



Students who accept the scholarship will be notified by their college of choice about the award's amount, according to HESC. | AP Photo

## Excelsior effect: Application period for scholarship ends

By KESHIA CLUKEY | 07/21/2017 05:14 AM EDT

*Editor's note: This is part of an on-going series examining the implementation of the state's Excelsior scholarship program. To read the other installments click on the "Excelsior scholarship" tag at the bottom of the page.*

ALBANY — Time is drawing to a close for students looking to receive tuition dollars through the state's new Excelsior scholarship program. The deadline is midnight on Friday night.

As of Thursday afternoon, more than 75,000 current and incoming undergraduate

students in the State and City University systems applied for the award, according to the Higher Education Services Corporation, which is administering the program.

More than 40,000 of those students already have been notified that they are eligible to receive the award starting in the fall and the majority is expected to be notified within two weeks after the application period closes, according to HESC.

The governor's office released a statement touting the preliminary numbers as a success.

"The Excelsior Scholarship will provide tens of thousands of students across New York a leg up on the ladder of opportunity and we are thrilled by the widespread interest in the program," said Cuomo spokeswoman Abbey Fashouer. "A central goal of this administration is making college affordable for our middle class, and we look forward to seeing this initiative help more students achieve their dreams of higher education both now and into the future."

The scholarship, which is being advertised as "free tuition," will cover the cost of in-state tuition at the state's public two- and four-year colleges for students from families with incomes of \$100,000 or less. The income eligibility ramps up to \$125,000 in 2019 when the program is fully rolled out. The program is last-dollar, coming after state tuition assistance, federal funding and private scholarships.

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The total number of award recipients will not be known until September as students have until July 31 to submit any missing documentation and current students until Aug. 31 to

complete summer courses.

The tuition dollars don't come without strings. For example, students are required to complete 30 credits a year and to live in the state after completion for as many years as they received the award. Otherwise it converts into a loan.

Although North Country parent Carol LaPorte knew about the requirement to live in the state, she was surprised to hear that her son Justin, 18, who is eligible for the program, must sign a contract to receive the funding. The contract includes language referring to possible repayment and default scenarios as well as education law.

"I can't even understand it, basically, some of it is so in-depth," she said of the contract's wording. "I can't imagine an 18-year-old sitting down and saying 'I'm actually going to sign it.'"

LaPorte, who lives in the town of Peru, has been a single parent since the death of her husband more than a year ago and has three children — two of whom are in college and one is looking to go back to nursing school. She decided to apply for the Excelsior scholarship for both her son Justin, who will be a freshman at a community college this fall, and her middle child, Jennifer, who will be in her second year at community college.

But after seeing the contract, she has decided to wait until next year, even though it means the loss of \$200 to \$300 in tuition per student.

"I don't feel comfortable with ...[the] legal ramifications," LaPorte said, particularly concerned for her son. "I don't think he'll have to pay a lot back if he had to, but I'm nervous about what is hidden in the sentences that are hard to understand as a regular parent. If you had a lawyer as a parent they would understand it."

"This is great," she said of the program. "I just think that they need to be more precise on what they're writing."

The governor's office and HESC did not immediately return a request for comment regarding the contract.

Students who accept the scholarship will be notified by their college of choice about the award's amount, according to HESC. The state has allocated \$87 million for the first year of the program, although the governor's office has said that every eligible student will receive the award.

The agency will send rosters of accepted students to institutions, according to HESC. The

agency noted that both SUNY and CUNY have been working with HESC and already have estimates of how many students will be attending under the Excelsior scholarship.

Similar to the state Tuition Assistance Program, the awards will be allocated to the schools at the end of the semester after they certify that the students are enrolled and completed the minimum of 12 credits per semester, according to HESC.

The timing of the application period — in July, well after the traditional May 1 decision day — and the influx of students interested have created additional work, particularly for admissions and financial aid staff, said Fred Kowal, president of United University Professions, the union that represents SUNY employees. “Fortunately they anticipated it, but there will be a necessity for resources in those areas as the work people are doing is increasing,” he said.

Overall Kowal said he was impressed with the volume of applicants. “It’s a significant number and more than I think most were expecting in terms of applications,” he said. “[W]hat is encouraging in terms of SUNY enrollment numbers is, this is just the first year and the pool deepens the next year and the year after in terms of eligibility.”

Time will tell whether the program is the political win Cuomo was expecting as he lays down markers for a potential 2020 presidential bid.

“It’s actually perceptually caused people to think harder about going to college and that’s a good thing, I think,” said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz.

Benjamin noted that Cuomo has been praised for the program and criticized for its rushed implementation.

“It’s certainly been a positive public relations outcome for the governor so far,” Benjamin said. “What matters is that the number of people increases over time ... The sustained and increased number would be a significant claim.”

[View the scholarship application and guidelines here](#) and [read the contract here](#).