LEARNING MATTERS–Help Is Out There for Those Who Want to Attend College

 By Meredith Machen

There has never been a better time for New Mexico’s residents to take advantage of the many incentives now available at our state colleges and universities. New Mexico offers a robust array of courses and programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, many of which can lead to enhanced career options and improved quality of life. Hundreds of millions are being invested for scholarships and loan-for-service graduate programs in health care, teaching, and STEM fields. Most of New Mexico’s legislators have responded very favorably to Governor Lujan Grisham’s mission to make education the cornerstone for improving economic security of our residents.

Here are a few tips for those wanting to obtain undergraduate degrees or certificates and wondering what financial support is available. This past school year, New Mexico became first in the nation to offer Opportunity Scholarships, “free college” for those who had not completed degrees. Opportunity Scholarships allow students to attend part time or full time making college possible for the vast number of residents who never completed their undergraduate degrees. So many residents took advantage of this remarkable program that our legislature and governor increased the budget allocation to $146 million for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Each year, our legislature and governor will have to decide how much can be made available for these new scholarships. Our Lottery Scholarship has been in place for years but is only open to high school and GED completers who attend full time immediately after graduating. Continuous enrollment both fall and spring semesters is required.

Opportunity Scholarships cover tuition and fees for up to 90 credit hours for an associate’s degree and up to 160 credits for a bachelor’s degree. While our state scholarships are very generous, many students are unaware that their books can cost more than their tuition and fees.

Most of high school seniors learn that they should complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) each year to determine their eligibility for grants, loans, and work study. The FAFSA application deadline for attending college this fall is June 30! <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>. Savvy students take advantage of our state scholarships and use federal financial aid to cover some of their living expenses, especially if they have to reduce their hours of employment or have child care expenses.

Sadly many adults are unaware of the availability of federal financial aid and even less aware that most of our higher education institutions also use the FAFSA’s Student Aid Report data to determine eligibility for other support. Financial Aid offices use the FAFSA results to assist eligible non-citizen high school graduates and residents who do not qualify for federal financial aid to acquire state scholarships and foundation scholarships made available donations from alumni, employees, businesses, and other donors. For access to general information and a directory of our state’s colleges and universities, go to <https://www.reachhighernm.com/>.

Students can stretch their dollars by attending our community and branch colleges. In addition to the many career training and specialized programs, students pursuing bachelor’s degrees can take all of their general education requirements confident that they transfer seamlessly because of our statewide articulated system. Our federal and state governments have invested millions in broadband. To meet some of COVID’s challenges, many of our postsecondary educators used technology to enhance instruction and strengthened collaborations with other institutions. Nowadays, full-time workers and parents of young children can access many courses online on their own schedules. Hybrid courses (in-person and online) provide flexibility unavailable previously.

Successful students recognize that they must focus on their coursework and commit the time necessary to do well. They forgo many social activities in order to make the academic progress required to keep their scholarships and achieve their long-term goals. True friends understand!

My precious memories are full of radiant faces of graduates beaming with gratitude when they reflect on the support they have received from their teachers, family members, and friends. Their accomplishments are life-changing not only for themselves but for their families and friends. Learning opens minds in immeasurable ways that enrich our workplaces, communities, and our overall quality of life. Education pays its weight in gold over and over again.

New Mexico’s voters need to continue to elect legislators who believe that investing in education is essential to our progress. We have come far, but nothing should be taken for granted.

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<https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/education/for-those-who-want-to-attend-college-help-is-out-there/article_0c8b3446-fd88-11ed-9a7d-d70a6a377c3d.html>

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