ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC & LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES

March 13, 2025

The Honorable Linda McMahon
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary McMahon:

On behalf of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), please accept my sincere congratulations on your confirmation as U.S. Secretary of Education. APLU looks forward to working together on common priorities to advance our nation, including the role of public universities in providing economic ladders of opportunity and contributing to a robust domestic workforce that will propel the country's short and long-term interests forward.

I look forward to the opportunity to meet and discuss how APLU can best serve as a resource to you and your team. In the meantime, I write to share questions and concerns of APLU's member universities on the Department of Education's recent Reduction in Force (RIF).

As you may know, APLU is a membership organization that fosters a community of university leaders collectively working to advance the mission of public research universities. The association's U.S membership consists of more than 230 public research universities and systems across all 50 states. The association and its members collectively focus on increasing student success and workforce readiness; promoting pathbreaking scientific research; and bolstering economic and community engagement.

The questions and concerns raised here come with the recognition that APLU is not positioned to make judgments on the appropriate staffing levels at the U.S. Department of Education and that any bureaucracy the size of the Department can undoubtedly benefit from greater efficiencies. That said, the scale of the RIF and impacts to specific units has raised immediate concerns among public university leaders. Public universities depend on the U.S. Department of Education to perform key functions that are vital to their success in educating students and preparing the workforce that America needs.

While APLU is only beginning to comprehend the full extent of the RIF's impacts, we are deeply concerned that the reduction's scope will have a drastic and immediate effect on several crucial areas of importance to students and their families. These areas encompass, but are not limited to, administering student aid programs that foster the nation's competitive workforce, administering key congressionally funded programs to enhance student success, publishing higher education outcomes data to empower students and their families to make informed decisions, and contributing to evidence-based research that advances teaching and learning. These are essential functions that must remain uninterrupted.

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Potential Impacts to Federal Student Aid (FSA)

First and foremost, APLU members are greatly concerned about the effective administration of federal student aid and whether reductions within FSA will impact timely processing and support to schools and students. Concerns are particularly heightened coming off the deeply flawed and chaotic rollout of the FAFSA under the prior administration as the public university community has seen firsthand the harmful implications of getting it wrong for students and their families.

Public universities rely on FSA for timely support on FAFSA submission issues, support on funding system infrastructure, FAFSA system troubleshooting, student/parent phone services support, processing of FAFSA data including corrections, Program Participation Agreement recertifications, oversight and responsibility for loans and loan servicers, and many other crucial functions. We greatly appreciate that your statement on the RIF noted that the Department "will continue to deliver on all statutory programs that fall under the agency's purview, including formula funding, student loans, Pell Grants, funding for special needs students, and competitive grantmaking." Nevertheless, given the size of the reductions, this is an area of substantial concern.

Potential Impacts to Federal Data Sets

Based on initial unconfirmed reports, APLU has been led to believe the staff in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has largely been eliminated. Doing so would severely undermine the evidence base needed to understand the performance of higher education institutions, programs, and the students they serve. This would impede efforts on transparency, accountability, and student success. IPEDS data collection, with its near-perfect 99 percent response rate and standardized definitions, is the cornerstone of transparency and comparability in higher education. Without this federal framework, the system would fragment into inconsistent state-level reporting with varying definitions, methodologies, and quality controls—creating data chaos that obscures rather than illuminates institutional performance. The resulting lack of standardization would make meaningful cross-state comparisons impossible. Transparency and accountability mechanisms (e.g., graduation rates, financial aid, institutional financial health) would lose their empirical foundation, while the burden on institutions would paradoxically increase as they struggle to respond to multiple, uncoordinated data requests from states and private entities.

This fragmentation would ultimately harm students and families who rely on the College Navigator and College Scorecard data for critical education and financial decisions, while creating significant inefficiencies for states attempting to build redundant data systems from scratch. The abrupt elimination of NCES staff would create a crisis for institutions attempting to complete mandatory IPEDS reporting, with no expert guidance available for technical questions or data validation. More critically, the loss of NCES professionals represents the disappearance of irreplaceable institutional knowledge about higher education trends, contextual factors affecting data interpretation, and specialized expertise that for decades has guided researchers, institutions, and Congress through complex educational analyses. While at this time, APLU does not know the Department's plans moving forward for NCES and IPEDS, without sufficient staff resources to lead and support these vital activities, it is difficult to understand how they will continue to sustain the levels of quality that have made them cornerstones in building the best higher education system in the world.

Potential Impacts to U.S. Department of Education Grants

The U.S. Department of Education administers a number of federal grant programs as directed by congressional appropriations, including IES research to develop new, innovative, and more effective practices for the field of teaching and learning, programs that partner K-12 and institutions of higher education to improve teacher performance, programs that invest in HBCUs and MSIs, funding to accelerate and broaden evidence-based student success practices to boost graduation rates, and Title VI international education programs that contribute to a more globally-competent and competitive U.S. workforce.

As an example of concerns with some of the agency's functions continuing as normal, APLU understands from several member universities that they have already been unable to reach program officers supporting Title VI programs. This is not typical and is resulting in schools slowing offers for graduate fellowships and leading to growing concerns moving forward on who is reachable to answer questions and approve spending on existing grants. Coordination is necessary now to plan for summer programs. APLU members are concerned that the impacts of the RIF have not yet been understood or felt across the array of grant programs in which public universities rely on regular interaction with program officers.

On behalf of APLU, I appreciate your attention to the concerns of public universities and would welcome the opportunity to discuss them directly.

Sincerely,

Mark Becker
President
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities