



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing

Rising to the Challenge: The Future of Higher Education

[Zoom](#)

Wednesday, March 17, 2021 | 1:00 p.m.

Today, we meet to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education and what we can do to expand access to quality higher education.

I want to start by reaffirming a well-established fact at the foundation of our work—that a college degree is the surest pathway to financial security and a rewarding career.

That is why, as a Miami-Dade County School Board Member, I led the creation of the 5,000 Role Models of Excellence Project, an in-school mentoring and drop-out prevention program that has helped prepare thousands of black boys for higher education and adulthood.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new barriers to a postsecondary degree.

Campus closures and the abrupt transition to online platforms saved lives. But we know that remote instruction has also made it harder for students across the country to access and complete college.

These consequences have not been felt evenly. As with every other facet of our society, Americans who entered the pandemic with fewer resources were disproportionately impacted by the disruption to in-person instruction.

Research indicates that achievement gaps between Black and white students are wider in online classes than traditional settings. And on-campus resources that underserved students normally rely on, like computer labs and reliable high-speed internet, are restricted while campuses are closed.

Now, fewer students—particularly fewer low-income students and students of color—are pursuing a higher education at all.

Social, psychological, and economic hardships have also forced many students to drop out during the pandemic. And we know students who discontinue their education are more likely to default on student loans and less likely to re-enroll, which lowers their chances of increased lifetime earnings.

Institutions are also facing unprecedented state and local budget shortfalls, which have already caused drastic funding cuts and cost more than 300,000 higher education jobs. In addition, decreased enrollment and campus closures are eroding schools' revenue. For example, undergraduate enrollment at community colleges is down 10 percent compared to before the pandemic. Consider that, when the pandemic started, many institutions were still recovering from state budget cuts made during the Great Recession.

To address these challenges, Congress secured urgent funding for higher education by passing three major relief packages:

- the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act*, or *CARES Act*,
- the *Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act*, and, just last week,
- the *American Rescue Plan Act*.

This combined investment of more than \$75 billion has helped our higher education system avert an existential crisis. The relief is helping institutions maintain basic operations, keep staff on payroll, and prepare for reopening safely. And it is helping students avoid hunger, homelessness, and other hardships.

Importantly, these relief packages also secured critical funding for state and local governments, supporting our nation's public institutions, the workers they employ, and the communities they support.

While this relief may have saved our higher education system from financial calamity, justice demands that the federal government do far more to address the longstanding disparities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

For example, as institutions access COVID-19 relief funding, we must strengthen institutional oversight to prevent waste and protect students from predatory for-profit schools. These institutions have a well-documented record of using taxpayer dollars to target vulnerable students during economic downturns, leaving them with worthless degrees and unreasonable loans. We cannot allow history to repeat itself.

Congress must also take bold action to lower the cost of college. This includes creating a federal and state partnership that incentivizes states to reinvest in their public institutions and offer free community college. And it includes expanding Pell Grants, the cornerstone of federal student aid, so that fewer students have to take out student loans.

As the subcommittee has already established, this pandemic is not only testing our students and institutions. It is also testing Congress's commitment to ensuring that all students have access to safe, affordable, and quality education.

Today, I look forward to discussing what we must do to rise to that challenge.

I want to thank our witnesses, again, for being with us and I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Murphy, for his opening statement.