

October 8, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
US House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
US Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairwoman
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Committee
430 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Chairman
House Education and Labor Committee
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, Chairwoman Murray, and Chairman Scott:

In light of current negotiations concerning the content of the Build Back Better Act, we, the undersigned education organizations, write to ask you to ensure the final inclusion of the three core higher education elements of the Build Back Better agenda: America's College Promise, a historic, first-of-its-kind tuition-free community college program; an increase to the Pell Grant; and a retention and completion grant program.

A federal-state partnership is an irreplaceable linchpin in a comprehensive strategy to increase college access, affordability, and success for students. It requires states to come to the table and fully support their public higher education systems, where we know most students attend. However, we also know these systems aren't [currently enrolling student bodies which are representative](#) of the demographics of the state in which each is located. This buy-in from states is also key to a longer-term strategy to combat state disinvestment, which is [the primary contributor to unaffordable college costs](#), has particularly damaged the ability of community colleges to serve their students, and isn't addressed as directly by other essential policy interventions proposed in the bill.

For decades, higher education has [become more and more unaffordable for students and families](#), and financial burdens have only increased in light of the financial disruptions caused by the pandemic. It is long past time to change the dynamic that has put more and more of the responsibility for finding the money for college on students; it is unsustainable, increases racial and financial inequities, and is detrimental to our nation's ability to compete in a 21st century economy. America's College Promise would cover tuition and fees for students up front via a "first dollar" commitment, allowing them to spend any additional aid and their own hard-earned money on essentials like food and housing. This change would provide immediate and tangible improvements to their lived experience while enrolled and help maximize their odds of completing their educational program.

Finally, we know that these models have bipartisan interest across the country, as "free community college" programs have been [created in states with different populations and economic needs](#), by leaders of both political parties. The creation of a federal-state partnership program like

America's College Promise would allow the best practices of successful models to be promulgated throughout the country, to the benefit of students everywhere.

Therefore, we urge lawmakers to ensure the inclusion of America's College Promise—along with a boost to the Pell Grant and a new retention and completion fund—in a final reconciliation package. This new federal-state partnership will truly address the structural problems that plague our nation's higher education system and would deliver immediate benefits to millions of students and families all over the country. Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions or concerns, and we stand at the ready to help you get this initiative over the finish line.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

American Association of University Professors

Association of Young Americans (AYA)

Center for American Progress

Denise Smith, The Century Foundation

Education Reform Now

Generation Progress

Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)

NAACP

National College Attainment Network

National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)

National Urban League

National Young Farmers Coalition

New America Higher Education Program

Ohio Student Association

PHENOM, Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts

Rise, Inc.

Student Debt Crisis Center (SDCC)

The Education Trust

The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)

Young Invincibles