

Gateway revisited

IN 2007, the College of William and Mary created a program called Gateway to give full scholarships to 600 needy students by 2011.

The program didn't have funding at the time, but the number of students — roughly 10 percent of the undergraduate population — and cost estimates suggested that it would take \$6 million per year to host 600 students on full rides.

In 2008, the college's Board of Visitors stepped in to create a restricted fund to support Gateway, netting \$10.7 million in a short time. Each year, 4.75 percent would be drawn to support the scholarships.

With \$10 million in the bank, the fund would provide about \$475,000 per year, which could pay for only 93 students in 2008, according to the college's finance folks — far fewer than the goal.

In the 2010-2011 school year, there were 221 Gateway students at the college, and 54 just graduated.

None of the college officials contacted explained why enrollment is so far below the goal.

Please let me explain it for you: It's all about reality.

The number of low-income, high-achieving high school students is tiny, not just in Virginia but nationwide.

Harvard and other private colleges and universities also offer free rides to this minuscule cohort of students.

Given a choice between a full ride to schools like Harvard or Princeton or Stanford and a full ride to William and Mary, most folks will choose the former.

Do the math.

No, wait. It's already been done.



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William and Mary — poor and public, in the midst of a budget crisis and a quiet campaign by the administration to create “a new financial model” — cannot afford to offer free rides to 600 low-income high achievers.

Gateway is a noble program, indeed, but it competes directly with bigger, better, well-endowed schools. Crazy well-endowed. They can afford to offer free rides.

William and Mary — poor and public, in the midst of a budget crisis and a quiet campaign by the administration to create “a new financial model” — cannot.

So there's \$10 million in restricted funding sitting in our coffers for Gateway. But setting a goal of enrolling 600 Gateway students, given the daunting facts cited above, well, that was pie-in-the sky, make-ourselves-feel-good fantasy from a former president and Board of Visitors.

Because those funds are restricted use, the administration should continue to do what it has been doing: recruit the low-income high-achievers it can and move on with finding that new model to finance our beloved college.

The college could, of course, revise the official program description, keeping the idea of a free ride and accepting the restricted funding but losing the quota. It would still be an uphill slog to find low-income high achievers who would give up Harvard for W&M, but at least the embarrassing quota would be gone.

And administrators wouldn't have to kick the dirt and avert their eyes when asked by the press and alumni to explain the numbers.

The good news for the college is that, along with the University of Virginia, William and Mary is one of seven schools in the country to earn a Green Light for free speech from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

As a watchdog organization, FIRE monitors 400 colleges and universities and their free speech policies or violations. They are nonpartisan and nationally recognized as fair.

I am bursting with pride that the college is so well respected for free speech. Not so long ago, we did not have that Green Light, nor did we deserve one. Let us hold tightly to that prize and rejoice in our reputation as purveyors of free speech.

Purveyors of free speech who shun quotas. I kinda like that.

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