



The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

November 25, 2020

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader McConnell, and Leader Schumer:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an outsized impact on today's students in college. This spring, they faced the closure of college campuses nationwide and continued to face uncertain academic and financial decisions due to our public health crisis. Today's students—of whom 34 percent are older than 25, a quarter parents, and 60 percent working while in college—have not simply lost access to campuses and lecture halls. They have lost access to stable and secure housing, affordable and nutritious meals, on-campus child care, and other supports that enable them to succeed in postsecondary education. New reports of enrollment and retention rates in decline are especially troublesome. At a time when higher education can be a meaningful engine of economic growth, today's students and their families face insurmountable barriers to entry and success. Congress has a critical chance to support student success during the lame duck session.

The Today's Students Coalition is a cross-cutting group of 26 policy, advocacy, and membership organizations who have joined forces to push for urgently needed policy changes that will better serve today's students. Collectively, our organizations have identified the following policy changes that are imperative to pass before the end of the year to jump-start our economic recovery and prioritize the needs of our nation's students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the economic struggles of today's students—the majority of students worked before the pandemic and one-third of students have

experienced job or wage loss; the 22 percent of students who are parents have lost access to child care or in-person school options; and campus housing and meals may no longer be accessible for students. Without these basic needs provided for, students face significant barriers to completing their degree or credential. Emergency aid—financial aid allocated to students to help pay for emergency expenses—can be a lifeline for students who are in unexpected financial need. The CARES Act was a good first step in allocating resources for emergency aid through institutions, but more needs to be done before the end of the year to further aid students in need. Congress should include further funding for emergency aid through institutions of higher education before the end of the year to ensure that students who continue to be affected by the pandemic, unfavorable job market conditions, the lack of child care, and other unforeseen circumstances have aid to help them stay on the path to complete their degree. Further, additional assistance should be distributed to students without undue delays; Congress must ensure that *all students* in need on campus can access this aid. Beyond explicitly directing student aid not be withheld from students based on arbitrary restrictions put in place by the U.S. Department of Education, the formula allocating this aid should be based on student headcount enrollment, rather than the full-time equivalent formula in the CARES Act.

Further, the process by which students from high school seniors to returning adults access federal student aid—the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA—must be simplified. FAFSA completion is down 16 percent when compared to last year’s rates, a troubling sign that students and their families face uncertainty and confusion when completing the form, often stemming from changes in their financial circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Today’s Students Coalition supports simplifying both the FAFSA form and formula, especially for students who receive means-tested benefits, and believe reforms should account for students’ full financial circumstances through allowing a negative expected family contribution. These changes must pass before the end of the year to ensure college enrollment and retention does not nose dive into further decline, and that our postsecondary institutions can remain strong stepping stones to the workforce during our country’s economic recovery.

Also, Congress and the Department of Education must send a strong message to students, families, and financial aid professionals that there are tools in place—namely, the professional judgment authority provided under the Higher Education Act—to make adjustments as financial situations change. An expected, or feared, financial change should not be a barrier to students completing this critical first step to paying for college.

When students were faced with closed campuses earlier this year and as they remain in remote learning settings, access to affordable and reliable broadband is critical to student success. A broken laptop or unstable WiFi connection is as much a barrier to student success in online learning as a student being unable to enter a campus building during face-to-face instruction. Instead of stable connectivity and access to devices like laptops, today’s students can be found writing term papers on their mobile devices in retail parking lots where they access WiFi. This is untenable—no student, whether in K-12 or postsecondary education—should struggle with connectivity in order to watch lecture videos or complete coursework. The lame duck Congress must pass legislation that increases connectivity for college students. The *Supporting*

Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act (S. 3701/H.R. 6814) and the *Emergency Broadband Connections Act* (S. 4095) would extend support to connect all students to ensure their success.

Finally, students who have graduated from college have been extended a waiver from repaying their federal student loans or accruing interest on such loans. This policy has meant graduates who have faced job or wage loss—as one in four Americans have reported they or someone in their household has faced unemployment—are able to postpone payment of their loans to prioritize other living expenses, including rent, food, medical costs, child care, and others. This waiver is slated to expire on December 31, 2020, and the U.S. Department of Education is already telling borrowers that payments will resume in January 2021, which would mean millions of Americans would face unwelcome financial pressures as soon as January 1. As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on and our economy continues to experience serious short- and long-term negative effects, the lame duck Congress must extend these protections through next year, when a new Congress and Administration can develop long-term solutions.

The Today's Students Coalition, our members, and the students we advocate on behalf of stand ready to assist you as you work to pass these changes swiftly through a lame duck Congress before the end of 2020. Doing so will mean the chances of postsecondary success and economic opportunity are a little brighter for today's students, and that at the turn of a new year we can continue to work toward long-term policy solutions that put higher education back at the center of our nation's economic recovery and long-term stability.

Sincerely,
The Today's Students Coalition

Advance Vermont
America Forward
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
Association of Big Ten Students
Center for First-generation Student Success
Higher Learning Advocates
JFF
Modern Military Association of America
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
Student Veterans of America
uAspire
UPCEA
U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG)
Young Invincibles

CC: Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, Ranking Member Foxx, Chairman Bobby Scott