

Tuition aid changes opposed

BY MICHAEL GOOT
Gazette Reporter

Diane Amada of Colonie works two part-time jobs and goes to school full-time at Bryant & Stratton College, in addition to being a mother to her 6-year-old son Jayden.

Still, she has maintained a 4.0 grade point average. "It's hard ... I'm driven to do whatever it takes," she said. "I'm following my dream."

However, she worries about a proposal by Gov. David Paterson to require students to take a full course load of 15 credits to receive the maximum \$2,500 grant per semester from the Tuition Assistance Program. Currently students taking 12 credits are eligible for the full grant. The proposal would allow students taking between 10 and 14 credits to get a portion of the full grant.

Amada said every person's situation is different and some people cannot handle a full five-course load in addition to balancing work and family. "I think it will hurt a lot of people."

Without TAP, she said she would be much deeper in debt after completing the two-year program at Bryant & Stratton. She said that people would be less likely to go on to four-year colleges if they get out of two-year schools thousands of dollars in debt.

Amada was one of the many current and former students who visited the Legislative Office Building on Tuesday to lobby state legislators not to change the standards for full TAP funding. The change would save an estimated \$22 million in the 2009-2010 budget.

Division of Budget spokesman Matt Anderson said a student's TAP eligibility runs out after four years, with or without graduation.

"What we're essentially doing is making sure that students don't exhaust their TAP eligibility before they graduate."

LOAN PROPOSAL

In order to help out students, Anderson said the governor is proposing a \$350 million lower-interest loan program, open to any New York state resident attending two- or four-year public or private colleges.

Michael Gutierrez, campus director for Bryant & Stratton's Albany location, said about three-quarters of its 700 students are "non-traditional" and hold either full- or part-time jobs. If they are forced to take an extra class to get the maximum TAP award, their schoolwork could suffer.

"At the end of the day, I believe it's going to cost the state money. Students are going to be unhappy and drop out," he said.

Dolnesha Figueroa of Albany attends paralegal classes all day at Bryant & Stratton College, picks her 4-year-old son from school, drops him off with her boyfriend and then goes to work during the evenings at Burger King.

Figueroa is currently taking a full 15-credit course load. She said it is difficult to balance work and school, but even her son realizes that it is necessary to achieve her goal of working in a law office.

Advocates such as B.J. Costello of the law firm on Hinman Straub are convinced that they will get the Legislature to change course. He said he believes education is an investment in the future.

"What you're doing is creating taxpayers and producing jobs. The investment in TAP comes back manyfold."

Reach Gazette reporter
Michael Goot at 395-3105 or
mgoot@dailygazette.net.