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Funding for College:

Analysis of the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP)

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the significance of the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP). This state reform was initiated to give tuition assistance to students seeking a higher education. This review of the OHLAP found interesting advantages and disadvantages to students and to the state of Oklahoma. This study found concerns regarding OHLAP funding, lowered student eligibility standards, and poor program publicity. Despite concerns for the program, however, the program is gaining new government attention regarding funding and accessibility. Also, slight increases in publicity are helping to inform students and parents about tuition assistance via OHLAP. Recommendations from this study include investigating students' perspectives about OHLAP and researching OHLAP eligibility as it compares to current Oklahoma students' academic success.

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The cost of a higher education continues to soar, prompting states to introduce and implement programs to financially aid students in gaining a higher education. State reform issues dealing with the costs and accessibility of a higher education continue to raise questions into eligibility standards and funding sources for free tuition assistance. These questions make the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP) an issue composed of positive and negative elements.

In order to understand the ramifications of Oklahoma's tuition assistance program it is necessary to define the OHLAP. Effective July 1, 1992 the OHLAP (Title 70) act was made effective in order to make tuition assistance available for qualified students entering higher educational institutions of different classifications in the state of Oklahoma. The *Oklahoma Senate Publications* website clarifies the act's intent by stating, "The purpose of this program is to provide an award to students who meet the criteria set forth...and who are pursuing studies in this state leading to an associate or baccalaureate degree or who are pursuing studies in a postsecondary vocational technical program... and who are in good academic standing...to relieve them of the burden of paying resident tuition at institutions of The Oklahoma State System of Higher Education" (2001, par. 1).

It is with the OHLAP that some students are able to pursue a higher education. And the importance of the program was a discussion focus when Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry commented in his February 2, 2004 State of the State Address that education needs more attention. Governor Henry's quest to promote and hopefully fund educational entities stretches past high school and into higher education. He concluded, "Oklahoma must produce more college graduates, both for economic development as well as for the enrichment that comes with higher learning. I propose full funding for the OHLAP program" (Henry, 2004, par. 32).

Proponents of the OHLAP conclude that the program gives economically disadvantaged students the opportunity to attend college by setting eligibility standards. According to the *Oklahoma Higher Education* website the requirements include student's family income not exceeding \$50,000 at the time of enrollment, the students' maintenance of a 2.5 GPA in required preparatory college courses in high school, and the student's pledge to be responsible in regards to homework and social activities. Having recently raised the income requirement from \$32,000 to \$50,000, the program is even more appealing, and students are taking advantage of the state assistance (2004, par. 1). A parent of a student given tuition assistance from the OHLAP praised the program and its realistic requirements when he said, "Without this program my son, Michael, probably could not have attended college" (Greiner & Hinton, 2004, par. 4).

Supporters of the OHLAP say it is because the requirements have been adjusted to match a greater need of students that the popularity of the program has increased. And, in relationship to funding, proponents are excited about the legislative promise that funds for the OHLAP would be available for qualified students for at least another year. The promised funding comes at a crucial time because Hinton (2004) reports in the *Daily Oklahoman* that there are "currently 24,000 high school students in the program... and that number is expected to increase this fall [by] about 9,000" (par. 7). Encouraged by Governor Henry, the State Regents recently allocated \$15.1 million to fund the OHLAP for the 2004-2005 school year. Also, the Oklahoma Legislature provided an increase of \$4.1 million, even though the \$4.1 million increase is only one-half of the additional monies the State Regents requested (*Oklahoma Higher Education* website, 2004, par. 1). This funding for the OHLAP energizes students and parents especially since the *Daily Oklahoman* reports that the total cost of college, which includes room and board,

tuition and fees is estimated at \$10,000 a year at most comprehensive universities (Greiner & Hinton, 2004, par. 3).

In addition to the allocation and provided funds by the State Regents and the Oklahoma Legislature, some funding for the OHLAP will be generated by the Indian gaming/horse track gaming initiative, which the public will vote on in the November 2004 election (*Oklahoma Higher Education*, 2004, par. 1). The issue of funding education through any possible means, including a proposed education lottery, is important because it is estimated that the “OHLAP scholarship costs are expected to grow from about \$11 million in 2003-2004 to \$19.2 million in 2004-2005” (par. 2-3).

In an effort to promote educational funding, the *Oklahoma Policy Studies Review* (2002) reports that for two years the Oklahoma Legislature has proposed the “Education Lottery.” The concept of funding “four-tuition free years of higher education or post-secondary Career Tech education” (p. 3) makes scholarship money for the OHLAP more realistic. Also, after a 2002 poll conducted by the University of Oklahoma, the *Oklahoma Policy Studies Review* states that “sixty-eight percent of Oklahomans favored a state lottery as a source of raising money” (p. 5), and the concept that the state would use part of that money to fund education, received favorable scores by poll respondents. Using this poll as grounds for increased support of the proposal, proponents are encouraged that education funding in connection with gaming is a means for promoting education in Oklahoma.

In an attempt to promote their positive opinions about the connection between gambling and education funding, those favoring this education lottery proposal reference Georgia as a means of comparison. Georgia has had ten years of success using the lottery to fund education. Camie Young (2003), a reporter for the *Gwinnett Daily Post* in Georgia, states a positive ratio

between the overall number of students attending higher education and the number of students receiving free tuition through the Georgia HOPE scholarship (par. 9). Young reports that the Georgia lottery has produced more than “\$2.5 billion toward scholarships” (par. 13).

Though supporters for the OHLAP claim the program is becoming more popular, a 2004 survey found 80 percent of respondents said they had not heard of the OHLAP, and this raises questions about the program (Martin, 2004, par. 4). Opponents of Oklahoma funding for tuition assistance do not oppose the OHLAP itself, instead they question eligibility standards as well as funding issues. When comparing other states that offer similar assistance, opponents say that requiring a 2.5 GPA is below the national standard. The *Gwinnett Daily Post* in Georgia, for example, reports that students must maintain a B average (3.0 GPA) versus Oklahoma’s C average. Georgia has even considered raising the GPA requirement, which reflects negatively on Oklahoma’s current unchanged standard. The issue of awarding less-academically motivated students becomes a concern with officials who are moving to encourage higher degree completion and retention.

In addition to the eligibility requirements, opponents question the funding for the OHLAP. After Governor Henry’s proclamation to fund the program, the issue of money accountability was raised. While connecting the issue of the OHLAP funding and trust in the Oklahoma state government, Jeff Martin (2004) reported that “serious questions were raised about whether money would be available for students who qualified for the OHLAP scholarships” and that “Tulsa high school students who were promised the scholarships said at the time that they didn’t have faith in state leaders” (par. 6-7).

The *Shawnee News-Star* also reported that in relation to trusting the education lottery, “higher education officials said they are concerned the Legislature will not come up with a

steady revenue source for their free tuition program” (2004, par. 8). This lack of trust stems from recent news that “last year, regents had to take \$6.5 million out of other higher education programs to keep the program going...they estimate another \$8 million will be needed this year” (par. 9).

The issue of trust and money relates back to the source of funding for the OHLAP, and opponents are not in favor of gambling to promote funds for Oklahoma higher education. State Representative Forrest Claunch demands that education lotteries are detrimental to the public’s perception about funding. He states, “Lotteries can hurt education funding if the general public has the perception that future bond issues and increased appropriations should not be necessary with a lottery dedicated to education” (*Oklahoma Policy Studies Review*, 2002, p. 6).

Representative Claunch continues to say that lotteries promote gambling and states should find alternate methods of funding education.

Opponents have also found that using Georgia as a comparison for successful education lottery funding is incorrect because of that state’s own issues with money accountability. Camie Young (2003) reports that due to an increased interest in the state’s free tuition program, “the scholarship’s ledger could tilt to the red in a few years time and state legislators began debating this summer how to revise the program” (par. 7). Based on Georgia’s funding statistics, opponents to the Oklahoma education lottery fear that students who qualify for tuition assistance will force the OHLAP to find money elsewhere, which could potentially harm alternate state funds.

Offering free college tuition to qualified students is an intriguing issue, as states have devised ways to make a college education more accessible and affordable to those wanting to pursue a higher education. Though the idea of a state reform involving higher education funding

seems promising, for the OHLAP there remains questions about the funding consequences and the validity of eligibility standards. Both proponents and opponents see the importance of a higher education and tuition assistance for deserving students; however, the best way to ensure those scholarships requires further investigation. Understanding the positives and negatives of the OHLAP is important because as Paul Risser said, “This scholarship program is a valuable asset for our state” (Martin, 2004, par.6), but free tuition programs are only as valuable as the funding will allow.



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