



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

DEC 04 2013

GEN-13-24

Subject: Experimental Sites Initiative – Solicitation of Ideas

Summary: The purpose of this letter is to solicit ideas for experiments to test alternative approaches for the administration of the Federal student financial assistance programs as a part of the Department of Education's ongoing Experimental Sites Initiative. For this set of experiments, the Secretary seeks suggestions for creative experiments to test innovations that have the potential to increase quality and reduce costs in higher education. While the experiments will be implemented at a limited number of postsecondary educational institutions, we invite any individual or organization to submit ideas and suggestions for experiments that would improve the Federal student aid programs.

Dear Colleague:

This past August, President Obama outlined an ambitious new agenda to combat rising college costs and make college affordable for American families. One of the components of the President's plan is to remove barriers that stand in the way of competition and innovation in higher education, including barriers that prevent the use of new technologies or adoption of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. (For more information see: [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/22/fact-sheet-president-s-plan-make-college-more-affordable-better-bargain-](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/22/fact-sheet-president-s-plan-make-college-more-affordable-better-bargain-)).

To support the President's agenda, the Secretary will use his statutory authority under section 487A(b) of the Higher Education Act, as amended (HEA), to grant waivers from specific Title IV, HEA statutory or regulatory requirements to allow a limited number of postsecondary educational institutions to participate in experiments to test alternative methods for administering the Title IV, HEA programs. Such experiments are referred to in the HEA as "experimental sites."<sup>1</sup>

Consistent with section 487A(b) of the HEA, the Secretary generally cannot waive requirements related to need analysis, award rules (other than an award rule related to an experiment in modular or compressed schedules), and grant and loan maximum award amounts. However, the Secretary has the authority to approve experiments in a wide range of other areas. Through this effort, we expect to develop creative experiments that align with the President's plan to promote innovations that increase quality and reduce costs, while strengthening the programmatic and fiscal integrity of the Title IV, HEA programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently there are approximately 120 postsecondary educational institutions participating in one or more of eight ongoing experiments. Information about these experiments is available on our Web site at <https://experimentalsites.ed.gov>. 1990 K ST. N.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20006

A key component of these experiments will be a rigorous evaluation of whether they achieve their stated objectives and outcomes. We may consider the outcomes of the experiments when considering changes to the Title IV, HEA program regulations or, if appropriate, in legislative proposals to Congress. Through this letter and a notice that will be published in the *Federal Register* in the coming days (available now in draft form on our website: <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/college-affordability/notice-experimental-sites-initiative.pdf>), we seek ideas from postsecondary educational institutions and other parties for innovative experiments that will improve postsecondary student outcomes while maintaining or improving Title IV, HEA program accountability. Institutions and others, including businesses, philanthropies, and State agencies and offices, are encouraged to collaborate in the development of proposals.

We are particularly interested in experiments that are designed to improve student persistence and academic success, result in shorter time to degree, including by allowing students to advance through educational courses and programs at their own pace by demonstrating academic achievement, and reduce reliance on student loans. Subject to the statutory restrictions and limitations of the Secretary's experimental site authority noted above, examples of areas that could be considered for experiments include:

- Allowing flexibility in how institutions provide Federal student aid to students enrolled in competency-based education programs where progress is measured on the basis of how much has been learned, rather than measures of time;
- Allowing high school students to receive Federal student aid for enrollment in postsecondary course work without a reduction in the amount of State and local support provided for such enrollment;
- Allowing Federal student aid to be used to pay for assessments of prior learning and other processes to evaluate students' knowledge.

We will require institutions that participate in the experiments to provide data on the outcomes of the proposed alternatives. Further, experiments must not only measure the results of the alternative approach but also provide reasonable assessments of what would have happened under the existing requirements.

What to submit?

Submissions need not be longer than two or three pages and should address the following:

- The specific statutory or regulatory requirement(s) relating to the Title IV, HEA programs that would be waived or modified to test the alternative approach.
- A description of the recommended alternative approach, and how the proposed alternative approach avoids or minimizes challenges imposed by the existing requirements.
- A description of how the experiment could be evaluated, for example, by identifying outcome measures and ways to collect comparative data with respect to the current statutory or regulatory requirements that will be waived as a part of the experiment.

It is not necessary to submit fully developed experimental or evaluation plans.

How to submit?

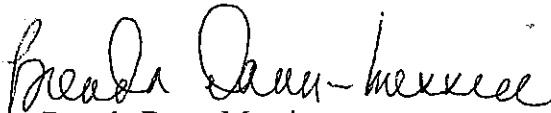
Suggestions for an experiment must be submitted no later than January 31, 2014, in order to ensure consideration as part of this call for new experiments. We recommend that suggestions be prepared as either a Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat document that is submitted as an attachment to an e-mail sent to [experimentalsites@ed.gov](mailto:experimentalsites@ed.gov). However, we will accept submissions in any format. We ask that submitters include the name and address of the institution or entity that is submitting the suggestion, and the name, title, mailing and e-mail addresses, and telephone number of one contact person for the submission.

What happens next?

Based on the submissions and our own input, and in collaboration with the submitting institution or other relevant parties, we will develop the final experimental designs and evaluation plans for each experiment. We may also develop experiments in addition to those proposed in response to this request. The Secretary will subsequently publish a second notice in the Federal Register to announce approved experiments, describe implementation and evaluation procedures, and invite institutions to apply to participate in the experiments.

If you have any questions on the information included in this letter, please submit them to [experimentalsites@ed.gov](mailto:experimentalsites@ed.gov).

Sincerely,



Brenda Dann-Messier  
Acting Assistant Secretary