

**STRENGTHENING
HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR TODAY'S
STUDENTS:
A TOOLKIT FOR THE
118TH CONGRESS**



**higher
learning**
ADVOCATES

2022

Picture this: Main Street, Anytown, USA. What was once a vibrant community gathering spot filled with restaurants, movie theaters, gyms, grocery stores, and a variety of jobs to be found is now only a shadow of its former self. Storefronts are empty with broken and boarded-up windows. The few remaining places to eat are relatively empty, and the movie theater is shuttered. Elsewhere in town, houses are run down and jobs hard to find. The town, the jobs, and the thriving economy were all centered around a once-bustling factory. But, as technology advanced, the local workforce did not have the required training or skills to meet the growing demands, and the factory ultimately had to close its doors. Many former factory workers had to leave in search of employment, but without the required education or credentials to obtain well-paying jobs, they were forced to take jobs with lower incomes, face food and housing insecurity, and rely on public assistance.

With greater access to education and workforce development, however, this could have been a different story. One where the factory employees had access to affordable and high-quality education, gained new skills with the new technology, and the economy grew instead of shrank.

Education creates opportunities by leveling the economic playing field and is integral to maintaining America's globally competitive economy. An educated workforce begins in local communities and expands to the state, the nation, and the world. It is able to keep up with rapidly changing industries and technology and creates opportunities to lead the way in research and development, poised for economic growth. As the U.S. continues to move through the fourth industrial revolution, it is imperative that Americans have access to affordable and high-quality education to stay competitive in the global economy.

America cannot afford an uneducated, underskilled workforce, and failing to increase the number of people with postsecondary degrees and credentials has individual, societal, and economic consequences. Students who start school but drop out are two times more likely to [default on their student loans](#) than those who complete a program of study. Individuals with some college but no credential are at a higher risk of [living in poverty](#) than their credentialed counterparts, leading to a higher dependence

Step 1: Connect Opportunities

- Allow the Pell Grant to be used for short-term training programs
- Reset Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)
- Extend the Pell Lifetime Eligibility Usage limit (LEU)
- Make all learning count

Step 2: Support Students

- Make Emergency Aid Permanent
- Increase the Maximum Pell Grant Award
- Enable Access to Means-Tested Benefits
- Make Mental Health More Accessible
- Increase Access to Public Transportation
- Support Parenting Students with Reliable and Affordable Childcare

Step 3: Deliver Value

- Strengthen Gainful Employment
- Modernize Rules for Online Education
- Enhance Oversight for Online Program Managers (OPM)

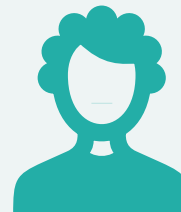
on basic needs entitlements. Educated workers [make more](#) than non-educated workers and consequently contribute more to tax revenue.

The face of our nation’s post-high school education and skills development system needs to change. Because unfortunately, the current state of play is leaving too many Americans behind. The number of high school students enrolling in postsecondary education has [dropped in recent years](#), exacerbated by a global pandemic and economic downturn, and the number of adults with some college but no credentials has grown from [36 million to 39 million](#). Those currently enrolled in higher education also look quite different than what was once considered the traditional student. Approximately [33% of the current student population is over 25 years old](#), one out of five are parenting students, and [56% of students ages 25-29 and 30-39 who are enrolled full time](#) are also working. Additionally, [56% are first-generation, and 51% are financially independent](#). As students’ demographics change, so do their needs and goals in higher education. What worked for students ages 18-24 who relied on their parents for financial support no longer works for today’s students.

Federal policy plays a significant role in ensuring that education, workforce development, and economic skills are accessible, affordable, and high-quality. Especially as the country moves out of the pandemic and through our recovery, there are specific steps to be taken within federal policy to help move our country forward to build a stronger, more educated workforce to maintain and enhance our economic competitiveness and ensure Americans have access to affordable, high-quality education.

TODAY’S STUDENTS

33%



OF STUDENTS ARE OLDER THAN 25

56%



OF STUDENTS AGES 25-29 AND 30-39 WHO ARE ENROLLED FULL TIME ARE ALSO WORKING

56%



ARE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

51%



OF STUDENTS ARE FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT

Step 1: Connecting Opportunities

For many Americans, the higher learning path is not linear. It's a series of stops and starts across multiple institutions and learning types and based on various life circumstances. [One in four Americans have some credits but no degree](#); [one in three takes at least one course online](#); and [more than 30% transfer courses between institutions](#). However, federal policy, and the higher learning system itself, assume a linear and consistent path between high school, higher education, and work, which leaves out many learners and potential learners.

1 in 4



AMERICANS HAVE SOME CREDITS BUT NO DEGREE

1 in 3



STUDENTS TAKES AT LEAST ONE COURSE ONLINE

30%



OF STUDENTS TRANSFER COURSES BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS

Federal policy can decrease barriers for returning students and expand access to educational opportunities.

Allow the Pell Grant to be used for short-term training programs. Currently, educational programs less than 15 weeks in duration are not eligible for the Pell Grant. Low-income students looking to re- or upskill and those who want to start their education in programs that quickly connect to viable employment do not have the resources to pay out of pocket to take the required courses for these credentials. Making high-quality, short-term education programs eligible for the Pell Grant will increase access to these programs and allow many Americans to move one step closer to attaining their career goals. This is a critical step given that many of these [short-term training programs are in high-demand fields](#) such as health care.



Read more: [Serve All Learners, Keep America Competitive](#)

Reset Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). SAP is the minimum academic requirement for students to continue receiving federal financial aid, measured by both grades and credit hours. But some students who have had to drop out of school struggle to earn the required grade point average or complete enough credits during the academic year. Unmet SAP requirements cause students to lose eligibility for federal financial aid, meaning that they have to pay out of pocket if or when they return to school. Paying out of pocket for classes is untenable for many students creating a barrier to their ability to finish what they started. Returning adult students [tend to excel in higher education](#), and allowing for a SAP reset for students who have not enrolled in higher education for a certain time frame removes a significant barrier to re-enrollment.



Read more: [Satisfactory Academic Progress \(SAP\) Background](#)

Extend the Pell Lifetime Eligibility Usage Limit (LEU) for students who have reached the maximum amount of their Pell Grant award, already hold a degree or credential, and have been employed in the workforce for most of the past ten years. In the current job market and economic climate, many adults are looking to re- or upskill and require further education. Resetting Pell LEU to allow adult students who have exhausted their Pell Eligibility will allow eligible students who need to restart their postsecondary studies to access better training or credentials they need to succeed in the workplace.



Read more: [Today's Students' Policy Toolkit 3.0](#)

Make all learning count. Competency-based education (CBE) and credit for prior learning (CPL) are ways to help students get to and through higher education in a timely fashion. CBE is a personalized learning strategy that allows students to quickly gain the skills they need to launch their careers by moving through their coursework at their own pace and demonstrating proficiency and understanding through a set of assignments and exercises, including direct assessments and adaptive

learning. Whereas CPL is an evaluation of prior training and experience for equivalent college credit. Both options help decrease the duplication of training and shorten the time to completion, saving time and money.

While some CBE programs exist, there are not enough. One way to increase the number of programs is to require the Department of Education (ED) to create a pathway that doesn't rely on the credit hour as the basis of financial aid. ED could do so by creating a demonstration program that would allow students to use federal financial aid for high-quality CBE programs.

Many students have to pay out of pocket for assessments that award any credit for prior learning (CPL), as it is not currently approved for federal financial aid. Making CPL eligible for this aid will help encourage institutions of higher education (IHE) and students to utilize CPL by making it more affordable for today's students.



Read more: [101: Competency Based Education and Completion with Quality and Value: Why Credit for Prior Learning Stands out as a College Completion Fund Strategy](#)

Step 2: Supporting Students

Every year [51%](#) of students who drop out of higher education do so because of financial insecurity. [Today's students](#) are often responsible for their food, housing, and health care for themselves and their dependents. Students go to school to create better lives for themselves and their families, yet, if they do not have access to food or housing, they have to decide between going homeless and hungry or staying in school, creating a “catch-22” situation. The student is looking to change the socioeconomic opportunities available for their family but must withdraw from classes because their circumstances prohibit them from staying enrolled. There are several specific steps we urge legislators to take to address the complexity of financial insecurity.

Federal policy can ensure that students' essential needs are met so that they can stay enrolled and succeed.

Make Emergency Aid Permanent. During the pandemic, Congress acted quickly to help students stay enrolled in school by [providing](#) emergency aid funds to help them pay for unexpected bills. In many cases, that emergency aid made it possible for students to stay enrolled in classes while meeting financial needs. Post-pandemic, students still lose jobs, cars break down, emergency health issues arise, continue to need to buy diapers or formula, and face many other unexpected bills. We know that students who have had access to emergency aid were [twice as likely to stay in school](#). A permanent program to provide emergency aid to students who face unexpected financial hardships will

allow students to stay enrolled in school instead of dropping or stopping out and complete their postsecondary credential in a timely manner.



Read more: [Today's Students' Policy Toolkit 3.0](#)

PANDEMIC AID

\$30 billion

IN EMERGENCY AID FOR CAR REPAIRS, FOOD, GAS, HEALTH CARE, AND OTHER LIVING EXPENSES



Increase the Maximum Pell Grant Award. The Pell Grant has played a significant role in making college accessible to low-income and first-generation families for the last 50 years. When first passed in the 1970s, the Pell Grant covered approximately [75% of the cost of tuition](#) at a four-year public college. Now, the maximum grant covers only about [one-third of the cost of tuition](#), making access to higher education even more expensive for students. The Pell Grant needs to be doubled and then indexed to inflation every following year to restore its historical value and ensure that it continues to level the playing field for low-income students. Doubling the Pell Grant will bring it closer to its original state,

consequently making [higher education more affordable and attainable for low- and moderate-income students, reducing student debt, helping increasing access to basic needs, and increase completion rates.](#)



Read more: [How We Can Double the Pell Grant](#)

Enable Access to SNAP Benefits. There are numerous ways access to means-tested benefits can be simplified and made available to today's students. Some benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), are [only available to students if they are working or have dependents.](#) Students who are enrolled in school full-time and unable to work the required 20 hours are not eligible for these benefits. Many of today's students [face food insecurity](#) and are even unable to sign up for their school's least expensive meal plan, meaning they might only receive one meal a week. During the pandemic, [SNAP requirements](#)

[were waived](#), making access to food and other benefits easier for today's students. Similar to unexpected financial challenges, food insecurity for students still persists. SNAP eligibility needs to be expanded to include students who are not parenting students or who work less than 20 hours a week.



Read more: [What Works for Today's Students – Connecting Students to Means-Tested Benefits](#)

Make Mental Health More Accessible. The mental health crisis in America continues to grow. Today's students are not immune. The [Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant](#) exists to help address mental health struggles on college campuses. Unfortunately, the amount funded for the grant is significantly low and does not address the growing needs. Prior to the pandemic, college campuses were [struggling to keep up with the mental health](#)



[needs](#) of students. Now that students are back on campus, the [mental health crisis continues to grow](#) at a rapid pace leaving campuses unable to provide critical assistance as much as it is needed. Increasing the amount appropriated for the grant would give IHEs the necessary resources to bolster their mental health support services and better provide mental health support to students in need.



Read more: [Today's Students' Policy Toolkit 3.0](#)

Increase Access to Public Transportation.

Public transportation can be a viable and less expensive option to commute to class than owning an automobile, but bus schedules and routes are often incompatible with class and work schedules. Additionally, only [57% of community colleges are transit-accessible](#), meaning that [four in 10 community colleges do not have a public transit stop](#) within walking distance of the school. And the average community college student spends [\\$1,840 a year on transportation](#). Congress can address this challenge by creating grant programs for states and local entities to partner with colleges and universities to expand existing routes and make public transit more accessible to today's students.



Read more: [Higher Learning Advocates and 24 Partners Urge Congress to Increase Access to Public Transportation on College Campuses](#)

Support Parenting Students with Reliable and Affordable Childcare.

Approximately [25%](#) of higher education students are parenting students. Among them, about [half are students of color](#), and [about half are single mothers](#). As the number of parenting students continues to grow, lack of access to reliable and affordable childcare can be a



barrier for students and impact their ability to attend class or study. Congress can help remove this barrier by increasing funding for the [Child Care Access Means Parents in School \(CCAMPIS\) program to \\$500 million](#). Congress can also [expand the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit \(CDCTC\)](#) to part-time students with a qualifying dependent and make it fully refundable, which would ensure students receive the tax credit even if they do not owe taxes in the form of a refund. Both of these actions help offset the high costs of childcare and make it possible for more students to attend classes and study sessions.



Read more: [Today's Students' Policy Toolkit 3.0](#)

Step 3: Delivering Value

It is integral that America invests in high-quality education programs in order to have a robust and competitive workforce. And students and taxpayers deserve a strong return on their investment. Creating common sense guard rails helps ensure education programs are providing students the quality training necessary that will lead to successful employees in the workforce. Programs that lack the content, scope, and rigor leading to educated and capable employees waste America's money and set its workforce back.

Federal policy can ensure that programs are meeting their essential mission — providing education and skills development for learners so that they can meet their educational and career goals.

Strengthen Gainful Employment. The current gainful employment regulations do not provide the necessary protection for both the students and the taxpayers who are attending low-quality programs. To ensure that programs providing career-focused education are meeting that mission for their students, the metric used to assess programs under any gainful employment rule should [consist of loan repayment rates based on programs evaluated with cohorts of graduates](#). Additionally, institutions should be required to publicly report earnings and debt by program to help students clearly understand how much debt must be taken on to complete a program and what earnings can be expected by a successful graduate who subsequently enters the workforce.



Read more: [A New Gainful Employment Rule – How to Protect Today's Student's Investment in Their Education](#)

Modernize Rules for Online Education. While work has been done to increase the value of online education, [more progress is necessary](#), especially in a post-COVID era after many schools moved to online learning platforms. As America starts to move forward from the pandemic, it is necessary to ensure that the waivers and exceptions of approvals and oversight for online education granted during the pandemic do not continue without further scrutiny and assessment of the current state of online education. Congress can authorize a new fund at ED for accreditors to provide technical assistance to IHEs to help them improve the quality of their online education.



Read more: [Ensuring Quality of Online Education Programs](#)

Enhance Oversight for Online Program Managers (OPM). Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) have also [increased their work with the OPMs](#) to help them manage the various challenges related to moving to an online learning platform. While OPMs could provide some necessary support to IHEs, there needs to be the same [oversight](#) of these platforms as there is for the institutions. OPM contracts need to also be held to the same standards as other forms of written arrangements. Additionally, Congress can authorize a new fund at ED for accreditors to offer technical assistance to IHEs establishing these programs and could consider including it in the same fund for the technical assistance to IHEs to help improve the quality of their online education.



Read more: [Online Program Managers \(OPMs\) Backgrounder](#)

Despite the potential impact on the economic mobility of millions in underserved populations as well as the American economy, much work remains to make higher education accessible and affordable for all. Our system of higher learning — including colleges, universities, workforce development, and more — is in need of reform and modernization.

An educated workforce is imperative for the sustainability of the competitiveness of the U.S. in a global economy. Helping students get access to, and effectively through, higher education will pay dividends to the American economy on many levels. The time is now for policymakers to expand pathways to higher education, enable access to basic needs support, and ensure the quality of education for today's students so that the nation's workforce can continue to grow and thrive.



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