



February 15, 2019

The Honorable Doug Jones
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Elizabeth Warren
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kamala Harris
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Catherine Cortez Masto
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Jones, Warren, Harris, and Cortez Masto,

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities' (APLU) views on addressing very concerning achievement gaps relative to students of color in postsecondary education. This is an issue of deep importance to our nation and its public universities.

APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. With a membership of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations, APLU's agenda is built on the three pillars of increasing degree completion and academic success, advancing scientific research, and expanding engagement. Annually, our 199 U.S. member campuses enroll 4.2 million undergraduates and 1.2 million graduate students, award 1.1 million degrees, employ 1.1 million faculty and staff, and conduct \$42.4 billion in university-based research.

Public universities have an obligation to be ladders of opportunity, particularly for students from underprivileged backgrounds. This is core to our public purpose. A lot more must be done to close achievement gaps and boost the capacity of public universities to shatter barriers to advancement and expand equality of opportunity. In the United States, students from households in the lowest income quartile account for just 10 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded. This is not acceptable. Not only does it lead to the perpetuation of the status quo regarding individual mobility, it is economically self-defeating for our country. We are failing to fully realize our potential by leaving so many potential graduates behind. Clearly, much more than just 10 percent of young people from the lowest income quartile are qualified to earn a college degree.

This is both a higher education and a broader societal challenge and there exists an imperative for all to do better. For example, there is an abundance of research that shows the long-term educational benefits of children who enroll in preschool. However, according to U.S. Census data in 2016, 45 percent and 42 percent of Asian and White children respectively enrolled in

preschool compared to 35 percent of Black and Hispanic children.

Among high school students who expected to attain at least a bachelor's degree, 12 percent¹ of Asian and 16 percent of White students had to take remedial courses in high school compared to 27 percent of Black and 28 percent of Hispanics. Studies show completing higher levels of math in high school is positively correlated with success in college. And while an overwhelming majority of Asians (72 percent) and Whites (68 percent) take additional math courses to help them get into college, just 50 percent of African Americans and 58 percent of Hispanics do so. These highlight just a few of the many education disparities that exist between underrepresented minority and majority student populations. The challenges clearly rest on the shoulders of all our society's institutions including colleges and universities.

Improve Higher Education Data to Better Understand the Problem

In order to most effectively and fully address these challenges, we must fully understand them. This is just one of the many reasons why it is critical for Congress to fix the flaws and gaps in federal higher education outcomes data through the passage of the College Transparency Act (CTA). APLU deeply appreciated the opportunity to work with the staff of the original Senate CTA sponsors, including Senator Warren, to develop the legislation and to now work closely to build broad and bipartisan congressional support for the bill.

While the benefits of the legislation are vast, most notably for this specific topic, the bill would allow for critical disaggregation of higher education outcomes data by Pell status and race or ethnicity. With the passage of CTA, we would know much more about the extent of achievement disparities, where to focus resources, and then have greater capacity to study the effectiveness of interventions.

Accountability and Affordability Policies Matter Greatly

Much of the data on student borrowing shows that racial disparities have increased over the last two decades. For example, Black students are 150 percent more likely to accumulate \$100,000 or more of debt than White students². It matters greatly what institutions students choose to attend. Additionally, federal policies that support affordability and accountability within higher education are critical.

Black and Hispanic students are more likely to attend a for-profit institution (15 percent and 11 percent respectively³) than White or Asian students (7 percent and 5 percent respectively). Similarly, Pell students are much more likely to attend a for-profit institution (15 percent) than non-Pell recipients (5 percent). According to National Center for Education Statistics data, students who attend for-profit schools pay significantly more in tuition and fees (\$12,335⁴) than students who enroll in public four-year institutions (\$8,603) and are less likely to have earned a

¹ HSLs 2009 Analysis by APLU

² <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2018/05/21/new-analysis-reinforces-racial-disparities-student-debt/>

³ NPSAS 2016 Analysis by APLU

⁴ NPSAS 2016 Analysis by APLU

credential or still be enrolled after 6 years (54 percent⁵) than students at public four-year schools (78 percent) or private not-for-profit four-year institutions (81 percent). Consequently, the disproportionate share of Black, Hispanic, and Pell students who attend for-profit institutions are more likely to accumulate debt without earning an educational credential.

Support for Public Higher Education

Public colleges and universities overall provide the best value to students and are the best path to educate and graduate more low-income students. Note, however, state [disinvestment](#) in public higher education has for many years increasingly shifted costs to students and families with a most severe shift following the Great Recession. A federal-state partnership that is simple and focuses on the core concept of incenting states to reinvest in public higher education is a needed solution.

APLU supports the partnership program included in the 2014 Higher Education Act reauthorization bill, the Higher Education Affordability Act from the 113th Congress, S. 2954. We also support the main concept behind Senator Ron Wyden's (D-OR) PARTNERSHIPS Act, S. 2191. In general, we think the ideal approach would be mandatory-funded to provide budget certainty and as simple, voluntary and non-punitive as possible in order to defend the program from charges of federal overreach and micro-management of state policy. At the same time, the incentive in the bill—the federal match—should be configured in a manner that would create real benefits for states stepping up to partner with the federal government.

Higher Education Accountability

It is critical for the federal government to maintain effective accountability safeguards to protect students and the taxpayer investment in higher education.

The data demonstrate the disproportionate risk posed by the for-profit higher education sector which as referenced earlier, enrolls a disproportionate number of students of color.

APLU submitted [comments](#) critical of the Department of Education's proposal to eliminate the gainful employment rule. And while we had some concerns with the previous administration's Borrower Defense to Repayment rule, we are deeply [troubled](#) by the administration's proposal to render it nearly impossible for students who have been defrauded by unscrupulous actors to successfully petition the Department for redress. We also urge Congress to fix the 90/10 loophole which does not count Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) benefits within the limit of for-profit institutions receiving more than 90 percent of revenue from federal financial aid programs.

In APLU's [priorities](#) for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, we also outline ways Congress can fix the broken cohort default rate system to better protect students and taxpayers. An effective program-level (better-constructed gainful employment) and institution accountability system could uniquely support and protect students of color.

⁵ BPS 2004-2009 Analysis by APLU

Support Minority Serving Institutions

Another way Congress can make progress in support of students of color is to support the public institutions that disproportionately and successfully serve them. Title III and Title V funding is critical to sustaining and advancing the ability of Minority Serving Institutions to drive student success. APLU is particularly proud to have within our membership our nation's [1890's land-grant universities](#). The nineteen 1890 land-grant universities are historically black colleges and universities dedicated to providing educational opportunity for all through innovative scientific research and community-minded extension programs. The 1890 land-grant universities are located in 18 states across the United States and have been educating students and improving our communities, country, and world for over 125 years. Nearly 90,000 students are enrolled across these 19 universities and 64 percent of students receive Pell Grants.

APLU is Working to Drive Student Success

APLU has a number of initiatives it is working on in partnership with its members to drive student success, including addressing achievement gaps. We continue to examine lessons learned from these initiatives and consider potential connections to federal policy. For example, we are deeply interested in how the federal government might support our institutions' completion grant efforts. Below are a few examples of relevant APLU initiatives.

[Powered by Publics](#)

Working with 130 public universities and systems, APLU recently unveiled a massive new effort to increase college access, close the achievement gap, and award hundreds of thousands more degrees by 2025. The participating institutions are working within "clusters" of four to 12 institutions that concurrently implement innovative and effective practices to advance student success on their campuses. Collectively, the institutions enroll 3 million students, including 1 million students who receive Pell Grants.

The initiative, called Powered by Publics: Scaling Student Success, represents the largest ever collaborative effort to improve college access, advance equity, and increase college degrees awarded. In addition to committing to those goals, participating institutions have pledged to share aggregate data demonstrating their progress to help spur lasting change across the higher education sector.

[Completion Grants](#)

Unmet financial need remains a significant barrier to degree completion for many low-income students, especially those in their final year of college – when savings are often exhausted and traditional need-based financial aid proves insufficient in covering students' expenses. Nearly 15 percent of students with three-quarters of their required credits fulfilled leave college without degrees, often due to financial constraints.

In an effort to ensure needy students with a proven record of academic success do not drop out due to financial need, some path-breaking APLU universities are offering completion grants of a

few hundred dollars to help students make tuition payments as they near graduation. In 2018, drawing on the lessons from some of these institutions' work, APLU issued a [learning brief](#) on completion grants.

[*APLU Diversity in Engineering Study*](#)

APLU recently published a study examining trends in engineering degrees conferred at the institution and national level to determine: areas of growth among various groups; changes in racial, ethnic, and gender diversity; and the colleges and the institutions that graduate large numbers in underrepresented groups in specific engineering sub-disciplines.

APLU will use this National Science Foundation-funded (NSF) project as a basis for identifying innovative programs that are already increasing the number of engineering degrees awarded to underrepresented groups, advocate for expanding these efforts, and work with our member institutions to implement these successful programs.

[*ASPIRE: The National Alliance for Inclusive & Diverse STEM Faculty*](#)

In an effort to cultivate a more inclusive and diverse faculty that will attract more underrepresented students into STEM fields and help them succeed, the National Science Foundation awarded a five-year, \$10 million NSF INCLUDES Alliance grant to APLU and the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning ([CIRTL](#)), based at the University of Wisconsin - Madison.

The project, known as ASPIRE: The National Alliance for Inclusive & Diverse STEM Faculty, is pursuing three mutually reinforcing strategic goals all focused on developing a STEM faculty that uses more inclusive approaches to instruction and that is more diverse. The ultimate aim is to attract more underrepresented students—women, members of minority racial and ethnic groups, persons with disabilities, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds—into STEM college programs, assist them to stay in these programs, and help them graduate and succeed in a modern STEM workforce.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide APLU's views. I look forward to working together to accomplish our shared goals relative to student success. Please do not hesitate to continue to let me know how APLU can be a resource.

Sincerely,



Peter McPherson
President
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities