

February 27, 2020

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate HELP Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

We write to urge the committee to exercise great caution through an evidence-based and data-driven approach as it considers proposals to expand the Pell Grant program to cover very-short-term workforce-training programs.

The Pell Grant is the federal government's cornerstone investment in higher education. We have significant concerns about changing the rules for certain types of very short programs—and extending the already under-resourced Pell Grant program to those programs—without an evidence base that demonstrates strong outcomes for students and adequate protections for taxpayers.

We strongly agree that it is vital for policymakers to make new investments to support students' access to a range of high-quality postsecondary pathways, and that short-term training programs have the potential to provide students with crucial skills in high-demand fields. However, given how little is known about many of these programs and their payoff for students, in this area, the rhetoric has so far outpaced the research.

[Research](#) from The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) finds that available data fall short of providing sufficient evidence that these programs are, on whole, a smart investment of limited federal Pell dollars. While variable labor market outcomes are [not unique](#) to the short-term program space, they do underscore the need for strong quality assurance and more research before Congress stretches available Pell dollars further and risks allowing low-quality programs to proliferate.

We therefore urge the committee to reject the extension of the already-overburdened Pell program—which serves our nation's neediest students—to cover untested programs that may or may not pay off for these students who already face significant barriers. If the committee is to propose such an expansion, we urge you to do so only through a carefully designed demonstration project with the goal of building an evidence base around the effects of such an expansion, including its effects on both student outcomes and institutional behavior.

The Pell Grant program was designed by Congress to work alongside the triad of basic accountability, including Title IV eligibility and accreditation. However, current proposals would exempt short-term programs from some of those requirements, including by funding non-credit programs that receive less oversight. And, even if a pilot study were to yield promising results, Congress would still then need to carefully examine the issue of quality assurance before expanding Pell eligibility to short-term programs—both to protect students and to assure the efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

While proposals to invest in new postsecondary pathways are worthy of consideration, more evidence and evaluation are needed before undertaking an unprecedented expansion of the Pell Grant program.

We therefore urge Congress to protect the Pell Grant program from new risks of abuse, including through a well-designed and size-constrained pilot project.

Please do not hesitate to contact Clare McCann at mccann@newamerica.org or Michele Streeter at mstreeter@ticas.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bipartisan Policy Center Action
New America
The Education Trust
The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)
Third Way
Veterans Education Success