

## **Memo to Parents: Post-election Prospects for College**

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The recent congressional decision to reduce Pell grants for low and moderate-income college students is a clear and decisive action by Washington — and it's a mistake. Why? Because the erosion of federal assistance to higher education seriously compromises the development of America's next generation of leaders. The decision could spark a series of significant unintended consequences that would precipitate many problems for the future of our economy and nation.

The truth is that a college degree is now a necessity rather than an option. But while higher education has been able to moderate tuition increases over the past 10 years with proportionately higher amounts of financial aid, a number of factors — particularly recent cuts in state appropriations -- are again contributing to a rise in net tuition costs. The resources needed to meet the growing demand for college education — faculty, technology, financial aid and facilities — are also increasing. And although many public universities have pared back to skeleton operations and shut programs, the onus still remains on the federal government to increase its investment in higher education.

But now the opposite is happening. According to estimates from the American Council on Education, about 85,000 of the 5.2 million students currently eligible to receive Pell grants will become ineligible with this latest congressional action. And 1.2 million others will get smaller awards under a new formula the government will use to determine how much families can afford to pay for college -- a change that will take effect for students starting or returning to classes next summer or fall. And according to the College Board's Trends in Student Aid 2004 report, the Pell grant is covering less of the cost of a college education each year — currently less than 25 percent. Granted, even in stable times federal budgets are tight. Add to this scenario the expensive, high-profile issues of war and terrorism, concerns over health care and Social Security, a sluggish economic recovery and deficits, and there's a good chance that any additional money for higher education will be overlooked.

Yet regardless of the dynamics facing a new administration, there's a global competition among top universities. However, it's a competition the United States is beginning to lose. Program pre-eminence among overseas institutions is becoming the norm, particularly in such fields as science and engineering. And since manufacturing and service jobs are increasingly being outsourced to overseas companies, can we really afford to fall further behind in preparing our graduates to compete in a global economy?

As parents and educators, it's up to us to make sure that issues concerning higher education stay at the forefront of each administration's legislative agenda. And with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), we have the opportunity to keep it visible. Signed into law in 1965 as a way of authorizing federal student-aid programs for colleges and universities, the HEA is subject to congressional reauthorization every five years, a process that reviews legislation affecting the ability of more than two-thirds of the nation's students to attend college.

Now, after a two-year extension, the reauthorization of the HEA is again on the Congressional agenda, with the bulk of the discussion centering on institutional accountability, the challenge of keeping higher education affordable, and access to the college of one's choice.

These three principles — accountability, affordability, and access — must be the driving force behind everything we strive for as institutions of higher learning. But what exactly do these terms mean in light of the Higher Education Act Reauthorization? First of all, our primary goal as higher education leaders is to provide our students with the best possible preparation for their lives and careers.

This preparation is the principle of public education; in fulfilling this goal, we are affecting not only the future of our students, but the future of our nation's economy as well. Therefore, we should always be prepared to give a full and public accounting for how we manage our resources.

But we must take this accountability one step farther, and monitor the efforts as prescribed by the state and federal governments to ensure educational affordability and access. Simply holding out our hand amidst dozens of competing concerns is not enough. Specifically, we must be ready with our own concrete solutions, from increasing need-based financial-aid programs and containing tuition increases, to developing stronger academic programs and better support services that will help students get into school, stay there, and graduate on time, among other things.

But we're rapidly running out of options. Although the overall government spending on scholarships has increased in the past few years, the financial-aid formulas have not taken families' economic situations into account. The result? Significant numbers of students, particularly those in high school, are becoming discouraged in their search for an affordable education.

At one time a higher education was a luxury affordable to only a few; in the 21st Century, however, higher education has become an economic necessity, with ramifications that go far beyond personal or professional enrichment. With the elections now over, families will once again take stock of the administration's policies that will have the most direct impact on them and their children. And when they consider which policies will stay the same and which are being rewritten, one thing they should never have to guess at is whether they, unlike many of their parents and grandparents, can still send their children to college.

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