

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 18, 2024

The Honorable Miguel A. Cardona
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20002

Dear Secretary Cardona,

As strong supporters of the Federal TRIO Programs, we write to urge the Department of Education to ensure the timely execution of the upcoming Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) grant competition.

As you know, SSS is the only national program providing college retention and completion supports for low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities. Through academic tutoring and counseling, personal mentoring, professional development and financial advising, SSS has generated a strong record of success. A recent report by the Department demonstrated that SSS students were more likely than their similarly-situated peers to persist at both two-year (51 percent v. 32 percent) and four-year (58 percent v. 48 percent) institutions.¹ Although many SSS programs have been in continued operation for multiple decades, they, like all other TRIO programs, must re-compete for their funding every five years.

Unfortunately, the Department has an historic track record of failing to award grants to TRIO funding recipients in sufficient time to prevent disruptions to student services. The Higher Education Act requires the Secretary to inform TRIO applicants about the status of their application for continued funding “at least 8 months prior to the expiration of the grant or contract.”² However, the Department has for decades failed to meet this statutory deadline. Delays in the delivery of competition results create uncertainty for grant applicants, particularly those already operating programs on campuses across the country. Lack of certainty around the timing of grant awards prevents colleges from recruiting student participants and securing adequate resources on campus. Additionally, such delays often result in layoffs or resignations of seasoned SSS professional staff at grantee institutions. Fewer experienced TRIO professionals mean fewer productive programs and worse outcomes for TRIO students.

With 1,159 programs serving more than 208,000 students, SSS is the largest Federal TRIO Program. As such, the need for timely and methodical execution of the competition is clear. Therefore, we urge the Department to take the necessary steps to ensure the timely release of the FY 2025 SSS competition results so that successful grant applicants can launch their programs by September 1, 2025.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Student Service, Comparing Student Outcomes Between Student Support Services Participants and Nonparticipants in the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Washington, D.C., 2019.

² 20 USC 1070a-11(c)(7)

Specifically, we urge the Department to enact a timeline that notifies grantees of competition results at least three months before the grant start date. Because current SSS grants expire on August 30, 2025, it is critical that the Department publish the final application by fall 2024. By doing so, the Department will have sufficient time to execute the peer review and appeals processes such that the final slate of grant awards could be released in May 2025. This would prevent the previous unnecessary crises created by the Department and instead allow successful grantees sufficient time to recruit students and staff, secure campus resources and take other steps needed to ensure student success.

We deeply appreciate your support for TRIO and hope you will ensure that this upcoming SSS competition is conducted in a timely manner.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Mike Crapo
United States Senator



James E. Risch
United States Senator