

Written Testimony of Robert J. Jones, Chancellor, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor Subcommittee on Higher Education and
Workforce Investment

Hearing on “Keeping the Pell Grant Promise: Increasing Enrollment, Supporting Success”

July 29, 2021

Introduction:

Thank you, Chairwoman Wilson, Ranking Member Murphy and members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify in my role as Chancellor of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I am deeply appreciative of the opportunity to speak in support of the federal Pell Grant program. I am excited to be able to share some of the best practices and some of the lessons we have learned at Illinois in recent years as we’ve increased our enrollment and graduation rates of Pell-eligible students. And I will be perfectly direct and transparent in my message right from the start.

I am here to advocate in the strongest possible way for increased federal Pell funding and for an expansion of the number of families able to access these critically important grants. I firmly believe that the Pell program is one of the most strategic, most efficient and most flexible federal investments that we can make in our nation’s educational, economic and social development. And my institution, as a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), is fully supportive of the “Double the Pell” campaign. We are part of a nationwide coalition of higher education institutions who have come together on this most important issue.

Now that I’ve spoiled my ending, I’d like to step back and offer some more substantive background that I hope will help you better understand how I come to have this view and provide helpful context as you consider legislation to strengthen the Pell Grant Program.

My Background:

I currently serve as the 10th chancellor of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. My university was founded in 1867, one of the original land-grant universities established after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act in 1862. We are the state of Illinois flagship public research university, located about 120 miles south of Chicago. We rank among the top 15 public universities in the nation and we are proud to claim 25 Nobel Prize winners among our faculty and alumni. Our faculty and graduates have been the inventors and originators of everything from sweet corn to supercomputers, from the visible LED to Tesla, from the modern web browser to Pay Pal, and other examples too numerous to mention. Annually, we award more than 13,000 bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral and professional degrees. Our enrollment last year – even in the midst of COVID-19 – was over 52,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Our freshman class averages around 7,500 students each fall, with about 73 percent of those students being recruited from within our own state. And we are very, very proud that more than one in five of our freshmen class each year are first-generation college attendees. We take pride in providing education opportunities, research discoveries and innovations on a global scale and with world-class excellence.

Prior to Illinois, I was a faculty member and senior vice president at the University of Minnesota and then served as president of the University at Albany in the state of New York, a member of the SUNY system. My career as a university administrator and leader has been focused on expanding access to a high-quality college education while ensuring that those experiences are affordable to all who wish to pursue them. And it was my own personal educational path that brought me to this focus.

I grew up on a farm in southwestern Georgia during the Jim Crow era. My parents were sharecroppers and along with my siblings, I worked the fields with our parents growing up. I was the first in my family to attend college. I made that choice largely because of my own desire to have a life better than what my parents were experiencing. I was fortunate enough to have a mentor, my ninth grade vocational ag instructor, who started to call me “Professor.” My parents certainly could not afford to send me to college, and scholarships or Pell Grants were not very accessible for kids like me. So I worked a full-time job during my junior and senior years in high school in order to save enough money to enroll in Fort Valley State College, where I earned my undergraduate degree. I went on to pursue my master’s from the University of Georgia. At Georgia, I received an offer from the University of Missouri to pursue a Ph.D. with the support of its George Washington Carver Fellowship.

That fellowship changed everything for me, forever. It was a full ride. And it paid me \$7,500 a year. That was more money than I had ever earned in my life. And it was also the first time in my life that I was able to be a full-time college student without working a full-time job to support my studies. Removing that financial obstacle was life- and career-changing. It led to a faculty position at Minnesota and 34 years there, and to a career in higher education administration that I never would have imagined existed when I was working peanut and cotton fields in Georgia.

A fellowship that came to me unexpectedly, seemingly out of the blue, altered the trajectory of my expectations and my educational possibilities. In so many ways, I just got lucky.

It is wholly unacceptable to me that college attainment, college success and all of the lifelong advantages in our society associated with a degree should come down to a matter of luck for anyone. Access to a university shouldn’t be limited by what your parents earn or by the good fortune of where you happen to live. It is a human right. And it is a fundamental building block for our national economic and social development.

I realize that there are many components that factor into college access and college readiness. And we all know that there are plenty of differing plans, ideas and debates on how best to prepare students to attend and to succeed in college.

But we know that for too many people in this country, financial need is the one common, the one easily identifiable and the one fully solvable obstacle to college access, success and post-college opportunity. It is a particularly acute crisis for families of color and families living on the economic margins. It is a crisis within our power to address, right here and right now. And it is one where action to increase the investment of federal funds in the Pell Grant program will vastly amplify the ability of individual states and their respective universities to efficiently, quickly and measurably put a college education within the reach of far more of our families.

The Power of Pell Grants to Enhance Recruitment, Retention and Success for Illinois Students:

We know that too many well-qualified students in my own state of Illinois don’t even consider applying to our university because they believe they simply cannot afford it. Each year we aggressively recruit talented students, many from historically underrepresented backgrounds, who earn admission to our university. Yet many choose to not enroll at any college or university. When we ask these students why they didn’t enroll, the survey responses are consistently because the combination of federal, state and university aid wasn’t enough to close their financial gap. At Illinois, closing the gap between what families can afford and the cost of attendance is a priority.

Pell Grants are an essential component in making an Illinois education more affordable and more accessible for a growing percentage of our student body. Pell-eligible students now represent 25

percent of all undergraduates at our university. That is an increase of about 29 percent from 10 years ago and a 76 percent increase from 15 years ago. That upward trend is one that we are pursuing with deliberate intent. We were recently recognized by the American Talent Initiative (ATI) for our increase of more than 1,400 Pell-eligible students since 2016. So, for about 8,500 young women and men each year at Illinois, Pell Grants are quite possibly the difference between going to college or not. It is also important to note that Pell Grants – and innovative new recruitment and support programs enabled by the flexibility the Pell program offers – are especially important in improving the outcomes and trajectories of underrepresented populations. At Illinois, students from these populations account for about 60 percent of Pell Grants awarded here.

Institutional Aid for Students:

While Pell Grants are a critical foundation in our efforts, we fully recognize our own responsibility to leverage and augment these federal investments with our own dollars.

We have strategically, methodically and significantly increased the investment of our own institutional funds to need-based financial aid programs that serve Pell-eligible students. On top of Pell Grant funds our students will receive this year, we will commit more than \$145 million in institutional aid from our own funds.

We have created two different scholarship aid programs that are proving to be transformative in allowing more low-income state residents to enroll here. Our **Illinois Promise** program provides Illinois residents with a family income at or below the federal poverty level with support to cover the entire estimated cost of tuition and fees, room and board, and books and supplies. Two years ago, we added our **Illinois Commitment Scholarship**, which guarantees four years of free tuition and fees for Illinois families with annual income of \$67,100 or less. Nearly 30 percent of our new freshman classes are attending through one of these two programs. Both are built on top of Pell funding.

Student Recruitment and Early Engagement at Illinois:

Illinois Promise and Illinois Commitment have been extremely important in our ability to recruit high-need students from traditionally underrepresented populations to attend Illinois. The financial impact these scholarships offer to families – in combination with an active and robust recruiting agenda that focuses admissions efforts in the Chicago Public Schools, the St. Louis metropolitan area and also in geographically underserved regions in the southern part of the state – have led us to record levels of overall diversity in our incoming classes the past two years. We also recognize the importance of engaging with prospective students from underrepresented populations long before they consider applying to college. Early outreach can play a critical role in helping students and families understand the preparatory path they need to follow to be ready for college and creates a relationship that helps them understand the choices and opportunities open to them. We understand that for many families, particularly those in higher-need areas, everything leading up to the college experience can be a new and unfamiliar journey – a journey we can make easier and more understandable.

One great success story is our **Principal's Scholars Program** that begins engaging students in STEM fields as early as sixth grade. This program now operates in 66 elementary, middle and high schools in the state of Illinois. And I should note that this program isn't just about preparing students for admission to our university, it is about helping these students prepare for a college experience at any institution they choose.

Academic Support at Illinois:

While the foundations of Pell funding are important in our ability to increase access, they also underpin efforts to boost student achievement and success for enrolled students, putting them on a stable, sustainable footing when they graduate and begin their careers.

This federally established base allows us the fiscal freedom to create academic support programs and mechanisms tailored to help students with the greatest needs to thrive here and to earn degrees. At Illinois, our scale and our breadth of academic offerings create some challenges for us in how we build support programs that can be deployed enterprise-wide but that also meet the very diverse needs of students specific to their college, department or discipline. What we attempt to create is a core university framework and infrastructure for student support that is augmented by disciplinary or departmental networks designed for those pursuing these degrees.

In practice, that means we establish more tailored student advising programs embedded closely to the student's "academic life." Finding ways to put advisors within a figuratively "easy reach" leads to earlier identification of possible academic issues and also makes it easier for these students to build and sustain personal support networks throughout their time with us.

Creating strong, centrally funded, administered and operated student services, counseling and wellness programs and cultural programs is another approach that we employ to help ensure that the student experience at Illinois is consistent and rewarding. We work to build an infrastructure that supports cultural, social and emotional development and exploration, and helps students find their place in what might otherwise seem to be a very large and overwhelming institution.

We have also developed new programs that are very specifically geared to assist the students who come to us with the highest risk of leaving early. These are far more intensive and targeted to assist a smaller number of students. One example is the **Illinois Scholars Summer Bridge Program**, which brings a cohort of our first-generation, highest financial-need students to campus for a six-week residential orientation and preparation program. This gives them a critical head start on the transition into college at Illinois. Our legislature has recognized this pilot program as a model for all of our state, and we are expanding it.

For our **Illinois Promise** scholarship recipients – our students from families below the federal poverty line – we also created a dedicated advising, mentoring and support team that will be with these students for all four years of their Illinois journey.

And some of the most important steps we take involve looking more critically at our overall business and academic operations as a university to determine how we can make changes that create more consistent student experiences and remove some unintended obstacles to their progress.

Ultimately, if there is a common theme in our approach, it is that we use data-driven, evidence-based strategies that provide support to our students in every aspect of their college journey from the day they accept our offer – or even years before the apply – to the day they walk across the stage with their diploma.

Student Success at Illinois:

We have many examples of programs and activities that vary in their nature, size and target audience, but they all have several commonalities: They are student aid that is focused on success and achievement; they can be differentially deployed to assist specifically identified student needs; and they are resource intensive. And once again, the Pell program allows us to allocate those necessary resources in ways that are most efficient and most directly elevate student achievement at scale.

We are very proud that our student success initiatives at Illinois yield an 86 percent six-year graduation rate for our students – about 26 percentage points above the national average. Historically, across the nation, Pell-eligible students have succeeded at significantly lower rates than their non-Pell peers. At Illinois, we are working to close that gap and we have reason for optimism. Our six-year graduation rate for Pell-eligible students is 80 percent – just slightly lower than our overall graduation rate and 39 percentage points above the national average of 41 percent for Pell-eligible students.

And finally, Pell Grants and the additional aid and services they catalyze play an enormous role in reducing or eliminating the total debt our students carry when they graduate. At Illinois, 55 percent of our students leave this university with zero personal student debt. Of those who do have loans, the average debt is \$24,343 – about 16 percent below the national average. As a point of reference, our May 2020 graduates who took jobs within six months of graduation reported a \$65,000 average starting salary.

The recruitment and success initiatives that we have found to be effective for our students and for our state may not be appropriate for another institution. What works for us may be different than what would benefit students at a smaller liberal arts college on the East Coast or a Historically Black College or University. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to educational opportunity and achievement. And that is why the Pell Grant program is so very important to our higher education system. It provides enormous support in a way that also delivers enormous flexibility to universities in how we meet the needs of our students.

Conclusion:

I will end my testimony exactly as I started it – by respectfully but loudly advocating for increased federal funding and expanded access to the Pell Grant program. Double the Pell. Triple it even. I just ask you to act now. There is an urgency here. We are just beginning a national rebuilding and recovery from the devastating impacts of the worst global health crisis in 100 years, and educational access will be the driver of that effort.

Right now, we have a rare window of opportunity to increase and expand a program that will immediately change the lives of millions of families in this country – particularly those students who have the chance to be the first in their family to go to college.

I believe that if you want the fastest and most efficient way to increase college attainment, access and success, you already have a long-established and well-proven mechanism in place with the Pell Grant.

By increasing overall funding, increasing the maximum grants and broadening access, you give our nation's universities more resources and flexibility to tailor programs in ways that are best aligned with the needs of your respective states and those families who you represent. You are letting your universities fund more students and also to create more flexible and adaptive programs to assist those who have the greatest need.

You significantly reduce personal and family financial constraints as an obstacle to college attendance.

You dramatically improve the retention and graduation rates of lower-income and underrepresented students once they enter college.

And you significantly reduce the overall debt of those students when they graduate from our institutions.

I fully understand that when it comes to federal funding, members of Congress will always be challenged to balance too many legitimate and important priorities with the realities of budgets and dollars.

But I would argue that the math in this case is as simple as it is overwhelmingly convincing.

One program. More college access. More college graduates. Less student debt.

In short, by strengthening the Pell Grant, you are creating the more competitive, more equitable and more productive workforce that we must have if we are to meet the needs of our 21st century society.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.