

The Denver Post > denver & the west

Cap on college aid tossed Foundation says it'll lift \$3,000 limit for '07-08

By Allison Sherry, Denver Post Staff Writer

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Montbello High students Jaron Suddreth, right, and Moses Agbenyo listen to University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center assistant admissions director Jaime Alvarez. (Post / Brian Brainerd)

Officials from the Denver Scholarship Foundation reversed course Thursday, pledging that all needy and eligible Denver high school students will be able to afford tuition at participating Colorado colleges - at least for the 2007-08 year.

School officials and principals faced parent complaints and crying students after foundation officials said Wednesday that they would cap individual student assistance at \$3,000 annually.

"We're going to make sure the unmet need is covered," said Tony Lewis, a foundation board member.

School counselors said \$3,000 would not be enough in every eligible student's case to fully cover the gap between other available aid and the tuition at four-year colleges such as Colorado State University, University of Colorado and Metropolitan State College of Denver.

More than that, though, students said the limitation was not in the original promise given to them six months ago.

"They let a lot of people down," said Leana Lytle, a senior at South High, who decided to go to the University of Denver instead of a less expensive school, in part because she was counting on help from the foundation. "I could have saved myself a lot of money," she said before the reversal was confirmed.

At a surprise pep assembly in November, officials including Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet told seniors from three high schools - Abraham Lincoln, South and Montbello - that if they needed help paying for in-state college tuition, books and fees, they would get it.

Caveats attached

With that pledge came some caveats. Students must need help financially. They must apply for federal and state aid as well as three private scholarships.

But after that, the Denver Scholarship Foundation - thanks to a \$50 million donation from oilman and Abraham Lincoln graduate Tim Marquez - would kick in the rest.

On Wednesday, the foundation said the amount per student would be capped at \$3,000 a year. But on Thursday, Denver Scholarship Foundation officials said the foundation would fund all unmet needs, excluding room and board, in the upcoming school year at participating Colorado colleges and universities. That list of schools - a mix of public universities and private colleges willing to help some needy students meet their tuition with aid beyond the Marquez funds and other available grants - is still the subject of negotiations.

In the future, the board may limit gifts to \$3,000 per student and extend the program citywide, said Lewis, who is also executive director of the Donnell- Kay Foundation.

He said the announcement of a cap Wednesday was a miscommunication and was the Denver Scholarship Foundation board's fault.

"I think our board needed to be a lot more clear with the staff. ... Hopefully we'll engage in a different communication strategy," Lewis said. "The board can own this."

Statement issued

Foundation executive director Janet Gullickson issued a statement late Thursday saying the foundation anticipates spending roughly \$3,000 per student. But, she wrote, as officials look at individual students' cases this year, they may decide to spend more than \$3,000 when necessary "to ensure that eligible recipients are able to fill the gap at public and participating private higher-education institutions in Colorado."

Montbello principal Antwan Wilson, who spent the day listening to worried students and parents, said they were happy that current students will get the help they need.

"We had some students who were upset," Wilson said. "They were quite angry."

Wilson held a parent meeting Thursday night to spread the news. Wilson said he also planned to give parents a realistic view of what college really costs.

"You have to personalize it ... for them," he said.

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