



America Forward on Higher Education

Introduction

For far too many students, the path to and through post-secondary education is filled with barriers to access and critical gaps in opportunity. The work of overcoming these challenges begins with strong early learning and K-12 experiences and requires continuous support and resources as students navigate post-secondary education. From deciding on a post-secondary option, securing financial aid if necessary, and identifying available services, to maintaining enrollment and balancing school with financial, work, familial, or other responsibilities, supportive pathways are essential to improve both access and completion.

Federal policy has an outside role to play in building these pathways. By embracing innovation, promoting competency, and reasserting a focus on outcomes that reflect the needs of the full spectrum of today's students, Federal policymakers can help bridge existing gaps – first from K-12 to post-secondary and then from post-secondary to the workforce – and set students up for success. Our collective priority must be actionable policy and adequate resources to create student-centered, flexible systems of support that can 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, including making informed decisions about where to attend college, paying for their education, determining their ability to graduate and enter the workforce, and learning 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. Efforts like the College Transparency Act can help ensure this kind of

information is presented in a clear, consistent, complete, and actionable format so that it is truly accessible and useful for students and families.

- Developing strategies to **ensure that students and families have access to financial aid packages** – provided in a clear, transparent, standardized, consumer-friendly format – **prior to all (regular and early) admission decision deadlines**. The information provided to students and families 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.
- **Ensuring that required data on teacher preparation programs reflects program quality**. The evaluation measures for teacher preparation programs should be meaningful and should include both inputs and outcomes to measure the quality of such programs. Meaningful evaluation measures would include, for example, teacher performance, the number of recent graduates employed (including the number employed in high-needs schools), and satisfaction survey outcomes.
- **Amending laws, regulations, and access protocols to allow** federal, state, and local workforce and education agencies; state and local workforce boards; nonprofit workforce development organizations; social enterprises; and postsecondary institutions to have access to the National Directory of New Hires and to unemployment insurance wage records, while ensuring appropriate privacy protections.
- **Establishing accessible data infrastructure that enables public reporting and performance improvement to strengthen college access, completion, and post-college outcomes**, incorporating national and statewide information from early childhood through K–12 education, postsecondary education, and the workforce – including **providing data systems that track participants in college access programs** and provide information on program effectiveness by participant profile and dosage.
- **Providing information to students who are receiving Title IV aid for programs involving 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.

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 historically marginalized students 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. 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:

- **Authorizing the Postsecondary Student Success Grants program** to include long-term, large-scale funding; labor market outcomes as a priority alongside completion; support for evaluation with a focus on innovation and equity; support for building the evidence base and helping organizations develop capacity; support for early-stage innovation programs; and the use of pay for success funding structures. One model to explore is contained within the bipartisan FINISH Act, which would **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 to better **integrate 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 in 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 employment outcomes among Pell-eligible students.
- **Establishing the creation of emergency, individual grants** of \$500-\$1000 to help support students experiencing unexpected financial emergencies (such as unanticipated medical, transportation, and child care expenses, food insecurity, or sudden unemployment), which have been shown to create barriers to retention and completion.
- Supporting programs that provide for dual enrollment, early college high schools, and other approaches that provide access **to transferable credits**, including those with a career focus.
- **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 experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations 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.
- **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 institutions of higher education (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 education. 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 – particularly those that have historically struggled with internal and resource capacity constraints – to develop new, in-house programs** or partnerships with external nonprofits to provide data-informed supports and services to help students choose and complete a program of study; receive informed career, academic, and financial aid counseling; create an academic course focused on career; and access hands-on learning and service year experiences.
- **Clarifying and emphasizing 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.

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

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:

- 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, as well as strong post-college labor market outcomes**. These programs would be designed to be affordable, with a focus on persistence and completion, as well as placement and retention of students in careers for which they were trained and in which they can 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.
- **Developing standards and methods for recognizing non-traditional credentials**, including micro-credentials (which recognize individual skills or practice) and credentials offered outside of traditional education institutions, that take into account relevance, rigor, and reliability. We recommend that the Department of Labor convene a formal effort, in partnership with the Department of Education and Department of Commerce, to work with stakeholders to support and elevate best practices on these credentials.
- Calling on Congress to increase the set aside for **extra-mural internships, service-learning, career-related work experience, and service year opportunities in the Work Study program**. These opportunities allow students to link learning to experience, enable students to gain college-level learning through service, and provide human support to help 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, the HEA plays an important role in ensuring that every student has access to highly effective teachers and school leaders. Any reauthorization of the 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 so teachers, teacher leaders, and principals can 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.
- **Ensuring teacher preparation programs equip educators to partner with parents in service of student learning.** Learning loss 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 and development 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.
- **Building strong pathways to recruit AmeriCorps members into teaching.** National service programs – both teacher professional corps and other AmeriCorps 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 more men and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) into teaching. This pathway can be formalized and strengthened through teacher recruitment, fellowship, and apprenticeship 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. To facilitate this teacher talent pipeline, AmeriCorps should work to release corps member alumni contact information to external partners that offer AmeriCorps alumni support services.
- Amending Part A of Title II of the HEA to enhance **principal and school leader preparation programs within the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program**, with a specific focus on encouraging diversity among principals and school leaders and employing evidence based-strategies to recruit, prepare, support, and retain strong principals and school leaders.

- **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.
- **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.

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 might include, for example, the ability to draw down student aid regardless of current award year limitations to account for the anticipated and unanticipated costs of textbooks, transportation, housing, food and/or childcare. The federal government can support individual degree and certification completion by:

- **Ensuring that federal student loan borrowers have access to affordable student loan repayment programs** that 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 and address historic inequities.
- **Maintaining and expanding the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program** for individuals who take high-need public service jobs in under-served communities. Also, revising PSLF requirements to allow service year program participants to count their service term towards the 10-year requirement.
- **Strengthening the higher education system to ensure 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 gain opportunities to earn a postsecondary degree or training certificate, and supporting efforts to provide access for DREAMERS to federal aid and 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 and students who are experiencing extracurricular difficulties.

- **Providing service year participants with accelerated or enhanced loan forgiveness**, such as enhanced grant aid based on the length of their service, eliminating the tax on the AmeriCorps Segal Education award to make the award stretch farther, and more.
- **Expanding allowable uses for AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards** to include other workplace training programs or a cash award with greater fungibility.

National Service: Improving pathways to postsecondary completion and career

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 service experience**.
- **Providing deferment or forbearance options for certified service year programs**. Currently, 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 and conform to requirements essentially similar to AmeriCorps, including privately funded service programs. Since Service year programs move in and out of AmeriCorps funding streams and/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 program could be supported as an eligible benefit under the GI Bill, through the Department of Defense transition programs, or through Department of Labor’s veterans assistance programs.
- **Enable military spouses/families to participate in national service**. The U.S. Department of Defense should enter into an agreement with AmeriCorps to establish a Military Family Service

Corps as an AmeriCorps Affiliate. In addition, the AmeriCorps law should be amended to enable military families to serve overseas where they are posted.

- **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 IHE programs focused on developing K-12 educators and educational leaders.
- Incentivize **pathways into climate resilience and mitigation careers by exploring interagency partnerships**. With the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, significant federal resources are now available to move the country towards a climate resilience future, including opportunities to invest in a climate-ready workforce. National service programs have a long history of offering pipelines into climate resilience and conservation careers. AmeriCorps should consider pursuing interagency partnerships with the Departments of Agriculture, Energy, Transportation, and Labor, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other federal partners to build out more robust climate-related national service career pathways, encourage young people of all backgrounds to pursue opportunities in these growing fields, and meet urgent workforce needs.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, we see enormous opportunity to work collaboratively towards higher education policies that expand opportunity, embrace innovation, leverage science and evidence, and meaningfully advance equity for all students. In the face of persistent challenges, we are determined to continue amplifying the voices of our Coalition members; advocating for Federal action to expand effective, evidence-based, community-based solutions; and building more equitable, accessible, high-quality systems that support students, educators, workers, nonprofit leaders, and families in all 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 leads a Coalition of more than 100 social innovation organizations across the country. Every day, these organizations are working in 15,000 communities nationwide, impacting more than 9 million lives every year.

Together, America Forward Coalition members advocate for public policies that foster innovation, identify effective solutions, reward results, catalyze cross-sector partnerships, and advance equity in workforce development, education, early childhood, and poverty alleviation. Since 2007, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change; 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.