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NSF awards $1.5 million grant for students in computer science, computer engineering, and information technology

As part of a grant from the National Science Foundation the University of South Florida, the University of Central Florida, and Florida International University will each receive nearly $1.5 million in student scholarships to remove the financial barriers to student success and increase the number of graduates in the key IT-related disciplines of computer science, computer engineering, and information technology. The grant is designed to remove financial barriers and increase the number of graduates and was awarded to Ken Christensen and Rafael Perez in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering.

The scholarships are part of a $5 million, five-year grant awarded to USF, UCF, and FIU in support of the collaborative Florida IT Pathways to Success project. FIU was the lead partner in the grant and will be responsible for project administration and reporting. The goals of the project, which build on a previously awarded TEAm Grant from the Florida Board of Governors, includes recruiting, retaining, and providing scholarships and other support to academically talented students in IT-related disciplines, who have financial need. Located in Florida's three largest metropolitan areas, the three institutions comprise the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities. Collectively these universities serve about half of the students in the State University System and produce about 65 percent of the IT-related graduates.

Historically, science, technology, engineering and mathematics – or STEM – degrees take longer to finish than other majors. In some cases, students run out of financial aid before they are able to graduate. With this in mind, some of the scholarships are aimed at preventing students who are close to completing their degrees from being derailed by financial pressures.

"This grant will allow us to support academically strong students with financial need. We expect to support 36 students for about $20,000 each for four years and 115 students for about $2,400 each for their senior year," said the principal investigator of the grant, Ken Christensen, professor and interim chair in the USF Department of Computer Science and Engineering. Computer science and engineering Professor Rafael Perez is co-PI.

Funds from the grant will support each institution's ongoing efforts to align degrees with the state's workforce needs. Computer science, and related majors, have been positioned as an emerging critical discipline for American students. According to President Obama's initiative Computer Science For All, last year, there were more than 600,000 high-paying tech jobs in the United States and not enough people to fill them. By 2018, it's projected that 51 percent of all STEM jobs will be in computer science-related fields. STEM is an important part of USF's contribution to workforce preparation, innovation and research for Florida and the nation. Last academic year the Department graduated 175 students with a degree in computer science, computer engineering, or information technology.