

Summary of Comments Received on the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate
Achievement Program Application and Responses

The draft FY 2007 Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program Application package was published in the Federal Register on August 11, 2006 for public comment. A total of 20 individuals from institutions of higher education across the country submitted comments on the package. Almost all of the public comments received were relative to either the proposed standardized objectives or the proposed maximum funding levels/number of participants proposed by the Department.

The Department has carefully reviewed and considered the comments received and has made the following modifications:

1. Comment:

Six commenters were concerned with the proposed standard objective concerning the provision of research and scholarly activities to McNair participants. Generally, the commenters felt that the objective as presented required applicants to average two distinct numbers—those who persisted in undergraduate study and those who enrolled in graduate programs—to come up with a percentage projection that was unbalanced and unrealistic since it combined unlike items.

Discussion: The Department agrees and has made a change in the objective. The revised objective asks for a projection of the number of McNair participants who will receive research and scholarly activities in each McNair Program academic year. The provision of research and scholarly activities is the heart of the McNair Program and introduces students to the types of rigorous academic endeavors that will be required of them when they pursue graduate studies. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask applicants to project the number of McNair participants who will be provided the opportunity for research and scholarly activities each year. The objective has been revised to read as follows:

_____ % of McNair participants will complete research* and scholarly activities that will directly impact their educational progression each McNair Program academic year.

(*A structured research activity must be definitive in its start and end dates and contain appropriate benchmarks for completion of the various components. In addition, the activity should be conducted under the guidance of an appropriate faculty member with experience in the discipline selected by the McNair participant.)

2. Comment:

Seven commenters were concerned with the proposed standard objective concerning the three-year time frame for attainment of the bachelor's degree once students are accepted into the McNair Program. Specifically, the commenters said that since some of the students were at the freshman or sophomore levels when accepted, it was highly unlikely that they would achieve their undergraduate degree within the three-year time frame, which would make the objective unattainable in many instances.

Discussion: No change was made.

The Department has reviewed and considered the commenters' suggestions. Although, neither the law nor the regulations specifically prohibit the selection of freshmen or sophomores into McNair projects, this type of academic endeavor is more appropriate to students with a firm academic foothold and with some idea of the academic discipline that will most likely further their aspirations and is often more readily observable as students become rising juniors. A McNair participant's status as a rising junior also coincides with the minimum level at which the McNair students become eligible to receive the federal stipend for approved research activities provided by McNair projects. Therefore, the three-year time frame is entirely appropriate for projects that are targeting the students who are likely to receive the most benefit from the McNair Program.

3. Comment:

Five commenters were concerned with the proposed standard objective concerning the immediate enrollment of bachelor's degree recipients into postbaccalaureate programs. Specifically, the commenters said that many students take time off from their educational pursuits after completion of their undergraduate studies to complete internships, address family issues, and volunteer in Peace Corp, Teach for America, or other similar activities. The commenters suggested increasing the time for enrollment in post-baccalaureate programs to at least 18 months.

Discussion: No change has been made.

The Department has reviewed and considered the commenters' suggestions. It is recognized that the situations presented by the commenters may often occur, however, it is thought that the motivation and encouragement of McNair students to continue their studies at a steady and consistent rate is also a key activity that should be provided to students enrolled in the McNair Program.

4. Comment:

Eighteen commenters were concerned with the proposed standard objective concerning the attainment of a doctoral degree by McNair Program participants within seven years of the attainment of the bachelor's degree. Many of the commenters provided citations from various resource data that suggests that the average time for completion of doctoral level studies may be up to 11.5 years. Therefore, the seven-year attainment period included in the objective is unrealistic and should be changed.

Discussion: The Department agrees and a change has been made.

The Department is aware of the data on the protracted time frames prior to doctoral degree attainment for McNair and other students generally. Also, the data on actual doctoral degree attainment by McNair participants will be captured by the annual performance reports that McNair grantees must submit each year. It should be noted that grantees under the McNair Program, as well as the other programs that fall under the TRIO umbrella, may earn up to 15 prior experience points depending on how successful they have been in the achievement of their proposed objectives over the three years immediately preceding the competition year. The time frame proposed in the original objective was to allow eligible grantees to earn points for this portion of the prior experience criteria in as early as two grant award cycles. The objective has been revised to read as follows:

_____ % of McNair Program participants will attain a doctoral degree within ten (10) years of the attainment of the bachelor's degree.

5. Comment:

Three (3) commenters suggested that the proposed maximum funding levels and proposed minimum student service numbers required for each project did not take into account many factors, including intensity of services provided, geographical locations, and project complexities. The attempt to require standard costs per student and per project maximums could have the affect of dilution of services and adversely affect the preparation of students for the rigors of postbaccalaureate pursuits.

Discussion:

The Department has reviewed and considered the commenters' suggestions. However, no change has been made.