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House Education & Workforce Full Committee Hearing
"The Future of College: Harnessing Innovation to Improve Outcomes and Lower Costs"
November 18, 2025
Written Testimony
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Chairman Walberg, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee on Education & Workforce, thank you for the opportunity and invitation to testify before the Committee on innovation in higher education and its potential to lower costs and improve retention and completion for all students.

My name is Wil Del Pilar, and I'm the senior vice president at EdTrust, a national nonprofit organization focused on closing opportunity gaps and advancing racial and economic justice in education. At EdTrust, we believe that education is not just a pathway to opportunity — it is a civil right.

EdTrust believes fervently in the limitless potential of every student to achieve their dreams. Postsecondary education has been and remains crucial to achieving intergenerational social and economic mobility for individuals and their families. The strength and stability of our nation's economy, our democracy, and our position on the global stage is dependent on our ability to ensure that all students can access and receive a high-quality education that prepares them for the global economy. Yet for far too many students — especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities — these opportunities have been limited, blocked, or impeded.

The Challenges Students Face

Today's topic is an important one. Innovation in higher education has the potential to expand access and opportunity for millions of students. But to understand how innovation can help lower costs and improve access and opportunity, it is important to first underscore the current context of today's students. College access and affordability continue to be significant barriers and challenges for low-income students and students of color. Data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study shows that students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to have unmet need — 90% of students who received a federal Pell Grant at least once face unmet need, compared to 56% of students who never received a Pell Grant. Students of color are also more likely to face unmet need, compared to their white peers. Almost 9 in 10 Black students face a gap between college costs and estimates of available resources. These

financial barriers are significant factors contributing to [racial disparities in degree attainment](#) that result in Black, Latino, and [Native](#) students failing to obtain an associate or bachelor's degree at the same rate as their white and Asian peers.

Furthermore, beyond financial barriers, there are many other factors that can impede student success. Too many students are arriving at college underprepared for college-level work, requiring additional classes to get up to speed, slowing their time to earn a degree, thus increasing their costs. That process may also require repeating courses, taking classes that end up being superfluous, changing majors, or all the above.

The image of a college student coming directly from high school is [no longer the norm](#): Roughly 1 in 3 students is 25 years of age or older, nearly 80% work, and roughly one-third work full time. Over [1 in 5 college students have children](#). That means that many of today's students have external responsibilities that can force students to slow or altogether stop their educational progress. The overall funding landscape can also hinder attainment for students. [Research shows](#) that higher instructional spending and spending on student support services is positively correlated with higher degree attainment, but budget cuts have led to the elimination of course offerings and fewer student supports.

The confusion that exists for students, coupled with the lack of affordable and clear pathways, has resulted in a growing number of students with some college education but no degree. According to the [Some College, No Credential report](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 43 million Americans as of the start of the 2023-24 academic year fell into this population — a startling statistic. The frustration and confusion of that stop-start journey for students can be mitigated by proactive interventions, informative and timely advising, and clear pathways to credentials, but there is still work to do to promulgate those models in more colleges and universities.

Current Innovative Student Support Models

Given that current educational landscape, it is essential that innovation in higher education does not come at the expense of students, especially our most underserved. Innovation must center students and result in better outcomes. It should work to address systemic barriers to help expand access, lower costs, and improve retention and completion for millions of current and future college students. If done correctly, innovation in higher education could improve student success, bolster wraparound supports, address basic needs, and increase access and retention. To that end, there has been a recent expansion of successful models to help support students while enrolled and ensure they remain on track.

One of the [most successful](#) is the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY), or [CUNY ASAP](#). This program requires full-time enrollment and participation in a cohort to build relationships with other students with similar experiences, alongside structured first-year course scheduling and inclusion of

winter and summer coursework to keep students engaged. Equally as important, the program removes financial and logistical barriers by providing last-dollar scholarships to participants, free or subsidized textbooks, unlimited-ride transit cards, and personalized academic and career advising. An external study showed that the ASAP program nearly doubled graduation rates for its participants. Similar success has been replicated in three different community colleges in Ohio, where graduation rates have similarly increased, and participants have seen higher earnings eight years after graduating. This model has expanded to other states as well.

Other examples of successful student support programs include those that are using analytics to identify students at risk of falling behind or not completing using a variety of factors. Georgia State University employs proactive outreach models under the banner of "Early Alert" to ensure that there are frequent touches early in a student's first year to ensure they are receiving advising and support to prevent more serious issues from arising. They also use a "GPS Advising" model, where all students receive outreach as they progress; per GSU, the model generates thousands of meetings between students and advisers annually and freshman fall-to-spring retention rates increased by five percentage points in the first three years of implementation. They supplement these interventions with financial aid via the Panther Retention Grant, which provides grants as small as $300 to students who need relatively small amounts of aid to ensure they do not drop out. Per GSU, 61% of the seniors who received Panther Retention Grant support in a given academic year graduated within two semesters of receiving the grant, and 82% either had graduated or were still enrolled one year after receiving the grant. This holistic approach of melding proactive intervention with financial aid is logical and vital to ensuring all students, especially those traditionally underserved, can succeed.

Similar models employ personalized support from designated counselors, real-time data systems that track student process, and allow for early warning interventions. These strategies help keep students engaged and have promulgated nationally: Stay the Course in Fort Worth, Texas, One Million Degrees in Chicago, Illinois, Project QUEST in San Antonio, Texas, and Inside Track in multiple locations have all been shown by random control trials to have statistically significant positive effects on persistence in school after at least one year — evidence of positive effects on degree completion, significant and sustained impact on earnings for students, or some combination thereof. There is real momentum out in the field.

To that end, Congress has agreed that the federal government has a role in helping to promulgate these models. In Fiscal Years 2022, 2023, and 2024, Congress funded the Postsecondary Student Success Grant program, which invests in evidenced-based student success programs like those just discussed. Secretary of Labor Chavez-DeRemer co-led the bipartisan House bill, the Postsecondary Student Success Act, to formally authorize PSSG last Congress. Furthermore, language authorizing PSSG was included in Representative Foxx's College Cost Reduction Act in early 2024. Congress understands

that investing in PSSG can help strengthen completion and employment outcomes and reduce the "skills gap" between available jobs and qualified candidates.

That's why it was so stunning and disappointing that last week, the Trump administration declined to continue to fund PSSG, and other student support programs that received funding in the March Continuing Resolution via the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). In allocating funding for FIPSE in FY24, Congress understood that those funds would be used on PSSG, alongside other student-centric programs designated for funding by report language, including Basic Needs Grants, which is the only federal program dedicated to addressing student basic-needs insecurity, and have helped campuses in more than 20 states establish and expand basic needs centers, enhance community partnerships that provide services for students in need, and raise awareness for students of available federal, state, and other benefits. Other important programs, such as the Open Textbook Pilot Grants, which help significantly reduce the cost of higher education for students from low-income backgrounds by supporting the expansion of college textbooks freely available under an open license, or the Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success Grants, which support veteran student success by coordinating services to address their academic, financial, and other needs, would also be gutted. This decision hampers Congress' efforts to deliver the support and necessary resources to improve college access, retention, and completion for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds and promote innovation in higher education.

EdTrust urges Congress to restore funding for PSSG and the other FIPSE grant programs in any FY26 spending deal, and will continue to advocate for the programs, alongside other stakeholders.

Innovative Practices Led By States

In addition to institutional initiatives, states increasingly serve as laboratories of innovation for improving college access, strengthening pathways into and through higher education, and advancing opportunities, especially for students who have been underserved in higher education. While we find pockets of excellence across the country, there are opportunities to scale these innovations to accelerate results with federal support.

Many states have built robust dual enrollment and Early College High School (ECHS) options that allow high school students to earn college credits and credentials before they graduate high school. States are leveraging dual enrollment to expose students to postsecondary pathways. Students who participate in dual enrollment graduate at higher rates and are more likely to enroll in college. In addition, students from low-income backgrounds who participate in dual enrollment have higher levels of degree attainment than their peers who do not. In the 2022-23 academic year, nearly 2.5 million high school students took at least one dual enrollment course.

State and districts doing the most innovative work are also leveraging dual enrollment to design structured pathways programs. Ideal pathways programs provide students and their families with a clear understanding of all their options; early outreach before entering high school; information that is accessible and in multiple formats; regular touchpoints with a navigator; and dedicated and targeted support in high school. An example of this type of support can be found in Pinellas County Schools, Florida. Every high school in the county has a College and Career Center staffed by a coordinator and trained volunteers who help students navigate college and career planning, from completing the FAFSA and college essays to exploring majors, military opportunities, apprenticeships, and financial aid. These types of supports could be advanced through federal support and oversight via a new federal grant program, legislation ensuring universal access to Pathways counselors, dedicated federal funding for resource development, and incentives to scale innovation and best practices across states and institutions.

Another promising model for leveraging dual enrollment is the aforementioned Early College High School (ECHS) approach. Jointly operated by school districts and postsecondary institutions, Early Colleges enable students to earn both a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit or an associate degree at little or no cost. These programs combine rigorous academics with targeted advising and social supports that prepare students to succeed in college-level work while still in high school.

Research demonstrates the model's effectiveness. Early College students are significantly more likely to enroll in college, earn an associate degree, and complete a bachelor's degree compared to their peers. By integrating high school and college experiences and removing financial and structural barriers, Early Colleges represent another innovative, evidence-based strategy states can scale, and one that federal investment could help replicate nationwide to expand access to postsecondary opportunity.

Federal investment should support states in expanding these models via dedicated grants, ensuring that dual-credit opportunities are high quality, aligned with postsecondary curricula, and anchored in career-relevant pathways.

Over 20 years ago, the federal government began investing in Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS). That policy decision has helped states and territories make informed decisions to improve learning and outcomes via the information collected by designing, building, maintaining, and expanding early childhood through workforce longitudinal data systems. To date, the federal government has invested nearly $1 billion in this program; and now states are leveraging these systems to power direct admissions programs, where all high school seniors receive a college admissions offer. Idaho was one of the first to adopt this model, and today, over 14 states are either engaged or piloting a direct admissions program. A recent study found that direct admissions programs increase the likelihood that students apply to college and reduce administrative and informational hurdles, simplifying the process, and signal that higher education is within reach.

A final innovation we see in states is in the implementation of community college baccalaureate programs. These programs offer bachelor's degrees, typically in career-technical fields, to provide a more affordable and accessible pathway to a four-year degree. Evidence shows these programs are effective at improving student outcomes, as graduates often earn significantly more, find employment in their field of study, and face less debt than students at traditional universities. These pathway models remove structural barriers and reduce cost and time to degree for many students, particularly first-generation, adult, and low-income students.

Anti-Innovation Policy Choices by The Trump Administration and Congress

As noted above, states and the federal government can play a critical role in spurring innovation and strengthening access and opportunity for students. But recent actions over the past year to dismantle systems and structures seriously jeopardize our ability to meet the current moment.

First, the administration took unprecedented actions to dismantle the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the research arm of the Department of Education that assists states, schools, and educators with making data-backed decisions, assessing the impacts of various education programs and interventions, and more effectively supporting student learning. IES helps us better understand the current state of higher education, including by disseminating essential postsecondary data collections, including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Data collections such as IPEDS serve as the foundation for the College Scorecard, which provides the public with valuable data on cost, completion, and value of postsecondary programs. The data and research IES gather and disseminate is indispensable to help inform our efforts to innovate and address cost, access, and completion.

And yet, the future of these crucial data collections and other essential activities is directly at risk following the administration's actions earlier this year to layoff nearly 90% of IES employees, as well as the slashing of more than $1 billion in multi-year contracts administered by IES, such as the What Works Clearinghouse, which gathers and summarizes education research in a central repository and whose functional status, despite being recently reinstated, is still in jeopardy. Laying off nearly 90% of IES' staff does not simply reduce headcount; it eliminates decades of institutional expertise in methodology, sampling, program evaluation, and survey design. That expertise cannot be rebuilt quickly or cheaply. While there has been some ongoing discussion regarding reorganization of IES, the deep cuts to staff, coupled with the gutting of contracts and the president's 2026 budget proposal, threaten to imperil efforts to maintain the viability and persistence of IES. Regardless of political ideology, every administration depends on accurate federal data to implement policy effectively. No party benefits from operating without reliable information.

Furthermore, the attempted dismantlement of the Department of Education writ large by the administration is entirely illogical if you want to promote innovative practices. As discussed above, the Department administers innovative, evidence-based student success programs at scale that operate in conjunction with federal information clearinghouses and data infrastructure that collect and organize various state-level programs in one place for practitioners. The Department can also select recipients due to need and impact, allowing less well-resourced institutions to get funding to positively impact their student populations. This allows for benchmarking across states and institutions, and without the Department aggregating, analyzing, and publishing national and state data on access, retention, completion, and outcomes, it becomes much harder to track progress, identify equity gaps, compare across institutions, and scale effective models. You cannot modernize higher education policy by dismantling the data infrastructure and the Department that supports it.

The administration's efforts to date to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education broadly threaten to jeopardize any hope to advance meaningful reforms to lower costs and improve outcomes. Over the course of the year, the administration has effectuated roughly a 50% reduction in staff at the Department of Education, which has significantly hampered its ability to fulfill core functions, such as enforcing federal civil rights law through the Office for Civil Rights, which has reportedly dismissed thousands of cases at a record pace. Other core offices within the Department saw deep cuts as well, including the Federal Student Aid office, which oversees the loan portfolio for more than 40 million borrowers and has seen delays and disruptions to its ability to manage and review student aid complaints, among other issues. Given the harms these layoffs are having on the Department's ability to fulfill its core functions, it is all the more shocking that the administration over the course of recent government shutdown advanced another round of profound federal layoffs across the Department, including in the Office for Civil Rights, the Office of Postsecondary Education, and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. While we were relieved to see the inclusion of important language in the shutdown deal that would reverse these layoffs and prevent future layoffs until January 30, 2026, the existential threat these further reductions in force poses to students, families, and borrowers cannot be understated.

The mass firings at the Department and elimination of critical data infrastructure even threaten policy initiatives that the administration supports. The administration's aggressive layoffs endanger its ability to effectively implement the myriad provisions contained within the reconciliation bill passed this summer; these new requirements, such as implementing a simplified repayment system and establishing a new accountability metric, are significant changes to the higher education landscape that demand appropriate capacity to implement. These cuts are especially concerning at a time when the administration is seeking to expand Pell Grants into short-term and workforce-training programs. Such an expansion demands stronger data, greater analytic capacity, and a robust federal research infrastructure to ensure programs deliver value and do not expose students or taxpayers to risk. Instead, the federal government is dismantling the very

systems required to oversee and assess this expanded portfolio — eliminating staff, slashing multi-year research contracts, and undermining the data collections that make basic program monitoring possible. Put simply, the administration is attempting to take on more responsibility while hollowing out the systems and people needed to execute that responsibility — jeopardizing the basic effectiveness and integrity of federal higher education policy.

Taken in totality, these layoffs and the elimination of essential data collection capacity are not designed to improve the efficiency and quality of services the Department delivers daily to states, schools, and individuals, and in fact, will only weaken our efforts to institute innovative practices to address the cost of college and to improve retention and completion for millions of students.

In reference to the reconciliation bill, EdTrust remains concerned about the various sweeping changes to the higher education landscape included with the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Changes to student loan repayment will increase monthly payments for the majority of borrowers, placing more financial strain upon them and increasing the risk of default, especially for lower-income borrowers. Furthermore, the reconciliation bill has weakened important borrower protections that protected millions of students from predatory institutions and practices. Additionally, the new income-based repayment terms mean very few people will ever achieve loan forgiveness. The restriction on federal loan access for graduate education will result in students being forced to take out loans from private banks with more onerous terms, and some students will decline to pursue graduate education altogether. Additionally, these changes will result in fewer students moving into fields of specific national need, like various medical or teaching professions. And while the new earnings metric and expansion of Pell to short-term programs have the potential for positive impact, that potential is directly connected to the maintenance of existing accountability regulations and robust consumer protections, respectively, in conjunction with strong enforcement by the Department. We urge members to continue to track the rulemaking process closely, continue to submit comments, and propose legislation to reform and eliminate burdens for students created by these new policies.

Additionally, the administration's budget proposal for FY26 is also at odds with the stated goals of this important hearing. The [Trump budget proposal](#) would implement a 15% overall cut to the federal education budget by eliminating numerous programs designed to address affordability and improve retention and completion for students, such as TRIO, GEAR UP, FIPSE, the Child Care Access Means Parents In School Program (CCAMPIS), Teacher Quality Partnerships (TQP), Hawkins Centers of Excellence, and more. Furthermore, the president's budget would slash the max Pell award, a cruel policy choice that, if enacted, would have devastating consequences for millions of low-income, college-aspiring students for decades to come. The [House Labor-H bill](#) regrettably takes a similar approach and has proposed double-digit percentage cuts to federal education spending for the last three years. [Public polling](#) [repeatedly shows](#) that Americans want more federal spending on education programs, not less. These cuts must be rejected, and

negotiations should align to the parameters set by the bipartisan Senate Labor-H bill reported out of committee earlier this summer by a vote of 26-3.

Similarly, other recent actions taken by the administration threaten to jeopardize innovation and efforts to lower costs and improve academic outcomes. For example, last month, the administration sent a 10-page "compact" to nine selective universities outlining a host of requirements schools would need to fulfill in exchange for receiving a "priority" designation for receiving federal funds — although as the administration and the author of the compact later noted, it is their intention that every school accept these terms as a condition for receipt of federal funding. This compact likely violates the First Amendment, the General Educational Provisions Act, and other Constitutional rights of the institutions and faculty. If adopted, this would punish universities by stripping away federal research funding for failing to comply with its requirements, which include: capping the enrollment of international students; requiring conservatives (however that is to be determined) be hired as faculty to advance "ideological diversity;" the elimination of consideration of a students' personal experience shared in a written statement should it touch on race (despite being protected by the Supreme Court); prohibit "all university employees, in their capacity as university representatives," to abstain from "actions or speech relating to societal and political events except in cases in which external events have a direct impact upon the university;" ban anything that would "punish, belittle and even spark violence against conservative ideas;" in addition to other restrictions.

Federal research funding to universities is determined by merit per a legally defined process. Federal research funding is meant to reward excellence and advance discovery, not serve as a political weapon. Threats to strip away critical research funding and other sources of federal support for universities that fail to agree to this compact will stifle innovation, jeopardize lifesaving medical and scientific research, and push talented faculty and students out of the very institutions that anchor our nation's progress, and it will certainly jeopardize our efforts to improve access, retention, and completion.

Distance Education and Artificial Intelligence

Finally, two areas of particular focus, both nationally and in today's hearing, concern distance education and innovation in the digital age, particularly the explosion of artificial intelligence (AI).

Technology should certainly be used to expand access to education, especially to learners who require additional flexibility to continue their education, but we must ensure that students who are learning online have access to high-quality instruction, the necessary devices and high-speed internet to adequately engage with and complete their coursework, and related supports, just as students learning in a brick-and-mortar environment. One study found that online coursework in higher education generally worsens student performance compared with in-person instruction. These findings were especially pronounced for students who were relatively less academically prepared for

college and students who were pursuing bachelor's degrees. Those are the types of studies that policymakers and stakeholders should consider when determining how best to implement or support these models. Online, hybrid, competency-based models, and third-party partnerships can be part of the solution — but only if deployed with strong supports, transparency, equity, and student success at their core, rather than as a cost-cutting substitute for traditional supports.

Furthermore, generative AI use is accelerating at a rapid rate with students, professors, and administrators experimenting with Large Language Models (LLMs), alongside an educational technology ecosystem that is integrating AI technologies into new and existing educational tools. There is real potential in leveraging technology enabled solutions, including AI, to support access and success in postsecondary education through efforts to provide advising, degree planning, streamlining the transfer process, orientation, and career navigation supports. Actualizing this potential, however, will require ample guardrails.

While guardrails are essential, it is worth acknowledging that thoughtful implementation of AI can support educators by automating routine tasks, identifying learning gaps, and providing data-driven insights that help refine instruction and customize support for different students. Schools and colleges can also benefit when these tools are aligned with curricular goals that allow them to scale personalized learning experiences more efficiently. While there is potential that AI will improve learning via the responsiveness and individualized feedback theoretically generated from its effective use, this is predicated on intentional design and responsible use, which must be evidence-based and informed by research verifying its effectiveness in improving instruction and learning outcomes. Absent these critical and basic safeguards, the potential drawbacks are obvious: reliance on AI can reduce critical thinking and human interaction, unintentionally reinforce biases, fail to effectively improve student learning, and exacerbate learning gaps if access is inequitable. AI must enhance, not replace, the human elements of teaching and learning.

To that end, a growing body of research shows that general purpose AI tools can exacerbate harmful biases and stereotypes, commonly yet confidently make errors, and tend to be overly agreeable. Furthermore, a litany of heartbreaking stories demonstrates the devastating consequences people experiencing mental health crises can face when interacting with AI. These risk factors and the tragedies that can arise because of them reinforce the critical need for institutions and technology providers to adopt risk mitigation strategies. Those should include the continuous assessment of procured technologies for bias, co-designing with community stakeholders to create practical AI tools that are aligned with real-world needs and goals, and investing in AI literacy trainings to ensure faculty and students develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies to safely use and understand AI. And most importantly, federal privacy laws, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, must be updated to reflect current technological advances that allow vast amounts of student data to be stored, used, and monetized in ways that existing laws never anticipated, putting students at real risk without updated protections.

Instead of dismantling systems and supports proven to address barriers and expand opportunities for students, Congress can take decisive action that would help facilitate innovation in ways that support student success and degree attainment. EdTrust stands ready to partner with you on this important work.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.