

Appendix B

THE 2012 NPEC FOCUS TOPIC

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) announces this year's focused grant program. This program, administered for NPEC by the Association of Institutional Research (AIR), is designed to increase understanding and knowledge of a specific issue area identified by NPEC as important to the postsecondary education community and data collection efforts. The program will award funds of up to \$20,000 for dissertation grants and up to \$40,000 for research grants focused on the topic of "Exploring Postsecondary Non-Degree Programs."

NPEC FOCUS TOPIC: "EXPLORING POSTSECONDARY NON-DEGREE PROGRAMS"

Grants may be used to analyze data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) or other data sources. IPEDS is the core postsecondary education data collection program for NCES. Data are collected from all primary providers of postsecondary education in areas including enrollments, program completions, graduation rates, faculty, staff, finances, institutional prices, and student financial aid. Other data sources may include: data from other NCES or U.S. Department of Education databases, state data systems, or an institutions' data. Researchers may also develop their own data collections. This program does not require the use of NCES or NSF databases.

Much of the research in postsecondary education focuses on degree-seeking students and degree programs. However the recent political and regulatory climate has highlighted the importance of postsecondary non-degree programs while voicing concerns about the high student loan default rates affiliated with some of these programs. In remarks to a Joint Session of Congress, President Obama called upon every American to have at least one year of postsecondary education, highlighting the importance of the workforce preparation conducted at our nation's postsecondary institutions. Then more recently, the Obama Administration has sought to protect students from taking on unsustainable debt and protect taxpayers from high loan default rates through the so-called "gainful employment" regulations. To qualify for federal aid, the law requires that career colleges and training programs prepare students for gainful employment in recognized occupations.

In light of this unique political and regulatory climate, grant proposals should focus on postsecondary non-degree programs, their role in higher education, and appropriate measures of student success and institutional effectiveness for these programs. NPEC is interested in studies that focus on questions such as the following:

- How have the demographics of students enrolled in non-degree programs changed, if at all, over the years?
- What are the characteristics of these programs? Are they concentrated in particular fields? Do particular types of institutions offer these programs more than others? Are they offered predominantly online or in-person, or a mixture of both?
- How do institutions (or state agencies) determine the need for such programs? How do institutions design such programs?

- Who teaches in these programs?
- How do students typically fund their education in these programs? Without aid or any outside assistance? Federal and state aid? Institutional aid? Loans? Employer aid? Other? Does how they pay for their education impact their success in it?
- What is the return on investment for students completing non-degree programs? For the institutions offering these programs? For states and the federal government? How is return on investment in these programs defined by the different stakeholders?
- How are non-degree programs contributing to the workforce? How are these programs leveraged to respond to workforce needs both nationally and locally?
- What are appropriate measures of institutional effectiveness and student success for non-degree programs?
- What appropriate measures of student success in non-degree programs could be developed either with existing IPEDS data or by making additions to the current IPEDS institution-level data collections? For example, interim measures of success or post-completion outcomes.

The NPEC Focus Topic grants may support a variety of research activities focused on non-degree programs, including:

- Data synthesis or meta-analysis of research studies that address a specific question regarding non-degree programs and students;
- New analyses using national, regional, state, or institutional databases that focuses on non-degree students and/or programs;
- Literature review of available data, analyses, and research regarding non-degree student success measures or institutional effectiveness measures for institutions with differing missions;
- Case studies that focus on one or more issues related to non-degree programs or students;
- Studies that focus on identifying national or state level data that would be needed to help gain better insight into these programs; and
- Other creative and relevant studies.

Proposals that include the collection of data from individuals or groups or the observation of individuals or groups must include Institutional Review Board clearance to be considered.