Policy Matters Ohio

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Ben Stein
bstein@policymattersohio.org
304-685-8354

Ohio college aid program shortchanges students who need it most

Policy choices hamstring Ohio's only need-based financial aid program

Ohio's only need-based financial aid program falls short of its potential because state policymakers created rules that reduce aid for many low-income students and fail to account for the true cost of attending college. A new Policy Matters Ohio brief finds that the Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG) could do more to help Ohioans afford higher education at a time when the state increasingly depends on a highly educated workforce.

“OCOG was created to help Ohioans afford college, but legislators and the Governor-appointed Chancellor of Higher Education have structured the program in ways that limit its effectiveness,” said Bailey Sandin, author of the brief. “Students who choose affordable options like community colleges and regional campuses often receive little or no benefit, while the program ignores major costs like housing, transportation, and books that can determine whether a student is able to stay enrolled.”

The brief finds that Ohio's “Pell first” policy forces many students to use federal Pell Grant dollars to cover tuition and fees before receiving state aid, reducing or eliminating their OCOG awards. The policy can leave students who attend affordable institutions with no OCOG support at all.

Federal changes may soon exacerbate the problem. “If Congress doesn’t take action, Pell is facing a $5 billion deficit by the end of 2026,” Sandin said. “That would likely result in a significant reduction in award amounts for the 2028-29 school year, meaning even more students will depend on OCOG.”

“At a time when Ohio's economy increasingly requires postsecondary education and enrollment continues to decline, policymakers should be making college more affordable, not less,” Sandin said. “Lawmakers can strengthen OCOG by eliminating the Pell first policy and ensuring that aid reflects the full cost of attending college. Those changes would help more Ohio students complete degrees and credentials while strengthening Ohio's future workforce.”

Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.