

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 12, 2017

The Honorable Kathleen S. Tighe
Office of the Inspector General
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue Southwest
Washington, DC 20202-1500

Dear Ms. Tighe:

We write to you to raise concerns with the Department of Education's handling of applications for grants under the federal TRIO programs. For years, grantees have reported to Members of Congress that they have struggled with the Department's lack of timeliness and consistency in administering TRIO grant competitions. We ask you to investigate the Department's administration of these competitions, identify what deficiencies within the Department have caused these competitions to be run repeatedly behind schedule, and make recommendations to the Secretary and to Congress about how these problems can be addressed.

We ask you to address the shortcomings that have caused the Department to regularly fail to meet statutory deadlines in awarding TRIO grants. The law requires the Department to notify both new and continuing grantees of their continued funding status at least eight months prior to the start-up date or end of their annual grant cycle. Additionally, the law requires grantees with continued funding status to see no interruption of funding. However, in multiple times in recent years, the Department has published application requirements or notified grantees of awards well past this deadline. In many instances, this lack of timeliness has been so severe and disruptive that Congress has included language in appropriations legislation directing the Department to address these delays.¹

As a most recent example, in the Fiscal Year 2017 Upward Bound and Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement competitions for new grant awards, the Department notified some grantees nearly a month after their awards were scheduled to begin.² In the most recent


¹ S. Rept. 115-150 to Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2018, S. 1771; Conference Report to Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016, P.L. 114-113; Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015, P.L. 113-235; S. Rept. 112-84 to Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2012, S. 1599; Conference Report to Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012, P.L. 112-74.

² There are three Upward Bound grant competitions: Upward Bound (UB), Veterans Upward Bound (VUB), and Upward Bound Math and Science (UBMS). The UB competition was announced in the Federal Register (81 FR 71492) in October 2016, and the VUB and UBMS competitions were announced in the Federal Register in February and May 2017 (82 FR 10348 and 82 FR 23215), for grant cycles beginning September 1, 2017. Congressional offices first received notifications of UB awards on May 24, 2017, with additional slates of awards not finalized until August 29, 2017 and September 21, 2017. Congressional notification for VUB and UBMS similarly was not complete until September 28, 2017.

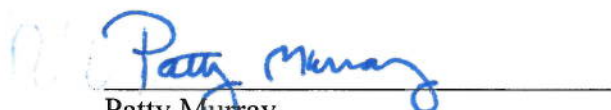
FY17 Veterans Upward Bound competition, the Department was so delayed in announcing new grant awards to existing grantees that they had to offer “no-cost extensions” to avoid creating a funding gap.³

The Department’s repeated failure to conduct TRIO competitions in a timely and consistent manner has subjected TRIO programs and the students they serve to unnecessary uncertainty and disruption that diverts time and resources from the central goal of TRIO—ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have access to higher education. By investigating the causes of these administrative failures and recommending how they can be remedied, you will provide a valuable service to the low-income, first-generation college students who rely on TRIO for their shot at achieving a better future. We stand ready to work with you to improve the Department’s administration of TRIO, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
U.S. Senator



Patty Murray
U.S. Senator

³ Existing grantees nearing the end of their 5-year award cycle had awards scheduled to expire on August 31, 2017. The Department had to offer these grantees a “no cost extension” to extend their current grant award until September 30, 2017. Congressional offices did not receive final notification of awards until September 28, 2017.