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Illinois tests a financial incentive for transfer students

By Beckie Supiano

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Like their peers across the country, students in Illinois can save money by starting at a community college. But, because community colleges charge lower tuition, students who take this approach and who qualify for the state's need-based grant program stand to receive less money than they would have if they started at a four-year college.

That is about to change for some students. This fall the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, the state agency that runs the Monetary Award Program, known as MAP, will test a MAP 2+2 program at nine four-year colleges, both public and private, in partnerships with one or more community colleges. The four-year colleges will offer either dual enrollment or dual admission to qualified MAP-eligible students who start at the partner community colleges.

Students eligible for the MAP program will still receive the usual amount of grant aid at the community college, but the difference between that amount and what they would have received at a four-year college will be banked and applied to their final two years toward a bachelor's degree. That means more of the cost savings of starting at a community college are passed on to the student.

"They should not be penalized. They should be able to capitalize on that good choice," says Eddie Brambila, managing director of community services at the agency.

For example, a student with an expected family contribution of zero would receive an average MAP grant of \$2,900 at a community college, compared with \$4,968 at a four-year college. In the pilot program, such a student would have that \$2,068 difference provided as additional aid in each of the last two years, resulting in a grant of \$7,036.

The new program grew out of conversations the agency had with college leaders in light of the state's goal of having 60 percent of its adult population holding postsecondary credentials by 2025. The new twist on MAP is intended to encourage on-time graduation and better articulation agreements between two- and four-year colleges, reducing the number of courses that don't move students toward timely graduation. Students in the program will meet with an adviser from their four-year college each semester to track their progress toward a bachelor's degree.

The new program formalizes existing relationships between two- and four-year colleges, Mr. Brambila says, but it's not a transfer program in the traditional sense. This year, because the program is new, four-year colleges may be looking for students in their first semester of community college to take part in MAP 2+2. But in future years, high-school students who are accepted to four-year colleges in the state will choose this path from the beginning.

Several of the four-year colleges selected for the pilot program are already working to coordinate with community colleges. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale has run centers at seven community colleges on a part-time basis for four years. Now the university is moving to make those centers full-time.

Coordinators at the centers help students apply to transfer into the university, check the status of their applications, register for classes, and make appointments with their academic advisers, says Tamara Loyd Workman, director of transfer-student services at Carbondale. "It takes the transfer process and includes it as a very integral part of the education process."

Working with the state agency will enhance what Southern Illinois is already doing, by providing financial support for students when they need it most, Ms. Workman says. The university already offered a dual-admission program, accepting students during the first semester of their community-college work. After those students complete associate degrees, they transfer to Carbondale.

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Under the MAP pilot program, the university has chosen 14 bachelor's-degree programs that MAP-eligible students can pursue as the second half of their 2+2 program. The degrees were chosen on the basis of their popularity with students and work-force demand, says Ms. Workman, and all can be completed in two years on campus—an important point, since the MAP money is available to each student for a total of 135 credit hours, a cap meant to spur graduation within four years.

Avoiding 'Transfer Shock'

Western Illinois University-Quad Cities was already working to create a strong transfer pipeline. Quad Cities, a campus for juniors and seniors, started working with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission even before the new MAP 2+2 pilot program to offer dual enrollment with two nearby community colleges, Black Hawk and Carl Sandburg.

This program works differently than dual admission does: Students take one class per semester, typically lower-division classes for their major, at Western Illinois from the time they enter community college. That helps them acclimate to the four-year university, avoiding "transfer shock," says Joseph Rives, vice president for planning and technology at Quad Cities.

The university also provides students with a big financial incentive. Western Illinois has long offered students a guarantee that they'll pay the same tuition and room and board for four years if they meet certain requirements, and all public colleges in the state are now required to offer guaranteed tuition to in-state students.

For dual-enrollment students, the university will lock in tuition based on when they enter the program, and package their aid as if they were at Western Illinois all along, with the excess banked and applied to their last two years. There is no cap on the number of students who can participate, says Mr. Rives, pointing out that Rock Island County, where the campus is located, has one of the highest percentages of associate-degree holders in the state, but one of the lowest share of bachelor's-degree holders. "If students meet the entry requirements, we will take them," he says.

Edwin Moore is already taking advantage of dual enrollment at Black Hawk College and Western Illinois. Mr. Moore, who graduated from high school in the spring, began taking classes at Black Hawk in the summer. He is also taking one class, "University 101," at Western Illinois. The program will save Mr. Moore, who is taking out some student loans and plans to live at home throughout college, a good deal of money. He thinks it will also help prepare him to be on a four-year campus full time. "The best thing is it gives me hands-on experience at Western," he says, "so it's not a whole new school."

For another participating college, the MAP 2+2 pilot folds into efforts to grow strategically. Governors State University is an upper-division institution that attracts mostly working adults. Its evening classes are full, says Jose J. Reyes, director of dual-degree programs and transfer articulation, but it has room to spare in its daytime ones. That meant the university is looking to enroll more traditional-age students, he says.

So Governors State started a dual-degree program, allowing students to gain admission to the university early in their community-college careers. This program allows the university to work with the community colleges to reach out to students while they are still in high school, Mr. Reyes says.

Now, as a pilot university for MAP 2+2, Governors State will offer a more specific group of students the same advising and other benefits, along with enhanced financial aid. "It really gives especially the low-income students a chance to focus on academics instead of worrying about how they'll pay for their education," Mr. Reyes says.

That will be good not only for students, leaders say, but for the state, too.