IMPROVING FOCUS

Cabrillo College joins network aiding low-income families

Grant designed to increase retention

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APTOS » Cabrillo College students struggling with finances can expect more support, due to a $100,000 grant announced Thursday.

Cabrillo became one of four community colleges in the state to join the Working Families Success Network, a three-year plan helping low-income students complete training and achieve financial stability.

Each college will design its own services, such as financial coaching or application assistance for public benefits, said Julian Haynes, program associate director at Achieving the Dream, the nonprofit overseeing the network’s expansion.

Cabrillo will receive $100,000 in 2014, and to be determined amounts in 2015 and 2016.

“There are students who leave college, who are in good academic standing, and leave for financial reasons,” Haynes said. “Working Families Success Network is trying to prevent that from happening.”

Many students quit or take longer to graduate, because they’re juggling two or three part-time jobs, said Karen Reyes, director of Cabrillo’s Fast Track to Work, a program for low-income students.

Reyes will manage the grant, along with Fast Track to Work’s other services, such as CalWORKs, academic and financial assistance for low-income students with children.

According to Cabrillo’s fact book, 47 percent of freshmen receive a degree, certificate or enough credits to transfer within six years. About half of Cabrillo students receive financial aid, a figure that has risen steadily for a decade.

Reyes said she’s not yet sure how the grant will be used, but ideas include money management and job interview workshops and application assistance for financial aid and food vouchers.

Cabrillo student Tyrone Williams, 30, works part-time as a Fast Track to Work office specialist while taking full-time classes toward a transfer degree. A father of three, Williams enrolled at Cabrillo in 2012 after being laid off from a warehousing job.

A high cost of living for a family of five makes coursework a second or third priority, said Williams, who plans to enter the internet security field.

“Keeping food in the refrigerator and the lights on, and on top of that you have to find time for them (kids) and time to study, sometimes it’s easier to quit school and go find a survival job,” he said.

The goal of the network, said Reyes, is to help students achieve economic stability while in college.

“(So) they know they have a place to live and food to eat, and they’re not thinking, ‘Oh I have to get third part-time job,’” she said. “The point of that is to provide them with the ability to focus their attention on school.”