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Higher ed department launches review of voucher program

Controversial financial-aid process could be headed for reform

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By Brittany Anas

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The state's higher education department is paying for a review of its college voucher program, an analysis that will show whether the way Colorado doles out taxpayer tuition subsidies to its in-state students needs to be overhauled.

The Department of Higher Education announced today that it's entering a \$79,000 contract with an organization to conduct the review and suggest reforms.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education will report to the department, which will then provide the findings to the Legislature before 2010, as mandated by the legislation that set up the program.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Denver-based education advocacy group, gave the higher education department a \$40,000 grant to help pay for the report.

The review will look at how the controversial voucher program has affected student enrollment in higher education as well as how colleges and universities administer it.

The study comes after some criticism that the vouchers are cumbersome for colleges and universities to run and that many students don't know the college cash is available, according to the higher-education department.

"This method for funding higher education is unique to Colorado, and the Legislature wisely directed an evaluation after the first few years," said David Skaggs, executive director of the Department of Higher Education. "That's what this study is all about."

The College Opportunity Fund, which launched in 2005 under a Republican administration, intended to show students and their parents how much state money is spent on their education.

Before the voucher program, the state funds automatically followed students to the colleges or universities they attended — with the money moving behind-the-scenes straight to the schools.

Higher-education leaders say it's time to review whether the program is meeting its original purpose: While it may dodge the funding restraints of the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights, fewer poor students are enrolling at Colorado's higher education institutions.

The number of low-income students receiving federal Pell grants, which go to the most financially needy students, has dropped by 8 percent since 2005, according to the state's Department of Higher Education.

Republican Rick O'Donnell, the former higher-education chief under the Owens administration, has criticized state leaders for undermining the program and says that a nearly 99 percent enrollment rate should be considered a success.

David Longanecker, president of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, said the research will be "impartial."

Tony Lewis, the executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, said his group is helping fund the study because it supports improving access to higher education. He expects the report will help lay out ways to improve the voucher program and make it easier for schools to administer the program.

At the University of Colorado in fiscal year 2007, there were 27,681 full-time students receiving the vouchers, according to the school. That represents a more than 98 percent enrollment rate in the voucher program.

The university has multiple ways of reaching out to eligible students to make sure they sign up for their vouchers, including making phone calls and routinely alerting them during their online registration.

But for the students who forget to apply, they are missing out on up to \$2,600 that could have gone toward their tuition.



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