



The Plight of the Married Student

Introduction

Student Aid Alberta invests in Albertans; it provides funding and reduces financial barriers to a post-secondary education so Albertans can fully contribute to their families, communities and a knowledge-driven future. (Government of Alberta, 2012c)

The recent changes made to the student assistance program have reduced financial barriers and improved access to Post-Secondary Education for many single Albertans, giving them the opportunity to fully contribute to their families, communities and a knowledge driven future. However, these changes have not addressed the myriad of financial barriers faced by married students.

Current living allowances and loan limits do not recognize the higher costs incurred by married students, are not reflective of current costs or realities of family life in 2013, and leave many married students unable to realistically afford a post-secondary education. The resource exemptions, primarily spousal income, can prevent these students from accessing government student loans. This leads to inequitable access to post-secondary education for married students.

ASAPA would like to highlight how current living allowances and resource expectations can leave married students chronically underfunded and struggling to make ends meet while pursuing their educational dreams.

Living Allowance

The monthly shortfall experienced by a married couple can be \$968, over an average 8-month academic year; this represents a shortfall of \$7744 each year (see Appendix 1). One response could be to suggest that these students work part time to make up their shortfall; however, while that may be a workable solution for single students (who are not underfunded), it is an unrealistic expectation for married students, particularly those with children and especially with young children in the household.

Spousal Resource Expectations

Coupled with this, the resources expected of married students are also much higher than their single counterparts. Spousal earnings are counted heavily in the assessment (only the first \$800 of earnings is exempt), while their unmarried counterparts are generally eligible for “full” funding regardless of student or family financial standing. The resulting spousal income used in the calculation of need is often enough to greatly reduce calculated financial need and subsequent loan eligibility. For example, a married student with no children who is attending the University of Alberta will have no calculated student aid eligibility if their spouse earns more than about \$60,000 gross (see Appendix 2 for detailed sample calculations). Under Student Aid Alberta assessment protocols this student has no student aid eligibility, not even loan eligibility, due to the burdensome spousal resource expectation. Curiously, this income falls below the Canada Student Loan Program’s Middle Income Grant threshold and would be eligible for

federal grant funds (Appendix 3). Married families are not expected, but often forced by underfunding, to liquidate spousal savings and RRSPs and due to their age they will not have as much time to rebuild that retirement portfolio before retirement.

Presumption of Familial Support

There is a presumption of familial (spousal) support for the married student, while the same presumption of familial (parental) support no longer exists for single students. This is an inequitable treatment of Alberta post-secondary students. Furthermore, Student Aid Alberta's presumption of spousal support is an archaic view of marriage. It is becoming increasingly common for married students to have separate finances and it is unreasonable for government to expect spousal wages to be used by the student when the spouses have made the choice to keep their finances separate. This reality seems more and more at odds with the historically established structure of the full time needs assessment and part time eligibility determination.

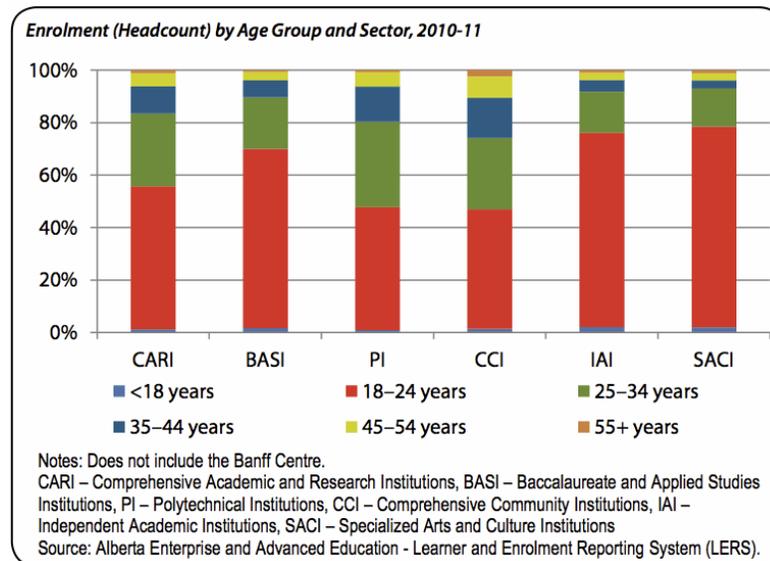
Maintenance Grant Eligibility

Married students face additional difficulties when it comes to provincial grant eligibility. The Maintenance Grant is intended to fund students with high need who have exhausted other funding types, and is automatically assessed for certain students. In the case of married students, only those with children under the age of 12 months or whose spouses are unable to work due to medical reasons, lack of work visa or language barriers are included for consideration for the grant. Married students with children over the age of 1 are specifically excluded from the provincial Maintenance Grant, even if the non-student spouse is a low-income earner and/or both spouses are students and struggling to make ends meet. While Maintenance Grant can be awarded at the discretion of the Manager, married students are less likely to be awarded the prerequisite legislated loan maximum due to expected spousal contributions and the lack of recognition of the full cost of living, making them ineligible for "special" consideration for the Maintenance Grant. Similarly, married students where both spouses are attending post-secondary are also disadvantaged with regards to the provincial Maintenance Grant because each spouse is awarded only half of the familial living allowance, making it more difficult to reach maximum loan and qualify for special consideration for the provincial grant.

Impacts of Inequitable Access

As shown by the Campus Alberta graph below, the average age of students in the post-secondary system is increasing, making them more likely to be married or common-law (Government of Alberta, 2012a). With only 58.4% of post-secondary learners transitioning into post-secondary within 6 years of starting Grade 10, strengthening access to post-secondary for those who did not transition from high school would help address skill shortages and improve quality of life for those Albertans (Government of Alberta, 2012b).

Graph 1: Enrolment (Headcount) by Age Group and Sector, 2010-11



Source: Campus Alberta Planning Resource, Chapter 3

Diminished access can also have implications for future generation's attendance at post-secondary. Recent research published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario has shown that parental educational attainment is more of a predictor of future post-secondary participation of the children than family income (Zhao, 2012). When other variables are controlled for, learners from families where at least one parent has attended post-secondary increases the likelihood of future post-secondary participation by the children by 40% when compared to families where both parents have a high school diploma or less. In addition to this, the impact of family income is significantly lessened when considered in tandem with other factors, especially parental education. While the policy implications of this are far ranging and extend beyond the scope of current student aid programs, the research indicates that removing financial barriers for the 'traditional' single student is not enough.

Recommendations

ASAPA recommends that the assessment for married students be equitable to single students. There are a variety of ways in which this could be achieved.

1. The income exemption on spousal earnings could be increased.
2. Spousal contribution could be assessed as a flat-rate contribution, similar to the way students are assessed a flat-rate contribution.
3. Spousal income could be exempt in the provincial need calculation.
4. The married student living allowance could be increased to be more reflective of actual costs.
5. Maintenance Grant could be automatically assessed for married students with dependents under the age of 12.

6. Married students could be given a higher yearly and lifetime loan maximum to account for higher costs that married students face.

We fully support Student Aid Alberta's mission:

Student Aid Alberta invests in Albertans; it provides funding and reduces financial barriers to a post-secondary education so Albertans can fully contribute to their families, communities and a knowledge-driven future. (Government of Alberta, 2012c)

Allowing for equitable assessment of married students is another way to encourage a knowledge-driven future and ensure the continued success of the "Alberta Advantage."

Works Cited

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Comparison of Monthly Costs allowed by Student Aid Alberta and Average Actual Monthly Household Costs Incurred

	Student Aid Alberta Living Allowance Married couple with 1 child	Monthly Market Household Average in Alberta	Actual Monthly Shortfall
Rent & Utilities	\$1007	Rent (2 bedroom apartment in Edmonton): \$1030 Water: \$40 Telephone: \$30 TOTAL: \$1100 Source: Government of Alberta, 2011	\$93
Food, Clothing, Personal Care	\$1275	Food: \$702 Clothing: \$336 Personal Care: \$91 Household Operation: \$373 Miscellaneous: \$115 TOTAL: \$1617 Source: Statistics Canada, 2012	\$342
Transportation	\$171	Bus pass: \$85 (adult), \$77 (post-secondary student), \$66 (youth) TOTAL: \$228 Source: http://www.edmonton.ca/transportation/ets/fares/fares-passes.aspx	\$57
Daycare	\$724	\$950-\$1200 Source: Government of Alberta, 2011	\$476
TOTAL	\$3177	\$4145	\$968

Appendix 2: Sample Calculations using automatically assessed values

Scenario 1: Married Student, no dependents, attending the University of Alberta full-time.
Family size= 2, Spouse earns \$60,300 gross (\$44,496 net*)

Costs		Resources	
Tuition	\$5269	Student Contribution	\$1500
Fees	\$1356	Spousal Contribution	\$23,264 (\$3708 net- \$800) X8
Books/Supplies	\$1600		
Computer	\$200		
Additional Transportation	\$200		
Living Allowance	\$16,032 (\$2004/month)		
Total Allowable Costs	\$24,657	Total Expected Resources	\$24,764

Financial Need= Allowable Costs-Expected Resources

Financial Need= -\$107

No Student Aid Eligibility

Scenario 2: Married Student, 1 dependent, attending the University of Alberta full-time.
Family size= 3, Spouse earns \$69,600 gross (\$50,328 net*)

Costs		Resources	
Tuition	\$5269	Student Contribution	\$1500
Fees	\$1356	Spousal Contribution	\$27,152 (\$4194 net- \$800) X8
Books/Supplies	\$1600		
Computer	\$200		
Additional Transportation	\$200		
Living Allowance	\$19,624 (\$2453/month)		
Child Care Costs (can receive up to \$724/month per child with documentation)	\$600 (\$75/month)		
Total Allowable Costs	\$28,649	Total Expected Resources	\$28,652

Financial Need= Allowable Costs-Expected Resources

Financial Need= -\$3

No Student Aid Eligibility

*Net income figures calculated using the Canada Revenue Agency's Payroll Deductions Online Calculator found at: <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/esrvc-srvce/tx/bsnss/pdoc-eng.html>

Appendix 3: Federal Low/Middle Income Table

Family Size	Low Income Threshold	Middle Income Threshold
1	\$23,647	\$45,644
2	\$29,439	\$63,901
3	\$36,192	\$76,592
4	\$43,941	\$85,589
5	\$49,839	\$92,577
6	\$56,209	\$98,280
7 or more	\$62,581	\$103,105

Source: canlearn.ca