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BC-College Grants,0622

Education Department announces "rigorous" rules for college aid

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WASHINGTON (AP) — In a rare venture into curriculum, the Bush administration on Tuesday declared which high school programs are "rigorous" enough to qualify students for college aid.

The designation is important because only college freshmen and sophomores who complete a rigorous high school course of study can receive certain new grants approved by Congress.

The Education Department typically avoids endorsing or rating coursework, a politically sensitive area that states control.

But in creating the math and science grants for poorer students, Congress ordered Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to judge which high school programs are challenging.

Spellings, under pressure to get the program running in every state by the fall, announced a range of ways for students to be eligible for grants over the next two years.

She deferred for now to programs that states themselves already consider rigorous, either based on the nature of the coursework or the sheer number of courses that students must take.

But in future years, the criteria will get tougher to better reflect what colleges demand of students, Spellings said in a letter to governors and state school officers.

The grants are open only to students who already qualify for low-income Pell Grants. Some students may be shut out simply because their schools don't have sufficient offerings.

"We can't know that every single student will have had the

opportunity to take these courses,” said assistant education secretary Tom Luce. “But we believe we set up enough options that it’s likely that a vast number of students would have had the opportunity.”

The grant program is also open to college juniors and seniors who maintain good grades and are pursuing a degree in math, science, engineering or foreign languages in high demand.

In total, an estimated 500,000 students will be eligible this fall.

Students will qualify if they:

- Have an advanced or honors high school diploma, as offered in at least 19 states.

- Completed the courses of the State Scholars Initiative, a congressionally backed program. It requires students to take four years of English, three years of math, three years of lab science, three and a half years of social studies, and two years of a language other than English. Fourteen states have the program now, and eight more are starting soon.

- Finished a set of courses “similar” to the State Scholars curriculum.

- Taken at least two Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses and passed the tests in both subjects.

Beyond those four options, states may also submit their own idea of what a rigorous course of study means, for review by Spellings. Those are due by June 1.

Starting this fall, grants of \$750 will be available for college freshmen and \$1,300 for sophomores. Juniors and seniors can receive up to \$4,000 a year.

Congress has approved up to \$4.5 billion for the program over the next five years.

Republican lawmakers approved the program in December as part of a bill that otherwise slashed almost \$13 billion in college spending.

When Spellings was directed to rate high school rigor

nationwide, educators complained the federal government was poised to tell high schools what to teach.

In response, Republican leaders of the House and Senate education committees sent Spellings a letter to remind her that she had no authority to set high school curricula.

On The Net:

Education Department: <http://www.ed.gov>

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