Dear Chair Aderholt and Ranking Member DeLauro,

Thank you for your leadership to invest in federal programs that support postsecondary education students. On behalf of the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), we write to respectfully request that the investments, such as for funding federal student aid programs, remain a priority for the Labor-HHS-Education Subcommittee in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024. We hope that discretionary funding will rise in FY24 for the following programs that are critical for our nation’s students and future workforce.

For FY24, NCAN requests these funding levels for the U.S. Department of Education programs:

- Requisite funding so that the maximum Pell Grant award can be increased to $7,895, a $500 increase from award year 2023-24.
- Federal Student Aid (FSA) administrative funding of $2.7 billion.
- Postsecondary Student Success Grant (PSSG) program funding of $165 million.
- Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grant funding of $1.1 billion.
- Federal Work-Study funding of $1.5 billion.
- TRIO program funding of $1.3 billion.
- GEAR UP funding of $408 million.

Additionally, we request that the Corporation for National and Community Service receive $1.48 billion in funding for FY24 – and that the AmeriCorps program, that allows some college access programs to provide near-peer mentors for their students, receive $650 million in funding.

Founded in 1995, NCAN represents more than 500 members across the country that all work toward a shared mission to build, strengthen, and empower communities and stakeholders to close equity gaps in postsecondary attainment for all students. Collectively, we are committed to college access and success so that all students,
especially those underrepresented in postsecondary education, can achieve their educational dreams. NCAN’s members span a broad range of the education, nonprofit, government, and civic sectors, including national and community-based nonprofit organizations, federally funded TRIO and GEAR UP programs, school districts, colleges and universities, foundations, and corporations.

Drawing on the expertise of our hundreds of organizational members in every U.S. state, NCAN is dedicated to improving the quality and quantity of support that underrepresented students receive to apply to, enter, and succeed in postsecondary education. Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and those who are the first in their family to attend college experience disproportionately lower rates of postsecondary success. For example, a low-income student is 29% less likely to enroll in postsecondary education directly after high school than a high-income student. Ultimately, only 35% of low-income high school students obtain a postsecondary credential by age 26, compared to 72% of high-income students.

To help close equity gaps in attainment, NCAN requests the following federal investments:

Pell Grant Program

The Pell Grant serves as the cornerstone of financial aid for students from low-income backgrounds pursuing higher education. The need-based grant provides crucial support for around 7 million students each year, or about one-third of undergraduates. Without this need-based grant funding, far less students from low-income backgrounds would be able to access higher education. NCAN appreciates investments Congress has made to raise the maximum Pell Grant award in recent years.

Given that the previously required automatic inflationary increases have expired, annual investments by Congress are essential for our nation’s students who are least likely to have the means to pay for education after high school. Even with recent investments, the maximum Pell Grant award’s purchasing power at a public four-year institution only covers 32% of the in-state cost of attendance. At its peak in the 1970s, the maximum Pell Grant award could have covered more than three-fourths of the average cost of attendance – tuition, fees, and living expenses – at a four-year public institution.

To address Pell’s declining purchasing power, and so that the maximum award can cover at least half of the cost of attendance at a public four-year institution, the maximum Pell Grant award needs to be doubled. NCAN requests Congress consider a Pell Grant award increase of $500 through additional discretionary funding to bring the total maximum award to $7,895 for the 2024-25 award year. This investment is necessary to reach the goal outlined in the president’s budget of doubling the Pell Grant by 2029.
FAFSA Simplification

In the president’s FY24 budget request, the administration requests a $620 million increase in administrative funding for the management of federal student aid. This funding is necessary to help with the implementation of the FAFSA Simplification Act and FUTURE Act—two laws that will achieve the goal of simplifying the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, a top priority for NCAN. NCAN supports this funding request to ensure that the timeline and implementation plan for FAFSA simplification is not delayed further. The urgency for students to access need-based aid via the FAFSA has only grown since passage of the legislation.

College Retention and Completion Funding

While high school graduation rates have improved steadily nationwide in recent decades, large disparities by race, ethnicity, and income, in college completion rates persist. In the bipartisan FY22 omnibus funding bill, $5 million was allocated for the Postsecondary Student Success Grant program and $45 million was allocated in FY23. This funding is vital to developing, implementing, and scaling evidence-based postsecondary retention and completion reforms enacted by institutions. NCAN is requesting $165 million in overall funding to help increase attainment rates and the associated public return on investment in higher education.

Campus-Based Aid

As low-income students piece together resources from a variety of sources to support their postsecondary education pursuits, every dollar and type of aid is significant. For most low-income students, the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG) and Federal Work-Study help to fill unmet need in their financial aid packages.

The SEOG program should be increased for FY24 so that institutions of higher education can support a greater percentage of our nation’s lowest-income students. For FY22, NCAN respectfully requests that Congress fund the SEOG program at a total of $1.1 billion.

Sixty-four percent of today’s students work while enrolled in school. The Federal Work-Study (FWS) program allows students to work in a flexible environment, learn important skills, and minimize the amount of time they spend commuting between work and campus. For FY24, NCAN respectfully requests that Congress increase funding for a total of $1.5 billion.
Federally Funded College Access Programs

High school seniors, and especially students from low-income backgrounds, require a variety of programs to help assist as they strive to pursue education beyond high school. NCAN’s members serve roughly two million students annually in their path towards attainment. To reach the students who need crucial assistance services, our members build important partnerships with TRIO and GEAR UP programs. NCAN respectfully requests that Congress continue its investment in federally funded college access programs at the amounts requested by their communities: $1.3 billion for TRIO and $408 million for GEAR UP.

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

For every dollar spent on national service, our nation sees a substantial return on investment. Service plays an important role in the college access movement. Many of NCAN’s largest members can maximize their impact for underrepresented students by participating in the AmeriCorps public-private partnership. Continuing support for CNCS, and specifically the AmeriCorps program, will enable additional volunteers to work with low-income students, students of color, and students who are first in their family to attend college. NCAN respectfully requests that the Corporation for National and Community Service and the AmeriCorps program receive $1.48 billion and $650 million, respectively, for FY24.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our funding priorities for the 2024 fiscal year. Through continued supports – both financial and programmatic – our country can work together to close gaps in attainment, where a low-income student is about half as likely to complete a postsecondary degree or credential as a high-income student. NCAN appreciates your leadership in Congress to support these important federal programs.

Sincerely,

Kim Cook
Chief Executive Officer
202-347-4848 x205
cook@ncan.org

National College Attainment Network
800 17th St., NW #630
Washington, DC 20006