

“Ensuring Access to Higher Education: Simplifying Federal Student Aid for Today’s College Student”

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Remarks to U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Alexander, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on “Ensuring Access to Higher Education: Simplifying Federal Student Aid for Today’s College Student.” I am particularly honored to offer this testimony as a Pell Grant recipient myself.

The National College Access Network (NCAN) and its over 400 affiliates work in communities across the country to help students to and through college. Committee members may know some of our programs such as the Iowa College Access Network, tnAchives, the College Success Foundation in Washington state and uAspire in Massachusetts. Most of our students are low-income and the first in their families to attend college.

As a nation, we have made progress over past 20 years with more students pursuing higher education, but when we scratch the surface of the data, attainment gaps remain, particularly by income and race. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 52 percent of 2011 high school graduates from low-income families enrolled in college immediately after high school, a figure 30 percentage points lower than their high income peers. This is the first generation of Americans less likely to achieve a college degree than their parents, an unsettling detour from our belief in the American dream where successive generations attain more than the previous ones.

Access to college relies on three factors: academic preparation, awareness through advising, and affordability/financial aid, the three A’s of access. I will focus on the awareness and affordability issues in these remarks.

First-generation college students need support, often described as “one arm around one child,” to help build awareness and aspirations and then navigate the steps needed to enroll in and complete college. Our field is challenged to scale these labor-intensive efforts to provide this necessary “intrusive” advising to every needy student.

Students also need the right information to help them make decisions to attend a school that best matches their academic qualifications and provides the best environment to support ultimate completion. Currently, students are not able to answer the simple question: “how likely is a student like me to succeed at this college?” Vital elements are not reported, including Pell Grant recipient graduation rates, status of part-time and transfer students, and outcomes in the labor market.

Further, our primary database, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), that provides most of the information that we do know, tracks only first-time, full-time students that account for barely half of today’s college enrollment. We need to broaden that data set to more accurately reflect all students including today’s student that is more likely part-time, delaying entry and/or attending multiple institutions throughout his or her academic career. We also encourage the

Department to use this as an opportunity to evaluate current regulatory burden and to streamline data collection and regulations to those that are most relevant to students.

As we look to affordability and the future of federal student aid, we urge you to maintain your commitment to need-based aid that is core to the Pell Grant program and to incentivize states and institutions that share that commitment.

The financial aid process should be simplified by giving students information about their federal student aid eligibility earlier than the current process allows. Today's student applies for admission to institutions before fully knowing his or her eligibility for federal, state and institutional aid. Using income data from two years prior would allow us to reverse these steps in the process, giving students the information at a more timely point in decision-making.

Lastly, we must acknowledge the changing demographics and profile of today's student. We must adapt student aid to serve this new profile of student that is increasingly older, working, attending part-time, and transferring among multiple institutions. We must respond with more flexible disbursements of the Pell Grant to allow for continuous year-round enrollment and more flexible repayment options for student loans.

In closing, we believe in a continued strong role of the federal government to ensure college access. NCAN and its member programs offer our assistance and best practices to inform your considerations of the next reauthorization of that Higher Education Act. We thank you for having this important discussion today and for your ongoing commitment to college access.