

## **AACC Higher Education Act (HEA) Reauthorization Priorities**

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has a broad HEA reauthorization agenda. A short version of AACC's top priorities follows. Community college students and presidents urge Congress and the President to enact comprehensive HEA reauthorization legislation in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress. Reauthorization is now five years overdue, with negative consequences for students and other stakeholders.

### **Strengthen the Pell Grant Program with Sustained Increases in the Maximum Grant**

The Pell Grant program is the foundation of student access and success at community colleges, and assists almost 2.5 million of those students each year. Despite relatively low community college tuition and fees (average, \$3,660, fall 2018), the Pell Grant maximum must consistently increase to cover these expenses as well as books, transportation, food, housing, and child care. The reauthorized HEA must guarantee annual increases in the grant, preferably through mandatory funding.

### **Create New Opportunities for Students Enrolled in Short-Term Programs**

Federal policy needs to keep pace with the growing need for student access to high-quality, short-term workforce programs keyed to labor market demands. AACC strongly supports providing Pell Grant eligibility to students enrolled in programs that are at least 150 hours in length but less than 600 hours, the current minimum threshold. Programs should demonstrate workforce relevance and provide career pathways, but unnecessary roadblocks should be avoided. AACC strongly supports the JOBS Act (S. 839) introduced by Senators Portman (R-OH) and Kaine (D-VA).

### **Provide Second Chance Opportunity Through the Pell Grant Program**

Community colleges urge the re-establishment of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals. This common-sense policy will improve employment prospects for those transitioning to civil society upon release. Data overwhelmingly confirm that higher education for incarcerated individuals reduces recidivism and therefore is a cost-effective investment. Prison education programs contracted after the elimination of Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals in 1994. A reinstatement of Pell Grants to this population, which enjoys bipartisan support, would enable thousands of people to better integrate themselves into society once they have paid their debt.

### **Reject Risk-Sharing**

In the last few years, a variety of proposals designed to financially penalize institutions that fail to meet certain federal standards have been proposed. Legislative proposals have addressed loan defaults, loan repayment rates, and student withdrawals. All these proposals would have reduced resources for those colleges least able to bear such reductions, disproportionately impacting those that enroll the most at-risk students.

Risk-sharing ignores the substantial "skin in the game" that state and local governments, which provide 51% of the average community college's funding, have in improving student success – far more than is provided indirectly by the federal government through student aid. That state and local funding is

increasingly tied to institutional performance. Congress needs to achieve desirable policy objectives without unduly impacting those institutions with the fewest resources.

### **Prevent Unnecessary Borrowing**

Community colleges seek greater authority to reduce maximum loan amounts in specified circumstances. These include when students are enrolled less-than-full-time (thus paralleling the Pell Grant program), taking shorter-length programs or programs in which earnings are relatively low, already carrying significant debt, or in need of substantial academic preparation to enroll in credit-bearing programs. In all these circumstances, colleges should be required to provide students with written policies about limiting loan eligibility, and allow students adversely impacted to appeal any institution-wide policy that negatively impacts them.

### **Establish a Unit Record Data System That Accurately Reflects Community College Student Outcomes**

Community colleges and most of higher education strongly endorse establishment of a postsecondary unit record data system (URDS) anchored with strong privacy protections. Such a system would provide comprehensive information on the performance of higher education institutions that is currently unavailable, benefiting students and institutional leaders and also enhancing public credibility. The URDS would reduce college administrative costs by eliminating the need for collecting similar but slightly different data. The system should be linked to the Department of Treasury to generate earnings data to display the economic benefit of postsecondary programs to prospective students.

In addition, the completion rates generated by the unit record data system should be structured to report the completion rate of community college students within 300% of the “regular time” to completion – the standard used by AACC’s Voluntary Framework of Accountability and one that better reflects community college student performance than current reporting metrics.

### **Facilitate FAFSA Filing for Low-Income Students**

As is broadly acknowledged, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) needs to be streamlined. Changes to the FAFSA should emphasize the financial and other circumstances of low-income students. Furthermore, the HEA should allow IRS data to be imported directly to the FAFSA, to expedite student aid applications and reduce the need for verification. AACC strongly supported the FAFSA Act, approved by the U.S. Senate in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress.

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