

## Federal Policy Digest

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December 19, 2025

### Education Department and Negotiators Reach Consensus on Workforce Pell Regulations (12.12.25)

The Education Department and its AHEAD rulemaking committee have [reached](#) consensus on Workforce Pell draft regulations, which will now be posted on the Federal Register for public comment. To qualify, all programs must:

- Be 150–599 clock hours and 8–14 weeks
- Aligned with state-defined high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand industries
- Articulate into credit towards a subsequent degree at one or more institutions
- Lead to a recognized postsecondary credential
- Have been in operation, meeting all criteria for at least 12 months prior to approval
- Meet 70% completion and 70% job placement (defined broadly as job placement in any job until at least 2028-29)
- Not outsource more than 25% of the program to an unaccredited provider
- Pass a value-added earnings (VAE) test (i.e., tuition rates cannot surpass the difference between a graduate's average earnings and 150 percent of the poverty line)

Governors must approve every Workforce Pell program to ensure it aligns with state workforce priorities, meets employer demand, provides credit that counts towards a credential, and has met all requirements for the prior year. Governors must also approve distance education programs for students located in their state. States must use transparent and equitable approval processes, regularly update workforce-demand priorities, and calculate and submit completion and job placement rates. States must also verify via a written agreement that the credit earned will be accepted at either the same institution or by at least one other institution. After state approval, the Secretary of Education will also conduct a federal review, including the VAE Test. If a program fails to meet completion or job placement rates, then it loses Workforce Pell eligibility. When a program fails the VAE, then the institution must lower its tuition and fees and will lose eligibility if the problem persists. Programs that fail must wait two award years to reapply.

**Implications/next steps:** As of now, higher education experts [noted](#) that it is unclear how many programs will be eligible for Workforce Pell, with one committee member sharing that “it will require significant effort by schools to secure and maintain eligibility for these programs” and that Workforce Pell “may not be what some institutions or employers expected,” given the proposed guardrails. Wesley Whistle at New America also expressed concern that accreditation does not have a more substantive role. Since consensus has been reached, the committee’s agreed-upon regulatory text must be used in the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking published in the Federal Register for public comment. Once the public comment period begins, the ED can change the regulations in response to feedback, though the changes must be related to issues raised in the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking and the comments submitted. Now that consensus for Workforce Pell has been reached, the AHEAD committee will focus on accountability for degree programs during their next session on January 5-9, 2026.

### Trump Administration Expands Travel Ban to 20+ Countries (12.16.25)

The Trump administration [announced](#) an expansion of travel restrictions affecting additional countries. Full travel bans now [apply](#) to the following newly added countries: Burkina Faso, Laos, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Syria, as well as individuals traveling on documents issued or endorsed by the Palestinian Authority. These additions build on the 12 countries already subject to a full ban since June: Afghanistan, Burma, Chad, the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. In addition, partial travel bans now apply to 15 more countries; these

restrictions suspend entry for immigrants and for individuals traveling on B-1, B-2, B-1/B-2, F, M, and J visas. The newly affected countries subject to partial travel bans are: Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominica, Gabon, The Gambia, Malawi, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tonga, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Partial bans will also remain in effect for four of the seven countries originally announced in June: Burundi, Cuba, Togo, and Venezuela. Since June, Laos and Sierra Leone have been moved from the partial to the full ban list, while Turkmenistan is now subject only to a ban on immigrant entry.

**Implications/next steps:** The updated travel bans go into effect on January 1, 2026; existing visa holders are exempted. NAFSA issued a [press release](#) citing concerns that the full and partial bans will impact international students and exchange visitors, particularly for Nigeria, which is a top ten sending country to the United States. The press release stated: "Our isolationism will create a vacuum that other enterprising nations will gladly fill. At a time when countries including China, Canada, Germany, and Japan are actively courting talented students, scholars, and researchers from around the world, this travel ban sends the message that the United States is better off without their contributions." The announcement also noted that the visa overstay rate data used as evidence in the proclamation is based on flawed data.

## **NSF and NIH Alter Grant Review Processes (12.1.25 and 12.12.25)**

The National Science Foundation (NSF) announced in a December 1 internal memo that changes are being made to the grant proposal review process. The memo [notes](#) that as few as one outside review is now allowed (the current minimum is three). Additionally, the routine use of expert panels to discuss individual reviews will end, and program managers will have greater authority to recommend which proposals to fund. Program officers must also shorten their summaries of strengths and weaknesses of each proposal, which are part of the review process. NSF spokesperson Mike England told [Inside Higher Ed](#) that changes outlined in the memo are intended to streamline processes, reduce administrative burden, and expedite shutdown-related backlogs. The memo also mentions that the changes are intended to help the NSF's reduced workforce. *Science* reported that the elimination earlier this year of hundreds of "rotators" – scientists on loan from institutions who served as program managers and higher level administration – has contributed to the backlog.

According to [STAT](#), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) distributed guidance on December 12 titled "Reviewing Grants for Priority Alignment" that orders staff to use a computational text analysis tool to find certain terms in current and new grants that are misaligned with NIH priorities. The guidance notes that funding won't be provided until "all areas of non-alignment" in "misaligned" grants have been addressed. According to [NOTUS](#), the guidance has also paused new funding for NIH grants that include words such as "health equity" and "structural racism" until they are reviewed using the text analysis tool.

**Implications/next steps:** The changes at the NSF [mean](#) that program officers can more easily reject proposals without sending them out for review and can move ahead without convening a panel for proposals aligned with Trump administration priorities. One former senior White House science aid argued that these changes advantage the Trump administration by shifting funding away from university-driven research priorities that rotators have prioritized. The NIH's new guidance will likely impact health disparities research, although the full list of terms or phrases the tool is supposed to identify remains unclear.