



Financial aid experiment for nontraditional courses taps N.J. university

By Jonathan Lai (8/22/16)

Aug. 22--In its latest experiment in higher education, Trenton-based Thomas Edison State University is testing a program that gives federal financial aid to students taking courses with nontraditional providers.

Beginning this fall, up to 200 Thomas Edison students will be able to receive federal financial aid for courses taken at Study.com, an online course provider.

Students pursuing bachelor of science in business administration or bachelor of arts in liberal studies degrees would enroll with Thomas Edison and then take at least half their degree credits through Study.com.

"One of the founding principles at Thomas Edison is: What we value is learning," said George A. Pruitt, the university's president. "Where and how the learning takes place, for us, is irrelevant."

Called Educational Equality through Innovation Partnerships (EQUIP), the Education Department program is expected to cover 1,500 students with up to \$5 million in Pell grants at the eight institutions participating in the pilot program.

The other colleges are Colorado State University Global Campus; Dallas Community College System in Texas; Marylhurst University in Oregon; Northeastern University in Boston; SUNY Empire State College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.; University of Texas-Austin; and Wilmington University in New Castle, Del.

In each case, the college pairs with a nontraditional educational outlet -- several programs are "boot camps" to teach coding skills -- and has a third-party monitor to evaluate outcomes.

The goal of the experiments, Education Department officials said, is to determine how to offer financial aid for nontraditional programs while also ensuring their quality.

"Today's average student is no longer the 18-year-old whose parents drives her up to State U. in a minivan stuffed with boxes," Ted Mitchell, the undersecretary of education, told reporters.

"Instead, the new normal student may be a 24-year-old returning veteran, a 36-year-old single mother, a part-time student juggling work and college, or a first-generation college student.

"The faces we picture as our college hopefuls can't be limited by any factor, including inflexible or unaffordable higher education options."

Those goals are familiar ones for Thomas Edison, where most of the 18,000-plus students take courses online. The university is meant for adults returning to college and does not accept students under age 21.

"The landscape is changing so rapidly, we're trying to not just keep up, but trying to push ahead if we can," said Marc Singer, vice provost for the university's Center for the Assessment of Learning.

Singer hopes to have the program ready by November. The Study.com courses are self-directed and based on video, with no hard deadlines for when the courses must be completed.

Because the university has worked with Study.com in the past to accept credits, Singer said, he does not expect obstacles for students. The main change for students will be the ability to receive the financial aid.

For the university, Singer said, the big addition will be the third-party quality assurance monitor, Quality Matters.

That evaluation will give the university information such as whether students graduated faster, how they performed academically versus through other methods, and how it affected their preparation for the workforce, Singer said.

"We'll be able to see whether a program like this really helps them by providing more access," he said, comparing it to traditional metrics such as whether the content covered in an online course matches that in the classroom."

Pruitt said the third-party monitoring will be important because "there is tremendous potential for abuse" if the government begins subsidizing nontraditional online course providers.

The for-profit college industry has come under fire for shady business practices, Pruitt noted, and some schools could view the program through the lens of money and not quality, he said.

"You don't want that to happen for the students' sake -- and you certainly don't want the United States taxpayers subsidizing the financial aid," Pruitt said.

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