

Ad blitz credited with helping draw 2,770 to scholarship

BY HILARY HILLIARD
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

An extended deadline and a promotional blitz helped attract about 2,770 qualified Arkansas college freshmen to the state's most popular scholarship for the 2005-06 school year.

The students will receive more money than past Academic Challenge Scholarship classes — up to \$11,750 over four years if students continue to meet requirements. The award was amended in the 2005 legislative session to apply a flexible income cap that starts at \$60,000 for a family with one child.

The state likely will spend about \$18.5 million on the scholarship over the coming school year, said Melissa Goff, coordinator of financial aid for the Arkansas Department of Higher Education. That's about \$2.8 million more than was spent this past year.

The scholarship is awarded on a sliding scale. Students interested in attending a two-year college generally must score a 19 on the ACT college-entrance exam and graduate from high school with a 2.75 grade-point average. To attend a university with the award, a 3.0 GPA is generally required.

Students must also complete a college-preparatory core curriculum by the time they graduate from high school. The core includes four years of English, four years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies and two years of a foreign language.

In early summer the department began a campaign to have the scholarship touted in TV, radio and print spots. The contract drew some controversy when it

was taken up by the Legislative Council Review Subcommittee in the fall of 2004 and again in the spring. The subcommittee later endorsed the contract but asked the department for reports on how the blitz fared.

Sen. Mary Anne Salmon, D-North Little Rock, led the opposition to the contract. She now says she's happy for any success the campaign generated, but still has doubts.

"It's just surprising to me that we need to spend money to give money away," she said. "I think people who are serious about college are seeking out scholarships."

About 6,500 students are expected to draw money from the Academic Challenge Program this fall. That's similar to the number of students who received the aid last year.

Goff said the department didn't expect a large increase in total students this year because the extra students recruited during the media blitz have balanced out last year's larger graduating class. That group held more students because they applied before the scholarship's income limits were narrowed several years ago.

After the deadline to apply for 2005-06 was extended by a month to July 1, about 500 more students were considered.

Joyce Rose, a counselor at Walnut Ridge High School in Walnut Ridge, said the seniors there were nearly done with classes when the news of the extended deadline and restructured income limits reached them. The students still had ample time to apply, though.

"It was handed to the seniors on graduation night," Rose said. "It was put in their hands. That was one way we did address it."

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Linda Caillouet is on vacation. Her Paper Trails column will not appear in today's Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.