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College secures grants for scholarships

By Jessica Musicar, Staff Writer

Tuesday, February 17, 2009



Photo by Lou Sennick

Community colleges are seeing an increase in students wanting to retrain for better jobs. To help students pursue their education, the Southwestern Oregon Community College Foundation has secured more grants for scholarships. This statue was created by art students several years ago.

COOS BAY — College freshman Amber Reis didn't exactly get a free ride through college. She still has to pay for books and works just like many other students her age.

But thanks to a scholarship from the Southwestern Oregon Community College Foundation, along with a little hard work and planning, by the time she's out of school, she'll probably be debt free.

The 18-year-old, who plans to enroll in Southwestern's nursing program after completing her associate's degree, said she's saving for the specialized program, while her scholarship pays through the 2009-10 school year.

"I'm basically not paying for school for two years, which is really helping me out," Reis said. "College has gone up and up and up. ... I'd just like to get out and be able to graduate and find a job in an area that I like ... and not worry so much about finding a job that would be able to pay off the financial debt."

More students like Reis will benefit from scholarships in the coming school year, as the foundation has secured grants from two private charitable foundations to give about 70 Coos and Curry counties' students a portion of more than \$71,000, said Marie Simonds, the executive director of the SOCC Foundation. For the 2008-09 school year, the foundation offered \$44,000 in scholarships and assisted about 50 students.

"I think it will just make a huge impact," Simonds said. "It allows it to be a little easier for students to come to college."

A private nonprofit, the foundation exists to support the college, Simonds said.

The grants came from the Juan Young Trust of Portland, which gave \$13,400 for the 2009-10 school year — about \$9,000 more than this year — and the **Gordon Elwood Foundation** of Medford gave \$15,000 specifically for Curry County workforce training students.

SOCC operates a satellite campus in Brookings.

“This is really huge for Curry County students,” Simonds said. “We have nothing of this magnitude.”

Included in the money is \$2,000 for emergency assistance for students, Simonds added, to pay for things such as gasoline for students who can’t make it to class or day care.

The extra money may help students even more in the future if Southwestern is able to participate in a matching grant program with other community colleges.

Late last spring, the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation in Portland challenged Oregon’s 17 community colleges to raise \$1.5 million for a matching challenge grant of the same amount. To be eligible, Southwestern needs to obtain \$50,000 more in scholarship donations.

Simonds said in the first year of the challenge Southwestern picked up \$401,000 in scholarships, including those earned by incoming students on their own. In order to achieve the challenge, it needs \$451,000.

“Working on that and these two additional scholarship grants ... (is) putting us very close to our goal,” Simonds said.

Winning the extra money will mean about \$121,000 in grants the foundation will be able to offer to next year’s full-time and part-time students enrolled in a defined program of study or seeking a program certification.

“We exist to support the college and to be able to have this significant of an impact on the students is why we’re here,” the executive director said.