Eager to Jump on the Gravy Train, Campus Officials Wonder, How Far Will New Retention Legislation Really Go?

BY RONALD ROACH

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. - Though a federal proposal to create a new national retention program is still under debate, Dr. Audrey Kharem already has a good idea as to how Pennsylvania State University could spend the money if her campus were funded.

In Kharem's view, federal matching funds should help the Penn State-University Park campus establish a summer transition program for rising low-income sophomore students.

"This could be a wonderful opportunity for our program," Kharem says.

As director of Penn State's Student Support Services program, Kharem would have significant say over setting the school's priorities with regard to competing for and spending new funding from a Clinton administration budget proposal that would create the College Completion Challenge Grant program.

She says if she got her hands on some of the funds, she'd also like to expand the number of students who could participate in her campus' program as well as line student pockets with money for textbooks.

But Kharem is joined by concerned observers and other student support personnel at campuses across the country who wonder: Will there be enough of a pie to divvy? How much ground will this new legislation really break? And will simply coming up with federal dollars in fact get to the root of why so many of higher education's susceptible students don't return to complete their degrees?

Fierce Competition

The federal proposal stipulates that only campuses with student support programs are eligible to participate in the grant program. Campuses with retention programs that specifically serve low-income students would also be eligible to compete for the funding.

Fierce competition for challenge grants is to be expected, given that only 70 of the more than 800 student service programs at college and university campuses across the country would receive funding during the program's first year.

Typically, the programs provide services such as tutoring, help with course selection, financial aid and career counseling to students who come from low-income families or are first generation college attendees.

Student Support Services, authorized in the Higher Education Act of 1965 as a federal TRIO program, serve as the basis for retention and counseling initiatives that are widely used throughout higher education.

The programs are said to have a credible enough track record in retention to serve as the base for a new national program.

"It makes sense to link the initiative with TRIO programs the federal government has this network [in Student Support Services], it makes sense to build on that rather than trying to start another program from scratch," says Dr. Jeffrey Milem, associate professor at the University of Maryland's College of Education.

Federal officials and congressional advocates, such as U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah D-Pa., characterize the College Challenge Grant proposal as one that will lead to retention programs. One administration official has called the proposal a "demonstration project."

But many onlookers remain cautiously optimistic about the program's ability to penetrate retention's deeper roots.

Federal Funds or Federal Research?

Although the new administration proposal focuses on beefing up funds, experts say new federal experimentation is sorely needed in the retention field.

"We need more research in understanding what increases college completion rates among students, says Milem.

The way Dr. Ronald McFadden sees it, a pre-freshman summer transition program for students who have traditionally enrolled in Student Support Services at the University of Tennessee would help many of them avoid academic trouble.

As director of the program at the Knoxville, Tenn., campus, McFadden says Student Support Services enrollment usually starts at around 200 at the beginning of the academic year and swells to 300 by the second semester.

"Many of our students don't come until they get into trouble, McFadden says.

He explains that many eligible students fail to enroll in the pro-program at the beginning of their freshman year because they don't want the stigma of being associated with the developmental pro-program. McFadden says a summer program would attract pre-freshmen who might normally shy away from enrolling in student services at the beginning of the semester."