



Community Colleges Urge U.S. House of Representatives to Restore Key Strengthening Institutions Program (Title III-A), in Higher Education Act Reauthorization Legislation

Legislation reported by the House Education and the Workforce Committee, H.R. 4508, would eliminate the Title III-A, the Strengthening Institutions program. This program is a longstanding source of critical support for community colleges and AACC urges its reinstatement.

The Strengthening Institutions Program (Title III-A) helps eligible higher education institutions expand their capacity to serve low-income students by providing funds to improve their academic quality, institutional management, and fiscal stability. Funding is targeted on institutions that have relatively few resources and serve high proportions of low-income and historically underrepresented populations. Awards are subject to intense competition, and only a small percentage of applications are funded, often fewer than 20%.

Applications are generated at the local level by the colleges to meet their specific goals, within broadly set federal guidelines and priorities. Funds may be used for planning, faculty development, academic programs and establishing endowment funds. Other eligible activities include joint use of instructional facilities, construction and maintenance, and student services. Innovative instruction designed to help retain students and rapidly move them into core courses and through program completion can also be supported. Over recent years, the population of low-income students served by Title III-A institutions has grown in number and in need, and the resources of these schools have been stretched razor thin.

FY 2016 awards are representative. In that year, community colleges received 60% of the \$86.5 million funding. Overall, 179 colleges got grants.

A major focus of the Title III-A awards to community colleges is increasing student completion. Colleges are using Title III-A funds to implement a variety of innovative approaches to supporting students changing their campus cultures. Such projects include:

- **Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College** will add a new, hybrid Network Security CIS option; revise its online Business program according to best practices in online education; and convert its Agriculture, Process Technology, and Psychology programs for online/hybrid delivery. NEO will develop a suite of online services to bolster students' academic and non-cognitive skills. The services will include self-paced, interactive modules for basic skills in reading, writing, and math as well as for non-cognitive skills, such as time management and study skills. A new online coaching system will also be developed to create virtual connections between students in online and hybrid courses and faculty/staff on campus.
- **Mercer County Community College (NJ)** will implement an initiative entitled Achieving Milestones: Persistence and Success in the First 30 Credits through Completion. Student Success Coaches will provide case-management intrusive advising for first year students. The College will implement the Colleague Retention Alert early alert system using Faculty Retention Specialists to respond to the needs of continuing students. A Director of Assessment and Analytics will collect and analyze data to identify loss and momentum points and benchmark individual and student cohort progress. A Student Communication Specialist will develop an Enrollment and Retention Communication plan to improve communication with students. The plan will

coordinate the resources of a financial aid contact center and Colleague Communications Management, including SMS capacity, to respond to student inquiries in a timely manner and proactively “nudge” students with reminders of important deadlines, especially those related to financial aid.

- **Lurleen B. Wallace Community College (AL)** will engage in one comprehensive activity to resolve problems of low retention and completion by developing a college-wide student success coaching program and by improving student advising and orientation. The activity also addresses problems of low enrollment and low employment of career technical students by developing high-wage, high-demand career programs including the Occupational Therapist Assistant Program and options and certificates for the Industrial Electronics Program to include a Networking Option, an Industrial Systems Option, and an Electromechanical short certificate.

The Title III-A program has often been underappreciated because, unlike most other HEA institutional aid programs, it is not focused on a specific student population. But in fact, the program typically serves large numbers traditionally underrepresented students, they simply do not meet certain statutory thresholds for any one category of student. These low-income students, attending poorly resourced institutions struggling to improve, are deeply deserving, despite how difficult it is to obtain grants.

For these reasons, community colleges urge restoration of Title III-A of the HEA.

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