Policies for Today’s Students

Allow Returning Students to Reset Their Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)

Thirty-seven percent of today’s students are older than 25, and there are more than 31 million adults with some college, but no degree. Many of these students dropped- or stopped-out of school following a poor academic performance or not completing enough credits. Despite the demand for postsecondary education among adults seeking pathways to career and economic success, many will face an obstacle to re-enrolling and receiving student aid through a federal requirement called Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP).

What is SAP?

SAP is a requirement set by institutions that establishes the criteria a student must meet in order to remain eligible for federal student aid, such as Pell Grants and loans. Typically, to meet SAP requirements, students must meet a minimum grade point average (GPA), or its equivalent, and complete a minimum number of credits or courses.

While institutions are responsible for setting SAP requirements, federal statute lays out the following guidelines for institutions to use:

- Qualitative standard: 2.0 GPA or equivalent by the end of second academic year;
- Quantitative standard: Minimum percentage of work successfully completed; or
- Maximum timeframe: Cannot exceed 150 percent of published length of undergraduate program in credits.

Most institutions use cumulative 2.0 GPA and 2/3 ratio of credits attempted vs. completed.

How Does SAP Impact Today’s Students?

If a student fails to meet SAP requirements, regardless of whether they’ve been continually enrolled or haven’t been enrolled for a number of years, they cannot use federal student aid to cover the cost of their education. If a student has previously failed to meet SAP, they may be able to regain eligibility for federal student aid, but will likely need additional academic and financial aid counseling. A student in this situation may have to first cover their college costs out-of-pocket. This inability to access federal aid can create a huge barrier for students seeking to continue their postsecondary education.

How Can SAP Be Improved to Better Serve Today’s Students?

Today’s students may return to postsecondary education for a wide variety of reasons: their job or career requires additional skills or credentials; they are returning after taking a break to raise children; or they are going back to complete their degree after getting employment or saving enough money to pay for college. Regardless of reason, these students should be afforded a “reset” of SAP requirements after a certain period of time so they can once again access federal student aid to continue to work toward a degree or other credential and contribute to the workforce.

Policy Recommendation:

Create a SAP reset

SAP should be reset for students who have not been enrolled in any postsecondary education in the prior five years. To remain eligible after such a reset, students should be required to prospectively maintain a 2.0 GPA and complete 2/3 of credits attempted.

Check out our policy toolkit for today’s students to learn more.

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For more information about Higher Learning Advocates, please contact Nia Davis Sigona, Government Relations Director, at ndavissigona@higherlearningadvocates.org