



## COMMUNITY COLLEGE AGENDA FOR THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is pleased to present its 2020 agenda for the presidential candidates. AACC represents the nation's 1,051 community colleges and their students.

[Community colleges](#) remain by far the most affordable and accessible sector of higher education, with average full-time annual tuition and fees of just \$3,730 (fall, 2019). The colleges enroll almost 7 million credit students annually, representing more than 40% of all U.S. college undergraduates. Furthermore, at least 5 million students take non-credit classes, often in workforce-oriented programs. The colleges enroll the largest percentages of low-income, underrepresented minorities and first-generation college students of any higher education sector. In addition, millions of these students are adults with family responsibilities; the average age of a community college student is 28.

The profile of community colleges has increased in recent years, due to recognition of the necessity of drawing more people into higher education and to providing more high-quality technical education, many times in “middle skills” areas that require college but not a baccalaureate degree. Policymakers also have become aware that community colleges do not receive funding proportionate either to their enrollments or the essential role they play in America's economy and society. However, preconceptions and existing policies die hard, and community colleges generally lag far beyond their peers in public support.

[Historically](#), community colleges have provided higher education opportunity to those who might not otherwise have had it, and this remains a defining feature.

However, the nation relies upon community colleges in other respects. These include:

- Preparation of a highly skilled workforce that is adaptable to new technologies and work environments, and ready for lifelong learning;
- An assurance that all students can succeed at community college, whatever their preparation and academic background;
- A student population that reflects the local community;
- An ability to work closely with private and public entities to develop responsive economic development strategies as the speed of commercial change accelerates;
- Course offerings in modes that reflect current technology and the new habits of learners; and,
- Open campus environments where students from all corners of society and with differing views can engage in free and fair exchange of ideas, and where civic virtues are nurtured.

The federal government has a vested interest as well as a responsibility to help community colleges realize these goals. The national government is a partner with state and local governments, as the latter provide 51% of all community college revenues, mostly through direct institutional support, while the federal government provides the bulk of student financial assistance. Effective statutory vehicles exist for federal support – the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), among others.

Outlined below are broad areas where community colleges and their students seek sustained, or new, federal engagement. Some of this should come through proven programs. In other areas, the federal government needs to move into new areas of public policy, such as eliminating tuition at community colleges.

## **PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO SUCCEED**

### **1) Strengthen Pell Grant Program Support to Assist Needy Students**

The Federal Pell Grant Program provides essential support for low- and middle-income students seeking to pursue higher education. Access to, and success in, college continues to be highly correlated to family income, which is the fundamental justification for the Pell Grant program and other need-based student financial aid.

Approximately 35% of community college students receive Pell Grants—roughly 2.2 million each year—with the majority receiving the maximum grant. In addition to tuition and fees, Pell Grants help pay for books and equipment, transportation, and living expenses. This is especially important for community college students, whose non-tuition costs generally exceed tuition.

The maximum Pell Grant continues to receive strong bipartisan support from both the executive and legislative branches and will increase to \$6,345 on July 1. However, much more needs to be done to better assist today's students:

- **Boost the Maximum Pell Grant and Key It to Inflation:** Until the 2017-18 award year, mandatory funding was used to index the Pell Grant maximum to the Consumer Price Index. This indexing has helped to ensure the grant's value against rising student costs, particularly living expenses in many parts of the country. Ensuring that maximum grant at least keeps pace with inflation is essential to maintaining higher education opportunity. Community colleges also support an immediate boost in the maximum grant in the HEA reauthorization.

- **Adapt the Pell Grant Program to Today’s Economy with Short-Term Program Eligibility:** Community colleges strongly support expanding Pell Grant eligibility to programs between 150 and 600 clock hours in length or its equivalent. Employers across the country rely upon community colleges to deliver educational programs of this length, and the Pell Grant program is the best way to ensure that needy students receive that opportunity. Creating this new eligibility will foster innovations such as competency-based education, micro and stackable credentials, and training directed to industry certifications. The right outlines of this new eligibility are found in the bipartisan JOBS Act, introduced in both the House and Senate.
- **Create Second Chance Pell Grants:** Community colleges strongly support restoration of Pell Grant eligibility to individuals incarcerated in federal and state facilities. This will benefit impacted individuals, business, communities, and public treasuries in the form of increased revenues. There is bipartisan support for reinstating the status quo that existed until 1994 in Congress and the administration. The ongoing “Second Chance” experimental Pell Grant demonstration project is generating useful information about the positive impact that this eligibility would have.

## **2) Support Universal Access to Community Colleges Through a New Federal-State Partnership**

Over the last decade, scores of state and local governments, often supplemented by private resources, have established programs to ensure that community college students are relieved of tuition costs. This rush of activity reflects the recognition that a postsecondary credential is now essential to attaining a middle class or better lifestyle; close to 100% of the job growth since the Great Recession has been in occupations requiring a college credential. Meanwhile, those holding only a high school diploma continue to lose financial ground to inflation.

The federal government should enact a tuition-free community college program that builds on the Pell Grant program’s commitment to equality of access to higher education. As with legislation pending in Congress it should be a “first-dollar” program, allowing students to use Pell Grants and other student aid for additional costs of attendance. Second, it should be sufficiently flexible to easily mesh with state and local laws, regulations, and other practices. The plan should contain a maintenance of effort provision that requires states to sustain their current investment in higher education—a primary reason to establish a program of this nature is to retard the ongoing trend of state disinvestment in postsecondary education. However, a federal plan should realistically reflect the states’ ability to generate large amounts of new resources.

## **3) Eliminate Food Insecurity**

Food insecurity is a national problem with particularly negative ramifications for college students, because learning cannot occur on an empty stomach. Virtually all community colleges have food pantries, but these are at best a piecemeal solution. Despite the growing awareness of the pervasiveness of food insecurity across community colleges, little has been

done at the national level to specifically mitigate this problem. Therefore, the next administration should decisively address this issue by creating new forms of direct nutritional support to community college students, likely through changes to SNAP eligibility.

#### **4) Help Economically At-Risk Students Stay in School**

Even if all the above proposals were adopted, many community college students would still be forced to cease their studies or take longer to complete them because of unanticipated expenses and family events. For many financially at-risk students, these expenses are not large. Some colleges have found that micro-grants that help students with expenses such as car repairs or medical treatments can reap large dividends by preventing them from dropping or stopping out. The federal government should follow suit by establishing a new Micro-Grants for Student Success Fund, distributed to colleges based on their number of Pell Grant recipients and flexibly administered by the institutions.

Childcare expenses often cause students to drop out of college or even refrain from enrolling initially. Many community colleges operate daycare centers for their students, often in conjunction with early childhood education programs, but the centers are complex and costly entities, and demand for services far outstrips supply. The federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) currently supports some campus childcare centers, but even with welcome recent increases, funding is still inadequate. The program should be increased to at least \$100 million annually.

#### **5) Rethink the Tax Code's Student Financing Provisions and Better Support Technical Education**

The federal government provides an enormous amount of support for higher education attendance through the tax code—\$20 billion for tax credits alone, more than two-thirds the cost of the Pell Grant program. It is widely acknowledged that these credits, along with the code's savings incentives and loan interest and tuition deductions are not targeted to those who need them the most and are poorly integrated with each other. The next administration should rationalize these tax provisions and ensure that they support individuals with the greatest financial need, who are least likely to attend and complete college. In particular, the American Opportunity Tax Credit (AOTC) should be altered to ensure that the lowest income community college students qualify for the credit.

In addition, the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit (LLC) should be adjusted to cover 50% of the expenses for students enrolled in lower cost technical training programs. The low cost of many community college programs, particularly non-credit programs, coupled with the LLC's eligibility metric, means that the LLC is not of significant benefit to individuals wanting to upgrade their job-related capabilities via community colleges, even though these are exactly the type of programs that the credit was originally conceived to support. Over time, the LLC has to a large extent become a \$2,000 subsidy for graduate and professional students.

## INVEST IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE WORKFORCE TRAINING AND RELATED CAPACITY

### 1) Reestablish Direct Federal Support for Community College Training Programs

From 2005 to 2014, the federal government provided competitive grant funds to community colleges to help them expand and improve their capacity to train workers for quality jobs. Starting with the Community-Based Job Training Grants and continuing with the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grants (TAACCCT), the last two administrations, with different political affiliations, have demonstrated a commitment to providing direct support for community colleges in this mission. AACC calls on the next administration to do the same.

AACC proposes an annual \$500 million investment in the Strengthening Community College Training program, located in the U.S. Department of Labor and created through the FY 2020 appropriations process. Initial funding of \$40 million will have a positive impact on workforce education, and the program can be expanded to great benefit, engaging key players, particularly business and industry, in expanding, modernizing, and otherwise improving community colleges' workforce education programs. These programs tend to be much more costly than traditional transfer programs. Funds should be deployed flexibly and include support for faculty and curriculum development to align programs with industry needs; equipment and infrastructure expansion and modernization; development of innovative program designs, such as competency-based models, apprenticeships, and other workplace learning; and facilitation of broad-based college/business coalitions, including sector-based initiatives.

### 2) Increase Investment in Existing Workforce Education Programs

In addition to having the needs outlined above, community colleges rely heavily on several federal workforce programs, all of which are funded well below their historic highs in real terms, despite an increased need for these programs and services that often far outstrips the resources currently provided. AACC calls on the next administration to support restoring the following vital programs to their inflation-adjusted historic highs. Dramatic increases are needed and well justified.

- *Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Basic State Grants*: Perkins Act resources flow through state agencies to local secondary and postsecondary education institutions to support improvement of CTE programs at each level and bolster the connections between programs.
- *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Programs*: These programs provide formula funding to train and otherwise assist dislocated workers, low-income adults, and at-risk youth. WIOA is scheduled for reauthorization and it can be better tailored to accentuate the strength of community colleges.

- *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)*: Authorized in Title II of WIOA, the AEFLA program helps adults attain basic literacy, numeracy, and English language skills, G.E.D. certificates, and helps them make the transition to postsecondary education.
- *National Science Foundation Advanced Technological Education (ATE) Program*: The ATE program awards competitive grants to community colleges to develop and improve technician and STEM education in a variety of cutting-edge fields, such as nanotechnology and biotechnology. Industry partners are heavily involved in program development.

**PRODUCE A MORE ACCOUNTABLE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM THROUGH BETTER DATA AND LIGHTER REGULATORY LOADS**

**1) Establish a National Unit Record Data System to Benefit Students and Other Stakeholders**

Community colleges are dedicated to full transparency and to providing value for money to their students; this accountability occurs naturally at the state and local government levels through their financial support. However, the national data that would facilitate commensurate transparency and accountability are not available—an unacceptable shortcoming. The next administration must act decisively to address this problem.

Important progress in providing greater accountability has been made, including the “Outcomes Measures” implemented in the Obama administration that track all students throughout higher education, and the Trump administration’s enhancements to the earnings data on the College Scorecard. But key information remains unavailable for most college programs, particularly their long-term economic impact; and this situation undoubtedly adds to the well-documented impression for high percentages of Americans that college is no longer “worth it,” a shocking fact given higher education’s clear economic and other benefits. It is imperative to generate and make public the average earnings of program completers over timeframes reflective of career arcs. The obvious solution is to create a national unit record data system.

Strict privacy protections must be maintained in this area and with federal student data generally. Creation of a national unit record data system would ultimately result in reduced regulatory costs for institutions as a comprehensive federal data set replaced the need for other requirements.

## 2) Reduce Unnecessary Regulatory Burden

Community colleges are accountable for their stewardship of substantial federal resources. The Title IV programs carry with them an elaborate regulatory compliance structure that has swelled over time. Unfortunately, the costs often outweigh their benefits, and these costs necessarily result in higher tuition or reduced educational services. Furthermore, some colleges experience contentious and counterproductive relationships with Department of Education officials, who in some cases appear to lose sight of the complex, and often resource-thin, environments in which institutions operate.

The next administration must commit to smarter regulation that more closely examines the relationship between public benefit and the onus of compliance. Some of the current administration's deregulatory efforts, in accreditation and gainful employment, have been welcome, but others have placed students at risk of exploitation.

The next administration will likely be responsible for enacting regulations based on a reauthorized Higher Education Act, making a review in this area especially important, as reauthorization legislation usually results in increased compliance burdens. AACC urges the candidates to pledge to pursue the still-relevant recommendations made in the 2015 report, *Recalibrating Regulation of Colleges and Universities: Report of the Task Force on Federal Regulation of Higher Education*.

### Conclusion

Much rides on the success of the nation's community colleges. They cannot fulfill their mission without the federal government, nor can the federal government meet critical national needs without the colleges' contributions. The next president can play an essential part in ensuring that community colleges continue to evolve and improve as American society itself advances.

*For additional information about these recommendations or community colleges, see [www.aacc.nche.edu](http://www.aacc.nche.edu) or contact David Baime, AACC senior vice president for government relations and policy analysis, [dbaime@aacc.nche.edu](mailto:dbaime@aacc.nche.edu).*