

Engineer assistance available

State grants will help
pay off student loans

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Sikorsky Aircraft engineers jumped on board what might be a one-time opportunity to receive state funding to help pay off student loans.

Nancy Brady, the state Department of Higher Education's director of finance, said 26 engineers have submitted applications to the Connecticut Engineering Loan Reimbursement Program. The program kicked off two weeks ago, she said.

"The vast majority are from Sikorsky," Brady said. "They were on this from Day 1."

The Jobs for the 21st Century Act authorized the higher-education department to dole out \$250,000 in aid to engineers who were hired as full-time employees in Connecticut after Dec. 31, 2005.

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The legislation authorizes one year of funding.

The act is designed to provide the assistance because engineers are vital to the state's economy.

Before its passage, the Connecticut Business & Industry Association and several big employers had complained it is difficult to find and recruit engineers. Employers said the high cost of living in the state and the low number of students graduating from engineering programs are the major problems they face in finding employees.

A similar program for scientists holding doctorates will be launched this year.

Brady said this is the first time her department has administered a program that helps people who have earned degrees and are in the work force. She said this program is also unique because the engineering degree can be from any U.S. college or university.

Applicants must be legal residents of the state and have an outstanding loan in their name. The deadline for the program is March 30.

The department expected to give out 50 awards of \$5,000 each, but Brady said that could change depending on the number of applicants. If a lot of engineers apply, she said, the department could use other criteria, such as income, to decide who gets an award and its amount.

Getting a high number of applications shouldn't be difficult, said John Tirinzonie, an economist with the state Labor Department.

While the department doesn't track the yearly number of engineers hired, Tirinzonie said he knows a lot of companies and state agencies are desperate to hire engineers. He said there might be hundreds of engineers hired in a year in Connecticut.

In a news release Thursday, Gov. M. Jodi Rell touted the program and said it shows the state's dedication to building a world-class work force.

50 awards to be disbursed

Tarek Sobh, dean of the University of Bridgeport's School of Engineering, said the program is a good start and that he hopes more is done to help with high education costs.

"Kids are graduating with entirely too much debt," Sobh said.

Education costs are soaring, but federal financial aid programs haven't adjusted the income requirements to reflect this, he said. That means the aid packages available to families are not adequate or realistic when it comes to covering costs, which forces students to take out private loans, Sobh said.