

Funding in limbo for low-income college students



By

snapshots.mysuburbanlife.com/882385 Staff photo by John Cox Elmhurst College student Matt Kovich studies in the coffee shop in the school's library Thursday.

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By Dave Matthews, dmatthews@mysuburbanlife.com
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ELMHURST, IL -

The mother of Elmhurst College senior Matthew Kovich was a secretary, so Kovich came up with tuition, but at least he had a place to stay without worrying about rent, utilities or groceries.

But when Kovich's mother died in January, his life, and his financial plan to get through school, drastically changed.

Now Kovich, a music education major who also is completing Elmhurst's music performance

certificate program, has come up with the money for his last three semesters through scholarships, loans, federal Pell and supplemental grants, and by waiting tables five days a week at The Standard restaurant.

Kovich also relies on \$2,484 a semester from the state's Monetary Award Program (MAP), a \$400 million program that aids 167,000 low-income students in Illinois, 800 of them at Elmhurst College. Program funding was cut in half by the General Assembly in July, threatening students who depended on the funds for the upcoming spring semester.

"It is helpless when you're trying everything you can and one year from graduation, all of a sudden, you can't win," Kovich said. "Are you really going to take it away my last semester of college?"

For now, the answer is no, as Gov. Pat Quinn pledged in October to reinstate the remaining \$205 million from special state funds to keep the program in full force for the next fiscal year.

But where exactly the money will come from, and its effect on a growing state budget deficit, is undecided.

According to Kelly Kraft, a spokeswoman for the Governor's Office of Management and Budget, Quinn plans to take out a \$900 million short-term loan, with \$205 million allocated toward MAP grant funding. Another \$250 million would go toward Medicaid, and \$445 million toward a backlog of miscellaneous bills owed by the state.

Kraft said the loan will fall under the short-term borrowing act and will have to be repaid in 12 months once issued.

"This was done without a real clear revenue source," said University of Illinois-Springfield political science professor emeritus Kent Redfield. "This is one more drop in the bucket in terms of a really, really bad (budget) situation."

Because of the impact of the loan on the ballooning state deficit, Redfield said state politicians likely won't sign off on the plan until the February primary.

Another method of restoring MAP funding touted by state Republicans has been establishing a six-week tax amnesty period for delinquents to pay backtaxes, but Redfield also was skeptical that would work in the long-term.

"It's a one time thing, if in fact the amnesty does generate you money, it's a one-time solution for an ongoing problem," he said. "We can't go back to that well again, can't give the same people amnesty two years in a row."

Regardless of how it's funded, Elmhurst College senior Nicole Spizzirri is glad MAP grants are back for the spring semester.

Spizzirri, a commuter from Villa Park, also worked with her mother to pay for school. But when her mother, a German immigrant who worked multiple jobs much of Spizzirri's childhood to make ends meet found herself out of work, Spizzirri relied on loans to get through school.

As she prepares for her last semester, Spizzirri has accumulated nearly \$40,000 of debt, and said even the \$800 a semester she receives from MAP grants is a relief.

"It's a little bit of money I don't have to worry about when I graduate," she said. "Why with so many things they could cut, instead they're going to jeopardize our education, knowing some people without this funding couldn't go to school."

Elmhurst College President S. Alan Ray wrote in a statement the 800 MAP-eligible students at the school constitute one-third of undergraduates. He said 80 of those 800 would be in immediate jeopardy of dropping out for lack of MAP funding.

"The immediate challenge is for our state leaders to find a way to make good on their promise to fund MAP for spring 2010," Ray wrote. "The longer-range challenge for these same leaders is to find a permanent source of funding for MAP."

Kovich said education is a key prerequisite to success, and wondered why the state would even consider cutting access funds now in a time working professionals are needed.

"We have a nursing shortage, we have a teacher shortage, do you know how many nurses and teachers are on MAP grants that couldn't go back to school (if funding were cut)?" Kovich said. "Students are the future of this state and this society. ... Every one of our reps and senators went to college, the governor went to college ... we shouldn't be denying students that opportunity."

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