Dear Chairwoman Murray and Ranking Member Blunt:

As you begin drafting the Fiscal Year 2023 appropriations bill for the U.S. Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, we write to express our continued support for significant funding for college retention and completion initiatives. Specifically, the proposed $110 million investment in a new Retention and Completion Grants program in President Biden’s budget request recognizes that more federal funding is needed to support the hundreds of thousands of college students who drop out of school each year without graduating or earning their degree. These investments will not only pay significant dividends to students through stronger long-term wages and employment outcomes, but will also strengthen our broader economy by building a more highly skilled and competitive workforce. Given this, we strongly encourage you to fund these evidence-based Retention and Completion Grants at the $110 million level requested in the President’s budget.

The United States has made major strides to improve college access and affordability among historically underrepresented student populations in recent decades, including students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students who are the first generation in their families to attend college. Yet troubling disparities in college completion rates persist. The six-year graduation rate for Latino students is ten percentage points lower than for white students, while Black and Native American students complete at a rate more than twenty percentage points lower than their white peers.

These disparities are so important because successfully completing a college degree or credential is a key stepping-stone to the middle class, but this upward mobility can be significantly impacted when a student doesn’t graduate. Research has found that college students who drop out of school see income gains only half as large as those who graduate (compared to those who don’t attend any college). In addition, students who start college but don’t earn a degree have employment rates that are five percentage points below those of associate degree holders and ten percentage points below those of bachelor’s degree holders.

Completing college doesn’t just benefit students, but also their families, their communities, and the economy as a whole. If two- and four-year college completion rates improved from 57 percent to 84 percent, research suggests that over 100,000 workers could gain employment just for a single class of graduates nationwide. At a time when workforce shortages continue to hold our economic recovery back, this increased labor force participation could play an important role in supporting economic growth in our communities.
Given these large potential gains to students and our economy, greater and more targeted federal investment is needed to close these attainment gaps. Rigorous research has demonstrated that support models that employ comprehensive approaches to student success and provide intensive academic, career, and personal services can powerfully improve postsecondary outcomes and graduation rates for our nation’s most vulnerable students. However, the institutions that are most likely to enroll and serve students facing the largest barriers to completing a college degree often have the fewest financial resources to address students’ needs or to launch and sustain such initiatives. Programs such as CUNY ASAP in New York, One Million Degrees in Illinois, Project Quest in Texas, and Bottom Line in Massachusetts and New York have all met a high evidence tier for effectiveness in increasing credit accumulation, persistence, and degree completion. For example, studies have shown that the CUNY ASAP program nearly doubled the three-year graduation rate for associate degree students, and Bottom Line students were eight percentage points more likely to graduate with a bachelor’s degree within five years of high school graduation. These programs offer replicable models that can be scaled through large-scale investment in a Retention and Completion Grants program. This scalability will offer as a model for promising practices, such as the Student Experience Project, which is working with partner institutions like the University of New Mexico to create a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment in entry level courses and improve the support services provided to first and second-year students from underrepresented backgrounds.

The initial $5 million allocation for these types of initiatives in the FY22 omnibus appropriations package was a key step in the right direction to support under-resourced students and the schools they attend, and will deliver a large return on investment to our economy and communities. Yet we know that a much greater and longer-term investment will be needed to sustain and expand high-impact student success practices, particularly those meeting the high bar for receiving an “expansion” grant under the Education Innovation and Research program based on prior effectiveness. This critical investment of $110 million to bolster evidence-based college retention and completion initiatives would provide students with support to reach their postsecondary education goals and institutions with resources to make strides in closing gaps in college degree attainment. The program will ensure that our higher education system fulfills its potential to better students’ lives and bolster our economy and our nation’s future.

Sincerely,

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator