STATE AFFAIRS
WISPOLITICS
Wisconsin's Premier Political News Service

UW System: Testifies in support of federal financial aid for students in UW Flexible Option program

Posted on Friday, Sep 14, 2018

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. Get the app or access via desktop.

Heather LaRoi, UW System
608-265-3195, hlaroi@uwsa.edu

MADISON – The University of Wisconsin System on Thursday urged the U.S. Department of Education (DoEd) to rewrite regulations governing the federal student financial aid programs to ensure students participating in its innovative UW Flexible Option program have access to federal financial aid.

Laura Kite, assistant dean for student services for UW System's Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning, told DoEd officials that federal regulations for student-teacher interaction and for defining credit hours should be revised.

"We believe to be successful we must be innovators," Kite said. "To be innovators we need our partners, like the U.S. Department of Education, to remove rules and regulatory barriers to innovation."

The DoEd held the third of three hearings about the federal financial aid programs Thursday at Gateway Technical College in Sturtevant. The others were in Washington, D.C., and New Orleans. The agency is soliciting information on program regulations and creating a negotiated rulemaking committee to discuss updating aid program regulations. Department officials intend to present proposed regulatory language at the committee's first meeting.

Under the pioneering Flexible Option program, students master competencies rather than accumulate credit hours. They progress toward degrees at their own

pace, receiving a high-quality education at a lower cost than a traditional on-campus or online program. About 300 students have already graduated.

Kite told federal officials that two areas of aid regulation need modernization.

One centers on the amount of time faculty spend with students, or “regular and substantive interaction.” While originally conceived to protect students and taxpayers by insuring against unscrupulous providers, Kite said, regulations have not kept pace with current instructional methods.

The regulations, she said, should focus on student outcomes. “New models like CBE (Competency-Based Education) that support student learning should be recognized and encouraged through new regulations,” Kite said.

The other area that needs updating is the definition of credit hour, Kite said, which is tied to semesters or terms and not outcomes. Credit hours don’t recognize the kind of learning that takes place under CBEs, she said. Instead, federal regulations should recognize the delivery of financial aid based on the mastery of subject matter.

“We colloquially call this a ‘paycheck model’ of disbursement, because if a student completes more work at the mastery level within a month, say, they could then receive an amount of aid commensurate with the amount of work completed,” Kite said.

The University of Wisconsin System is one of the largest university systems in the U.S., with 13 four-year universities and 13 two-year branch campuses serving about 170,000 students with 39,000 faculty and staff.