

Program a Boon to Foster Children

For many, Independence Scholarships make a private college education affordable.

By KEN MA
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Having been in and out of the foster-care system since he was 4 years old, Patrick Darius wants a better life for himself, and he is using higher education to accomplish that.

The 19-year-old sophomore is majoring in architectural engineering at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach. Everything was going well until he lost several scholarships. That could have forced him to drop out of the private, historically black college because he didn't have enough money for the school's annual price tag of about \$19,000.

"This year [2005-06 academic year], I thought I was not going to be able to go back to school because I was short \$4,000 to \$6,000," Darius, a Miami resident who plans to become an architect, said Tuesday.

Last month, however, his prayers were answered when he received a \$10,000 scholarship from the Independence Scholarship Program. Announced in May, the new program is a joint project of the DeLand-based nonprofit Florida Independent College Fund, and the Tallahassee-based Workforce Florida Inc., a public/private agency seeking to help people get jobs.

The scholarship program was created to help foster children attend private colleges and universities throughout Florida by awarding them up to \$10,000 to offset tuition and fees, room and board, books and related costs, both organizations said.

"I feel like I am very lucky and blessed with this scholarship," Darius said. Statewide, 28 private colleges and universities are participating in the scholarship program.

In Central Florida, 10 institutions will honor the scholarship. "These students have generally had a much more difficult path than many of us have had, so it's nice to provide these opportunities for them," said Phil Asbury, director of financial aid at Rollins College, which is participating in the program.

Many who go through the foster-care system choose to attend public colleges and universities because a Department of Children & Families program guarantees their academic expenses will be covered.

For the minority who decide to attend private schools, the program, called Road to Independence, will pay a portion of their educational expenses, but it does not guarantee they will not have to take out loans.

Under the Independence Scholarship Program, there is a good chance recipients won't need loans to attend private universities because the scholarship, combined with federal and state grants and scholarships from

individual schools, is likely to offset the total cost of attending school, some Central Florida college financial-aid directors said.

"If we can do anything to reduce their debt burden when they graduate, it's just a bonus for them," said David Bodwell, director of financial aid at Florida Southern College, a Lakeland school that also is participating in the scholarship program.

At Rollins College, former foster kids who receive the scholarship are likely to avoid the \$15,000 debt that the average student there assumes after four years of college, Asbury said. The total annual cost of attending the school is about \$39,000.

Mike Switzer, vice president for policy, programs and performance with Workforce Florida Inc., said his organization provided money for the Independence Scholarship Program even though that was not what the cash was supposed to be used for originally.

In 2000, his agency gave an estimated \$975,000 to the Florida Independent College Fund to create a college scholarship for fathers who weren't paying their child support. The scholarship's intention was to help deadbeat dads get their degrees, so they could find employment and support their children.

The deadbeat-dad scholarship program ended after a six-month trial period, leaving \$300,000 of the original amount to help foster children.

"Very few of them [foster kids] even get to college, much less complete it," Switzer said.

Helping former foster children get to college, he said, creates benefits for them and for Florida's business community.

"We are training their [the business community's] future workers so they don't have to recruit from other states or offshore," Switzer said.

So far, 18 scholarships have been awarded, and there are nine pending applications, said Kathy Burley, director of the Florida Independent College Fund, a nonprofit that works with private colleges and universities throughout Florida to create more opportunities for students of all backgrounds to receive higher education.

The Independence Scholarship Program will award 30 scholarships for the 2005-06 academic year. Burley said her organization and Switzer's agency would evaluate the program and seek funding sources for next year.

Both groups are looking for public money and donations from businesses and individuals.

Doris Godbey, Bethune-Cookman's financial-aid counselor and scholarship coordinator, said the college would do everything in its power to keep former foster children enrolled, should the new scholarship program be discontinued.

"It is Bethune-Cookman's intention to graduate students, not to bring them in one year and out," Godbey said.

INDEPENDENCE SCHOLARSHIPS

What: Scholarships for former foster children to attend private colleges and universities, Available to anyone who has gone through Florida's foster-care system.

Amount: Up to \$10,000 per year.

Participating colleges and universities:

28 statewide; 10 in Central Florida.

Central Florida participants: Beacon College, Bethune-Cookman College, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences, Florida Southern College, Rollins College, Southeastern University, Stetson University, Warner Southern College and Webber International University.

Information: 386-734-2745

SOURCE Florida Independent College Fund