JULY 21 2010 - “We will do whatever it takes,” says College Bound Persistence VISTA team leader Taryn Quattrocchi of University City, left, after having Carl Lewis of St. Louis sign another round of financial aid papers for the University of Missouri at Columbia for his son Carl Lewis II, 18 Wednesday afternoon. With just over a month before the start of the Fall semester, college students and their parents have yet to learn the impact of last month’s slashing of two key scholarship programs. Lewis is one of the many incoming freshman who are still waiting to see how and if their scholarships and financial aid will be reduced. College Bound is a non-profit that helps prepare students with the college application and graduation. Photo by Laurie Skrivan

BY FAITH SANDLER AND LISA ORDEN ZARIN

This is a week of heartache for students and families across the St. Louis region. Several months ago students began celebrating their college acceptances. This week, some very tough conversations have occurred at kitchen tables and in program offices like ours. The first of May is decision day, and this year is crueler to low-income families than any that came before.

Over the summer and into next year, the effects of escalating costs, declining aid and dangerous amounts and types of debt will be evident. St. Louis ranks 24th of 35 large metropolitan areas in degree completion; but the economic vitality of our community depends upon an educated workforce.

Education for all is a shared investment; that concept inspired the founding of The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis 92 years ago. Students who live in poverty, are the first in their families to graduate high school and pursue postsecondary education or who have suffered the effects of substandard schooling travel a treacherous route to success in college. The realization that such students need significant and additional personal, academic and financial support fueled the beginnings of College Bound in 2006. While both organizations are deeply invested in degree completion, the practices and policies of financial aid have shifted entirely away from the benefits we all gain when our sisters and brothers are educated.

While it is unquestioningly painful for a parent (or program officer) to explain to a student that her admission to a college is meaningless without a way to pay, the cumulative costs to our community are still worse.

Financial aid policies at the school, state and federal levels that were borne out of community interest instead have become an unfortunate part of the “purchasing” of students to benefit the rankings, branding and fundraising potential of colleges. Much of the financing of higher education now is based on the premise that a degree is a commodity benefitting the individual. Students not born into privilege are expected to find a way to finance the ever-growing gap between total cost and available grant aid. More and more, the financial aid...
award packages of students are overloaded with loans. When those loans require an adult family member to be credit worthy, the next generation of low-income students is doubly disadvantaged.

In this season, our staff members see hundreds of financial aid letters from all types of institutions, and many reveal infuriating practices. Many letters fail to identify the total or true cost of attendance. Often, the financial aid letter that begins “Congratulations” depicts a calculation resulting in a zero balance (appearing as if the total cost is “covered”), but buried in the detail is a frightening level of debt and types of debt that students cannot or should not accept. Students who have no parents share with us financial aid offers that rely upon parent loans. We have met with students enthusiastic to enroll but whose aid packages are for one year only. Families struggle mightily with financial aid “offers” that are so complex and full of technical terms that even conscientious high school guidance counselors have to find experts to help decipher them.

Across the St. Louis region, students are faced with the possibility of dreams denied. While it is unquestioningly painful for a parent (or program officer) to explain to a student that her admission to a college is meaningless without a way to pay, the cumulative costs to our community are still worse. In time, an undereducated community will see the economic effects in business closings and relocations, job loss, health care for the uninsured, incarceration and other costly social services that weaken the economy.

Four recommendations could make this season a time of hope for St. Louis students.

- First, financial aid should be awarded to promising students with financial need. No state, federal or institutional dollar should be awarded for the purposes of “purchasing” a student who does not need it. Individuals and corporations that endow scholarship funds should ask tough questions about who gets the money and how it is awarded.

- Second, financial aid award letters should be simplified and standardized (College Bound has advocated this at state and federal levels, and the Department of Education has attempted to implement this — to no avail).

- Third, postsecondary institutions should drive costs down and not up. Student loan debt can be a part of the solution, but it should not be the primary share of financing for those unlucky enough to have been born without wealth.

- Fourth, the race for rankings should stop, or at the very least should include consideration of a college’s demonstrated commitment and success in educating and graduating the neediest of students in reasonable proportion.

Most important, our policymakers and community leaders should return to an understanding that educational attainment is not a private commodity but a public interest.

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