

Gains for higher education included in American Rescue Plan Act

One of the largest spending bills ever approved by Congress—the \$1.9 trillion-dollar American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)—includes unprecedented levels of direct and indirect funding for libraries, including for academic and research libraries.

The Department of Education (ED) is expected to issue further guidance and begin distributing money directly to colleges and universities. Academic librarians should consider now where funding could support their activities. Initial communications from ED indicate that the agency will remain focused on ensuring college campuses have access to guidance, technical assistance, and examples of best practices to inform their efforts to get students back into classrooms and meet their academic, social, and mental health needs.

Overall, ARPA builds on COVID-19 relief packages passed in 2020 by aiding institutions of higher education and its students as they navigate the final stages of the pandemic and early stages of recovery. ARPA provides \$39.6 billion to colleges and universities and their students, more than what was provided in multiple relief packages in 2020 (\$14 billion in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, or CARES Act and \$21 billion in December's Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriation Act, or CRRSAA). At least half of such funding must be spent on emergency financial aid grants to students to help them with college costs and basic needs like food, housing, and health care. The other half is available to institutions of higher education to defray lost revenue and increased costs from declining enrollment, the transition to online learning, closures of revenue-producing services and facilities, and COVID-19 testing, vaccination, PPE, and classroom retrofits.

ARPA requires institutions to use a portion of their funds to implement public health and safety best practices, as well as to conduct outreach to financial aid applicants about opportunities for additional aid. The legislation also provides nearly \$3 billion to historically Black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities, Hispanic serving institutions, and other minority serving institutions.

ARPA also includes emergency relief funding for additional national priorities, which may benefit libraries indirectly. Creative thinking and collaboration by academic

librarians within their institutions may allow them to take advantage of these sources of funding, such as:

- **State and Local Aid.** ARPA includes \$360 billion in state and local assistance. This funding provides states and localities with flexibility on how monies are spent in responding to economic losses relating to COVID-19. For example, funds could help mitigate dramatic cuts to public sector employees, including those for higher education (estimates of more than 650,000 jobs have been lost). The funding will direct \$195 billion to state governments, \$130 billion to local governments, and \$25 billion to tribal and territory governments. Academic librarians should assess their needs, with emphasis on COVID-19 emergency, and work with their institutions and other partners as they consider how these funds may benefit them.

- **IMLS/LSTA Funding.** \$200 million for libraries through the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is included in ARPA, with 89 percent (\$178 million) allocated for state library administrative agencies (using the Grants to States formula after a \$2 million state minimum and \$200,000 minimum for territories). IMLS is currently working with state library agencies to provide guidance on allowable uses of funding. Congressional intent was for this funding to be as flexible as possible to allow each state and territory the freedom to address its individual library needs. While most LSTA funding benefits public libraries, IMLS has awarded grants to other library types.

- **Arts and Humanities.** The final ARPA package includes \$135 million each for the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities. With further guidance for NEA and NEH grants expected in the coming weeks. Academic libraries that work with on-campus arts programs are encouraged to collaborate on possible grant applications.

This is the time for academic librarians to make their needs known to campus leadership. For the state and local funding in particular, ideas that especially focus on serving the local community would have appeal. One such appealing example might be services for local high school students or incoming university students to help make up learning losses because of the pandemic. Funding for education, state and local governments, and other priorities included in ARPA will be delivered quickly, and academic libraries are encouraged to work now to assess needs and collaborate within their institutions. *ZZ*

Kevin Maher is deputy director of government relations in ALA's Washington Office, email: kmaher@alawash.org