



America Forward on Higher Education

Introduction

America Forward is a coalition of more than 100 organizations nationwide, focused on advancing public policies that foster innovation, identify more efficient and effective solutions, reward results, and catalyze cross-sector partnerships in education, early childhood, workforce development, youth development, and poverty alleviation. We are educators, advocates, case managers, and organizers working in more than 15,000 communities across the country and touching more than 9 million lives every year.

Our organizations work to support students, young people, families, educators, workers, leaders, and communities by providing critical tools, supports, funding, and resources to increase accessibility and improve outcomes. America Forward brings together nonprofit leaders and social entrepreneurs with policymakers to leverage community-based solutions to address systemic inequities that exist in both our education and workforce systems. Over the past year, the coronavirus pandemic, a renewed national reckoning on racial injustice, and the economic instability that so many are experiencing, have only deepened these disparities and highlighted the vital need to reimagine and restructure these systems with an intentional focus on equity; multi-dimensional, holistic skill and competency development; sustainability; and expanding opportunity so that every person can thrive.

Higher Education

For far too many students, the path to college and career success is one filled with barriers to access and critical gaps in opportunity. The work of overcoming these barriers and closing these gaps begins with supported and well-resourced early learning and K-12 experiences and requires continuous support and resources as students navigate the college process, including applying and selecting a program, identifying disability services and supports (if necessary), securing financial aid, and more - as well as a host of additional challenges upon arriving at institutions of higher education (IHEs), including maintaining enrollment amid competing financial or familial responsibilities.

In order to improve both access to and retention rates at IHEs, federal policies must embrace innovation, promote competency, and reassert a focus on outcomes that reflect the needs of the full spectrum of today's students. Additionally, both organizational and political partners have a key role to play in providing students exposure to skills and experiences that help bridge the gap between college and career through strong, experiential learning, out-of-classroom learning opportunities and bold education policy, such as the Higher Education Act (HEA) - which funds vital workforce development programs. We must continue to work to leverage effective partnerships and create student-centered,

flexible systems of support that are able to adequately respond to the dynamic and holistic needs of all students in the postsecondary education system.

POLICY PROPOSALS

Data Transparency: Provide actionable information for students and families on postsecondary outcomes, financial aid, and available support services and accommodations

Many students and families from traditionally under-resourced communities face significant barriers to equitable access, information, and support, when it comes to making informed decisions about where to attend college, how to pay for their education, their ability to graduate and enter the workforce, and what specific accommodations may be available to them. Information about costs, outcomes, supports and accommodations at various institutions is often difficult to navigate and presented in a disjointed manner that makes cross-institution comparison difficult and confusing. Federal policies have a critical role to play in addressing these problems by:

- Continuing to ensure **higher education institutions participating in student aid programs provide complete and contextualized information to students and families on postsecondary outcomes disaggregated** by race, ethnicity, financial aid status, part-time or full-time enrollment status, major, program costs, financial aid offers, and available support services and accommodations. Where such information is currently collected by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and made available via the College Navigator and College Scorecard, it must be presented in a clear, consistent, complete, and actionable format so that it is truly accessible and actionable for students and families.
- Developing strategies to **ensure that students and families have access to financial aid packages prior to all (regular and early) admission decision deadlines** that meet standard formatting practices for consumers. These should include: total Cost of Attendance; the amount a student will need to pay directly to the college; differentiation of grants/scholarships and loans; and separation of Parent PLUS loan and work-study where applicable, not included as a line item in calculations.
- **Requiring IHEs to publicly provide information about the types of services and supports available to students**, including students with disabilities, and how students and their families may access these resources.
- **Providing information to students who are receiving Title IV aid with career education credentialing** about the demand for certain workforce skills and the regional job opportunity assistance options through the federal workforce development system and other assistance programs.

- **Establishing data systems that track participants in college access programs** and provide information on program effectiveness by participant profile and dosage.
- **Requiring IHEs to accept prior documentation of a disability** - such as an Individualized Education Program or a 504 Plan - to serve as sufficient documentation for the purposes of qualifying for disability services.

Innovation: Target federal funding to develop and scale-up innovations that increase access, persistence, and completion in postsecondary education

Innovation coupled with a focus on equitable access and results is essential to maximizing higher education attainment for students from under-resourced communities. Today, a wide range of new approaches are emerging to support students who are historically marginalized to navigate the complex college application process, provide integrated supports for post-enrollment, accelerate time to completion strategies, and form tangible connections with career opportunities, among others. Outcomes and tiered innovation fund models could accelerate the adoption of these approaches, as could reforms in numerous federal aid, workforce development, and other education programs. The federal government should support and encourage this ongoing innovation by:

- **Creating a new Higher Education Innovation and Tiered Evidence Fund:** an \$800 million competitive evidence-based innovation and replication grant program focused on increasing completion rates and improving employment outcomes from the U.S. Department of Education from the U.S. Department of Education.
- Enacting a proposal, like the bipartisan FINISH Act, to **authorize higher education Pay for Success pilots, an innovation fund,** and other provisions to promote evidence-based innovation.
- Building on the federal Performance Partnership Pilots initiative by working toward a model that better **integrates higher education, workforce, and human services funding streams and outcomes goals into a holistic approach that fully meets the needs of students and families.** Rather than restricting funding and supports into a series of siloed programs, this model would identify data sources to track progress and allow for flexibility and innovation to improve results.
- **Providing additional funding for a Pell Success Award premium** paid to accredited and certified postsecondary providers that achieve specified retention, completion, and job outcomes among Pell-eligible students.
- **Establishing the creation of “emergency” grants:** individual grants of \$500- \$1000 to help support students experiencing unexpected financial emergencies, which have been proven to

be a barrier to retention and completion (such as unanticipated medical expenses, transportation, child care, and sudden unemployment).

- **Allowing income-eligible students who are concurrently enrolled in high school** to access separately allocated Pell grants without drawing down on their lifetime Pell eligibility in order to participate in approved high-quality early college high schools.
- **Continuing and evaluating the Experimental Sites Initiative** to identify effective, new approaches for Pell funding, including for dual enrollment and competency-based education.
- **Incentivizing states to transition to performance-based funding models for public higher education**, which award funding at least partly based on persistence, graduation, and other factors - rather than enrollment - while continuing institutional Pell bonuses to prevent exclusionary changes in enrollment practices.
- **Conducting an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation of college access, persistence, graduation, and career practices** to generate evidence about which practices are most likely to get young people into and through postsecondary education.
- **Allowing Title IV student aid to be awarded to credits earned through innovative, evidence-based approaches**, such as competency-based models, approved dual enrollment and early college high schools, Portfolio Assessment, and other Prior Learning Assessment tools, which focus on subject mastery rather than traditional measures of seat-time.
- **Supporting the National Center for Information and Technical Support for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities**, which provides disability training for college faculty and information to students and families.

Partnerships: Invest in effective partners that provide critical expertise and capacity

Effective partnerships between IHEs and high-quality community partners and intermediary organizations at the local, state, and national levels are essential to supporting students as they progress through their postsecondary careers. Too often, however, such partnerships do not receive adequate support to expand their services, even when students are in desperate need of the resources they provide. New federal policies should intentionally harness the power of effective partnerships to increase postsecondary access and improve outcomes among under-resourced students by:

- **Incentivizing IHEs that participate in the Title IV program - particularly those that have historically struggled with internal and resource capacity constraints - to develop new, in-house programs** or in partnership with external nonprofits to provide data-informed supports and services (or strengthen those already in place) to help students - especially under-resourced, students with disabilities, and first-generation college students - choose and

complete a program of study, receive informed career, academic, and financial aid counseling, create an academic course focused on career and have access to hands-on learning experiences.

- **Clarifying and emphasizing in federal legislation the potential role of intermediary organizations**, which can connect IHEs to a range of nonprofit and for-profit partners, other IHEs, and community-based organizations, to improve educator quality and capacity as well as student outcomes.
- **Encouraging IHEs to work with qualified community partners** - either through external offerings or new, in-house programming - to train higher education faculty on course designs that are accessible to the range of learners on college campuses, and to enable faculty and staff to respond effectively to requests for support and accommodation from students with learning differences.
- **Providing greater flexibility for Title IV IHEs to engage in partnerships with nonprofit entities** focused on both the academic and non-academic barriers students can face during their higher education careers, including practical barriers like child care, transportation, and housing support.

Credentials, Classroom Learning, and Career: Expand certification options for students that map skills and experience with job placement, and increase access to experiences that directly link classroom learning with careers

In order to improve postsecondary outcomes for students, it is critical that IHEs and postsecondary providers recognize the realities facing today's students and consider the core competencies sought by employers in that context. As part of this effort, it is important that postsecondary providers and employers work together to create innovative credentialing and certification programs that reward the development of certain in-demand skills that apply directly to areas of need in the economy. In addition, expanding relevant, meaningful opportunities for students to explore careers in their fields of interest will lead to improved completion rates and increased employment after graduation. The federal government should help pursue these goals by:

- **Developing a protocol at the Office of Personnel Management for recognizing non-traditional credentials**, including micro-credentials (which recognize individual skills or practice) and credentials offered outside of traditional education institutions, that takes into account their relevance, rigor, and reliability.
- Creating a system whereby **micro-credentials are accepted by the Department of Labor as evidence of learning** through internships, service year programs, and other experiential learning.

- **Tasking the Department of Labor with validating that such credentialed experiential learning programs constitute “vocational education”** per the determination requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and, therefore, are deemed to be FLSA compliant.
- Requiring that, in addition to on-campus opportunities, **at least fifty percent of Work Study grants support extra-mural internships, service-learning, career-related work experience, and service year opportunities for eligible students**, including Pell recipients. These opportunities would allow students to link learning to experience, enable students to gain college-level learning through their service, and provide human support to help other students access and persist in higher education.
- **Enacting legislation that encourages IHEs to focus on providing hands-on learning experiences – including in partnership with nonprofits, community organizations, and businesses – that get students out of the classroom and enable them to apply what they are learning to real-world challenges, creating strong linkages between classroom knowledge and career-focused applications.**

Educator and School Leader Preparation: Recognizing the importance of well-prepared and well-supported teachers, principals, and other school leaders

Teachers and school leaders have an outsized influence on a student’s academic achievement. Because it governs teacher and school leader preparation programs, HEA plays an important role in ensuring that every student has access to highly effective teachers and school leaders. Any reauthorization of HEA should ensure that teacher preparation programs better prepare teachers, through a whole-learner lens, to provide high-quality instruction to all students and that school leader preparation programs better prepare school leaders to be strong instructional leaders, talent managers, and culture builders. Federal lawmakers can support these efforts through the reauthorization process by:

- **Ensuring that Title II of HEA and Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) work in concert with one another and reinforce the same priorities.** This includes: support for high-quality preparation programs that train educators to be able to meet the range of needs of all students, as well as investments in professional development to raise expectations for current educators and develop teachers, teacher leaders, and principals to meet the same high bar as new educators.
- **Amending Title II of HEA to better support training and professional development opportunities** designed to prepare teachers to implement and lead whole-learner approaches and innovative models, including but not limited to earlier postsecondary pathways.
- Ensure teacher preparation programs equip educators to partner with parents in service of student learning. School closures due to COVID-19 revealed a major gap in pre-service training: teachers have been ill-equipped to help parents support learning at home. Teacher preparation

programs should include practical experiences in which teachers team up with parents to help students reach learning goals.

- Requiring grantees under Title II of HEA to **align training for early educators with K-12 educators so that all children experience a continuum of whole-learner approaches**, rather than facing disruption that can hamper positive impacts on learning and development.
- Amending Part A of Title II of the Higher Education Act to **better support opportunities for principal and school leader preparation programs within the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program**. These opportunities include allowing high-need school districts to enter into new partnerships dedicated solely to training educators who aspire to fill leadership roles in high-need schools, as well as supporting pre-service residency opportunities for aspiring school leaders, which would train them to offer high-quality administration and leadership to geographically diverse or high-need schools.
- **Funding partnerships among high-performing principal preparation programs** (including IHEs or nonprofit organizations) and high-need local education agencies (LEAs) to create model principal preparation programs.
- **Making targeted research investments in principal and other school leader preparation programs** - including in those based at IHEs, LEAs, and nonprofit organizations - to learn more about the leadership practices that correlate with successful outcomes, in addition to other important measures related to program inputs (e.g., admissions rate), processes (e.g., residency or internship hours required), and outputs (e.g., placement rate of graduates into relevant positions).
- **Maintaining and enhancing the TEACH grant program** to support the recruitment and retention of educators who practice in high-need fields, such as special education, mathematics, and science.
- **Reducing the overall number of reporting requirements in Title II of HEA while focusing the remaining requirements on critical outcome measures**. For all principal preparation programs, we recommend collecting methodologically sound data on admissions rates, licensure rates, placement rates, and leadership effectiveness.
- **Encouraging and incentivizing transparent reporting of inputs and outcomes**. To demonstrate diversity, teacher and leader preparation programs should report inputs and outcomes in a transparent way, with data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and Pell Grant recipient status.

- **Building strong pathways to recruit AmeriCorps members into teaching.** National service programs - both teacher professional corps and other models - have long provided a pathway into teaching for young people from diverse backgrounds, and such programs should be part of an intentional strategy to recruit men and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) into teaching. This pathway can be formalized and strengthened through recruitment and fellowship programs funded by the Department of Education that reach out to AmeriCorps members, particularly men and BIPOC, and support them on a pathway to teaching.

Outcomes: Focusing on and emphasizing public reporting of outcomes in federal higher education policy

Federal higher education programs have long been focused on access rather than on whether students are completing and receiving the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in today’s world. Higher education needs to be refocused on prioritizing both access and outcomes. The federal government can support these efforts by:

- Continuing to pursue statutory and regulatory changes in the HEA that **require accredited and certified postsecondary institutions offering workforce credentialing programs to support student access and completion.** These programs would ensure affordable student access, persistence, and completion at school, as well as placement and retention in careers for which they were trained and in which they earn wages that enable them to repay education loans. Such policies should be aimed at all providers, whether they are for-profit, nonprofit, or public.
- **Ensuring that required data on teacher preparation programs reflects program quality.** The evaluation measures for teacher preparation programs should be meaningful ones, rather than a laundry list, and should include both inputs and outcomes to measure the quality of such programs. These would include, for example, teacher performance, the number of recent graduates employed, the number in high-needs schools, and satisfaction survey outcomes.
- **Amending laws, regulations, and access protocols to ensure appropriate privacy protections** while permitting federal, state, and local workforce and education agencies, state and local workforce boards, nonprofit workforce development organizations, social enterprises, and postsecondary institutions certified by the Department of Education for participation in Title IV of the HEA to have access to the National Directory of New Hires and to Unemployment Insurance Wage Records.

Student Aid: Reforming student aid programs to reduce debt burden

Federal student aid has been primarily focused on access to, rather than completion of, higher education credentials and degrees. Federal student aid programs should include incentives for IHEs to be more focused on individual attainment of degree and certification programs. As part of this effort,

financial aid should be flexible enough to meet unique needs that may arise throughout a student's term. This may include, for example, the ability to draw down student aid regardless of current award year limitations to account for anticipated and unanticipated costs of textbooks, transportation, housing, food and/or childcare. The federal government can support individual degree and certification completion by:

- **Strengthening the higher education system to ensure that it continues to be a vehicle for economic mobility for all students - regardless of their income, background, or immigration status** - by incentivizing IHEs to provide supports to help justice-involved youth to gain opportunities to earn a postsecondary degree or training certificate and supporting efforts to provide access for DREAMERS to federal aid or other supports.
- **Ensuring student aid is available to students who are enrolled but who may not take a full course load**, such as students with disabilities, as well as students who are experiencing other extracurricular difficulties.
- **Ensuring that federal student loan borrowers have access to affordable student loan repayment programs** to prevent the build-up of long-term and potentially intergenerational debt that hinders career and personal aspirations.
- **Restructuring campus-based aid programs** to be based on the share of Pell-eligible students enrolled.
- **Maintaining and expanding TEACH grants** while ensuring they are accessible and their funding robust. The design and awarding of these grants must take into account that teachers in under-resourced schools need immediate student loan relief to cover their first year as a teacher, rather than five to ten years later.
- **Maintaining and expanding the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program** for individuals who take high-need public service jobs in under-served communities.
- **Providing service year participants with accelerated loan forgiveness** (such as three-years of credit for each year of full-time service) or enhanced grant aid based on the length of their service.
- **Expanding allowable uses for AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards**. Alternative allowable uses should include other workplace training programs or expenses associated with starting a small business or nonprofit.

National Service: Increasing connection to completion and careers

Research shows that national service participants have higher college completion rates than nonparticipants, choose public service careers more often than their peers, and are better paid when they do pursue public service. Service year programs benefit communities while providing participants with opportunities for personal growth and tangible, transferable skills that are valued by employers. As we seek innovative strategies to help ease the transition between postsecondary education and the workforce, federal policies should promote the role of service year programs as an effective and mutually beneficial bridge to the full-time workforce or, if the service year takes place before college, as a bridge to college by:

- Incentivizing IHEs to develop a system to **award credit for college-level learning gained through a service year or other experience.**
- **Incentivizing pathways to entrepreneurship for young people with a service background.** The Biden Administration should announce a new competitive entrepreneurship program that would be open to young people who have served at least one year through a service year program. One thousand young people would be selected annually based on their past community engagement and the ‘Big Bet’ they detail in their application.
- **Providing deferment or forbearance options for certified service year programs.** AmeriCorps members may receive deferment and are specifically eligible for forbearance of their direct student loans. This benefit should be extended to individuals participating in all service year programs that are certified to conform to requirements essentially similar to AmeriCorps, including privately funded service programs. Service year programs move in and out of AmeriCorps funding streams or have AmeriCorps funding at one site but not another. This change would help to equalize benefits for corps members regardless of the federal funding status of their programs and would make it possible for more individuals to serve.
- Creating a Civilian Service Option for returning military members to **provide returning veterans with much-needed transition time, pathways to education, training for jobs, and the dignity and pride of continuing their service here at home.** This mission could be supported as an eligible benefit under the GI Bill, through the Department of Defense transition programs, or through Department of Labor veterans’ assistance programs.
- **Providing incentives for IHEs to dedicate federal college work-study hours to service.** Career exposure and experience increase college completion rates. The original work-study program was intended to allow students to serve in the community. Some IHEs far exceed the minimum seven percent mandated for work-study community service hours, while others fail to achieve even this low minimum. To address this issue, fifty percent of any increase for College Work-Study should be awarded by formula to those IHEs that in the previous year used more than fifty percent of their work-study funds for community service hours.

- **Establish a new higher education grant program and/or specific incentives within current federal grant programs**, such as enrollment support, credit hours, AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards match or other financial support **for AmeriCorps alumni who have served the equivalent of at least one full year term (1700 hours)** in the previous five years to support their application to and enrollment in institutions of higher education in programs focused on developing K-12 educators and educational leaders.

Conclusion

The past year in America has been defined by unprecedented challenges, enormous loss, and our continued struggle to confront deeply entrenched, systemic injustice and inequity. Nonetheless, we see enormous opportunity; opportunity to work collaboratively towards policies that expand opportunity, that embrace innovation, that leverage science and evidence, and that meaningfully advance equity. In the face of seemingly intractable challenges, we feel determined; determined to continue amplifying the voices of our Coalition members, determined to uplift effective, community-based solutions, and determined to build more equitable, accessible, high-quality systems that support students, educators, workers, nonprofit leaders, and families in all of our communities. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

About America Forward

America Forward is the Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a pioneering national venture philanthropy organization that invests in a portfolio of breakthrough social entrepreneurs and systems-change initiatives, catalyzes and builds their impact, and transforms how government and philanthropy pursue social change to ensure that all people can thrive.

America Forward unites social innovators with policymakers to advance a public policy agenda that advances equity, fosters innovation, rewards results, catalyzes cross-sector partnerships, and transforms local impact into national change. The America Forward Coalition comprises a network of over 100 social innovation organizations that champion innovative, effective, and efficient solutions to our country's most pressing social problems. Since 2007, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change in education, workforce development, and Pay for Success policy; leveraged \$1.7 billion for social innovation; and driven millions of federal resources toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most.