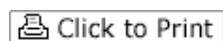




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New scholarships aid students committed to service

By Justin Pope, Associated Press

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With the hospice care volunteer work she's done in Belize, Kara Pennino is one of those millions of youngsters challenging the myth of the selfish teenager.

But while the Rochester, N.Y., high school senior always figured her service work might impress a college, she never imagined it could help make college more affordable.

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So she was stunned earlier this month when she got her acceptance letter from [Drew University](#) in New Jersey. She stopped reading after "Congratulations" to celebrate with her teary-eyed mom. It was mom who noticed the second letter — telling Kara she'd won a new community service scholarship Drew was offering that would cover her full tuition, which runs just under \$36,000 this year.

"With the economy and the stock market, they're very happy," Pennino recalled of her parents, still giddy herself two days after getting the news. They started joking Kara deserved a new car, and she's hoping they weren't kidding.

Ask college administrators about what sets this generation of current and aspiring college students apart and they'll quickly bring up their volunteer spirit. An estimated three-quarters of high school students do some volunteering, and the rapidly growing number of college students who volunteer is estimated at around 3.3 million.

But while college admissions offices like to see service work from applicants, they've rarely rewarded it with financial aid — or at least not the way they do for star athletes and students with high SAT scores. Of the \$29 billion U.S. colleges and universities awarded in institutional grants last year, only a tiny fraction goes to service scholarships.

In the short-term that may not change much, with colleges squeezing their aid budgets to help students in sudden financial need because of the economy.

But longer-term, service-based merit aid looks like an idea with momentum. Colleges are catching up to the interests of an especially civic-minded generation of students, building curricula around service-learning and eager to attract the most ambitious students. And backers are excited about the election of Barack Obama, who made federal financial aid in exchange for community service his centerpiece college affordability campaign proposal.

The federal work-study program now requires schools to use 7% of their funds paying students for

community service work. But more schools are now putting up some of their own aid dollars.

Seventy-nine colleges match tuition awards students earn through [AmeriCorps](#), the federal community service program. In November, Drew announced plans to spend \$1 million annually supporting 12 service-minded students per incoming class. The College of New Jersey and Tufts University are among schools with similar programs, and 27 colleges partner with an organization called the [Bonner Foundation](#) to provide four-year service scholarships to about 1,500 students (the foundation also works with about 50 other institutions in a separate but related program). Other schools, like Duke, offer scholarships that are at least partly service-based.

Wayne Meisel, president of the Bonner Foundation, says he's been challenging higher education leaders to develop 50,000 service-related scholarships by the end of the decade (though it's unclear exactly how many there are now).

"I've had these conversations with college presidents, and they say that's the kind of financial aid package we provide our football players," Meisel said. "I'm like, 'Exactly. That's the idea.'"

Administrators emphasize such programs shouldn't just be one-time prizes to reward students for their good deeds in high school. The new ones are actually not unlike college sports scholarships — the time commitment to earn back the scholarship starts when you get to campus. Requirements can include up to 300 hours per year and a commitment to projects that tie the service work back to classroom learning.

But it's not just a campus job. Ideally, it's a key educational experience.

The new Drew Civic Scholars will experience special classes and off-campus programs, part of a larger commitment to learning through civic engagement that will set the school apart from peers, said president Robert Weisbuch. The first class of scholarship recipients will help define how exactly the whole school will make that happen.

"We thought, 'How do we get people to know that we want to attract ... pragmatic idealists to Drew, that this is the student we're especially looking for?'" he said.

One answer: The university announced the scholarships to guidance counselors with a letter that included an Old-West-style poster saying, "Wanted. Students Who Serve. Reward Offered."

"It's a competition, with the notion that it's not just an award," Weisbuch said. "It's a challenge: You've done some great stuff in high school. Now we want to see you make a commitment in college and thereafter."

About 50 miles south, outside Trenton, [The College of New Jersey](#) runs essentially its own version of the Bonner Scholarship program, spending about \$360,000 of its own money annually to aid 65 students who perform service work on 13 issue-based teams.

Pat Donohue, who directs the program, says for now he recruits from lists the admissions office provides of students who have already applied and may be a good match. But he wants to move more toward the model college coaches use, identifying their own talent, and going out and recruiting prospects to the school.

"This is giving the taxpayers a return on their investment," Donohue said, noting TCNJ is a public college. "We're probably mobilizing students and spending in excess of 25,000 hours a year helping our community partners."

Kristina Merced, a TCNJ freshman from Hoboken, spends time at least three days per week tutoring and mentoring at a Trenton high school that prepares students for careers in the medical field. She also works with them on their own service projects and college prep.

She wasn't aware of the program when she applied to TCNJ but was thrilled to learn she would get 100% of her tuition covered for something she planned to do anyway.

"It really helps draw people into TCNJ, especially if you didn't get a big financial package," she said. "Any little dollar helps."

Fred Derilus, a fourth-year TCNJ student from East Orange, said his financial aid came in the nick of time; he picked up a community service scholarship just as a two-year state grant ran out. He works at a Trenton academic sports academy and considers the work an essential part of his education. And he likes what the program — which has ties to the Bonner Foundation and has taken that name — says about TCNJ's values.

"Like the athletes, the Bonners are really recognized on campus," he said. "Similar to like how you'd point out the point guard on the basketball team, people say, 'That's a Bonner.'"

Donohue emphasizes it's not just about rewarding high-achieving students who happen to have a long high school record of service work. Sometimes he's looking for students who really need the high level of engagement the program provides.

Service work helps students "feel more connected to the institution, and I think is one more reason for them to stay and get to the finish line and graduate," he said, adding several high-risk students he's brought in told him they stayed because of the program.

Depending on institution and program, financial need is often factored into such scholarships. But they may also be awarded essentially as merit scholarships to better-off students.

Pennino, the Rochester high school student, said her parents had told her not to pick a school based on cost. But with two older siblings, Pennino, whose father is a surgeon, said the offer is a relief.

She has a few other applications in and hasn't made up her mind, but she likes what the program says about Drew.

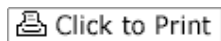
"During the college application process I got more and more stressed out about my SATs and GPA, and I've always thought, 'This is just a letter or a number, what does this 'B' really represent?'" she said. "'Does it say who I am?' What I've always thought matters most about me is what I do."

"I love seeing Drew has looked at another side of life, saying it's not all about grades," she said. "It's about what you do in the community. I really hope other schools catch on."

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