



Expanding Access to Higher Education and the Promise It Holds

Testimony Before the Oversight Subcommittee of the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee

By Marshall Anthony Jr. July 2, 2021

Marshall Anthony Jr., senior policy analyst for Higher Education at the Center for American Progress, testified on the importance of expanding access to higher education before the House Ways and Means Committee on June 29, 2021.¹

Chairperson Pascrell, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appear before you as a researcher on higher education, but I have also lived the failures of the higher education system.

As a young, Black man from a low-income, single-parent household, I received the maximum Pell Grant throughout my undergraduate studies to help pay for college. But I did not have enough financial aid to cover other necessities such as housing, food, textbooks, or transportation. That meant when I should have been sleeping, I spent countless nights staring at the ceiling worrying about expensive course materials that professors required me to purchase. It also meant canceling my meal plan in order to pay for gas to get to campus and participate in internships. And it even meant chipping in at times to help my family cover a utility bill.

Through hard work, yes, but also a great deal of good fortune, I made it here before you today. But far too many other Black, brown, low-income, and disabled college students never make it to the graduation stage to collect a diploma—including those very close to me.

A large portion of college students today are also, in many cases, working adults who are attending college part time and raising children.² Like some of my family members, classmates, and students I've taught, they are juggling demands that would strike you or me as nearly impossible—all in a desire to give their family a better life.

Never has a college degree been more necessary to make it in this country. Nearly two-thirds of jobs require some form of postsecondary education, and yet our higher education system is not equipped to do its job.³ Consider these four troubling facts:

1. First, the Pell Grant is not what it used to be. Pell is the cornerstone federal aid program for students from low-income backgrounds to help them pay for college. At its peak, close to 50 years ago, Pell once covered nearly 80 percent of the cost of attendance at public four-year institutions.⁴ Today, the maximum Pell award covers less than one-third of the average cost of tuition, fees, and room and board.⁵
2. Second, if you think students today can work their way through college, think again. In 47 states, on top of any and all financial aid they receive, low-income students need to work more than 15 hours per week to pay for a public four-year education.⁶ This is an issue because studies suggest that working over that threshold can slow students' progress toward a degree or force them to leave college altogether.⁷
3. Third, community colleges operate on only half the revenue that public four-year institutions receive.⁸ This means that community colleges don't have the resources they need to adequately serve low-income students as well as Black and Latinx students who are more likely to attend community colleges.⁹
4. And fourth, even before the pandemic, public higher education was already in deep trouble. When the pandemic began, only 18 states had fully recovered from cuts made in the wake of the Great Recession.¹⁰

These are just a few of the reasons why so many students leave college with no degree and debt they cannot repay.¹¹ Black borrowers—who are hard hit by employment discrimination¹² and have nearly 10 times less wealth than white families¹³—are most likely to suffer.¹⁴

The system has failed too many students. The ability to graduate should not be conditioned on a student having good fortune! But we've created and perpetuated a system where that unfortunate reality has been the standard for far too long.

The United States can and should do better.

I ask you today to reinvest in an equitable American dream by better supporting college students, limiting debt, and investing in community colleges and public four-year institutions in order to build a higher education system that works for people from all walks of life.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Endnotes

- 1 A recording of the full hearing can be found at U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee, "Oversight Subcommittee Hearing on Expanding Access to Higher Education and the Promise It Holds," June 29, 2021, available at <https://waysandmeans.house.gov/legislation/hearings/oversight-subcommittee-hearing-expanding-access-higher-education-and-promise-it>.
- 2 Marshall Anthony Jr., "3 Ways Congress Can Support Adult Students During COVID-19," Center for American Progress, December 10, 2020, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/news/2020/12/10/493621/3-ways-congress-can-support-adult-students-covid-19/>.
- 3 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020" (Washington: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013), available at https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_Web_.pdf.
- 4 Alexis Gravelly, "Doubling Pell Has Broad Support, but Is It Attainable?," Inside Higher Ed, June 25, 2021, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/25/doubling-maximum-pell-grant-necessary-experts-say-it-attainable>; Spiros Protosaltis and Sharon Parrott, "Pell Grants – a Key Tool for Expanding College Access and Economic Opportunity – Need Strengthening, Not Cuts" (Washington: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017), available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/pell-grants-a-key-tool-for-expanding-college-access-and-economic>.
- 5 National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, "NASFAA Issue Brief: Student Aid Funding" (Washington: 2019), available at https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/Issue_Brief_Student_Aid_Funding.pdf.
- 6 Marshall Anthony Jr., Andrew H. Nichols, and J. Oliver Schak, "How Affordable Are Public Colleges in Your State for Low-Income Students?" (Washington: The Education Trust, 2019), available at <https://edtrustmain.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/18122721/How-Affordable-Are-Public-Colleges-in-Your-State-for-Students-from-Low-Income-Background-December-2019.pdf>.
- 7 Omari Burnside and others, "Employing Student Success: A Comprehensive Examination of On-Campus Student Employment" (Washington: NASPA Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education, 2019), available at https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/NASPA_EmploymentStudentSuccess_FINAL_April1_LOWRES_REVISIED.pdf.
- 8 Victoria Yuen, "The \$78 Billion Community College Shortfall" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2020/10/07/491242/78-billion-community-college-funding-shortfall/>.
- 9 Anthony, "3 Ways Congress Can Support Adult Students During COVID-19."
- 10 Sophia Laderman and Kelsey Heckert, "State Higher Education Finance: FY 2020" (Boulder, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2021), available at <https://shef.sheeo.org/report/>.
- 11 Marshall Anthony Jr., "Building a College-Educated America Requires Closing Racial Gaps in Attainment," Center for American Progress, April 6, 2021, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/news/2021/04/06/497888/building-college-educated-america-requires-closing-racial-gaps-attainment/>.
- 12 Danyelle Solomon, Connor Maxwell, and Abril Castro, "Systematic Inequality and Economic Opportunity" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472910/systematic-inequality-economic-opportunity/>.
- 13 Emily Moss and others, "The Black-white wealth gap left Black households more vulnerable," Brookings Institution, December 8, 2020, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/12/08/the-black-white-wealth-gap-left-black-households-more-vulnerable/>; Heather Long and Andrew Van Dam, "The black-white economic divide is as wide as it was in 1968," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2020, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/04/economic-divide-black-households/>; William Darity Jr. and others, "What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap" (Durham, NC: Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity; Oakland, CA: Insight Center for Community Economic Development, 2019), available at <https://socialequity.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/what-we-get-wrong.pdf>.
- 14 Victoria Jackson and Tiffany Jones, "The 'Black Tax' Is Key to Understanding and Solving the Black Student Debt Crisis in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond," The Education Trust, April 16, 2020, available at <https://edtrust.org/resource/the-black-tax-is-key-to-understanding-and-solving-the-black-student-debt-crisis-in-the-time-of-covid-19-and-beyond/>; Ben Miller, "The Continued Student Loan Crisis for Black Borrowers," Center for American Progress, December 2, 2019, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2019/12/02/477929/continued-student-loan-crisis-black-borrowers/>; Ben Miller, "New Federal Data Show a Student Loan Crisis for African American Borrowers," Center for American Progress, October 16, 2017, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/news/2017/10/16/440711/new-federal-data-show-student-loan-crisis-african-american-borrowers/>.