

PROPOSED SCHOLARSHIP SOFTWARE INVESTMENT

The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) is proposing to invest in scholarship software to improve its ability to serve Montana students and schools. OCHE administers numerous scholarship and grant programs. WICHE/WWAMI/MN Dental, the MUS Honor Scholarship, and the Governor's Best and Brightest are perhaps three of the most notable, but OCHE also administers a variety of other grants and scholarships. Some of those include the Quality Educator Loan Forgiveness Program, the GEAR UP Pathways Scholarship, the Montana State Fund Scholarship, and the New West Scholarship. OCHE does not currently have scholarship software to administer these programs; rather, all recipient information is housed in a combination of Access and Excel spreadsheets.

The main advantage of scholarship software is that it improves the application process for students and allows recipients to access up-to-date information throughout the life of their scholarships. The process is currently quite manual, often requiring students to complete multiple applications for grants and scholarships. Essays, transcripts, references, and other common components of a scholarship application must be duplicated each time a student applies for a scholarship. This proposed software purchase would create a portal for students, through which students could apply for scholarships, monitor applications, and accept awards. Once awarded, students would have unlimited access to their scholarship information, including the ability to view current and future disbursements, ask questions and receive answers, and update contact information. This type of ongoing contact with recipients correlates with better retention and graduation rates. The software also would allow for the direct input of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data, thereby improving accuracy and efficiency for students.

The scholarship software also benefits many other interested parties: parents, high school counselors, financial aid offices, and OCHE staff – to name a few. Parents can make sure students are applying for scholarships and can track application status and even scholarship disbursements. The manual systems currently used require a large amount of data input and are susceptible to human error. Through the new software portal, financial aid offices could download Banner files directly and minimize the chance for mistakes while saving countless hours of processing and reporting time. High school counselors can access the portal and provide student information, including things such as GPA and ACT/SAT scores. The workload for high school counselors should be greatly decreased, with the chance of error virtually eliminated.

This software could impact some 10,000 students each year and also will benefit OCHE. The software will increase our ability to accurately track awards in a timely manner, project award allocations, extract more detailed information on trends and demographics, and increase our administrative capacity. In addition to programs mentioned above other programs benefiting from this software would include the Nursing Incentive Program and the Montana Rural Physicians Incentive Program. It will provide a centralized database to create efficiencies in the application process, track awards (including continued eligibility), track disbursements of funds, and allow for a greater ability to gather data and historical demographic information.

While the initial software investment is significant and could exceed \$500,000 the need for scholarship software is great and grows larger every day. The benefit to students and the time savings for high school counselors, financial aid offices, and OCHE staff makes the purchase worth the initial expense. The investment will come out of the MGSLP Operating Fund and may result in a decrease in the Fund Balance.