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A Joint Response to the U.S. Department of Education's Call to Action

WASHINGTON, DC — The American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities together share several perspectives on Secretary Linda McMahon's August 3 letter and her call to action to drive essential reforms in higher education. We are hopeful that future discussions will highlight that our community colleges and regional public universities (RPUs) are the institutions that have long been committed to rigorous teaching, national service, and, in the case of RPUs, to performing fundamental and applied research that serves our communities and the country. This is why our institutions already enjoy higher public confidence and trust for their focus on student success.

The nation's community colleges and RPUs collectively enroll 68% of all students in public and nonprofit higher education. The colleges and universities we represent are already deeply engaged in the principles and practices identified in Secretary McMahon's letter. The critiques in the letter appear to target institutions without the mission focus of our members. Clarifying this important distinction is essential to recognizing the extraordinary work already accomplished by our institutions.

Jointly, our associations are intensely focused on meeting national social and economic needs while prioritizing students' educational and career goals. We have remained focused on addressing public needs, including transparency, affordability, and deep civic engagement for many decades.

Transparent, Merit-Based Admissions

Nearly all community colleges and many regional public universities are open-access or have very broad acceptance thresholds, a factor in which we take great pride. Any student with a high school diploma or its equivalent can enroll at their local community college, and the majority of students who aspire to attend an RPU are also admitted. The complex system of pricing student aid and other enrollment-related decisions that riddle the admissions process at other types of institutions is largely absent at our colleges and universities.

Free Expression and Orderly Campuses

Our colleges and universities are enmeshed in their communities. They are, by their very design, multicultural, reflecting the demographics of our nation today. Classrooms as well as cafeterias are sites for a multiplicity of perspectives on political issues. Our institutions work indefatigably to nurture such dynamics. Campus leaders understand that inclusion fosters retention and academic success, and so we intentionally build environments in which civility and tolerance for varied opinions are nurtured. Many of our institutions have adopted institutional neutrality on political questions as a matter of longstanding practice, not recent reform. Our colleges are often sites for robust nonpartisan dialogues that are open to community members.

Intellectual Pluralism and the Teaching Mission

The core work of our colleges and universities is technical, professional, and general-education instruction directly tied to employment and transfer outcomes. Faculty hiring and evaluation are centered on teaching effectiveness, subject-matter currency, and student outcomes. Rigorous intellectual inquiry is fundamental to our instruction, and we encourage our members to ensure that classroom discussions of contested public questions reflect a genuine range of perspectives.

Affordability

Affordability is one of the most salient features of our institutions. Average annual tuition and fees at a community college are \$4,150, about one-third of those at flagship public institutions, and only 12% of all community college students take out federal loans. RPUs charge an average full-year tuition and fees of \$10,000, and nearly 9 in 10 undergraduates at RPUs pay in-state tuition. Our institutions remain an incredible bargain for students who aspire to higher education and the economic and social mobility it provides.

Outcomes and Return on Investment

Community colleges and RPUs are primary engines of workforce credentialing in fields such as teaching, nursing, advanced manufacturing, information technology, and the skilled trades, where completion translates directly into employment. We are committed to continuing to publish clear, program-level data on cost, completion, and post-completion earnings so that students and families can make informed choices before they enroll.

These institutions have direct, ongoing relationships with employers and licensing bodies in surrounding communities and regions that set external, verifiable standards for student competence: a nursing student must pass the NCLEX; teachers are expected to pass strict state certification exams; a welding student must demonstrate their skills and obtain industry certification. These external accountability measures are natural checks against grade inflation.

Our Commitment

We share Secretary McMahon's view that higher education's covenant with the American people depends on plain speech about what institutions do and how they do it.

We stand ready to continue working with the Department of Education to ensure that any forthcoming initiatives encompass the priorities of affordable tuition and workforce orientation that already distinguish our institutions. We are eager to ensure that reforms designed for one kind of institution do not impose unintentional burdens on others.

We appreciate constructive attention to the health of American higher education and welcome continued dialogue between the department and our sectors.

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About AACC

The [*American Association of Community Colleges*](#) (AACC) is the primary advocacy organization for the nation's community colleges. Located in Washington, D.C., the association represents the interests of more

than 1,000 2-year, associate degree-granting institutions and nearly 10.5 million students. Uniquely dedicated to access and success for all students, AACCC's member colleges provide an on-ramp to degree attainment, skilled careers, and family-supporting wages.

About AASCU

The [American Association of State Colleges and Universities](#) (AASCU) is a Washington, D.C.-based higher education association that represents the sector of over 500 regional public colleges, universities, and systems whose members share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to serving today's students, and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and cultural development. These are institutions delivering America's promise.