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## Value of public-private scholarships to increase to \$5,000 from \$1,000

Next school year, nearly 1,900 Washington students will get \$5,000 scholarships to pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering, math and health care.

By Katherine Long

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One of the easiest scholarships for Washington students to win has become a lot more lucrative, as well.

Starting next school year, nearly 1,900 juniors, seniors and fifth-year students who receive the renewable Washington Opportunity Scholarship will get a check for \$5,000 — five times the amount the scholarship is worth this school year.

"It was unexpected," said Nemer Tello, a junior studying neuroscience at Washington State University, who learned yesterday that he was going to get a bigger check next year. "I won't have to be so stressed about having to pay rent and buy food."

The scholarship is for Washington residents studying at in-state institutions who are majoring in science, technology, engineering, math — often called STEM — and health-care fields, and who meet an income threshold that's considered low- to middle-income — up to \$102,200 for a family of four. Its aim is to encourage more students to go into those high-paying, high-demand fields.

It may be especially important to middle-income families, who often don't qualify for financial-aid programs and must rely instead on loans, especially as tuition has risen so dramatically.

Freshmen and sophomore scholarship winners will receive the smaller \$1,000 award. Because it's renewable, and can be used for up to five years of college, the value of the scholarship could be as much as \$17,000 for a student who receives the award as a freshman and takes a fifth year to graduate.

"It's terrific," said state Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina, of the award expansion. "The IQ of kids isn't determined by their family income — if they can imagine they can go to college, they've got more motivation."

It's also one of the easiest scholarships to get, with no essay requirement. Students must have a 2.75 grade-point average and fill out the Federal Application for Free Student Aid.

The scholarship was designed to be available to a broad range of students because "looking for scholarships today is a bit like engaging in a scavenger hunt," said Brad Smith, executive vice president and general counsel for Microsoft. Smith is a member of the Opportunity Scholarship Board, which oversees the program.

Most of the scholarship money comes from Microsoft and Boeing, which together have contributed \$50 million. The state has contributed \$5 million.

Smith said the board decided to boost the scholarship size so that the money would have greater impact. "This is a number that will not only help current students pay for college, but inspire future students to focus on STEM," he said.

Some research shows that students are at greatest risk of dropping out midway through college, after several years of tuition and living expenses take a toll on savings or require more loans.

Tello, the WSU neuroscience student, said that's what happened to his older sister, who dropped out of Central Washington University after two years and debts totaling \$20,000. Tello, who has a \$4,500 loan and also works 60 hours a month, hopes the extra scholarship money will help him avoid taking on more debt. He would be the first in his family to complete a four-year degree.

Sam Lim, a University of Washington graduate and the founder of Scholarship Junkies, a nonprofit that helps students apply for scholarships, called the increase phenomenal, saying he could not think of another Washington scholarship program with such a broad reach.

It's especially helpful for students who don't quite qualify for financial aid, he said. "We're seeing that middle-income students and families have really gotten the squeeze as tuition has gone up."

Legislation passed in 2011 created the public-private Opportunity Scholarship, and Smith and others set a goal of raising \$1 billion by the end of the decade for a scholarship endowment. Under the terms of the program, the state will begin matching private donations after state revenue collections reach a certain threshold, or in 2014, whichever is later.

Smith hinted that the Opportunity Scholarship Board would raise more private money soon, but did not offer specifics.

"What that board needs to do now is shake down people for money," said Hunter, adding, "There's a reason the business community is in on this — the high-tech community needs these graduates."

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### Washington Opportunity Scholarship

Who qualifies: Students must be residents of Washington, have at least a 2.75 grade-point average, be majoring or planning to major in science, technology, engineering, math or health care, have family income no more than 125 percent of the median family income and fill out the Federal Application for Free Student Aid. To apply: The application for new awards will be available on Jan. 7, and the deadline is Feb. 18. Students who currently receive the scholarship must renew by July 15. For more information: [www.waopportunityscholarship.org](http://www.waopportunityscholarship.org)

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