

U.S. House Appropriations Committee

Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee

Thursday, March 23, 2023

Submitted by Dr. Yolanda S. Wilson, President, College of Southern Maryland

Thank you for the opportunity to advocate for your support to reform student aid for community college students, specifically through Workforce Pell Grants for Students in Short-Term Programs and Investing in Basic Needs Supports for Students. We must not overlook the critical role of community colleges in today's conversations about college affordability, both in helping our students to achieve their educational needs as well as helping our communities thrive. As favorably reported by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), President Biden's budget proposal showcases a commitment to the nation's community colleges and their millions of students. Particularly significant are the proposed funding allocations for the Department of Education and the Department of Labor that provide resources for community college-specific programs. Today I direct your attention to additional funding for the Department of Education to support much-needed increases to the Pell Grant maximum and for the Department of Labor to increase the capacity of community colleges to provide skills training and education and further expand registered apprenticeships across business sectors.

I recognize the powerful impact of community colleges. I have worked 23 years as a professor and senior administrator for South Carolina and North Carolina community colleges, and now as a community college president in Maryland. I have focused my work on creating a student-ready college culture, mitigating institutional barriers to access, retention, and completion, and strategically focusing on programming and policies that support all students to

success. At the recent national [Achieving the Dream Conference](#), peers from more than 300 community colleges shared and learned evidence-based strategies to improve access, support momentum, create upward mobility, and foster community impact. Throughout the conference, some of our community college students, proudly referred to as [Dream Scholars](#), used the power of ‘I am’ statements to share their unique backgrounds, obstacles they have faced, and the transformational impact that their community colleges have had on their lives. As members of my community college’s team reflected on these statements, we were inspired by students who face unimaginable obstacles but speak boldly about how they are actively achieving their dream.

Who are our students? The rich diversity of our community college students cannot be neatly categorized. [AACC reports](#) that of the nation’s 10.3 million community college students, 4.1 million are considered non-credit or workforce development students. Of those students in credit-bearing programs, 65 percent, or roughly 4 million students, attend part time. Some are considered dual-enrolled, completing high school requirements while getting a head start on their higher education. Many are returning adults, balancing full-time employment, raising and caring for a family, all while taking one or two classes that require studying 6 to 10 hours a week. And they are the under-employed who are working to gain the necessary licensures and credentials to boost their employability and stay current in their chosen profession.

When we say college affordability, we are inclined to think of ensuring higher education is accessible and affordable for the traditional-age, full-time student on their path to a bachelor’s degree that leaves them with a debt that is manageable upon graduating and pursuing a career. But for the working/part-time student, or the student gaining workplace licensures and stackable credentials, or the under-employed who has little access for financial assistance, what does college affordability look like for them? The conversation about Workforce Pell is a game-

changer for community college students because it removes financial burdens for part-time and skilled trade students who seek our high-quality, short-term workforce development programs.

In February during the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) [National Legislative Summit](#), we heard about efforts at the federal level to expand Pell grants for workforce development students. Since then, I have vigorously championed this wider net at the federal level with our Congressman and Senators. I have discussed the implications with our Maryland State Delegation and more meaningfully at the local level in adapting it similarly to the Boards of County Commissioners Cares Scholarships that we successfully launched in our three counties during Covid. That effort supported 1,798 credit students in continuing their education during the pandemic, and of those recipients, almost a third have now graduated. When you consider that 87 percent of our community college graduates remain in our region, it is clear the local economic impact by our students is significant. Now, imagine this impact by extending similar support to Workforce Development students in achieving credentials. Further, imagine the impact for employers to more quickly meet their workforce and pipeline needs.

Support of Workforce Pell Grants for Students in Short-Term Programs is critical. This will establish Pell Grant eligibility for shorter-term programs, accompanied by rigorous and relevant quality standards. Currently, programs must be two-thirds of a year to be eligible for Pell Grants. This excludes many community college workforce-oriented programs that greatly benefit both students and local businesses. Many students cannot participate in these programs because of their cost. Community colleges support lowering the threshold for Pell Grant eligibility to 150 clock hours, as in the JOBS Act and the PELL Act, which would increase access to these programs.

I like to describe the partnership between community colleges, the community we serve, and our business partners with the premise of ‘*Live. Train. Remain.*’ Our joint efforts to grow our trade programs and non-credit certifications and stackable credentials are more important today than ever before. In Maryland alone, our 16 community colleges annually provide [customized training to more than 1,000 Maryland businesses and organizations](#), upgrading the skills of close to 100,000 employees. Each of the nation’s community colleges are their community’s most significant ‘connector and convener,’ because that is exactly what community colleges do. We connect students from where they are coming from, to where they are going to – whether that is a new career or transferring to another college.

Community college students also have a great need for wrap-around services. Throughout my interactions with students, the most frequent obstacles they identify are food insecurity, transportation, and childcare. At my college now, we are exploring a new job description for a Basic Needs Coordinator. The staff member who assumes this role will help students identify wrap-around services to address their housing and food insecurities, transportation issues, textbook costs, and other critical needs to get timely services from both the College of Southern Maryland and our community resource partners. I see this person serving as a resource connector who will approach students’ needs compassionately and holistically to provide answers and guide students to the resources and support they require to be successful.

This local need reflects what is on the ACCT [National Legislative Agenda](#) to Invest in Basic Needs Supports for Students with policies to support students by providing greater access to basic needs services. Title IV assistance is rarely generous enough to cover all necessities such as food, housing, transportation, childcare, and medical expenses for many community college students. Therefore, the basic needs of the whole student can be addressed by increasing the

capacity of community colleges to connect students with supportive services to help them persist and succeed in postsecondary education. The promising new Basic Needs and Postsecondary Student Success programs tackle some of these issues, and Title IV student aid programs can be better integrated with income-maintenance programs by strengthening existing federal programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to meet students' true needs.

In summary, by addressing college affordability at the community college level, you have it in your power to ensure all students have accessible, affordable education. On behalf of all community college students everywhere, current and future, I ask your support for Expanding Workforce Pell to cast a wider net of support for these students, and for Investing in Basic Needs Supports for Students. With this, all our community college students – whether full-time or part-time, credit or workforce – are better situated to be successful. In turn their families and our communities—in essence, all of us as a country—grow stronger in achieving our dreams and in improving the economic and social mobility of our communities.

References

- About Us*. AACC. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/>
- ACCT. (2023). Community College National Legislative Summit. Retrieved March 20, 2023, from https://www.nls.acct.org/files/ugd/02f5c8_6c645091fde04722ad7ce1486d6dd776.pdf
- Emsi Burning Glass. (September, 2021). *The Economic Value of the College of Southern Maryland* (p. 15).
- Fast facts*. Maryland Association of Community Colleges. (2023, January 15). Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://mdacc.org/fast-facts/>
- The United States Government. (2023, March 16). *President's budget*. The White House. Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/>
- Thurman, L. (2023, February 2). *Meet the 2023 dream scholars*. Achieving the Dream. Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://achievingthedream.org/meet-the-2023-dream-scholars/>