students who pursue graduate degrees. He believes a number of the Promise graduates remain in state and are still in school.

"Of course, we're certainly hoping we find that many of the scholars eventually stay in West Virginia," he said.

Toney could not provide a total cost of the scholarship program for this school year. Universities are still reconciling their accounts for the current year, he said.

Nor could he say how much the scholarship would cost next year, but he's concerned about the possibility of an increase.

He was unsure whether eligibility requirements would have to be changed again.

"I think it's something we need to study," Toney said. "It's certainly something we should be looking at each year."

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May 11, 2007

New director of state's financial aid services on job

by Jessica M. Karmasek

Jack Toney, former financial aid director at Marshall University, has begun his duties as the new director of state financial aid programs at the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.

Toney replaced Lisa DeFrank-Cole, former executive director of the state's Promise Scholarship program.

Officials at the policy commission said DeFrank-Cole left her position about a month ago to take a job in Morgantown.

As director of the scholarship program, DeFrank-Cole earned \$63,949.84, according to the state auditor's office.

She served as an outreach coordinator for the Office of Financial Aid and Outreach Services with the Higher Education Policy Commission before becoming the scholarship program's director. She also worked several years promoting the Promise program at the high school level.

Toney worked at Marshall for 29 years, the past 15 as financial aid director. His salary as new director of state financial aid programs is \$91,000, according to the state auditor's office.

Before that, he worked at the state's Board of Regents, now known as the Higher Education Policy Commission.

His official start date was May 1.

Toney's new position was the result of some restructuring at the policy commission, said Lara Ramsburg, spokeswoman for Gov. Joe Manchin.

"When (DeFrank-Cole) left, it was decided to restructure, to have someone over all the financial aid programs," Ramsburg said.

As director of financial aid programs, Toney is responsible for policy development and the oversight and management of all external relations regarding financial aid, including the Promise Scholarship and the state's higher education grant programs.

"There are some challenges in bringing all the programs together, but I think we can do it," Toney said. "Bringing them together will better serve the citizens and the system."

His goals: "To provide services to the citizens and the students that will enhance the access and the affordability. That's our primary goal."



May 11, 2007

Report: South leads nation in pre-K enrollment and quality

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The South, which has lagged for decades in most areas of education, is leading the country in early childhood education enrollment and quality, according to a report released Thursday by the Southern Education Foundation.

According to the report, 19 percent of the region's 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded pre-K. That number compares to 12 percent in the Northeast, 9 percent in the Midwest and 5.6 percent in the West.

The foundation's report analyzed several independent studies done in the South over the past decade of state-supported pre-K programs, shown to be critical in shaping a child's future. Though the report acknowledges that there are different benchmarks for measuring quality pre-K programs, it found that all six states requiring full-day pre-K programs are in the South and that nine southern states fund pre-K above the national average cost per child.

"Pre-K is a long-term, essential strategy for closing the gap on the quality of life between the South and the rest of the country," said Steve Suitts, program coordinator for the Southern Education Foundation and one of the authors of the study.

"Pre-K is not all that should be done, but an essential part of what must be done," Suitts said. "Pre-K is where the South can finally break this long pattern."

Results are already being seen in several states:

A Georgetown University study

of Oklahoma's pre-K program showed that minority and low-income children in the program made the largest gains in early learning skills like letter-word identification, spelling and problem solving. The same study showed that pre-K students in every racial and ethnic group outperformed those without pre-K.

A Georgia State University study showed that even compared to children in Head Start or private preschool programs, children in state-funded pre-K in Georgia were the least likely to repeat kindergarten.

Long-term studies of the North Carolina preschool program Abecedarian showed that its pre-K students were almost three times more likely to go to a four-year college than students without pre-K.

Still, only one in five children eligible for state-funded programs is enrolled in the South. And the three leading Southern states — Oklahoma, Georgia and Texas — may be in danger of losing the ground they had gained. An increase in the number of eligible children in those states has not led to increased funding and availability of programs.

The key to raising those numbers is more awareness of the benefits of pre-K for lawmakers and parents, foundation officials say.

West Virginia could become the first state in the South to achieve universal enrollment in pre-K if it maintains its current rate of annual growth, the report said.

While noting that West Virginia has a smaller population than most other states in the region, Suitts attributed its success as a leader to aggressive state policy.

“Where states have been able to really begin to become a national leader in pre-K is where there has been state leadership that doesn’t just depend on one governor or one legislature, but is more a state commitment that goes through several terms and leaders — which is, so far, what West Virginia has,” Suitts said.

West Virginia’s pre-K program began in 2002, and ranks ninth in the nation in pre-K enrollment rates with 21 percent of its three- and four-year-olds enrolled.

May 10, 2007

Tech dean outlines success, plans

By Susan Williams

MONTGOMERY — Like a business, a school needs customers, the dean of engineering at West Virginia University Institute of Technology said Wednesday.

In the case of the Leonard C. Nelson College of Engineering, those customers are students. Tech's engineering faculty said they are also offering their customers a special: good-paying jobs.

If charted on graph paper, the recent history of Tech's engineering school might show some ups and downs. But Larry Nottingham and some of his department heads said there has also always been a constant running through the school: a dedication to academics that ranks the school "one of the best east of the Mississippi, with the possible exception of MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]," Nottingham said.

In a recent informal discussion two weeks ago, some engineering students voiced their disappointment that the engineering school was not moving to South Charleston, a proposal that Gov. Joe Manchin first voiced in his State of the State address more than a year ago. The students agreed they are getting a first-rate academic grounding, but they complained their facilities were run down and the town of Montgomery had little to offer them.

Nottingham and members of his faculty said the needs of the facilities are being addressed.

New equipment

The Legislature recently awarded Tech \$3.2 million to be used for new equipment. Stephen Goodman, who heads the electrical and computer engineering departments, said he feels "like a kid in the candy store" as he looks through catalogues and tries to determine what new lab equipment to buy.

Jim Cercone, who heads the computer science program, added, "These are not toys. These are industrial grade pieces of equipment. They are also not showpiece labs. Every student can use them."

All the faculty members also agreed that the students will have full access to all the equipment as they always do. "These will be pieces of equipment that the students will get their hands on," Goodman said.

Nottingham noted that the school of engineering has approximately 350 students, and the school offers a 13-to-1 student to faculty ratio. "That means the students get lots of attention. The faculty knows them on a first-name basis, and after they have been here a few years, it's almost like family. There are no graduate assistants and no teaching assistants. Our faculty grade all their own papers, so a teacher knows what a student is doing. The faculty conduct all the labs."

"If a student is in trouble, we know it," said Steve Leftwich, who heads the civil engineering department.

Strong work ethic

Tech's engineering school has always had a good reputation for academics. Nottingham believes there are two reasons for that. "It's the quality of our faculty. They work very hard, and it's the kind of students we attract. We get many students who are from hard working, blue-collar families. Many of them are the first in their family to go to college. These students are highly motivated," he said. The combination of faculty and students willing to work hard has been a formula for success, he said.

Good paying jobs

Cercone and Nottingham also said that many of the students who come to Tech bring a strong work ethic with them.

Pat Puttaiah, chairman of the mechanical engineering department, said members of industry also constantly monitor Tech's engineering curriculum. They let faculty know what their industries need in future employees.

Cercone said Tech engineering students always find good-paying jobs.

Goodman said, "We are all registered engineers. We know what it takes in the real world. Our students have practical orientation to their jobs, not just theory. So they hit the ground running."

In a previous interview, some Tech engineering students complained they did not have enough choices for entertainment in Montgomery. Nottingham said students in many colleges in small towns can make the same complaint.

Fewer distractions, though, can make for better grades, he said. Tech students have a reputation for studying a good deal in their free time instead of drinking and prowling around, he said.

With renovations set to start in the Bear's Den, the student center, Nottingham said students will have more to do.

'We're here'

As the question of whether the engineering school would move or not was debated, many parents who wanted their children to come to Tech decided to enroll them in other schools, Nottingham said.

“People wondered if the school would be here or in South Charleston or if the school would be anywhere. The Legislature mandated that the engineering school stay here. So the stability of the school is not in question. We’re here. We’re going to be here. We’ve got the greatest engineering faculty around. They work hard to provide the best education possible. Enrollment is up for this fall. With the renovations going on, we’re going to be in good shape.”

May 9, 2007

Bethany president denounces rankings

Magazine's college ratings unfair, says letter encouraging boycott

By Davin White

Bethany College President G.T. "Buck" Smith joined 11 other small-college leaders in criticizing the validity of a magazine's annual college-ranking edition.

These members of the Council of Independent Colleges say U.S. News and World Report's annual college rankings incorrectly assert authority and offer a disservice to students, parents and the schools they analyze.

Now, they're looking for more support.

With the backing of the Education Conservancy, a Portland, Ore.-based organization whose focus includes raising awareness about commercial influence in college admissions, Smith and others hope to mail the letter to more than 500 colleges and universities, for starters.

Lloyd Thacker, director of the Education Conservancy, said the rankings have "seriously distorted the way education is pursued and perceived."

"They imply a false sense of precision and authority that is not supported by data," Thacker said, while adding, "U.S. News is laughing all the way to the bank."

Smith and Thacker say the annual edition [the most recent was released in August 2006] is merely a financial boon for U.S. News. Magazine spokeswoman Cynthia Powell said it's usually in the top 10 of about 48 annual editions, but defended it as smart reporting.

"The reason that we do the ranking is that it's consumer journalism at its best," she said.

She argues that the "50,000 pages" of tables and other research information found on the magazine's Web site are proof enough that the rankings are grounded in solid data.

Smith's chief concern is the "reputation" portion of U.S. News' survey. It questions college presidents, provosts, deans of admission and other college leaders to account for intangibles such as faculty dedication to teaching, according to a U.S. News article explaining the methodology.

This "peer assessment" is the rankings' most heavily weighted factor, accounting for 25 percent of a school's rating. Other top factors are student retention after the freshmen

year, classroom size, the accessibility of faculty and quality of student body (via test scores, grades).

The rankings also consider — but don't weigh as highly — a school's per-student spending, graduation rate and the amount of money donated by alumni.

"I can't do more than the one I'm most familiar with, let alone two or three" or more than 200, Smith said of completing a peer assessment survey. Bethany is a private liberal arts college in the Northern Panhandle.

There are about 215 small liberal arts colleges like Bethany considered in the survey, Powell said.

"In many industries, it's an acceptable practice to ask peers about those in the industry," Powell said.

Bethany does not have a definitive ranking, but ranks as a "tier four" liberal arts college — and somewhere between 163 and the bottom.

"I wouldn't say it's a negative ranking," Smith said. "It is what it is ... It isn't a sour grapes sort of thing."

As editor of the book "College Unranked," Thacker said the rankings' influence has "grown beyond their value or jurisdiction."

Presidents from Dickinson, Marlboro and Wheelock colleges and four small-university presidents also back the letter. They lament the rankings for:

Obscuring important differences in universities' educational goals by aligning them too rigidly.

Saying little about whether students learn at particular schools.

Encouraging wasteful spending and gamesmanship in institutions' pursuit of improved rankings.

Overweighting the importance of a university's prestige.

Thacker plans to mail the letters soon. In bold print, it asks that college presidents refuse to fill out the magazine's reputation survey and not use the rankings in promotional efforts for their school.

Thacker, who says he acts only as a guide, believes college presidents need to denounce the rankings and act as "education trustees."



May 8, 2007

Science college first to make SAT/ACT scores optional

By Mary Beth Marklein

Officials at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts say they will make college entrance exam scores optional in admission, making it the first nationally ranked science and engineering institute to do so.

Beginning with the entering class of 2008, WPI applicants will have the option of submitting either ACT or SAT test scores or some other indicator of academic achievement, such as a research paper, science fair project, or similar effort that demonstrates a student's organizational skills, knowledge of subject matter, motivation and initiative.

"This helps us capture a completely different side of a student, and also potential leadership ability," says Kristin Tichenor, associate vice president for enrollment management.

WPI's announcement brings to 739 the number of schools moving away from requiring a standardized test from applicants, says the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), a Cambridge, Mass., non-profit that is critical of testing.

Since last spring, 18 liberal arts colleges have de-emphasized scores in admissions, as has George Mason University, a large public institution in Fairfax, Va.

A University of Rhode Island panel is studying the possibility of making standardized admission tests optional.

"Any kind of college, from extraordinarily selective liberal arts schools to very large public universities, can do it," says FairTest spokesman Robert Schaeffer. "It sounds as if WPI has developed an admissions process for the type of student they want to recruit, and that's exactly what we've been arguing."

No other tech-oriented school in U.S. News & World Report's top 100 national universities has gone test-optional, Schaeffer says. In fact, George Mason still requires scores for admission to most of its engineering and computer science programs.

Officials there found that math scores help predict a student's likelihood of success in those programs, so "the feeling was (that) it would be prudent to continue to have that

data at our disposal," admissions dean Andrew Flagel says. He says the school will reconsider the requirement in a few years.

Tichenor says the debut of a revised SAT in 2005 led her to "carefully consider" whether test scores were of value. Studies have since confirmed her sense that SAT scores were not providing useful information about a student's chances of success. "I have seen so many students with marginal high school records but outstanding SAT scores crash and burn, and quite the reverse," she says.

She says she hopes the new policy will help WPI attract more women and minorities, who tend on average to earn lower scores, and "lower the flame" on the admissions frenzy.

She also hopes other tech-oriented schools will follow suit, but notes that most larger schools "do not have the luxury (of reading) applications from cover to cover."

This year, WPI got about 5,700 applications and expects to enroll 800 freshmen this fall. In contrast, Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh receives about 22,000 applications for 1,360 places.

Scores provide a national yardstick and a hedge against grade inflation, says Carnegie Mellon admissions director Mark Steidel. "The scores really do help us narrow down who we're going to offer admission to," he says.

Tiny Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering in Needham, Mass., which has enrolled about 75 students a year since 2002, requires test scores, too, but that could change, says admissions dean Charles Nolan.

An "eyeball review of the data" suggests test scores are "not a good predictor" of academic success, but "we don't have enough history to determine with any certainty that they aren't helpful."

Even WPI is not quite ready to make its test-optional policy change permanent. Tichenor says it will operate as an experiment for five years.

May 8, 2007

Research, technology lead to brighter future

By Paul L. Hill

I RECENTLY had the opportunity to testify before the U.S. Congress on behalf of the National Science Foundation and NASA. My message to the House of Representatives appropriations subcommittee, chaired by Representative Alan B. Mollohan, D-W.Va., was simple and direct:

Our nation must invest more in research and technology development.

We must utilize the resources in every state.

The decisions — and the future — are in our hands.

This is an important message here at home, too. Research and technology development are essential to our state and national security, as well as to our economic prosperity. For decades, the United States' preeminence in science went unchallenged, but today's world is very different and we face growing competition from around the globe. Every state needs to act immediately to ensure our research base continues to grow, and that we can provide opportunities for students across the country to become first-rate scientists and engineers.

Last fall, I was part of a delegation from West Virginia privileged to attend a meeting in Washington, D.C., of more than 800 of the nation's top scientists and policymakers. The purpose of this special convocation was to discuss and respond to a report titled "Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future." Commissioned by Congress, the report concluded that our country's world economic leadership will erode in the coming years if the United States does not proactively seek to improve the scientific and technological expertise of its workforce. Governor Joe Manchin addressed the gathering, strongly endorsing state-led initiatives to respond to global competitiveness and pledging to implement strategies both in West Virginia and with the National Governor's Association.

During my recent Congressional testimony, I was pleased to tell the members of the subcommittee about the research renaissance underway in our state, and the role played by the Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research.

Congress created EPSCoR some 28 years ago to develop research infrastructure in states that traditionally received little federal funding for research. West Virginia was one of five charter states when the program began, and our state has benefited

tremendously from its participation. With federal grants as a catalyst, we have been able to greatly expand our state's research capacity.

Perhaps just as importantly, however, the success of the research initiatives enabled by EPSCoR funding has been the impetus for increasing the state's investment in research. Several years ago, the West Virginia Legislature voted to dedicate a portion of the state's racetrack video lottery revenue — approximately \$4 million each year — to the Research Challenge Fund. This investment of state funds for research represented a major step forward for West Virginia, and is already beginning to show results. In just a few years, these Challenge Fund grants have generated more than \$18 million in corporate and federal research grants, and several million dollars more in venture capital.

We are continuing to build on that momentum. Gov. Manchin and the Legislature provided a new line item in the state's budget for next fiscal year. They set aside \$10 million in additional funds to help build the research programs at West Virginia University and Marshall University. Again, this represents an unprecedented state investment in research infrastructure — an investment that will allow us to continue to grow our state's capacity to compete in the new global economy. An additional advantage is that grants from the money in this fund will be linked to economic development goals, so we can ensure the initiatives undertaken contribute to the long-term quality of life for West Virginians.

The federal government also is addressing the competitiveness issue with renewed vigor. On April 25, the U.S. Senate passed the America COMPETES Act (S.761), a bipartisan legislative response to the recommendations in the Rising Above the Gathering Storm report. The bill, if passed by the House, will increase American investment in basic research and improve the teaching of math, science and engineering. Outstanding!

As a nation, we must continue this momentum to meet the challenges facing us. And in West Virginia, although we may not yet have the capacity to compete on the same level as states such as California (Silicon Valley) or North Carolina (Research Triangle), we can, and must, contribute to the national effort to step up our economic and intellectual leadership. Our future depends on it.

Hill is executive director of the West Virginia Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research. Vision 2015, the state's long-term strategic plan for science and technology.

Charleston Daily Mail

May 7, 2007

Costs at 4-year colleges still rising

by Jessica M. Karmasek

Tuition at four-year colleges in West Virginia keeps rising, while the tuition at the state's community colleges is remaining relatively stable. The chairman of the organization that oversees the state's community and technical colleges says the trend is alarming.

Increased improvements to the buildings and campuses at four-year institutions is to blame for the tuition spike, said Nelson Robinson, who serves as chairman of the West Virginia Council for Community and Technical College Education.

For example, he points out a proposed wellness center to be built on the campus of Shepherd University.

"That funding base is going to come from increasing tuition and fees and putting that burden on the students and parents for the next 30 years," Robinson said.

The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission late last month approved increases in tuition and fees for the university -- 4.9 percent for resident undergraduates and 4.99 percent for non-resident undergraduates.

That means tuition and fees for resident undergraduates will cost \$4,564 next school year, compared to \$4,348 this year. Tuition and fees for non-resident undergraduates will cost \$12,036 next school year, compared to \$11,464 this year.

The policy commission approved similar increases for graduate students at the university.

They also approved increases in tuition and fees for undergraduates and graduate students at Bluefield State College, Concord University, Fairmont State University, Glenville State College, Marshall University, West Liberty State College, West Virginia State University, West Virginia University, WVU-Parkersburg and WVU-Potomac State College.

In comparison, only four of the 10 community colleges in the state are increasing tuition and fees next year. They are: Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, West Virginia Northern Community College and WVU-Parkersburg.

Tuition and fees at the four community colleges hovered at \$1,700-1,800 this school year. Next year, costs there will increase by \$70-80.

Most community colleges, particularly those that are independent, manage to keep their costs low because there are fewer buildings on campus, a smaller student base and thus less of a need for capital improvement projects, Robinson said.

Of the 10 community colleges in the state, four are considered independent. They are: Blue Ridge Community and Technical College, Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical, and West Virginia Northern.

The remaining six are deemed "administrative-linked" community colleges. That is, they share a campus with another four-year institution. They are: Community and Technical College at WVU Institute of Technology, Pierpont Community and Technical College, Marshall Community and Technical College, New River Community and Technical College, West Virginia State Community and Technical College, and WVU-Parkersburg.

"There's no question that the community college in West Virginia is the best buy for a student for at least the first two years of education," Robinson said. "Look at those independent community colleges, especially. They average around \$1,800.

"Why pay \$4,000-5,000 for those first two years when you can be paying \$1,800?"

But Brian Noland, chancellor of the Higher Education Policy Commission, said community colleges and four-year institutions are very different -- in their missions and their costs.

"The biggest difference relates to the mission and scope of the campuses and services provided therein," he said.

The campuses, naturally, are larger and have more buildings, he said.

However, to better control the growing cost of tuition and fees at those four-year universities, Robinson points to the state Legislature.

"If we're going to continue these projects, the Legislature's going to have to come up with other funding methods," Robinson said. "We can't continue to build buildings and expect the students to pay it."

He suggests lawmakers identify other funding sources to help fund more capital improvement projects.

Lottery revenues could be an option, he said.

If table games pass in Ohio, Hancock, Jefferson and Kanawha counties in June, a portion of those monies also could be dedicated to funding bonding programs for such projects, he suggests.

"In the event that the lottery continues to increase, which it probably will given its history, and table games pass, then I think we need to look into dedicating those monies to bonding programs," Robinson said.

Senate Education Chairman Bob Plymale, D-Wayne, did not return phone calls or respond to e-mails.

Noland said the tuition and fee increases in recent years are not so out of sync with other states.

"Our increases parallel what's happening in other states," he said. "Out of the 16 states in the Southern Regional Education Board, we're in the bottom third with respect to tuition and fees. While higher education is becoming increasingly expensive in other states, we're still affordable."

He said the increases at four-year institutions are caused by traditional inflation costs and pay raises for faculty and staff members.

"Just as we want to retain the best and brightest students, we must do whatever we can to retain our best and brightest faculty," Noland said.

Still, Robinson says higher education officials and lawmakers are not keeping the average West Virginia family in mind.

"I know the struggles that people are going through," he said. "I'm fortunate enough, I can afford to send my children to school. But the average West Virginia family, with an income of about \$25,000-30,000, just can't do it."

The increasing cost of tuition and fees at those four-year universities is not only a problem for students and parents, who are bearing the brunt of it, but it's also a problem for the state, Robinson said.

He points to the state's merit-based Promise Scholarship.

"Every time we increase tuition, the Promise Scholarship costs go up," Robinson said.

To deal with the growing costs of the scholarship program, lawmakers have chosen to tighten eligibility requirements.

Last year, Promise board members voted to increase standards, saying students must earn an ACT composite score of 22 or a SAT combination score of 1,020 to receive the merit-based scholarship.

Promise also requires a 3.0 grade point average in high school and minimum ACT subscores of 20 in reading, math, science and English, and SAT subscores of at least 490 in verbal and 480 in math.

In 2003, eligibility standards were tightened for the first time to limit costs. In addition to a 3.0 GPA and a 21 composite score on the ACT, students also had to post at least a 19 on each ACT component.

In 2004, the criteria got even stricter. Students had to attain at least a 20 on each ACT component -- the current ACT subscore requirement.

Continuing to tighten the scholarship's requirements won't fix the problem forever, Robinson said. He points, again, to rising tuition and fees at four-year institutions.

"I think what we need to find out is why the cost of living increases at one level and our tuition increases way beyond that," Robinson said.

Still, the question remains, will the cost of tuition and fees continue to increase?

Noland anticipates 5-7 percent increases on an annual basis.

Robinson is hoping, with the help of the Legislature, costs could plateau.

"Based on our history for the last 10-11 years and before, no, I don't think it'll drop off," he said. "But I think we can at least level off the cost if we can control the costs of those capital improvements."

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Muddle on how to value Advanced Placement tests

Some colleges, universities give full course credit for a good score, but others give no credit. No consistency among colleges on what advanced placement's worth.

By Eleanor Chute

Starting this week, thousands of high school students here and across the country will sit for Advanced Placement tests, many hoping their \$83 investment per test will give them college credits on the cheap.

Whether they actually get credits -- and how many -- depends not only on their scores but also on their colleges, their majors and whether the students even want to accept them.

In a survey of 22 colleges and universities popular with local students, the Post-Gazette found wide differences in how AP work is treated.

Waynesburg College, for example, doesn't award any credit for the Spanish language course. But Penn State University awards 12 credits for a score of 4 or 5 (on scale of 1 to 5) on the Spanish exam. At \$485 per freshman credit on the main campus, students could save as much as \$5,820 in tuition by taking and doing well on the test.

AP courses -- for which there are 37 tests in 22 subjects -- are intended to give students college-level work in high school. They can be used for credits toward a degree or placement in advanced classes, for gaining an advantage in the college admissions race or for just an extra challenge and preparation for the years ahead.

Hari Seshedri, a junior at Franklin Regional High School, hopes scoring 5 on three AP exams last year will help him win college admission. He is aiming for high scores on two others this year.

Fox Chapel Area senior Elise Liu -- who has scored 5's on eight AP exams and a 4 on another -- plans to take six more AP exams in the next two weeks.

"Originally, it was just for the challenge," she said.

Now the future Harvard freshman hopes to enter college with advanced standing so she can take higher level courses and take off a year or half a year to go abroad, perhaps

for an internship. While she would be eligible for more than two years of credit at some schools, Harvard limits AP credit.

Valuing the scores

The College Board considers a score of 3 a "success," but colleges are free to set their own standards.

A score of 3 on the test is enough for college credit at some schools, such as California University of Pennsylvania, West Virginia University and Robert Morris University.

However, it won't result in any credit at some others, including Allegheny College, Carlow University, Carnegie Mellon University and Chatham University.

"We want to be sure they have strong skills before we accept the credit," said Kathleen Larkin, dean of advising and registrar at Carlow, which requires a score of 4 or 5.

With a lower score, she said, students "might not be as prepared to go on to the next level."

More than a decade ago, CMU officials decided that a 3 wasn't a strong enough performance to allow a student to skip a course. Its standard is now all 4's or 5's, depending on the course.

"What we were experiencing primarily were kids getting credit for courses and recognizing at the next level they didn't have a strong enough foundation to be successful, so they ended up having to take the class again," said Mike Steidel, CMU's director of admission.

"We weren't helping them at all by giving them the credit."

CMU isn't alone.

"Anecdotally and from all the evidence we see, colleges are demanding more than AP test scores. That '3' might not necessarily get you credit anymore," said David Hawkins, director of public policy for the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Linda Conlon, secondary academic adviser in the Quaker Valley School District, said, "It's like they've upped the ante because we've caught onto the fact this is a good deal and we've encouraged more kids to do it."

Jennifer Topiel, spokeswoman for the College Board, said more and more students are taking AP courses and thus more are entering college with scores of 3 or higher. She said very competitive colleges have to manage the situation because they can't have all of their students going directly to the sophomore year.

AP exam participation has grown by 150 percent in the past decade for a variety of reasons, including more awareness of its role in college admissions and a push in high schools for higher standards.

Among public high schools, nearly 15 percent of last year's graduating class nationwide -- 11 percent in Pennsylvania -- scored a 3 or better on at least one AP exam.

"What a 3 represents is a student would be able to succeed in the target college-level course," said Tom Matts, director of the College Board's AP course audit.

For the first time since the AP program began in 1956, the College Board is in the midst of auditing every AP class to make sure they are consistent and meet AP guidelines.

By June 1, all of the estimated 130,000 AP teachers must submit their syllabuses to the College Board for approval. If not approved in three tries, the course cannot be marked AP on high school transcripts.

So far, 60,000 teachers have submitted syllabuses, and, of those reviewed, 81 percent have been approved. Of those who submitted a second time, more than 99 percent have been approved.

Valuing the programs

Recent studies have differed on whether AP courses help students in college.

Two studies at the University of Texas -- both paid for by the College Board -- found favorable results: Students who took one or more AP test and course had higher grade point averages and were more likely to graduate in four or fewer years. Students who scored only a 2 fared better than those who didn't take an AP course or exam.

An earlier study by researchers at Harvard and the University of Virginia -- funded by federal agencies -- found "little evidence" high school AP courses significantly improved college performance in the sciences.

The College Board considers a 5 equivalent to "top A-level work" in college; a 4 to "mid-level A to mid-level B" and a 3 to "mid-level B to mid-level C."

The number of AP classes varies widely from high school to high school. Some high schools also enable students to take AP courses online.

Instead of graduating early, many students who do receive credit use it to add flexibility, giving them room in their schedule for more courses they want or for a second major.

At Allegheny College, which limits AP credits to 20, Scott Friedhoff, vice president of enrollment, said even students with many credits end up staying for four years.

He said the value of AP is in the preparation for college work. He said students come to realize that taking full advantage of college courses "is of greater value than finishing a semester early."

David Hornyak, director of advising for the Honors College at the University of Pittsburgh, said most of the time students with AP credits use them for flexibility to add other majors, not to get out of college early.

If a student is eligible for credits, it can be a tactical decision on whether to take them.

"If they are going to be a science major, I do not recommend that [taking the credits] to them," said Adele Selinger, who teaches AP biology and environmental science at Fox Chapel Area High School.

She said the first-level biology and chemistry courses are "where they set up their procedures, how a student is going to write a lab report, where you get the lab equipment, all the basics. If you take the second-level course, your professor is going to assume you know all the foundational stuff."

Paul-James Cukanna, executive director of admissions and enrollment research at Duquesne University, said pharmacy or science students who score well on AP often still take the course on campus so they can become familiar with the course and teaching style and begin the sequence with their classmates.

Mark McCloskey, who teaches AP European history at Mt. Lebanon High School, said that for his history class, the college course may be redundant. "It's better to take advantage of it and get on to more focused studies."

Carolyn Stewart, who teaches computer science and calculus at Franklin Regional High School, said some students want to take the course in college anyway so they have one easier course on their plate and can keep a high grade point average.

But for her students in her calculus class, she said, "I would feel sad if they didn't skip at least one term of calculus because they've had so much and they're so good."