

THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND SUCCESS ACT

Sponsored by Senators Susan Collins (R-ME), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), and Jon Tester (D-MT)

Nationwide, the Federal TRIO Programs help students from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal access to a college education and the supports they need to prepare for, succeed in, and graduate from higher education programs. The Educational Opportunity and Success Act would:

➤ ***Reauthorize funds for the TRIO Programs through 2025.***

➤ ***Establish more reasonable guidelines for notice of pending grant competitions.***

To help ensure that all prospective TRIO grant applicants have an adequate opportunity to submit a successful application, this legislation instructs the Department of Education to publish guidance at least 90 days before each respective TRIO grant competition. This revises the current notification language, which only provides a 45-day notification period.

➤ ***Remove administrative burdens to ease and update the application process.***

Currently, for each grant competition, the Department of Education establishes a waiting list (i.e., the “funding band”) to allow for the second review of applications with administrative or scoring errors. As a result, many applicants with qualifying scores experience delays in funding while the Department reviews its own errors. This bill would eliminate this practice while directing that applications denied in error be funded directly out of funds reserved for administrative purposes. Correspondingly, the bill would increase that administrative allowance to one percent.

➤ ***Institute common-sense guidelines for TRIO applications.***

In 2017, the Department of Education attempted to reject dozens of TRIO applications based on arbitrary, non-substantive formatting criteria, such as font size and line-spacing. After facing pressure from Congress, the Secretary issued a new Department-wide policy preventing the agency from rejecting grant applications based on simple formatting issues. This bill would codify that practice, preventing the Department from rejecting applications on the basis of suggested formatting criteria. It would also institute a straightforward appeals process for applications with minor budgeting errors, allowing them the opportunity to quickly correct inadvertent mistakes (e.g., rounding errors, transposed numbers, etc.).

➤ ***Ease administrative burdens in determining income eligibility.***

TRIO programs serve low-income, first-generation students at schools and colleges nationwide, but proving income eligibility is often a barrier to services. This bill would ease this burden by permitting TRIO administrators to work with colleges’ financial aid offices to more easily identify potential participants by virtue of their Pell-eligibility. Meanwhile, in middle and high schools, TRIO’s Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers programs, which provide light touch services to guide students

toward high school graduation and college attendance, would have the ability to serve all students at schools where more than 40 percent of attendees receive free or reduced-price lunch. Doing so would reduce unnecessary time spent determining income eligibility and allow programs to direct more resources toward serving students. Both of these measures would promote greater alignment between financial aid and the TRIO programs as well as ensure more seamless access for students with the greatest need.

➤ ***Update TRIO eligibility criteria to reflect the most recent FAFSA requirements.***

TRIO programs were intended to serve as an insurance policy for the Pell Grant and other student aid programs. This bill would ensure TRIO income eligibility requirements rely on the “prior-prior year” financial data now included in the FAFSA as permitted by the Department of Education. This change would ensure that TRIO administrators do not have to consult multiple sources of data, but rather may use students’ most recently completed FAFSA to determine program eligibility.

➤ ***Require virtual training to reach more applicants.***

Reaching students in all areas of the United States is central to ensuring all student have equal access to a college education. The bill would require at least one virtual, interactive training for interested applicants, better ensuring that all areas of the country have the chance to access the TRIO programs.