

The Comebacker's Odyssey: Immediate Priorities for Action

Revamp the Pell Grant program

The CARES Act, signed into law in March 2020, currently freezes any Pell Grant awards counting toward the lifetime cap. Why not make this permanent, or at the very least extend the lifetime cap, so that Comebackers, who are often only able to take a couple classes at a time, can continue to access financial aid until they graduate? Additionally, less punitive measures related to maintaining Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) should be considered, such as the SAP “reset” proposed by Higher Learning Advocates: “After a period of non-enrollment, students who have lost access to federal financial aid should have their eligibility reinstated. The way, adults can re-enter the higher education system and have another chance at a degree or credential.”¹ A federal reset would set the stage for states and schools themselves to relax their policies around maintaining SAP.

Eliminate debt traps

Schools and states should not be in the business of debt collection, nor should they be holding low-income students' educational prospects hostage. Punitive policies targeting students who owe back balances, especially transcript withholding, should be banned at the institutional and state levels. As schools experimenting with debt forgiveness are already learning, there is a growing body of evidence that forgiving institutional debt can result in a net gain of tuition dollars to the school, as students are able to return and complete their degrees. Schools should also facilitate better communication between financial aid offices and bursar offices, so students are not caught by surprise when a back balance is threatening their status. And if it is the practice of schools to write off institutional debt owed by students after a certain period of time, then students should be granted amnesty after this period, have their active status reinstated, and be invited to return. In fact, students should be able to access any credits they have completed and paid for, perhaps through the creation of a national repository of earned credits.² Large scale change could, in fact, be facilitated by a federal rule banning punitive transcript hold practices.

Expand employer-sponsored tuition assistance plans

Tuition assistance programs can be a powerful tool for recruitment and retention. However, less than 60 percent of employers offer them and they are generally underutilized when they are offered. The Graduate! Network's own research has shown a deep gap between availability of such programs in large employers (close to 80 percent of those surveyed) and smaller employers (less than 50 percent of those surveyed). We encourage all employers to consider how they might use proven strategies, such as those mapped by [Upskill America](#), to invest in the continuing education of all their workers and particularly those on the front lines. We further call on elected officials, policy makers, and corporate leaders to consider how tax incentives and other policy measures could be enacted to ensure employer tuition investments are equitably distributed in support of those workers who could most benefit from this support.

¹ Ashley Clark, [What Works for Today's Students—Satisfactory Academic Progress Reset](#), Higher Learning Advocates, April 1, 2020.

² David Scobey, [“The Other Student Debt Crisis,”](#) *Inside Higher Ed*, December 4, 2017. Scobey was a senior scholar with The Graduate! Network in 2017.