



Oct. 13

New Approach to Aid

The University of Washington is putting a different twist on a growing movement to stop charging low-income students to enroll at leading public universities.

Unlike many institutions that have started such programs in recent years, Washington is covering only tuition and fees, not room and board (although other student aid may well be available for that). But the university is offering its [“Husky Promise”](#) to those from families with incomes of up to 65 percent of the state median income, which would currently be about 235 percent of the federal poverty level (\$46,500 for a family of four).

That’s a much higher income level than the other public university programs. And because Washington already has a better record than most research universities at enrolling students from low-income backgrounds, the university is projecting that about 5,000 students a year will be in the program as it starts, or about 20 percent of all undergraduates. If the program encourages more eligible students to enroll — as officials at the university hope — Washington says it is possible that it could eventually have up to 30 percent of its undergraduates eligible, a proportion of low-income students that is almost unheard of at highly competitive universities.

“This program is sending a very important message,” said Richard D. Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the Century Foundation and author of [America’s Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education](#). “This recognizes that the problems with access extend beyond the lowest income students to the working class.”

Ana Mari Cauce, executive vice provost at Washington, said that the institution wanted to cover students at the income levels it selected because focus groups indicated that many of them have false impressions about how much the university would cost them and about their ability to enroll. “We were hearing from an awful lot of people who thought tuition was \$10,000 a year,” she said (about twice the reality).

“I was sitting down with these people, many of whom I know would qualify for every aid program on the planet, but they have no idea. They think ‘I want to go to college, but you guys are too expensive,’ ” Cauce said. A psychologist who studies adolescents, Cauce said that research shows that these attitudes and expectations take hold early and can be hard to adjust, so the university wanted to do something dramatic to shake up those expectations and reach “the eighth grader trying to decide” whether it’s worth it to study hard, she said.

Similar ideas have prompted a number of leading public universities to tell low-income students that they will not need to borrow to pay for college. The [Carolina Covenant](#) — at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — kicked off the movement in 2003. That program started with an eligibility level of 150 percent of the federal poverty level, and was raised to 200 percent, the level used by a program at the [University of Virginia](#). Some of the institutions that have started programs since have used lower levels. In July, [Michigan State University](#) started a program for students at or below the poverty level.

None of these programs have reached as high into the student body demographics as will the University of Washington (although some private institutions exceed that level). As a result of the higher cutoff level — and the fact that Washington is starting with a higher percentage of low-income students — a much larger share of undergraduates will be covered by the program. For example, 9 percent of Chapel Hill undergraduates meet that institution’s income level cutoff, compared to Washington’s 20 percent.

The flip side, however, is that Washington won't be covering room and board through this program. Cauce noted that many of these students will receive other aid for room and board, and she stressed that covering tuition and fees was only the minimum commitment and should in no way be viewed as a ceiling.

The university's demographics and location may also suggest that it has taken the right approach in covering more people, while not covering everything. "This is a university that has always had seriousness about serving low-income kids," said Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar for the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. Add in the fact that the university is located in Seattle, making commuting a possibility for many students, and putting the emphasis on reaching more students with tuition aid makes sense, he said. "I'm not sure I would suggest this for Washington State University," he said, given its more remote location.

Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation said that in a perfect world, he would love to combine "the generosity of the Carolina approach with the cutoff of the Washington approach."

He said another plus to Washington's including more income levels was that it would build the political base for student aid. "You have a much larger constituency," he said.

Robert Shireman, founder of the [Project on Student Debt](#), said that he wasn't sure which approach (more people eligible or larger grants) would be the best over time. "A blanket offer like the University of Washington's can help deliver the message to more students in a simple way," he said. North Carolina's approach has the benefit of covering more needs for those at the lowest end of the economic spectrum, Shireman said. He said that there was no doubt that students do need to hear the kind of message Washington is now going to deliver.

One of those pleased to see the Washington effort is Shirley A. Ort, associate provost and director of scholarships and financial aid at Chapel Hill, who led the efforts to create the Carolina Covenant and has encouraged other institutions to follow suit, including [organizing a conference](#) on such programs last month. Ort said that she thinks there is increasingly "a little peer pressure at work" in top universities trying to come up with new approaches to student aid. "I think there's a lot more discussion about demographics and how they relate to institutional mission," she said.

Indeed, in announcing the new program, Mark Emmert, Washington's president, said that one of the messages he wanted to send was that while his university had high standards and aspirations, it would never seek to be "elitist," adding "it's not in our DNA."

To the extent Washington is going about it in a different way than North Carolina did, Ort said that she wants to see different universities try different approaches, with the idea that they will learn from one another. This is a "let a thousand flowers bloom" kind of issue, she said.

Mortenson of the Pell Institute also said he was pleased to see new approaches tried. His only caution was that most universities don't have the resources of a major flagship to provide the aid that is needed, and government officials aren't engaged in the issue. "One of the very positive things is that these institutions are not waiting for the government to address affordability problems. I think they are almost shaming the government," he said.

Added Mortenson: "I admire the commitment where I see it, but it really doesn't get at all the unmet need out there."

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

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