



American Association of Community College

Transition Priorities for Biden-Harris Administration

As the new Administration prepares to take office, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) presents the priorities enumerated below for community colleges. These priorities are in addition to those aimed at meeting the immediate need for substantial support for students and institutions to effectively respond to the pandemic.

This fall, the average annual community college tuition and fees for a full-time student was just \$3,770. Community colleges enroll almost 7 million credit students annually, more than 40% of all U.S. undergraduates. In addition, at least 5 million students take non-credit classes, often in workforce-oriented programs. These institutions enroll the largest percentages of low-income, traditionally 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 nation relies on community colleges for many reasons, including but not limited to the following:

- To prepare a highly skilled workforce that is adaptable to new technologies and work environments and ready for lifelong learning;
- To serve all students, whatever their level of college readiness, and help them succeed in and post community college;
- To work closely with private and public entities to develop economic workforce strategies that are responsive to accelerating technological and other changes;
- To use state-of-the-art methods of course and program delivery; and,
- To provide open campus environments where civic virtues are nurtured and students from all corners of society and holding differing views can engage in free and fair discussion of ideas.

AACC's priorities recommended for the higher education agenda of the Biden-Harris Administration fall into three categories. These would: (1) help students finance and fully participate in college; (2) help restore national economic health through community colleges; and (3) address regulatory and administrative imperatives.

I. Help Students Finance and Fully Participate in College

Without the Higher Education Act's student financial aid programs millions of community college students could not enroll. The ongoing pandemic underscores the vulnerability of community college students to economic and other contingencies. Community college enrollments declined this fall at a rate more than four times greater than for four-year colleges. In the area of student finance, we recommend the Biden Administration take the following actions:

Create America's College Promise

Enactment of an America's College Promise-like initiative would go far to realizing universal postsecondary education in the U.S. Such an initiative would dramatically reduce the costs associated with college attendance and for community college students would be an enormous boost to educational opportunity leading to family-sustaining wages and economic mobility. It should have the following features: "first dollar" funding (as in pending Congressional legislation); states must be induced to expand upon their support of community colleges while maintaining overall higher education investment; and, emphasis on student success. The Biden- Harris proposals in this area provide a clear framework for achieving all these goals.

Increase the Pell Grant Maximum and Expand Pell Eligibility for Short-Term Programs

The Pell Grant is rightly considered synonymous with access and success for higher education. Community colleges strongly support increasing the maximum grant. President-elect Biden's proposal would double the current \$6,345 Pell Grant maximum. Dramatically increasing the Pell Grant maximum would boost completion of the more than 2 million financially needy community college students who use the program each year. It would reduce their need to work significant hours outside of school and limit borrowing. Finally, Pell Grant Program eligibility should be extended to high-quality, short-term training programs; this is a longstanding community college priority. Also, given the demonstrated relationship between postsecondary education and reduced recidivism, "Second Chance Pell" should be established.

Making Transfer Seamless and Equitable

Barriers in the transfer process still exist. These barriers have significant impact on community college students and their ability to earn bachelor's degrees that lead to family sustaining wages. The most notable consequence of this broken system is the loss of credits during the transfer process, which leads to extension of time to degree. In many cases, students exhaust their financial aid before degree completion. Once their financial resources are depleted many students leave the institution and never return. Furthermore, research shows that Black, Hispanic, first generation and adult students transfer and complete at much lower rates than White and Asian students. The processes around transfer are not equitable and changing this is necessary to ensure that all students have an equal chance at the American Dream. It is critical that the Administration consider launching a national initiative to establish a robust, seamless transfer pipeline developed through an equity lens to ensure that all students have a direct pathway from the associate's to the bachelor's degree aligned to high demand occupations and family sustaining wages.

Provide Loan Relief

Policies addressing loan forgiveness should consider the vast differences in who borrows, how much they borrow, and their ability to repay. Community college borrowers generally have low loan balances. Even so, they are usually low-income and sometimes pursue lower-paying occupations that make repaying federal student loans difficult. Policies designed to address college debt should prioritize these borrowers. Furthermore, the Administration should dramatically simplify, and enhance, income-based repayment. The Administration should also seriously examine using the IRS as a means of collecting loans, given that more than 40 million Americans are now in repayment.

Address Broad Student Needs

Funding limitations notwithstanding, overall, Title IV programs effectively deliver aid. However, they are not designed to and do not address all the financial and related needs of community college students. Federal social benefits programs, such as SNAP, TANF, and other income maintenance programs, should be integrated into the financial aid delivery process and more favorable eligibility conditions for students should be promulgated. The pandemic has created widespread mental health issues, and this too should be a focus of the new Administration.

II. Help Restore National Economic Health Through Community Colleges

In the area of economic and workforce development, we recommend the Biden Administration take the following actions:

Establish a Community College Job Training Program

The route to short-term economic recovery and long-term growth runs through community colleges. AACC recommends immediate establishment of a broad job training program targeted at industry sectors that are poised to lead the nation out of the pandemic's economic damage. There are numerous models for this support. These include the expired Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCT) program, pending bipartisan Congressional legislation, and President-elect Biden's campaign workforce education proposals. Community colleges are eager to deliver the training that will be necessary for realizing long-delayed infrastructure investments. Apprenticeship should serve as a component of this and related initiatives.

Close Equity and Achievement Gaps

Community colleges educate the highest percentages of traditionally underserved, underrepresented populations. Research shows that Black and Hispanic students have made moderate academic gains. However, they are still not achieving at the level of their White and Asian peers. The pandemic has made the achievement gap between Black and Hispanic students and their peers more pronounced. The new Administration should join community colleges in their intensive efforts to close equity and achievement gaps for underserved, underrepresented populations.

Assist with the Challenges Facing Rural Colleges

Rural community colleges can and must play a unique role in fostering economic and community development in their localities. The incoming Administration should take actions that further these institutions' involvement as economic, social, and community catalysts by investing directly in them. Furthermore, federal agencies should engage in direct outreach to these colleges to ensure that they can access federal funds on a basis equivalent to that of better-resourced institutions. Rural community colleges need particular help in refreshing career and technical education (CTE) courses and in establishing registered apprenticeships in small numbers. These institutions also face challenges with acquiring and maintaining current technological infrastructure.

Enhance Connectivity by Providing Universal Broadband Access

The pandemic has brought to light disturbing structural gaps in broadband availability across the country, in urban, suburban, and rural areas. A national initiative to provide reliable, high-quality

broadband to all Americans is imperative. In addressing the digital divide both infrastructure and individual affordability need to be accommodated. Resolving this issue will help advance the American economy and aid both teaching and learning in community colleges.

III. Regulatory and Administrative Imperatives

In the area of regulations and executive actions, we recommend the Biden Administration do the following:

Restore DACA

AACC enthusiastically supports the incoming Administration's stated intention to immediately restore the Deferred Administration of Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Despite court intervention, the effort to rescind this policy has contributed to community college enrollment declines. Community colleges hope that this action will be followed by enactment, finally, of the DREAM Act, which has garnered bipartisan support in Congress. On a related matter, the Administration should quickly withdraw the CARES Act interim final rule limiting emergency grants to Title IV-eligible students.

Promote International Education

Student visa and immigration policy have had a chilling effect on the enrollments of foreign students at community colleges. Early data indicate that new international student enrollment dropped by 43% in the Fall 2020 semester. The nation relies upon these talented and committed individuals. Student visa policies need to be revised and broader immigration policy also needs to be changed to further encourage student study in the U.S. The Biden Administration should endeavor to reverse the so-called Muslim travel ban, allow new international students to take all their courses online in the U.S. during the pandemic emergency, and ensure that policies regarding Optional Practical Training and H-1B visas do not discourage international students from coming to the U.S.