Education Department awards $75 million in innovation grants to colleges

Submitted by Michael Stratford on October 1, 2014 - 3:00am

WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration announced Tuesday that it will award a total of $75 million to 24 colleges to support innovations in higher education.

The Education Department chose the winners of the grant competition from a pool of nearly 500 applicants, officials said. The grants are going to 19 public and private four-year institutions and five community colleges. No for-profit institutions were eligible for the award.

Congress set aside $20 million of the $75 million for minority-serving institutions, and the Education Department awarded those funds to six institutions, including one historically black university.

That institution, Hampton University in Virginia, will use its grant to redesign some of its courses to better incorporate new digital learning tools. Those efforts will yield cost savings for students because they won’t have to purchase traditional textbooks but will rather use online resources, said William R. Harvey, the university’s president.

Another recipient, Bay Path University, in Massachusetts, plans to use its grant to fund the development of a new digital learning platform for its online bachelor’s degree program, which launched earlier this year. The program, called the American Women’s College, is the first all-women, all-online degree program in the country, according to the university.

Mitch Daniels, the president of Purdue University, said his institution's grant would be used to redesign large lecture courses so that they do a better job of engaging students.

The university has already moved 120 of its largest lectures to that “active learning” model and plans to have a total of 300 classrooms adopt the approach in the coming years, Daniels said.

Daniels, a former Indiana governor, added that his university’s research, with Gallup, has shown that
college graduates are more satisfied with their education when they report having had engaging classroom experiences. That is particularly true for low-income, first-generation students, he said.

One grant recipient will combine efforts to improve remedial education in two-year degree programs with an emerging form of competency-based education.

The $3.9 million grant will go to an experiment by College for America, a subsidiary of Southern New Hampshire University that offers associate degrees that are not based on the credit hour standard. The college will seek to create a new learning support structure for students to bypass remediation and get "just-in-time" help to master concepts.

Kate Kazin, College for America's chief academic officer, said the work should yield results that will apply to other institutions.

"We'll have a lot of data on how students are moving through" the program, she said.

The competitive grant program, dubbed “First in the World,” was first proposed by the administration in its 2012 fiscal year budget request to Congress. But it wasn't until this past January that lawmakers allocated funding for the program.

The president has called on Congress to fund a more expensive initiative to boost innovation on campuses and give states financial incentives to increase their own spending on higher education, which has declined in recent years when adjusted for increases in enrollments in many states. But that proposal stands virtually no chance of passing any time soon. Congress has passed legislation that will, starting Wednesday, fund the government at roughly the same level as last year until mid-December.

For an administration whose active regulatory agenda and pushes for greater accountability have often rankled colleges and universities, the grants also reflect the type of postsecondary investments that higher education has widely praised.

Cecilia Munoz, the president’s top domestic policy adviser, said the grants were aimed at promoting innovations in higher education that combat rising college costs and prices and at boosting student success, particularly for low-income students. She mentioned the president’s plan to convene another White House summit on those issues in December. Left unmentioned: the fall release of the college ratings system.

“These winners enable us to imagine a higher education that is focused on value, greater outcomes and quality,” Munoz said.

Ted Mitchell, under secretary of education, said the grant program is also in part aimed at serving as a testing ground for future federal policy experiments.

“We’re pretty clear that that’s one of the things we want to come out here,” he said. “What are the barriers to innovation -- and how does the presence or absence of federal policy help that?”

Department officials said they weren’t sure whether the annual progress reports that the grantees must provide to the department will be made public. But they said they will be encouraging the colleges to share their best practices, possibly through a department website.
The grantees are:

- Arizona State University, $3,999,955
- Bay Path University, Massachusetts: $3,548,322
- Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania: $1,653,186
- Central Georgia Technical College: $3,215,009
- Delta State University, Mississippi: $1,660,957
- Gateway Technical and Community College, Kentucky: $3,327,881
- Georgia Tech: $3,800,000
- Hampton University, Virginia: $3,500,000
- Indiana State University: $1,627,322
- Jacksonville State University, Alabama: $3,175,302
- Kennesaw State University, Georgia: $3,209,405
- LaGuardia Community College, New York: $2,908,031
- Lee College, Texas: $2,690,954
- Northeastern University, Massachusetts: $3,920,926
- Purdue University, Indiana: $2,373,003
- Research Foundation for State University of New York Oswego: $2,885,126
- South Dakota State University: $3,599,996
- Southern New Hampshire University: $3,953,360
- Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi: $3,301,524
- The College of New Rochelle, New York: $3,998,781
- University of Minnesota: $2,828,912
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: $3,030,323
- University of Southern California: $3,203,257
- Western Michigan University: $3,217,511

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