



FEDERAL POLICY CHANGES OFFER NACAC POLICY VICTORIES

By David A. Hawkins

In the five months since the 2020 presidential election, NACAC has celebrated a string of legislative victories impacting a wide range of policy priorities, including undocumented students, school counselors, and student loan repayment. These accomplishments are the culmination of years of advocacy by NACAC members and staff to promote the interests of students and college admission counseling professionals on the federal level.

EDUCATION AND FINANCIAL AID FUNDING INCLUDED IN OMNIBUS SPENDING BILL

At the close of the tumultuous 116th Congress in December, the House and Senate finalized a massive [omnibus spending bill](#) that included COVID relief funding for schools and colleges, fiscal year 2021 education funding, and policy changes to the Higher Education Act.

- **COVID Relief and Education Funding:** Congress approved additional funds for education programs supported by NACAC, including a \$150 increase to Pell Grant awards, bringing the maximum award amount to \$6,495; an allotment of \$1.5 billion for

GEAR UP and TRIO programs, a slight increase from 2020; and a modest increase in [student support and academic enrichment grants](#) under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides funds for states to hire school counselors and support college access programs in schools. In addition, the bill provided \$54 billion in COVID relief funding for elementary and secondary schools, as well as \$23 billion in relief funding for postsecondary institutions. An additional provision relieved the capital debt obligations of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, freeing up much-needed budget space

for student supports and financial aid.

- **Pell Grants for Incarcerated Individuals:** The omnibus bill also restored Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals, a provision NACAC and several affiliates played a role in getting enacted. Championed by Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and co-sponsored by Sens. Mike Lee (R-UT) and Dick Durbin (D-IL), the measure restores access to Pell grants—eligibility that was taken away in 1994—and is expected to reduce recidivism and incarceration costs by increasing access to higher education. “When we give people in prison an opportunity to earn an education, our communities are safer, taxpayers save money, and we can end the cycle of recidivism,” Schatz said. “With our bill now set to become law, we’ll finally restore a program we know already works and give

people a real chance to rebuild their lives.”

- **Changes to the FAFSA and Financial Aid Eligibility Formula:**

Finally, Congress implemented a wide range of changes to the FAFSA and federal student aid eligibility formula that will take effect over the next two to three years. The number of questions on the FAFSA will be reduced from 108 to 36 beginning in 2023. Similarly, the 2023 financial aid process will include a revised eligibility formula that, among other changes, increases income protection allowance, removes a provision taking into account the [number of students in a family who are in college](#), and revises the simplified needs test to ensure that the students who are most in need receive sufficient aid.

NACAC and its colleagues in the higher education community stress that these changes are best viewed in combination, rather than individually. Together, they represent an effort to improve equity and fairness in the federal financial aid system while recognizing the breadth and depth of need. “The financial aid community applauds the bipartisan work in Congress to simplify the federal student aid application process and improve financial aid predictability for students,” said NASFAA President Justin Draeger. “During this time of crisis, lawmakers showed up for students by expanding Pell Grant eligibility and lengthening students’ eligibility for subsidized loans.”

BIDEN IMPLEMENTS THREE MAJOR NACAC PRIORITIES ON FIRST FULL DAY IN OFFICE

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Just after his inauguration, President Joe Biden signed a series of executive orders marking significant advocacy victories. Three of those orders [addressed](#) requests NACAC made for the first 100 days of the new administration: [strengthening](#) the Deferred Access for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, [eliminating](#) the previous administration’s travel bans, and [pausing federal student loan payments](#) due to the pandemic.

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN MARKS SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES FOR NACAC PRIORITIES

The [American Rescue Plan](#), Biden’s [signature initiative](#) to further infuse COVID relief funding and strengthen the government’s ability to manage relief and other programs, was passed in early March. The bill included \$40 billion for higher education, half of which must be spent on emergency financial aid for students in need. In addition, the bill included a bipartisan measure to close a loophole in federal law that allows predatory for-profit colleges to target veterans and servicemembers. NACAC has [advocated](#) for this change for more than a decade to stop the [well-documented exploitation](#) of those who have served our country. The components of this legislation checked off another four of NACAC’s [Priorities for the Biden Administration’s First 100 Days](#).

DREAM ACT, SCHOOL COUNSELOR, AND STUDENT PROTECTION LEGISLATION INTRODUCED

We’re building on this success with additional legislation introduced in the 117th Congress. NACAC has endorsed the Put School Counselors Where They Are Needed Act, introduced by Rep. Linda Sánchez (D-CA), which would provide federal funding for school districts to hire [school counselors](#). We encourage you to [contact your members of Congress](#) and ask them to support this bill.

NACAC has also endorsed the American Citizenship Act, a comprehensive immigration reform bill that includes the DREAM Act, one of our longest-standing policy priorities. While the Biden administration has strengthened DACA, Congress must act to provide a permanent solution to the challenge facing America’s undocumented students.

Finally, NACAC supports the Protect Our Students and Taxpayers (POST) Act, sponsored by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Rep. Steve Cohen (D-TN). This legislation would increase the percent of revenue that for-profit colleges must earn outside of federal funding, a measure that ensures they are not exclusively reliant on taxpayer funding. We encourage you to [contact your members of Congress](#) and ask them to support the POST Act as well. [👉](#)

–David A. Hawkins