

**Public Comments Received During the 60-day Comment Period –  
December 2016**

**NCER-NPSAS Grant Study - Connecting Students with Financial Aid (CSFA) 2017: Testing the  
Effectiveness of FAFSA Interventions on College Outcomes**

ED-2016-ICCD-0112-0001

Comments on FR Doc # 2016-25426

**Comment Number 1**

**Document:** ED-2016-ICCD-0112-0004

**Name:** John Thornton

I would like to address the extremely low college completion rate for students who suffer from a Serious Mental Illness (SMI), commonly referred to as consumers.

The college completion rate for consumers is much lower than the populations as a whole, somewhere around 20%. And without a college degree, many consumers are stuck in dead end, low paying jobs, if they are fortunate enough to even obtain employment. This perpetuates a cycle of low lifetime earnings, dependence on government assistance, and general hopelessness at their situation.

I know, because I am a consumer. I was fortunate enough to graduate in 2001 with a BS degree and 2005 with an MBA, before I got very sick. I pursued recovery diligently until I was ready to reenter the workforce a few years ago. And as hard as it is to do for the general population, it is even harder for those with an SMI.

I applied to and was accepted to a doctoral program in Higher Education from my undergrad alma mater in 2016, hoping to learn how to administrate higher education organizations and perhaps also improve the lives of other consumers in the process, but was offered no scholarships. And the approx \$20,000 a year price tag for what may prove to be too much for me to handle psychologically was too much, so I deferred enrollment to try to locate other funding.

Little did I know that virtually no funds are set aside for persons with an SMI to return to college. This saddens me. Because virtually no persons with an SMI qualify for an academic scholarship by virtue of having an SMI; I was fortunate to just scrape by and graduate with my degrees but certainly not with a 4.0. And obtaining a higher level career type job that might pay for the degree has proven equally difficult, for the same reason.

So I (and thousands of other consumers trying to better themselves) are stuck between a rock and a hard place. We would like to attend school and obtain higher ed degrees so that we are better able to compete with applicants without an SMI, but are unable to do so without incurring enormous debts that we might not be able to repay anyway should the SMI recur.

If it is AT ALL possible, could someone from the Department of Ed contact me regarding this situation? I believe I have a solution that would benefit all interested parties, while simultaneously improving the lives of students (or potential students ) like me who suffer from a Serious Mental Illness and would like to return to and complete school. For an up front investment in Human Capital , the long term return on that investment could potentially be huge, and get many consumers back into the work force where they belong. Retention and completion rates would also be positively impacted.

Thank you,

Col. John Paul Thornton, MBA, CAPM, CPSS  
Virginia College Adjunct Business Faculty  
Alabama Peer Specialist Association (APSA) board member

## **Human Capital Initiative short summary**

### **What is the Human Capital Initiative (HCI)?**

The idea behind the HCI began at the 2016 Alternatives Conference in San Diego, where, among other things, it was made clear that:

- 1) persons with a Serious Mental Illness (or consumers) enroll in and graduate from college at a much lower rate than the general population,
- 2) so there is a corresponding low number of jobs/career prospects for consumers here in AL, and low level of income (non attainment of the 'college wage premium'. This in turn makes consumers more reliant on government programs such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and the like.
- 3) There is a lack of board level organizational skills within consumer peer organizations nationwide. This limits the effectiveness of the organizations, and also lowers the level of support they can provide to consumer peers.

**So the main idea is that APSA (among other organizations) can coordinate a program of higher education and or professional certification assistance among multiple stakeholding agencies** both statewide and nationwide (such as the AL Dept. of Mental Health, the Social Security Administration, the US Dept. of Education, AL Vocational Rehab, various state colleges and universities, and others) so that more consumers can graduate college and or attain professional certifications in a variety of fields, thus:

- 1) increasing the number of gainfully employed consumers,
- 2) decreasing the costs to the various aforementioned organizations associated with non-gainfully employed consumers,
- 3) improving quality of life for consumers,
- 4) gaining board-level organizational skills through higher education and ensuing professional employment.

**This will be a long term, collaborative effort.** Just getting these various agencies to communicate with each other will take time, more so to actually achieve something this ambitious. But I believe that the end results will justify all the time, money and energy being it forth.

**For more information (or a copy of the full 5 page Human Capital Initiative proposal), please contact:**

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APSA Region A Board member  
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### **Response**

Dear Mr. Thornton,

Thank you for bringing up the topic of aid for students with disabilities and informing us about the Human Capital Initiative. Please note that while students with disabilities are not a target group in the NCER-NPSAS Grant Study sample, they are included in the underlying sample as represented in a national survey of all beginning postsecondary students.

Although your comment does not directly pertain to the NCER-NPSAS Grant Study - Connecting Students with Financial Aid (CSFA) 2017: Testing the Effectiveness of FAFSA Interventions on College Outcomes, we have forwarded your comment to other offices within the U.S. Department of Education and the Department provided the following response:

Within the Department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) division distributes federal funds for services to individuals

with disabilities that results in their education and employment. Each State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency is required to serve individuals with disabilities, including individuals with mental illness, that meet statutory eligibility requirements. Postsecondary education services are among the many services the VR program provides to individuals with disabilities that are required to achieve their employment goals.

There is no requirement in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, to fund programs specific to individuals with mental illness. RSA funds special demonstration projects through competition to improve and expand services that may focus on particular populations. At this time, none of these demonstration projects are focused on individuals with mental illness and their receipt of postsecondary education services.

State VR agencies may have initiatives that are funded with State and Federal funds to serve specific populations in the State that are unserved or underserved, which may include individuals with mental illness. The State VR agency must identify those populations that are unserved or underserved, based upon a comprehensive statewide needs assessment conducted every three years, in the VR portion of the State Unified or Combined State Plan. The plans for serving those populations must also be described.

Thank you again for your comment.