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MTSU measures HOPE effect as it readies for another year

Mike Stuhreyer

Special to the Nashville Business Journal

As the 2004-2005 school year winds down, college administrators and state lawmakers will closely examine the impact of more than \$47 million disbursed to Tennessee students through the Tennessee Educational Lottery Scholarship program in its first year.



Dr. Robert Glenn, vice president of student affairs and provost of enrollment management at Middle Tennessee State University, may be looking closer than most at the effect on his university's resources.

After all, 96 percent of MTSU's freshman class -- 3,017 of 3,143 students - were HOPE scholarship recipients.

According to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, MTSU ranks third among Tennessee public institutions in the percentage of eligible freshmen

who received the scholarship, just behind the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and Tennessee Technological University.

MTSU's ratio of scholarship recipients is more than 20 points higher than the average four-year university or community college in Tennessee.

By this measure, one might expect Glenn to be grappling with acute challenges in a host of critical areas, such as housing, class size and staffing.

Not so. Glenn points out that MTSU's freshman enrollment for 2004-2005 represents an increase of only 150 students over last year, and even that modest rise isn't necessarily due to the scholarship.

"It's difficult to say whether the increase is attributable to the scholarship or more related to the growth of the college-age population in the state," he says. "I would say it's probably a combination of the two."

Indeed, the Southern Regional Education board indicates that for a five-year period, of which the fall of '04 was the first year, there will be about a 30 percent increase in the number of college-age students in Tennessee.

All graduating seniors in Tennessee high schools are eligible for the \$3,000 HOPE Scholarship, provided they meet its academic requirements - a 3.0 GPA or a score of at least a 21 on the ACT or 980 on the SAT - and attend an eligible institution within the state.

While Glenn speculates the scholarship may influence more students to stay in Tennessee, he believes most whose academic achievements meet the HOPE Scholarship eligibility requirements would go to college anyway. Given that, he doesn't foresee a sudden spike in student applications.

Even if more students choose to attend in-state institutions, MTSU won't feel much effect. The university draws 92 percent of its students from within the state - a percentage Glenn isn't forecasting to change dramatically.

Also, because most MTSU students commute daily - only 3,500 of the university's 22,000 students live on campus - he anticipates no increase in demand for housing.

Glenn questions the scholarship's quantitative impact on MTSU and hopes to see qualitative

improvement in his students' college experience.

"I would think that there would be a decrease in the loan burden on students. In theory, if students are taking fewer loans, they don't have to work as much to go to college," he says. "They can concentrate more on their studies and gain more from their time in college. That would be a good thing for the state in the long run."

He also believes the Hope Scholarship's fairly rigorous academic requirements may result in a more highly qualified student body at all state universities as high school students work harder to gain eligibility.

MTSU's standards for guaranteed admission (3.0 high school GPA or a score of 20 on the ACT) closely mirror the lottery eligibility. Glenn credits these rising admission standards as an underlying reason for the institution's exceptional number of lottery scholarship freshmen.

The intricacies of HOPE

Students are required to re-apply for the HOPE scholarship yearly. Financially eligible students also must re-apply annually for the needs-based component of the program - the HOPE Access Grant - which supplements the scholarship with an additional \$1,000.

To remain academically eligible, a student has to maintain a GPA of 2.75 in his or her freshman year and a 3.0 in every school year (24 credit hours) thereafter.

MTSU won't know until the end of the spring semester, May 5, how many of its freshmen will retain eligibility for their sophomore year. At the end of the fall semester, however, 60 percent of MTSU freshmen were meeting the standards for scholarship retention.

Assuming those levels carry through the spring semester, MTSU's freshman class will far outperform their counterparts in at least one neighboring state, Georgia, whose experience in lottery scholarships can be used as a rough benchmark.

"This isn't necessarily a precursor of what will happen here, of course, but in Georgia, about 38 percent retain their eligibility after the first year. That drops steadily down until you see that 16 percent of their graduating senior class remains on the scholarship program," says Glenn.

Among the unknowns relating to Tennessee's program is whether students will drop out of school if they lose their scholarship eligibility.

"One of the weaknesses of our lottery program is that it's

unforgiving," Glenn notes. "If a student falls below the academic or financial-need standards for the scholarship, they become permanently ineligible."

Glenn doesn't know what that will mean for student retention or what the university can do to mitigate any negative effects.

"That's one of the reasons we can't rush to say this is a good thing or a bad thing," he says.

Administrators will continue collecting and analyzing a set of aggregate data on HOPE scholarship recipients' performance, but Glenn is withholding judgement.

"Next fall, we'll be in a position to speculate about some of that, but until we have a full four years of data - until this year's freshman class graduates - I really don't think it is appropriate for us to be making conclusions," he says. "That would be like a professor assigning a grade before the final exam."

Mike Stuhreyer is a Nashville-area freelance writer.

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