

## Students, Minnesota State Mankato welcome governor's free-tuition plan

**Gov. Tim Pawlenty's plan to provide free college tuition for top high school students creates winners and losers among colleges.**

**By Mark Fischenich, Free Press staff writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 6/30/2006]**

Gov. Tim Pawlenty's plan for providing free college tuition for top high school students creates winners and losers — not just among students but also among colleges in Minnesota, according to local higher education officials.

It's not hard to figure out which schools fall in which category.

"I welcome this visionary and strategic new idea from the governor," said Minnesota State University President Richard Davenport in a written statement.

MSU and other state-owned four-year universities would tend to benefit most from the Pawlenty plan unveiled this week. If he is elected to a second term, Pawlenty said his next proposed state budget would provide two years of free schooling at state-owned institutions for all students who finish in the top 25 percent of their high school class, provided their parents earn less than \$150,000 a year.

State officials estimate 16,000 graduating high school seniors would have been eligible for the free tuition if the plan had been in place this year.

Current college students, who have seen tuition rise by about 40 percent since Pawlenty became governor, are left out of the governor's plan. So are those who are disqualified by high family incomes.

Most importantly, high school students who aren't in the top quarter of their class but could succeed in college are not addressed, said Lance Schwartz, director of public relations at Bethany Lutheran College.

"The proposal doesn't address the state's biggest need to pull new students — first-generation students, kids who may not be at the top of their class — into higher education," Schwartz said.

The state's economy needs more highly educated workers to compete globally, and that means making sure all kids who have academic potential find a way to afford college, Schwartz said.

The funds required for Pawlenty's plan — \$112 million for the first two years — might be better put to use in the state grant program, which provides financial assistance for students whose families earn \$50,000 a year or less, he said. Those grant dollars also follow the students to whatever college they attend — public or private.

State policy should recognize the economic value provided by Bethany and the other private colleges in Minnesota, which provide a quarter of the bachelor's degrees earned each year in the state, Schwartz said.

Not only would Pawlenty's plan not bring any new dollars to the private schools, it would leave those schools essentially competing with taxpayer-sponsored scholarships in trying to attract the best students in the state.

"We're concerned about that," he said.

Students in the top 25 percent of their class who attend technical and community colleges would also receive free tuition under Pawlenty's proposal, but those institutions are likely to see a relatively small percentage of the \$112 million.

"It's not going to have as positive an impact on our institutions as it would on some of our other public university peers," said South Central College President Keith Stover.

SCC, which has campuses in North Mankato and Faribault, doesn't have comprehensive records about what portion of its students were in the top quarter of their class. But of the students who did report their class rank, just 6.6 percent were in the top quarter, Stover said.

While Stover isn't sure if that's representative of the entire student body, he believes it would be typical of community and technical colleges — which by law must accept all students regardless of their academic success in high school.

Stover understands the motivation behind Pawlenty's proposal — boosting the likelihood that top high school students would remain in Minnesota and preparing more of them for a high-tech economy by providing four years of free tuition for students majoring in math or science.

"Employers are saying 'We need a lot more scientists and engineers,'" Stover said.

So Stover has no complaints about the free tuition plan as long as the governor also finds a way to help students such as those at SCC — who are also filling crucial roles in the economy. If the Pawlenty plan ends up diverting money from two-year schools to four-year schools, then it would prompt even higher costs for SCC students.

"And they can't afford any more tuition increases," he said.