



2023 Federal Policy Platform

The California community colleges are the backbone of higher education in the nation's largest state. Consisting of 116 colleges in rural, urban and suburban communities throughout California, we annually serve more than 1.8 million students, representing nearly **one-quarter** of all community college students in the United States. The California community colleges are a leading provider of career and workforce training in the country. They are engines of social and economic opportunity that serve the diverse needs of students seeking to earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution, working adults looking to boost their skills to advance in their careers, immigrants striving to improve their English language skills, and entrepreneurs looking to start a small business. We are the primary entry point for transfer students.

Today, 70 percent of jobs are held by people with more than a high school diploma. As affordable and versatile institutions, community colleges provide the best pathway for Americans to obtain the education and training needed to obtain a high-quality job that pays family-sustaining wages, as well as remain competitive in the workforce and share in the benefits of the new economy.

Investing in and strengthening community colleges is of utmost importance to the vitality of our students and our nation. The **2023 California Community Colleges Federal Policy Platform** articulates policy priorities that support student success and strengthen our economy. In addition, California community colleges will continue our strong partnership with the federal government focused on workforce preparedness, reducing equity gaps, addressing the diverse needs of students, and an expansion of college access and affordability.

PRIORITIZING AFFORDABILITY AND BASIC NEEDS TO INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS

California community colleges offer an affordable pathway to college for all Americans. We have both the lowest tuition fees in the country and the largest free tuition program; however, community college students do not receive sufficient financial aid to cover the total cost of attendance. This gap in financial need that helps them cover books, supplies, and housing threatens their ability to earn a degree, transfer to a four-year university or gain a credential. Below are several investments in financial aid that are proven to significantly increase student retention and success.

Strengthen and Expand Access to the Pell Grant

The Pell Grant is the cornerstone of federal student aid, providing need-based grants to an estimated 660,000 low-income California community college students. We recommend that Congress take the following actions to ensure the long-term impact of the Pell Program, i.e., to increase college completion and degree attainment.

- **Double the maximum Pell award** to \$13,000 per award year to enhance college affordability for low-income students. By increasing Pell's purchasing power, students with the greatest need will be more able to cover the *total* cost of attendance, thereby increasing the likelihood of retention and decreasing the need to accumulate substantial student loan debt.
- **Provide annual increases to the maximum Pell award, based on inflation, and transition the program from discretionary to mandatory funding.** At its peak, the maximum Pell Grant covered more than three-

quarters of the cost of attending college. Today, it covers less than one-third of the cost. We strongly urge Congress to restore permanently the grant's automatic annual adjustments for inflation and reduce future erosion of the grant's purchasing power. Further, we urge Congress to establish Pell Grants as a mandatory program to ensure stability for recipients.

- **Restore lifetime Pell Grant eligibility to 18 semesters** (full-time equivalent). Extending lifetime eligibility preserves college access and affordability for adult learners who, for any number of personal reasons, take time off from their studies to care for themselves or family.
- **Extend Pell eligibility for short-term job training programs.** Short-term job training programs are essential pathways for adult learners, many of whom are working, supporting a family, and balancing complex life responsibilities. In California alone, it is estimated that there are more than 8 million working adults between the ages of 25-64 who lack a college credential and could benefit from short-term training programs that equip them with the right skills to secure a high-quality, living-wage job. We urge Congress to extend Pell eligibility to students who participate in high-quality, short-term job training programs. As Congress considers this expansion, we call on the inclusion of guardrails for these programs to ensure success in educational and employment outcomes for students.
- **End Taxation of Pell Grants.** Current law taxes the portion of a Pell Grant that exceeds a student's tuition and fees. This undermines the program's core purpose and, in effect, reduces the amount of the student's grant. Taxation of Pell awards denies full eligibility for the American Opportunity Tax Credit (AOTC) to hundreds of thousands of students attending public institutions nationwide. We recommend adjusting the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit to provide 100% for the first \$2,000 of tuition and fees paid by those taking job-focused training courses at community colleges.
- **Provide Maximum Pell Grant Eligibility for Recipients of Means-Tested Benefits.** Upon implementation of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) simplification changes for award year 2024-25, we urge guaranteed eligibility for a maximum Pell Grant to FAFSA applicants who have received a means-tested federal benefit (such as SNAP or Medicaid) within the previous 24 months. This would eliminate redundant eligibility verifications.

Federal Work-Study

The Federal Work-Study (FWS) program is one of the largest federal programs in history. At the heart of this program is the intention to provide part-time employment for students with great financial need. However, of 1.8 million California community college students, only 10,000 receive a FWS award, despite their eligibility. This is the result of an inequitable formula structure that primarily disburses FWS funds to institutions based on *past* funding levels, rather than the number of low-income students an institution serves. This outdated clause has led to four-year and private, non-profit institutions receiving a disproportionate amount of annual funding, while high-need institutions with much higher percentages of low-income students, like community colleges, receive much less funding per student. **We urge Congress to revise the FWS funding formula so that disbursements are targeted to institutions based on their number of students in need.** Additionally, it is vital that Congress substantially increase federal investment in the FWS program. In 2019-2020, the average FWS annual award for California community college students was just over \$3,000. FWS awards have not kept pace with rising non-tuition related costs.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Investments in SNAP not only support families, but they also support students enrolled in college who may be struggling with food insecurities. Access to SNAP is a key strategy for both college enrollment and retention. Data show clear connections between the expansion of basic needs programs like SNAP and student success¹. No student should be put in the difficult situation of choosing between paying for college or their next meal. **We support permanent expansion of SNAP eligibility by amending the Food and Nutrition Act to include “attending an institution of higher education” as a form of qualification.** In California alone, this expansion would ensure that

¹<https://www.ppic.org/blog/food-assistance-linked-to-student-success-in-college/>

more than 300,000 students are permanently eligible for SNAP (approximately one in every six community college students).

SUPPORTING THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Faced with changing job requirements that necessitate education or training beyond a high school diploma, an increasing number of working adults and other nontraditional students decide to enroll in community college. We must be ready to respond to the changing demographics in higher education where support services, such as on-campus job training centers, childcare and transportation assistance are critically important to ensuring learner success.

Support for Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)

We support expansion of institutional grant opportunities that incentivize community colleges to design evidenced-based strategies that support college retention, transfer, and completion for vulnerable populations. The College Completion Fund for Postsecondary Student Success prioritizes strategies that support student retention and recruitment of students. We urge Congress to continue to support this new investment, along with others, to assist MSIs, HSIs and TCUs. These institutions are critical to driving economic prosperity among low income communities and students of color. According to a recent study,² HSIs promote student upward mobility at a rate three times higher than non-MSIs; and MSIs move more students from the lowest income quintile to the top income quintile than non-MSI institutions. **The evidence is clear: supporting minority serving institutions is an economic investment.**

Establish a comprehensive pathway to citizenship. Undocumented students are aspiring teachers, medical professionals, first responders, and business owners, among others. They make up the fabric of our community and they will contribute to our future workforce. The Center for American Progress estimates that over the next decade, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program beneficiaries will contribute \$460.3 billion to the U.S. economy. Of the nation's estimated 800,000 DACA recipients, 223,000 are Californians and tens of thousands of undocumented students are enrolled in California community colleges. For far too long, undocumented students have lived through years of uncertainty without a permanent pathway to citizenship. **Now is the time to pursue codification of a comprehensive pathway to citizenship, so that undocumented students can have stability to achieve their higher education and career goals and contribute to the vibrancy of their communities, state, and the nation.**

Expand Federal Student Aid Eligibility to Undocumented Students

Congress should **broaden eligibility for Title IV financial aid programs—including Pell Grants, federal student loans, and Federal Work-Study—for DACA recipients and those with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Enforced Departure (DED).** Broadening federal financial aid will enable undocumented students to access the critical financial support they need to become enrolled, persist and complete their education goals.

CAREER AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENTS

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Reauthorization

WIOA, last reauthorized in 2014, establishes the nation's public workforce development system and authorizes funding for American Job Center operations, as well as career training and workforce programs. We urge Congress to prioritize the modernization of WIOA and restructure job training programs to equip students with the skills they need to thrive in a dynamic 21st Century economy, as well as meet the needs of employers in emerging and in-demand

²Espinosa, Lorelle L., Robert Kelchen, and Morgan Taylor. 2018. *Minority Serving Institutions as Engines of Upward Mobility*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. *California Community Colleges 2023 Federal Policy Platform*

industry sectors. WIOA programs are designed to support parents and working adults who want to quickly enter or reenter the workforce. To that end, **we urge WIOA language to encourage the co-location of American Job Centers on community college campuses**, thereby allowing students easier access to career counseling and job placement services while creating strategic linkages between community colleges and workforce development programs.

Community College and Industry Partnership Grants

Through our *Strong Workforce Program*, California community colleges are focused on matching employers in high-skill, high-wage industries with trained and qualified workers. **We support reauthorizing the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program or authorizing and enhancing funding for the Strengthening Community College Training Grants program** to create or grow industry or sector partnerships that expand workforce development programs in high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand industry sectors.

Perkins Act Grants

We strongly support **new federal investments to states to expand career and technical education programs for emerging sectors and to strengthen career pathways**, particularly for the underserved and underrepresented populations, in the digital economy. Of great importance is updating technological capacity and infrastructure to enable flexible delivery of in-person and virtual learning activities, as well as expanding work-based learning for students and employers.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS AND STABILITY

Modernize community college facilities

Over time, state and local support for community college facilities has fallen far short of need. The result is an increasing backlog of unaddressed projects and deferred maintenance needs. This harms education quality, as well as the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff. We estimate that, among CCC's 115 physical campuses, unmet or deferred maintenance needs total more than \$1.2 billion. As critical engines of economic and workforce development, our facilities and classrooms must be renovated with safe and reliable materials that leverage 21st century technology.

We call on Congress to provide dedicated funding for community college infrastructure, which would significantly improve our educational programs. Dedicated funding will complement student enrollment and retention efforts, as well as ensure that students receive - in safe and healthy facilities - the education, skills and training they need to become informed, productive members of our democracy.

Maintain Borrower Protections and Simplify Processes for Low-risk Colleges

The California community colleges support strong borrower defense to repayment allowances, streamlined income-driven repayment (IDR) plans, and monitoring collections and default practices by predatory lenders. The U.S. Department of Education should serve as the primary gatekeeper for student loans and ensure that colleges are providing students with pathways to well-paying careers, without unaffordable student loan debt. Strong oversight protects borrowers and minimizes taxpayer exposure to student loan defaults. Due to California's generous tuition and first-dollar financial aid policies, very few community college students borrow federal funds to attend our colleges. **We encourage Congress to continue protections for institutions with low-participation rates and to simplify the process.**

Align Accreditation Standards to Outcomes and Student Success

Currently, higher education accrediting bodies in the United States accredit both public and private institutions, including for-profit colleges and universities. The Biden Administration has proposed partnering with accrediting bodies through access to federal data in order to provide better oversight of student outcomes. **We support efforts to align standards of accreditation to ensure institutions are prioritizing outcomes and student success.**