



February 15, 2019

The Honorable Doug Jones,  
The Honorable Elizabeth Warren,  
The Honorable Kamala Harris,  
and  
The Honorable Catherine Cortez-Masto,  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Sens. Jones, Warren, Harris, and Cortez Masto:

On behalf of the 1.7 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, I want to thank you for your attention to the serious and long-standing racial inequities in our system of higher education and their severe impact on students of color, their families, and their prospects for social and economic well-being during and after college. We appreciate this opportunity to provide our recommendations for how these issues can be addressed through a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

We want to begin by previewing our core recommendations on the HEA in full. We believe that every avenue for postsecondary education should be as accessible in the 21st century as high school became over the 20th century. This means breaking down silos between apprenticeships, career and technical education, and traditional liberal arts education.

The truth is that our nation needs all of these—and individual students need access to all of them, at all stages of life. Rather than asking our vitally important postsecondary humanities, engineering, science and other programs to turn themselves into something they are not, we need to ensure that the HEA aligns with reality by valuing each of these separate pathways to postsecondary opportunity. The majority of high school students in CTE also aspire to a college degree. Likewise, many people with liberal arts diplomas follow a passion into trades or technology, or upgrade their skills later in life. Integrating the various paths of postsecondary education and treating them more equally through one legislative mechanism will also help to correct the persistent misperception that liberal arts degrees, and knowledge more generally, are the exclusive province of people who can afford them.

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The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

American Federation  
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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The passage of the Perkins Act in the summer of 2018 was an important down payment on widening the options after high school for more students. However, those pathways are relatively narrow and threatened by the bad acts of purveyors who would rather profit off students than support them. As the reauthorization of the HEA moves forward, we urge you to think broadly about students' postsecondary options, and to challenge stereotypes that try to track populations of students into certain pathways.

Some academic programs both debunk stereotypes and level the inequitable playing field. We see the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs as a model for achieving true access to liberal arts education for all students—particularly student populations like CUNY's, who are primarily people of color. ASAP is what all students deserve: investment significant enough to provide true access to education after high school. By providing block scheduling, significant counseling support, transportation funding and more, CUNY has systematically anticipated and addressed the barriers that interfere with college students' ability to persist—and succeed—in traditional higher education.

CUNY's long dedication to educating students of color has helped to make New York a singular and remarkable city and has resulted in CUNY's nearly unparalleled record of increasing economic mobility.<sup>1</sup> But this kind of equitably shared student success isn't only possible in New York City. It has been reproduced in Ohio,<sup>2</sup> and the same values underpin student success initiatives elsewhere in New York, as in the State University of New York's Educational Opportunity Program,<sup>3</sup> and across the country in Texas at Amarillo College's Poverty Initiative.<sup>4</sup>

The elements of the ASAP model, to the extent that they are reproduced, could make higher education truly accessible—without debt—to students of color across the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregor Aisch et al., "Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1 Percent than the Bottom 60. Find Yours," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html).

<sup>2</sup> MDRC, "Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) Ohio Demonstration," [www.mdrc.org/project/accelerated-study-associate-programs-asap-ohio-demonstration#overview](http://www.mdrc.org/project/accelerated-study-associate-programs-asap-ohio-demonstration#overview).

<sup>3</sup> State University of New York, "Educational Opportunity Program," [www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/](http://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/).

<sup>4</sup> Sara Goldrick-Rab and Clare Cady, "Supporting Community College Completion with a Culture of Caring: A Case Study of Amarillo College," Temple University and Wisconsin HOPE Lab, June 2018, <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/wisconsin-hope-lab-case-study-amarillo-college.pdf>.

While the supports provided by ASAP and similar programs have proven effective, they require additional resources. Often the institutions that serve the largest numbers of low-income students—the students who would benefit from ASAP—are the most under-resourced and therefore are unable to provide those types of student supports. The HEA should create a new grant program to provide resources to public institutions that serve high numbers and percentages of Pell-eligible students, similar to K-12 education's Title I grant.

In addition to this broad vision of meaningful access to education, which we will expand on in forthcoming comprehensive comments, there are four more priorities for students of color we feel the HEA ought to address:

1. **Student loan debt** disproportionately affects students of color, as you note in your letter. The states and some major municipalities have been serving as laboratories for free and debt-free college proposals. Programs like those we highlighted above not only cover tuition but meet other cost-of-living needs that are crucial to keeping students in college. It is a critical issue of justice to eliminate the need for debt, but retrospective relief is also necessary. Considering default and delinquency rates among students of color, and the catastrophic failure of more-targeted interventions to make loan debt manageable, it is time to consider broader solutions. Such solutions include establishing a retroactive audit process to grant public service loan forgiveness on much less stringent terms, and allowing for outright debt cancellation for students and families most affected by student loan debt. Yesterday's Office of Inspector General report is only the most recent evidence that something must be done to rein in the abuse federally contracted student loan servicers dish out to student borrowers.

2. **"Performance funding"** as a measure of accountability simply prolongs and amplifies the inequities currently in the system. Our system of supporting institutions of higher education needs to correct for the effects of racism and classism, like ASAP does, rather than perpetuating them. Basing state support for higher education on student outcomes is the same blame-and-shame mentality that undermined K-12 education so badly in the No Child Left Behind era. Funding so-called high-performing colleges may seem logical, but the evidence that performance funding produces better outcomes for any student population is slim, and the disparate impact of performance funding on students of color, particularly black students at under-resourced institutions, should disqualify it from being considered as an accountability measure. Instead, accountability measures should focus on how federal funding is being used, in order to ensure that resources are directed to increased investment in faculty and student supports, such as academic counseling, that research shows lead to improved student success, especially for students of color.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Center for Community College Student Engagement, "Show Me the Way: The Power of Advising in Community Colleges" (2018), [www.ccsse.org/nr2018/show\\_me\\_the\\_way.pdf](http://www.ccsse.org/nr2018/show_me_the_way.pdf).

3. **For-profit colleges** prey on students of color, and it is time to stop sending taxpayer dollars to them. In *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*, author Tressie McMillan Cottom explains that the practices of “lower ed,” spurred by the profit motive, are incompatible with the purposes of higher education: the development of engaged citizens, the preparation of workers for multiple careers and kinds of work over a lifetime, and the development of new knowledge that benefits our entire society. Covert for-profits masquerade behind nonprofit tax status, and high-priced “boot camps” turn workforce preparation into a gamble made by individual workers. These are not progress for students of color; they are more instances of the profiteering that harms students and their families.

4. **Representation matters.** Being a student of color at any predominantly white institution today means having almost no one who looks like you at the front of the classroom. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2016, “among full-time professors, 55 percent were White males, 27 percent were White females, 7 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander males, and 3 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander females. Black males, Black females, and Hispanic males each accounted for 2 percent of full-time professors.”<sup>6</sup> This is a major problem that can only be remedied by focusing on the faculty development pipeline—making faculty jobs, more than 70 percent of which are currently temporary, into sustainable careers once again.

As you are aware, our members include college faculty and professional staff who support student success in a variety of ways. We hope to continue this conversation in your offices, both in Washington, D.C., and in your districts, as the reauthorization moves forward. We thank you again for the opportunity to comment and for your diligence on this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten  
President

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<sup>6</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “Fast Facts: Race/Ethnicity of College Faculty,” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>.