



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (VA-03)
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing
Keeping the Pell Grant Promise: Increasing Enrollment, Supporting Success
Thursday, July 29, 2021 | 10:15 a.m.

Today we are meeting to examine trends related to Pell eligible students' access to public four-year institutions, the state and institutional roles in helping students succeed, and how federal legislation could help.

Each person in this country deserves access to an affordable, high-quality higher education. As we have consistently established, a high-quality postsecondary degree remains the surest pathway to financial security and a rewarding career.

In fact, that access is what President Johnson said when he signed the Higher Education Act in 1965. He said that the law means that: "a high school senior anywhere in this great land of ours, can apply to any college or any university, in any of the 50 states, and not be turned away because [their] family is poor."

That's the way it was back then when the Pell Grant was covering about 80% of the cost of college education and now it's covering about 30% of the costs of higher education, and that's one of the reasons we have the problems we have now.

For decades, Pell Grants and public institutions have been critical to helping students from low-income backgrounds enroll in college and reach their full potential.

However, growing research reveals that there are still too many public institutions with student bodies that do not reflect the communities they were established to serve.

Even institutions that do enroll Pell-eligible students may not provide the support students need to complete their degrees. According to research from 2018, only a quarter of institutions with higher-than-average Pell enrollment actually graduated more than half of these students.

Unfortunately, the campus closures and inequitable access to remote learning during the pandemic created new barriers for low-income students. In fact, the Brookings Institute found that "students from households making less than \$75,000 per year were almost twice as likely to forego college" during the pandemic.

Over the last year, Congress has taken decisive action to help institutions and students weather the pandemic. We passed three COVID relief packages, providing more than \$75 billion to help institutions stay afloat, reopen their campuses safely, and address the urgent needs of students.

We also increased Pell Grant award amounts for millions of current recipients and expanded eligibility for hundreds of thousands of students, including incarcerated students.

While these packages may have saved our higher education system from financial collapse, we know that we must address the *root* causes behind persistent barriers to postsecondary degrees—namely chronic state disinvestment in higher education.

Since the Great Recession, this widespread trend has led some public institutions to rely on revenue from wealthy, out-of-state students while also raising tuition and further pushing costs onto students and families. State disinvestment has also left many institutions unable to provide the services and resources that students need to complete their education.

Today, our expert witnesses will help us examine bold legislative solutions to lower the cost of college and support student success.

We will discuss the *Pell Grant Preservation and Expansion Act*, a bill that Congressman Pocan and I introduced, which would double the maximum Pell Grant award and tie future increases to inflation. Over the years, the purchasing power of Pell Grants has dramatically declined, covering the smallest share of college costs in four decades. By passing this long-standing higher education priority, we would not only boost Pell Grant awards but also expand eligibility for these critical resources.

We must also pursue investments in higher education like those included in the American Families Plan. The President's proposal calls for investing in:

- Stronger Pell Grant awards,
- Tuition-free community college,
- Reduced costs at under resourced institutions, including HBCUs and other MSIs,
and
- Dedicated funding to ensure institutions can help students complete their degrees.

As we will discuss today, these steps are critical to building back a better higher education system for our nation's students. If we fail to make these investments, we will further contribute to a higher education system in which only wealthy Americans can afford to go to college. However, if we act now, we can make significant progress towards ensuring that *all* students have access to the lifechanging benefits that come with a quality college degree.

Thank you, again, to our witnesses for being with us. I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member, the gentleman from North Carolina, Dr. Murphy, for his opening statement.