U.S. Department of Education Expands Innovation in Higher Education through the Experimental Sites Initiative

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As part of the President and Vice President’s new actions to provide more Americans with the opportunity to acquire the skills they need for in-demand jobs, today, the Department is announcing a new round of “experimental sites” (ex-sites) that will test certain innovative practices aimed at providing better, faster and more flexible paths to academic and career success.

“At a time when a college degree matters more than ever, we have to provide a flexible, innovative experience that can meet the needs of every American,” U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said. “This initiative will enable institutions to try some of their best ideas and most promising practices to provide more students with the opportunity to pursue a higher education and become equipped for success in today’s workforce.”

Since Congress gave the Department ex-site authority in 1992 through the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA), the Department has implemented experiments to allow colleges and universities to test alternative methods for administering the federal student aid programs under title IV of the HEA. Ex-sites allow the Secretary to waive certain statutory and regulatory requirements that could result in stronger academic or career outcomes for students. While providing new flexibilities for institutions to pursue these innovations, the Department will also conduct evaluations to demonstrate the effectiveness of these alternative approaches and inform potential future statutory and regulatory changes.

In December, the Department asked leaders in the higher education community for innovative ideas for ex-sites that could help more Americans succeed and improve outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds, those who struggle academically and nontraditional students who want to further their education. The Department took those suggestions, and will be providing institutions with greater regulatory flexibility to design and test new approaches to student financial aid designed to meet the need of these students through several new experiments that will:

- Enable students to earn federal student aid based on how much they learn, rather than the amount of time they spend in class by providing federal aid to students enrolled in self-paced competency-based education programs.
- Provide flexibility for an institution to provide a mix of direct assessment coursework and credit hour coursework in the same program.
- Allow the use of federal student aid to pay for prior learning assessments, which can allow students—including returning adults or veterans—to decrease their time to get a degree.
- Encourage college students to mentor high school students in the areas of college readiness, student aid, career counseling and financial literacy, through the use of federal work study funds.

In addition to these new experiments, the Department is continuing to take applications for an existing experiment that provides Pell Grants to students who are pursuing short-term training programs in order to receive the training they need to meet local or regional workforce needs. Institutions that apply for and are granted these limited waivers would be able to have more flexibility over a portion of their federal student aid in order to implement experiments suggested by colleges, universities and the higher education community. Applications for the new experiments will be due in late September.

To continue efforts to increase opportunities for Americans to strengthen their professional skillset, the Department is also announcing today that it will collaborate with the Department of Labor to develop a $25 million grant competition for an Online Skills Academy to support the development of a platform to enable high-quality, free or low-cost pathways to degrees, certificates, or other employer-recognized credentials. Further, the Department is announcing that it will release a notice inviting applications this week for a $1.5 million grant to study
online education which will contribute to the growing body of evidence about what works in online education, especially for low-income and first-generation students.

More information about today’s ex-sites will be published this week in the Federal Register and on the Department’s website: experimentalsites.ed.gov. To learn more about the Online Skills Academy and additional, Administration-wide efforts to expand opportunities for more Americans to develop the skills they need to be successful in today’s workforce, review the White House fact sheet.