

STATE OF ALASKA

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ALASKA COMMISSION ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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The Honorable Paul Seaton
Chair, Education Committee
Alaska House of Representatives
State Capitol, Room 102
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear Representative Seaton,

I am writing in response to your recent request that I *provide the Education Committee with recommendations on the best practices and needs for a needs- and merit-based scholarship program that would best serve Alaskan students.*

Because multiple factors impact access to and success in postsecondary education, any thoughtful response must consider the most fundamental factors. Based on my review of relevant research on the issue of student access and success, there appears to be consensus that key factors are: 1) academic preparedness (career or college readiness); 2) family financial capacity; and 3) student and parent access to critical information and support resources to complete secondary education, transition to, and succeed in postsecondary education programs. Finally, another factor appears to be a lack of recognition, particularly within Alaska's low-income population, of the importance of and need for youth to aspire to postsecondary education or training as an essential step for workforce and career readiness.

As the committee heard earlier this session from Taylor Foundation representatives, one approach in which many states are now engaged is the early commitment model. This model is predicated on the understanding that 21st century workforce and college preparation must begin no later than middle school if states are to increase the education pipeline's production of students who leave high school career- or college-ready.

One of the earliest such statewide programs is Indiana's 21st Century Scholars Program, established by the state legislature in 1990. In addition to reviewing outcome data for the IN program, I contacted Stan Jones, the executive officer of the Indiana Commission for Higher Education. Their program goals are:

- Reduce the high school dropout rate
- Prepare students for the workforce
- Increase opportunities for low-income students to attend college

- Improve individual economic productivity and the quality of life for all Indiana residents

Indiana's program was implemented targeting students (and their families) in the 6th through 8th grade. To have a chance at program funding, students must have signed on to the program no later than 8th grade. The potential pool of participants was established based on their eligibility for free or reduced lunch at the time of enrollment in the program. Participants agreed to fulfill a pledge which included meeting certain academic performance standards, not using illegal drugs or alcohol or committing a crime, and applying for admission and federal financial aid at a state institution. In return, the student would receive the cost of four years of tuition at any public college or university in the state. Both parents and students would be provided support resources during high school, and participating college and universities are required to provide academic and social support resources to assist in the transition to and success in postsecondary education.

As early as 1995, positive results for Indiana began to emerge as their confirmed Scholars were completing high school and continuing to postsecondary education not only at higher rates (82%) than other low-income students (60%) but also at higher rates than all other students without regard to socio-economic status (77%). Commissioner Jones reports that another trend, in this instance concerning, was noted relative to scholars—even though they were meeting the minimum grade requirements, they still required remediation at quite high rates upon entry into college. It was in the mid-1990s that Indiana business leaders, K-12 educators and higher education faculty worked together to establish a high school curriculum designed to prepare students for higher education (IN's Core 40). The Core 40 curricula constitute those courses which, if successfully completed in high school, all sectors agreed would produce high school graduates prepared for college or workforce success. The initial statewide implementation of the curriculum was voluntary with parents having the ability to "opt out" their child. However, effective with the high school graduating class of 2011, all Indiana secondary school graduates will be required to have completed the Core 40. Commissioner Jones states that they are experiencing reductions in remediation rates at the public institutions.

Having presented Indiana's relatively mature program as a model of best practices and integrated strategies which, when fully implemented, adequately resourced and sustained, are most likely to effect the greatest outcomes, we must acknowledge that designing, implementing, and sustainably funding such an initiative statewide would necessarily require key stakeholder involvement and input. Additionally, the reality in Alaska today is that a large number of our fellow residents, who are very much in need of workforce training or re-training, are no longer within the education pipeline. Because of our long history of low rates of college-going, any broad-based statewide program would need to have a mechanism for low-income adults to participate and prepare for high-skills, high-wage occupations.

Based on my perception of your committee members' concerns, I believe your key objectives are to 1) ensure any scholarship funds are targeting the neediest students, who 2) can also demonstrate their capacity to succeed in a program of study or training that results in them becoming career-ready. The universal availability of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) provides a uniform means of assessing and sorting applicants by financial need. It is important, to most efficiently use (stretch) available program funding, to ensure that applicants exhaust all other sources of non-loan aid before receiving additional funds. In terms of assessing applicants' preparedness to succeed academically, that is more complex because there is no single assessment that is appropriate to the various types of postsecondary training. However, the American College Testing (ACT) organization has deployed its online assessment tool, WorkKeys, which is used in at least one state, Michigan, to determine qualification for their state merit aid program. With the caveat that I have no personal expertise in competency assessment, WorkKeys is one option to explore as an alternative to solely relying on a high school grade point average. WorkKeys is an assessment tool the Department of Education and Early Development is currently promoting to Alaska districts as a means of assessing student competencies.

I hope you find this information helpful. I have tried to provide a high-level response to your inquiry. If there are other program elements relative to which you would like specific recommendations or advice, I will do my best to produce additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diane Barrans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping tail.

Diane Barrans
Executive Director