

Increasing College English, Math Completion Among Goals Of Grant

A \$2.1 million grant should help Ohio move toward its goal of 65% degree or credential attainment for working-age adults by 2025, according to higher-education leaders.

Their comments came Thursday as the Department of Higher Education conducted its fall convening for the Strong Start to Finish grant program. The department was one of four entities that received the award, which is intended to improve access to higher education and close attainment gaps for underserved populations.

The nationwide grant program is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates, and The Kresge Foundation. Among the state's goals for its funding will be increasing the percentage of first-time students at participating schools who complete college math and English courses in their first year from 33% to 50%.

Jack Hershey, president of the Ohio Association of Community Colleges, said he believes ODHE's application was approved because the state's institutions have already made strides toward implementing corequisite math and English courses.

"This is not something brand new dropped into this state," he said. *"We have been working on this for many years. We have seen the data...about why this is the right thing to do in terms of student success."*

Mr. Hershey said the state also stands out because it is leaving room for individual institutions to experiment in the area instead of mandating one solution for all its schools. He said he viewed the fact that no two institutions will follow the same game plan as the "strength of Ohio's (grant) application."

"(There are) 30 different opportunities in this room for people to figure out how to implement these reforms and to meet the goals of the program," he said. *"Thirty different opportunities to figure out what other programs, supports, etc. make sense when combined with corequisite remediation."*

Bruce Johnson, president of the Inter-University Council of Ohio, also cheered the collaborative nature of the grant-funded effort.

"We don't have to be top down. We are willing to work together to make great projects happen because they're good for our students," he said.

Mr. Johnson, who previously served as the state's development director, said he learned in his previous job that an educated, skilled workforce will attract employers. He said the state's 65% attainment goal shows the importance of improving completion rates at colleges and universities.

"The state's economic development efforts are only as good as its education system," he said.

Christopher Mullin, director of Strong Start To Finish, said along with the state's history of collaborative efforts, Ohio's application stood out because it has shown commitment to closing attainment gaps between age, economic and racial groups.

"We can't do this work and not consider the effect it has on inequity," he said.

Kathleen Cleary, an associate provost at Sinclair Community College who is on loan to ODHE to guide the agency's grant effort, said the work is important because early success in math and English increases a student's chances of completion.

She said that under the grant program, institutions will be expected to clearly structure courses of study for all their majors, align "gateway" math and English courses to majors, implement corequisite remediation programs at scale and introduce advisory efforts aimed at reaching the state's goal.

Among the benefits to the state, Ms. Cleary said, will be improving social mobility. She said too often the ZIP code a student is born into is predictive of his or her chances at graduating college.

"We want to turn that around (by) helping more students in poverty," she said.

In his opening remarks to the convening, ODHE Chancellor John Carey said he hopes the state's participation in the grant program encourages more students to believe they are college material.

"I think Strong Start to Finish sends the message that you are important. We want to give you the tools to pursue your dream," he said.