



America Forward Policy Platform on Higher Education

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Introduction

Higher education provides a critical path to opportunity in the United States. While our nation's students possess a multitude of strengths and perspectives, many encounter far too many challenges navigating postsecondary pathways. This is particularly true for students from historically under-resourced backgrounds. Critical barriers include a rapidly changing labor market, daunting costs, and a cumbersome financial aid process. At the same time, many students balance an array of personal responsibilities, such as work and caregiving.

Policymakers must prioritize reforms that break down these barriers and enable students to access and navigate higher education to attain affordable credentials that translate into strong economic and life outcomes. By embracing innovation and emphasizing evidence-based, outcomes-focused strategies, policymakers can achieve a fairer, more effective higher education system and strengthen communities across the country.

America Forward is a national nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization that unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward. The America Forward Coalition includes many leading non-governmental providers and intermediaries that deliver and facilitate critical, evidence-based postsecondary navigation and success services, including financial aid advising; program and college selection support; dual enrollment and early college programs; retention and completion coaching; support for basic needs; and career navigation ranging from in-school internships to post-college career pathways.

The America Forward Coalition urges policymakers to pursue critical reforms through long-overdue reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA); annual appropriations bills; and the array of opportunities available to administrative agencies, including strengthening implementation of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), refining grant priorities, and improving data systems. We call for postsecondary policy action in four areas:

- 1) Invest in High-Quality Postsecondary Navigation
- 2) Strengthen the Foundations for Postsecondary Pathways
- 3) Invest in Today's Students and a High-Performing Higher Education System
- 4) Align Postsecondary Policy with Community Needs

1) Invest in High-Quality Postsecondary Navigation

The road to and through postsecondary education is full of obstacles. The good news is that we know what can make a difference for students. Innovative organizations have developed evidence-based postsecondary access and success navigation strategies that put the benefits of higher education within fair reach for all students. These strategies include new ways to help students identify postsecondary options early in their educational journey, assess complex financial aid options, and leverage wraparound supports to address obstacles in their paths. And critically, this innovation has produced transformational experiential programs and career advising that pave the way for students to achieve career success after graduation.

However, federal funding provides only limited support for many of the most effective postsecondary access and success navigation approaches.¹ We call on policymakers to:

- **Ensure nonprofit providers are eligible.** While nonprofit postsecondary student success organizations have spearheaded some of the most evidence-based, innovative strategies, the vast majority receive no meaningful federal support for their work – often because federal funding opportunities are only open to educational institutions as lead applicants. This is problematic as nonprofit providers are often well-positioned to scale and innovate effective new strategies, and because nonprofits’ scope of operations often make it challenging to formally partner with institutions at the application stage. Nonprofit providers also play a critical role in supporting students across institutions. A growing number of programs support students from high school through college graduation, and others support students returning to school after stopping out. Policymakers must ensure that programs like TRIO, GEAR UP, and Postsecondary Student Success Grants are open to effective nongovernmental providers delivering results for students.
- **Invest in evidence-based strategies.** We urge policymakers to increase investment in evidence-based navigation strategies for all student populations through federal funding streams such as TRIO and GEAR UP by prioritizing effective models and supporting ongoing evidence-building. We encourage policymakers to direct these funding streams to evidence-based approaches; to ensure they are accessible for emerging, innovative providers; and to provide more flexibility to support students across levels and phases of education, including high school to college transitions and returning adult students.
- **Expand support for career navigation and experiences.** Students increasingly express concern regarding the value of higher education and the need for more robust navigation support as they consider their options, especially regarding career opportunities. Federal policymakers should supplement college access and completion support with career navigation beginning in middle school onward. Policymakers should leverage the creative, responsive strategies nongovernmental organizations have developed to enable students to gain exposure to hands-on learning experiences in partnership with nonprofits, community organizations, and businesses, ranging from apprenticeships in community colleges to career-focused courses. For example, policymakers should expand the Federal Work Study (FWS) program and the

¹ See America Forward’s report on this issue in partnership with the National College Attainment Network: Brown, López, Sackett, and Woodhouse (2025), *The Non-Profit Funding Gap: Strengthening the Postsecondary Student Success Ecosystem*, <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/NCAN-America-Forward-Student-Success-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>.

community service set-aside, which provide college students with critical opportunities for community engagement and real-world learning while attaining their credential.

In addition, policymakers must deepen investment in the development, testing, and adaptation of innovative, responsive navigation strategies that support today's student population. We call on policymakers to:

- **Authorize and increase investment in Postsecondary Student Success Grants (PSSG).** The evidence-based, competitive PSSG grant program fosters practitioners' development, evaluation, and scaling of postsecondary student success strategies to help students complete their credentials and achieve long-term career success. We urge policymakers to expand investment in this practitioner-focused program at least to the level of the companion Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program in K-12. We also strongly encourage Congress and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to ensure that nongovernmental organizations are eligible as lead applicants for PSSG – enabling, for instance, the use of strategies that follow students from high school to college – and strengthen the program's implementation.
- **Strengthen support for foundational research.** As a critical complement to practitioner-driven strategies, we encourage policymakers to expand investments in foundational research that sets the stage for groundbreaking postsecondary navigation approaches – ranging from descriptive studies to experimental evaluations. We support requiring ED to use its existing full authority to leverage up to 0.5 percent of funds for pooled evaluation under the HEA, as well as to ensure the Department allocates at least 1 percent of all postsecondary dollars for research and evaluation. ED and its partners must also deeply engage with social innovation organizations and proximate leaders as they develop and refine learning agendas.
- **Launch new Experimental Sites.** We urge the Department to partner with institutions and nongovernmental partners to leverage its Experimental Sites authority to test innovative navigation models and pathways, such as dual enrollment and competency-based education, using rigorous evaluation strategies that provide relevant implementation and causal evidence for the field.

Additionally, more effective technical assistance can help accelerate and strengthen high-impact postsecondary navigation approaches. Policymakers should:

- **Invest in and strengthen federal technical assistance.** We urge policymakers to ensure federal technical assistance resources, such as the Comprehensive Centers and Regional Educational Laboratories, provide intentional, well-aligned services to institutions and nongovernmental providers that effectively address postsecondary issues, including transition to careers. We also encourage policymakers to continue to support 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.
- **Support partnership development.** We encourage ED to develop opportunities to connect institutions and nongovernmental partners providing relevant services, including support for intermediaries who are well-positioned to facilitate such partnerships across sectors.

2) Strengthen the Foundations for Postsecondary Pathways

Updates to our nation's federal higher education policy framework under the HEA are long overdue. We

urge policymakers to adopt foundational reforms to strengthen students' access to high-quality postsecondary pathways.

As a starting point, policymakers must consider innovation in the field and recognize new postsecondary pathways that respond to students' needs as well as today's labor market. Key steps include:

- **Effective implementation of Workforce Pell for high-quality programs.** In 2025, Congress authorized Workforce Pell Grants that fill the gap in federal law that had prevented students from leveraging Pell Grants to participate in postsecondary programs that are 8 to 15 weeks long, even when these programs are proven to boost students' economic outcomes. Expanding the applicability of Pell Grants to help cover the cost of high-quality, short-term job training programs, including apprenticeships, holds enormous potential to make evidence-based education and training programs more accessible for millions of people in America. We urge federal officials to ensure Workforce Pell is implemented effectively, including by leveraging high-quality administrative data to assess outcomes and reduce burden and providing strong transparency into program participation and results. Program rules should also ensure that proven non-institutional providers can accessibly partner with colleges and universities and not create undue barriers to participation (e.g., accreditation process, unduly low cap on participation by external providers), as well as provide a pathway for such providers to directly access Workforce Pell if they meet quality standards.
- **Expand support for innovative pathways.** Policymakers should support innovative pathways to make higher education more accessible and affordable, including earlier access to postsecondary opportunities. We support the expansion of models such as dual enrollment, early college high schools, and other approaches that provide access to transferable credits, including those with a career focus, as well as strong technical assistance to support effective implementation and ongoing continuous improvement. We also support efforts to better align workforce programs, such as apprenticeships and sectoral strategies, with postsecondary programs by clarifying and expanding access to federal financial aid.
- **Develop 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 the Department of Commerce to work with stakeholders to support and elevate best practices on these credentials.

Students and their advisors need robust, accessible data and resources to make informed choices about postsecondary programs and financing. Building on progress over the past decade, policymakers should:

- **Ensure financial aid transparency.** Policymakers must ensure that students and families have access to financial aid packages, provided in a clear, transparent, standardized, and consumer-friendly format, prior to all admission decision deadlines (both early and regular). For example, these packages must distinguish properly between different types of aid and costs, including clarifying loans and work-study funds. Bipartisan policymakers have developed strong proposals for reform that should be a priority this Congress.
- **Improve and expand reporting on higher education participation, costs, and outcomes.** Policymakers should continue to ensure that the College Scorecard provides complete and contextualized data to students, families, and their advisors regarding Title IV institutions,

including program costs, financial aid offers, time to completion, and post-college career outcomes, as well as available support services and accommodations. This data must be available disaggregated by factors such as race, ethnicity, financial aid status, part-time or full-time enrollment status, and program/major. In addition, Congress should pass the College Transparency Act to ensure reported data includes all students and to reduce the reporting burden on institutions and their partners.

- **Support use of administrative data for analysis and improvement.** Policymakers should strengthen data infrastructure that links administrative data across early learning, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems, as well as public benefits systems as well. These efforts should include financial support for state data systems and cross-state collaboratives, as well as leverage national earnings and employment data. These systems should provide for secure, privacy-protected access for key stakeholders, such as nongovernmental providers, for performance management, continuous improvement, reporting, and evaluation. We support investments in this infrastructure under the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) and Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) programs, alongside robust technical assistance regarding technology infrastructure as well as to protect privacy.

Third, policymakers must eliminate persistent systemic barriers to accessing higher education:

- **Strong FAFSA implementation.** We call on the Administration and Congress to prioritize fixing the FAFSA system and learn from past missteps, and to ultimately build a system that is fairer and more accessible. This should include investing in a more effective Office of Student Aid. It also must include regular engagement with students, and with leaders from nongovernmental providers that support college access and success among millions of students nationwide.
- **Eliminate barriers to aid and support.** We support efforts to expand higher education opportunities to all people, such as enabling all students to participate in college access and success programs and expanding postsecondary access among incarcerated students.
- **Facilitate transfer.** Policymakers must strengthen the transfer process, whether by enhancing advising across institutions or reforming articulation policies. For example, many students enter community college with the aim of ultimately receiving a four-year degree, but only a small proportion actually transfer to a four-year school – and even fewer ultimately complete a BA.

3) Invest in Today's Students and a High-Performing Higher Education System

Our nation's investments in postsecondary financial aid have not kept pace with increases in costs to students, while many of our nation's public institutions – in particular regional institutions, community colleges, and Minority Serving Institutions – have faced decades of underinvestment. At the same time, the country's policy framework has provided little support and incentives for institutions to invest in the most effective strategies that support students' long-term success.

Policymakers should enable every student to pursue and complete a credential of value with a higher return on investment by adapting and enhancing financial aid to respond to the needs of today's students:

- **Expand Pell Grants.** We support increasing Pell Grant awards as a key strategy to improve access and success, including doubling the maximum Pell Grant.

- **Invest in Federal Work-Study (FWS) and the community set-aside.** We support increased investment in the Federal Work-Study program, as well as gradually increasing the Federal Work Study community service set-aside as appropriations rise. These reforms will enable the program to better meet demand to provide over half a million students with meaningful work experience, while also addressing pressing community staffing shortages in areas like child care and early education, and strengthening partnerships between institutions of higher education and community-based organizations.
- **Restructure campus-based aid programs.** FWS and Federal Supplemental Educational Grant (FSEOG) allocations should be based on the share of Pell-eligible students enrolled, not outdated funding levels.
- **Support benefits access for students and emergency aid.** Federal policymakers should support institutions and their nongovernmental partners in accessing federal benefits programs that enable students to address critical needs such as housing, food, and child care and allow them to more fully participate in their learning. This includes eliminating barriers to student participation in programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and federal housing assistance, as well as investing in the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program. Alongside these programs, we encourage policymakers to support institutions and their nongovernmental partners in offering emergency aid to help students address urgent financial emergencies that threaten their academic success and personal well-being.
- **Provide affordable student loan repayment.** We support ensuring federal student loan borrowers have access to affordable student loan repayment programs that empower students to pursue their personal and career aspirations, including in public service. Specifically, we support protecting and expanding the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program; enabling service year participants to count their service towards PSLF's 10-year requirement; providing service year participants with accelerated or enhanced loan forgiveness; and eliminating the tax on the AmeriCorps Segal Education award.

In addition, we support investments in the broader higher education system that prioritize growth and improvement. Key strategies include:

- **Invest in a federal-state partnership.** We encourage federal policymakers to dedicate new funding to co-invest with states to support institutions and address historic inequities, while prioritizing investments in evidence-based strategies that strengthen performance and ultimately lower costs to students.
- **Incentivize and support improvement.** We support policy measures that directly incentivize institutions to achieve stronger outcomes, such as completion rates, earnings and employment, and debt-to-income ratios. These measures should emphasize not just absolute outcomes but also growth, while accounting for disparate labor market outcomes across as a result of labor market discrimination, as well as the extent to which graduates pursue economically-sustainable public service careers.

4) Align Postsecondary Policy with Community Needs

We call on federal policymakers to ensure postsecondary policies align with community needs and support students to pursue public service careers. Our nation's higher education policy infrastructure

sets the stage in preparing students to serve communities across the nation.

First, postsecondary policy plays a crucial role in ensuring every student has access to highly effective teachers and school leaders. Moving forward, policymakers should:

- **Strengthen education training and professional development under Title II of the HEA.** Title II should better support training and professional development opportunities designed to prepare teachers to implement and lead innovative models, including whole-learner approaches, which leverage evidence-based strategies to take a holistic view of learning and development for every young person. Title II should also prepare teachers with what they need to partner with parents in service of student learning at home and in the classroom, including through practical experiences in which teachers team up with parents to help students reach learning goals. Additionally, Title II should help prepare teachers to ensure that students have access to postsecondary opportunities such as advanced coursework, dual enrollment and career and technical education, even before high school, so that they have strong onramps to college and careers. Policymakers must ensure that Title II of HEA and Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) work in concert to achieve these goals, and also that training for early educators align with preparation for K-12 educators so that all children can experience a continuum of whole-learner approaches.
- **Invest in preparation of diverse educators.** Congress should amend 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 recruitment and retention practices that draw directly from home-grown, community talent to strengthen the principals and school leader pipeline. In addition, ED should strengthen recruitment and preparation programs for AmeriCorps members, which have long provided pathways into teaching for young people from diverse backgrounds.
- **Support educators in high-need fields.** We also encourage policymakers to maintain and enhance 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.
- **Strengthen data on educator preparation.** Policymakers should expand reporting on teacher and leader preparation programs' participation and outcomes, including teacher performance, the number of recent graduates employed (including the number employed in high-need schools), and satisfaction survey outcomes. Data must be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and Pell Grant recipient status.

Second, Congress and federal agencies should strengthen connections between postsecondary policy and national service. 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 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. Policymakers should:

- **Support enrollment of national service participants in higher education.** We encourage incentives within current grant programs, 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 postsecondary programs focused on developing K-12 educators and educational leaders. We also support encouraging institutions to award credit

for college-level learning gained through a service year or other service experience.

- **Expand student loan deferment or forbearance.** 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 state and privately-funded service 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.
- **Expanding allowable uses for AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards** to include other workplace training programs or a cash award with greater fungibility.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, we see enormous opportunity to find common ground and work collaboratively towards higher education policies that expand opportunity, embrace innovation, leverage science and evidence, and meaningfully advance outcomes for all students. We strongly support federal action that expands effective, evidence-based, community-based solutions, and that builds more accessible, fair, high-quality systems to support students, educators, workers, nonprofit leaders, and families. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

About America Forward

America Forward unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward.

America Forward Coalition members achieve high impact, measurable outcomes in more than 15,000 communities nationwide, touching the lives of over 9 million Americans each year, and driving progress in early child care and learning, K-12 and post-secondary education, youth mental health and wellbeing, economic mobility and workforce development, evidence-based policy, social innovation, national service, and civic participation. Since 2007, America Forward's community of entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation policy and impact.