

## **The Education Trust’s Comments on the Secretary’s Proposed Priorities, Requirements, Selection Criterion, and Definitions for the First in the World Program**

The Education Trust is a national nonprofit organization that promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels, pre-kindergarten through college. Our chief goal is to close gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign too many young people — especially those from low-income families or who are black, Latino, or American Indian — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

We generally support the Secretary’s proposed priorities and requirements for the First in the World Program. To further advance the administration’s goals for college completion, we recommend using a subset of the proposed priorities as a focus of the upcoming competition. We also urge the Secretary to incorporate a focus on improving outcomes for low-income students and students of color as a requirement.

### ***Prioritize low-income students and students of color***

More young adults than ever are going to college, but graduation rates have barely budged in the last 10 years.<sup>1</sup> Although America ranks fourth among OECD countries in degree attainment for all adults, the ranking plunges to 12th when looking only at young adults — a dramatic drop from first place in 1990.<sup>2</sup> We are certainly not “first in the world” when it comes to college completion, and in order to achieve that goal, our higher education system will have to expand both access and success for low-income students and students of color, who are earning degrees at rates well below those of other students. The First in the World Grant Program presents an opportunity to change these trends and boost graduation rates – but only if the awards are targeted appropriately to change patterns among low-income students and students of color. The current structure of the proposed priorities does not do this.

We are concerned that absent a specific requirement, awards may ultimately be directed toward strategies and interventions not specifically targeted to address the most critical barriers to success for high-need students (as defined in the proposal). We therefore strongly recommend that low-income students and students of color be an unabashed priority of the First in the World Grant Program; all strategies and interventions should target the problems they face, and colleges and universities should be evaluated based on their outcomes.

We submit that Proposed Requirement 1: Innovations that Improve Outcomes for High-Need Students should be an essential part of the upcoming grant competition, so that all other priorities be considered with a focus on the outcomes of low-income students and students of color. These students represent a growing proportion of America’s young people;<sup>3</sup> if they don’t attain degrees at higher rates, we’ll never be first in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Trust analysis of IPEDS Graduation Rates 2003 to 2013. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2014*.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2013*, Table 203.70 and Table 204.10.

## ***Essential Components of the 2015 Grant Competition***

Among the nine priorities included, we believe four present the most promise for improving persistence and completion. We suggest all grants in the 2015 competition be awarded to institutions focusing on at least one of the following four priorities:

1. Priority 1 – Improving Success in Developmental Education
2. Priority 6 – Increasing Effectiveness of Financial Aid
3. Priority 8 – Improving Outcomes at Minority-Serving Institutions
4. Priority 9 – Systems and Consortia Focused on Large-Scale Impact

An intense focus on these priorities, paired with a requirement that all strategies be targeted toward barriers to access and success for high-need students, is necessary to improve degree completion across all sectors of postsecondary education.

### **Priority 1: Improving Success in Developmental Education**

Developmental education in its traditional form often serves as an unnecessary barrier to progression for many students. Between 60 and 70 percent of incoming community college students typically must take at least one developmental mathematics course before they can enroll in college-credit courses.<sup>4</sup> However, 80 percent of those students successfully complete no college-level courses within three years.<sup>5</sup>

These students deserve better. There is already tremendous innovation in developmental education, as evidenced by the numerous strategies listed under this priority. Based on our current and historical work with institutions, we recommend the following three strategies be given preference in the upcoming competition:

1. Identifying and treating academic needs prior to postsecondary enrollment
2. Accelerating students' progress by placing them into credit-bearing courses with proper support
3. Integrating academic and other support for students in developmental education

Consider this exemplar:

#### ***Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS) Program in Tennessee***

The SAILS Program introduces the college developmental math curriculum in the high school senior year. About 70 percent of Tennessee seniors do not meet the ACT Math threshold of 19 and are therefore considered not college-level ready. These students are identified in their junior year, based on

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<sup>4</sup> T. Bailey, D.W. Jeong, and S.W. Cho. "Referral, enrollment, and completion in developmental education sequences in community colleges," (Achieving the Dream, 2006), *Economics of Education Review* 29, no.2 (2010): 255-270.

<sup>5</sup> Bailey, Jeong, and Cho. "Referall, enrollment, and completion in developmental education sequences in community colleges."

an ACT score below 19 in math, and are required to take the Bridge Math course during senior year. Students who successfully complete the program are ready to take a college math course upon graduation, eliminating the need for developmental math, saving them time and money and accelerating their path to graduation.

The SAILS program has had a dramatic impact. In Year 1, all 13 institutions in the Tennessee Community College System partnered with 118 high schools serving 8,400 students. Seventy percent of the students completed all competencies and were ready for college-level math upon high school graduation. Eighty-one percent of the cohort completed the equivalent of one semester of Learning Support Math. In Year 2 (2014-15 AY), the program is expected to serve 13,636 students in 184 high schools in 79 school districts. SAILS Math TN has attracted national attention for its innovative and practical solution to the college readiness problem.<sup>6</sup>

### **Priority 6: Increasing Effectiveness of Financial Aid**

Despite their intent at the outset, financial aid programs at all levels have moved away from prioritizing students with the greatest need. Through the expansion of tax benefits at the federal level and “merit-based” grants at the state level, financial aid programs have become less targeted toward, and likely less effective at, improving outcomes for low-income students and students of color.<sup>7</sup> But this pattern doesn’t stop at government aid: If anything, the shifts in institutional aid away from the poorest students have been even more egregious. For example, public four-year colleges used to spend more than twice as much on low-income students, but now spend about the same on wealthy students.<sup>8</sup>

We recommend prioritizing strategies in the upcoming grant competition that expand or restructure institutional aid programs in order to better target low-income students. Testing and evaluating changes to how financial aid is structured and delivered can be a tool to better inform if and how federal student aid programs could be restructured and/or leveraged to promote persistence and completion, particularly for low-income students.

### **Priority 8: Improving Outcomes at Minority-Serving Institutions**

If we are to turn around attainment patterns among students of color nationally, it is critical to build the capacity of MSIs. Together, these institutions enroll roughly half of black and Latino undergraduates and half of Hispanics. If we focus on the capacity of MSIs, then we can improve the number of these students who progress through postsecondary education. We recommend that this priority be included in the upcoming grant competition as a competitive priority.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.chattanoogaastate.edu/high-school/sails>

<sup>7</sup> S. Dynarski, “Hope for Whom? Financial Aid for the Middle Class and its Impact on College Attendance,” The National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper No. 7756, June 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Education Trust analysis of NPSAS:96 and NPSAS:12 using PowerStats. Results based on full-time, full-year, one-institution-dependent undergraduates.

### **Priority 9: Systems and Consortia Focused on Large-Scale Impact**

To effect meaningful change, there should also be a focus on institutions that serve large *numbers* of students of color, not just those that have high representation among their student bodies. For example, Temple University is not classified as an MSI, but with more than 25,000 full-time equivalent undergraduates still serves nearly 3,500 black students. Similarly, Florida State University enrolls 15.2 percent Latino students, but with nearly 30,000 undergraduates, that's more than 4,500 students.<sup>9</sup>

We recommend that competitive preference be given to consortia that include MSIs or institutions serving large numbers of students of color (as described by the proposed definition below).

### ***Additional Proposed Competitive Priorities***

#### **Removing Barriers to Credit Accumulation and Progression**

Developmental education is a roadblock for many students, but barriers to credit accumulation and progression don't stop there. College-level gateway courses are often structured in a way that is intentionally designed to "weed out" students rather than prepare them for success, and oftentimes students find themselves graduating with excess credits, if at all, due to a lack of clarity on what courses to take and when.

As such, we recommend an additional priority — removing barriers to credit accumulation and progression — that focuses on institutional policies and programs that could be better designed to promote completion. Among others, we suggest this priority encapsulate such strategies as:

1. Course redesign for gateway courses, particularly in mathematics
2. Academic mapping

#### **Gateway course redesign**

A few years ago, The Education Trust convened a group of university system heads around the topic of student success in mathematics. Instead of asking leaders to come equipped with the numbers they were used to reciting — the low success rates in their developmental math courses — we asked them to bring along success data for their first credit-bearing courses. By examining success rates in the first college-level mathematics course, system heads realized that course structure was not just a problem in developmental education. Many other introductory courses impede student progress toward the degree. Since that time, many institutions have begun to redesign these courses with a focus on student success. The University of Alabama is one such institution: It replaced traditional classroom instruction with blended learning in a computer lab for the first college-level mathematics course. Using common textbooks, exams, and quizzes, course redesign allowed students to get help immediately when they encountered obstacles, instead of waiting for faculty office hours the following week. As a result,

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<sup>9</sup> *College Results Online*, The Education Trust.

they've seen course success rates increase substantially — and the wide black-white gap in course success has completely disappeared.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 6: Success Rates in the First Three Mathematics Courses at the University of Alabama Over Time**

	Math 005	Math 100	Math 110
Fall 2005	64.2%	67.2%	66%
Fall 2006	73.6%	73.8%	70.3%
Fall 2007	74%	75.2%	74.8%
Fall 2008	67.8%	78.1%	65.5%
Fall 2009	67.2%	70.5%	77.7%
Fall 2010	64%	72.2%	73.3%
Fall 2011	66.7%	65.3%	72.7%
Fall 2012	84.6%	65.1%	80.1%

#### Academic mapping

To help students stay on track and make timely progress, increasing numbers of colleges and universities are creating academic maps, which make degree pathways much clearer to entering students. These maps are often accompanied by early alert systems for both students and advisers when students are not completing milestones. One of the first schools to implement this type of system was Florida State University, which created degree maps for every undergraduate major offered at FSU. These maps are presented to students in an eight-term, two-column format, with all courses required for successful completion, including graduation requirements and electives, and all milestones that students must complete. Students learn about these maps during the admissions process, orientation, and counseling sessions, and each semester, advisers and students receive reports on how students are progressing. More institutions need to adopt similar practices.

#### ***New Proposed Definitions***

**Institutions with Potential Large-Scale Impact for Minority Students:** A two-year or four-year college or university with sufficient capacity to impact large-scale change for black, Latino, or American Indian students. Sufficient capacity should be judged based on the actual number of such students enrolled at the college or university, rather than the percentage of the student body. In doing so, institutions with large student bodies that are relatively diverse, but are not classified as Minority-Serving Institutions, will still be eligible for competitive preference. We recommend that institutions with over 3,000 black, Latino, or American Indian students be included in this category.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Education Trust, “Higher Education Practice Guide: Learning From High-Performing and Fast-Gaining Institutions,” (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, January 2014), Table 6.

<sup>11</sup> Many four-year HBCUs (65%) and HSIs (52%) have less than 3,000 full-time equivalent undergraduates. Education Trust analysis of *College Results Online* database.