

Washington Watch: Pell's public popularity



BY DAVID BAIME DECEMBER 8, 2021

Amid an ongoing campaign to double the maximum Pell Grant, recent public opinion survey results show extremely strong support for the program. These results square with the programs' longstanding bipartisan support in both the legislative and executive branches.

The recent national survey was conducted by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), one of the groups with whom the [American Association of Community Colleges](#) (AACC) has worked closely to [secure a doubling](#) of the maximum grant, and the major national organization representing private, non-profit colleges.

Key findings

According to the [survey](#), 65% of registered voters say they support the Pell Grant program, while just 5% oppose it. The survey also found strong bipartisan support for increasing or doubling the program. In a split sample test – where half of respondents heard one version of the question and the other heard another – 82% support “expanding” Pell and 75% support “doubling” the grant. This widespread support crosses political lines.

The Pell Grant program is also well-known. A sizeable number (42%) recall someone in their family receiving a Pell Grant, and a clear majority (60%) say they are familiar with the program. Familiarity is higher among voters of color (72%) and lower among older white voters. There is very little difference in support for the program between those who have a bachelor's degree and those who do not.

A full 82% of those surveyed found the following statement totally or very convincing: “The Pell Grant program helps low-income students, no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, or age. It gives students of all backgrounds the opportunity to complete college and can provide an entire family with the chance to improve its economic situation.”

Broader context

There is nothing new to Pell's popularity, either with voters or politicians, but the sustained enthusiastic backing for the program is notable given widespread public concerns with higher education. These concerns include:

- college prices
- high levels of student debt (though in recent years student borrowing has declined)
- a perception that campuses are rife with “cancel culture” and that the professoriate holds political views that do not reflect, on balance, those of the American public
- a belief for many that higher education is inadequately focused on the workforce

While not all these concerns are associated with community colleges, they make the national advocacy environment more challenging.

Current political state of Pell

The Pell Grant maximum is \$6,495 in the current award year. As has been reported, the Build Back Better Act contains a \$550 increase in the maximum grant for the next four years, limited to public and non-profit institutions. House-passed fiscal year (FY) 2022 legislation would increase the maximum grant by \$400, and legislation released by Senate Democrats but not acted upon would also increase the grant by that amount.

Although the fiscal year started last October 1, the current “continuing resolution” extends program funding through February 18, 2022, and so final spending decisions on the appropriated Pell Grant maximum will not be made until at least that time.

Currently, about 2 million community college students receive Pell Grants each year, accounting for roughly 33% of all Pell Grant funds. They receive a disproportionately large share of funding compared to students enrolled in public and non-profit four-year institutions because, on average, they have lower incomes.

Given the central role that Pell grants play in community college financing, AACC will continue to emphasize this program in its advocacy efforts.

