

A wide-angle photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The building is white with a large central dome topped by a statue. The foreground shows a green lawn with red flower beds and a large set of stairs leading up to the building. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

**AASCU** American Association  
of State Colleges and  
Universities  
Delivering America's Promise

# 2018 Public Policy Agenda

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## From the President



As president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), I am pleased to present the association's *2018 Public Policy Agenda*. This annual statement of principles and policy positions guides AASCU's advocacy efforts on current and developing issues at the federal and state levels.

Our policy agenda recommitments the association and its members to the national goal of promoting affordability by restoring the proper balance among the federal government, the states and families. For three decades, the financing trendline for public higher education has been the narrative of diminishing state support. America's public institutions of higher education are gateways to opportunity for millions of students and serve as the nation's main engines of social and economic mobility. But they need adequate resources to perform these functions well. We are pleased to see that policymakers increasingly recognize public disinvestment as shortsighted and counterproductive to the national interest, and that the broad consensus emerging is that the key to affordability is a carefully configured federal-state partnership to support high-quality, affordable public colleges and universities.

We remain concerned about educational quality and the forces that may chip away at academic freedom, rigor, integrity and, ultimately, the meaning and value of academic credentials. We view academic integrity and the labor market value of credentials as inextricably linked and we strongly support better quality assurance and greater accountability for all institutions.

As always, access and diversity remain cornerstones of our collective mission. This commitment remains only partially fulfilled more than a half-century after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Higher Education Act. But our institutions have made enormous strides during the past 50 years and have helped create a more prosperous and just society. We will continue to advocate for greater inclusion of those historically underrepresented in American higher education and oppose efforts to restrict the ability of institutions to serve all members of our society.

The *Public Policy Agenda* is the result of robust discussion within the AASCU Council of State Representatives—our policymaking body—and the AASCU membership. I hope it will promote more detailed conversations at both the state and the federal levels, and lead to policies that further expand educational opportunities for all Americans.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mildred García". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Mildred García, Ed.D.  
President

# State Colleges and Universities Are Engines of Mobility for the American Dream

America's public institutions of higher education serve a unique role as the portal through which so many of our citizens and much of our future workforce gain the skills they need to face the economic challenges of the 21st century. Our programs offer more than four million students the opportunity to achieve America's promise of an affordable, high-quality higher education. And, across the country, our institutions serve as indispensable venues for access and civic engagement. In addition, as institutions are created by and are accountable to the states, they serve as catalysts for economic growth in their communities and as engines of global competitiveness for the nation. In light of the challenges that state colleges and universities face—shrinking budgets, increased demand for accessible and affordable postsecondary education, and onerous regulations, to name a few—we must persevere to create opportunities for all students who would otherwise have few real options for realizing the American Dream.

To this end, AASCU presents its *2018 Public Policy Agenda*, which underscores the most compelling policy issues affecting public higher education and promotes policies that help our institutions fulfill their unique role in educating America's workforce. Each issue has implications at the state, federal or both levels of policy and law. Accordingly, we provide our state and federal policymakers with specific actions to take going forward.

## **State Colleges and Universities Will Lead on Issues of Affordability, Campus Climate and Quality Assurance**

Among the many issues impacting our campuses, conversations around the cost and quality of a higher education, fostering a safe and supportive campus environment for all students, and how we measure the success of our schools will be front and center heading into 2018. AASCU has prioritized these three issues in its advocacy plans at the national level, as well as in our work with state-level partners. Our collective voice will be instrumental to our work going forward to ensure that our state colleges and universities are heard and heeded in the policy discussions to come, especially in light of deliberations for a comprehensive reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the cornerstone legislation of American higher education.

## 1 Access, Affordability and Value

AASCU institutions uniquely provide the three essential ingredients of social and economic mobility in their combination of broad access, greater financial affordability, and the best return on investment for the students, the states and the nation. They have rightly been called engines of mobility because of their high impact in moving students from the lowest-income families up the income scale and for propelling their communities and the nation forward. But the very features that made America's great public higher education infrastructure so effective as gateways to the American Dream are being eroded by lack of adequate support, most notably through state disinvestment, over-regulation and economically regressive policies.

### *The State/Federal Partnership*

The top priority for the preservation of America's public higher education sector is for federal and state policymakers to ensure sufficient, consistent and sustained state funding in order to keep public colleges affordable for all students, especially those from modest economic circumstances. Virtually all other vexing higher education policy challenges in recent years stem from the erosion of state support for public institutions, including: educational attainment, institutional productivity, cost containment, financial aid, innovation in program delivery, and student persistence and completion. While all stakeholders play a role in financing a public college education—the federal government, states, institutions and students—the primary driver of higher tuition prices over the last several decades has been the state-to-student cost shift brought about by state disinvestment in public higher education. For several decades, per-student state support for public higher education has been diminishing, causing families to shoulder twice the share of costs they confronted 25 years ago. This trend was only accelerated by the economic downturn of the last several years.

AASCU developed a unique approach to federal-state collaboration in its Proposed Federal Matching Program to Stop the Privatization of Public Higher Education, a framework that has received significant support in the policy community. This new federal-state funding compact would leverage considerable federal monies, include a non-arbitrary state funding threshold, and contain a sound distribution formula. This would incentivize state reinvestment in public higher education and mitigate the privatization of higher education.

## ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Support federal policies that promote adequate state support for public institutions;
- ◆ Increase federal grant aid;
- ◆ Keep student debt manageable;
- ◆ Protect income-based repayment and loan forgiveness options;
- ◆ Maintain tax provisions that support higher education;
- ◆ Eliminate tax liability on loan forgiveness programs;
- ◆ Preserve and expand student loan tax deductions; and
- ◆ Expand employer-provided educational assistance benefits.

## ***Free College***

A number of states have been experimenting with various “free college” policies within their public higher education sectors. While we support tuition-reduction proposals, we are concerned about unintended consequences of tuition-free proposals for public higher education. Tuition-free public higher education is an appealing concept in that it continues and expands the nation’s earlier commitment to free universal K-12 education, but there are specific pitfalls—some of which have been cited in the discussion of state policies to promote tuition-free community college—that policymakers should heed as they proceed with any efforts in this direction.

First, it is important to explicitly recognize the need for joint and coordinated action on the part of both the federal and the state governments for any tuition-free proposals to be operationally and financially feasible, since neither the federal nor the state governments can unilaterally assume the significant costs of eliminating tuition. As identified above, AASCU has proposed, and will advocate for, a specific mechanism— the federal-state matching grant program—through which public sector tuition costs can be reduced or eliminated.

Second, to maintain and improve the academic quality of public higher education, it is critical for public funding to make up any lost institutional tuition revenues. Three decades of state privatization has deprived public institutions of greatly needed resources to keep up with their private counterparts, and what little additional expenditures have been possible in pursuit of quality have been financed with rising

tuition revenues. There is a great risk of stagnation or even deterioration of quality efforts if the total amount of available federal and state support does not keep pace with the actual needs of public colleges and universities.

Third, the reduction or elimination of tuition should be independent of federal student aid eligibility, so as to enable low- and middle-income students to use existing aid programs to offset other components of their cost of attendance. Existing state tuition-free initiatives have, in contrast, been configured as “last-dollar” programs that allocate aid recipients’ existing federal aid eligibility to tuition, and therefore, provide little or no benefit to students and families who need financial assistance the most. Despite these misgivings, we stand ready to work with advocates of free college to develop policies that anticipate and address potential unintended consequences. Most notably, we believe that any free tuition model would only work through a federal-state matching mechanism like the one developed by AASCU.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Advocate for increased state investment in public higher education, and promote policies that align federal and state practices in support of greater affordability and improved access;
- ◆ Encourage and promote AASCU’s proposed federal matching program and other strategies for leveraging federal resources to incentivize state higher education funding; and
- ◆ Support proposals that promote state-federal affordability partnerships by providing federal incentives for increased state funding of operating costs at public colleges and universities.

### ***Responsible Regulatory Relief***

While a regulatory framework is the inevitable requirement for proper oversight and quality assurance, burdensome, duplicative, non-germane and ineffective regulations have proliferated over the years at an alarming rate. Compliance costs are increasing at a faster rate than nearly all other institutional expenditures, and now contribute mightily to cost escalation at the same time as they divert resources from more productive activities. The federal government would do well to comprehensively examine the regulatory burdens it has imposed on institutions with an eye toward greater efficiency.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Support ongoing regulatory review to streamline compliance burdens whenever possible;
- ◆ Encourage more targeted risk-based regulations;
- ◆ Support meaningful analysis of the benefits and costs associated with new regulations; and
- ◆ Support evidence-based regulations, oversight and enforcement initiatives to target problem institutions.

## **2** Campus Climate: Supportive Learning Environments

Public institutions have a responsibility to provide open, safe and supportive learning venues for the entire campus community. Given the broad scope of functions that institutions are assigned—as places of research and teaching, but also as landlords, ISPs, telecomm providers, food service managers, athletic venues, event managers, and campus police force, to name a few—the discharge of this responsibility is a complex and difficult task. AASCU institutions are committed to doing all they can to create ideal environments for their students, faculty and staff, and will be particularly focused on the following specific challenges:

### ***Campus Safety***

Campus safety remains a top priority for AASCU institutions. AASCU schools seek to create an environment that is open, safe and respectful for all students. Beyond the resources made available to them through local police and judicial authorities, our campuses are committed to prevention and proper adjudication of all disciplinary violations. Chief among the issues they deal with are instances of campus sexual violence. AASCU believes that greater emphasis needs to be directed at solutions to help prevent sexual violence through education and outreach, including more attention to this in high schools. Campuses must also have support services in place for victims, and ensure that students are aware of these services. Lastly, AASCU remains committed to ensuring that campus disciplinary hearings on these matters are conducted in a fair, equitable and timely manner.

Campus safety extends beyond sexual violence and includes crime prevention and the implementation of policies that eliminate or mitigate physical violence. Ensuring that institutions are provided adequate legal authority and the means to maintain campus safety is an important priority.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Support policies and programs emphasizing a renewed and sustained commitment to sexual violence prevention;
- ◆ Encourage state and system officials to review and update state laws and campus procedures related to sexual violence and ensure fair and equitable proceedings;
- ◆ Call on the Department of Education and Congress to consult with institutions of higher education in devising policies against sexual violence on campus;
- ◆ Ensure that federal legislation pertaining to campus disciplinary processes maintains a standard that is fair and equitable to all parties;
- ◆ Oppose federal and state intrusions on academic practices, including transcription;
- ◆ Harmonize Clery Act data reporting requirements with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting standards;
- ◆ Oppose legislation that prevents campuses from exercising judicious discretion regarding events and scheduling choices that may lead to violence; and
- ◆ Oppose state legislation that seeks to strip institutional and/or system authority over campus weapons policy.

### ***Protection and Promotion of Free Speech***

Open inquiry and academic freedom rely on the right of students and faculty to express themselves without prior restraints or fear of retribution. As creatures of their respective states, public institutions are constitutionally barred from constraining or limiting free speech rights based on content of the speech in question. As custodians of their facilities and as the parties responsible for maintaining public safety, they do have a legal obligation to prevent violence and injury, and are at times forced to intervene in activities or planned activities in those capacities.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Promote free exchange of ideas to the maximum extent possible;
- ◆ Sponsor and support activities that educate the campus community about the value and central importance of academic freedom and open discourse;
- ◆ Ensure and promote broad intellectual engagement; and
- ◆ Oppose micromanagement of constitutional campus operations through new “free speech” laws.

### ***Promoting Civic Engagement is a Critical Educational Responsibility of Public Colleges and Universities***

The undergraduate experience involves much more than gaining knowledge and training in a given discipline. It also entails inculcating in students a sense of civic responsibility and active community engagement. Across the U.S., state colleges and universities seek to embed learning opportunities that prepare students to be the informed, engaged citizens our communities need. AASCU works with a variety of institutions to promote civic learning and engagement through initiatives such as the American Democracy Project. One of the foundations of a vibrant democracy is participation in the electoral process. States and institutions should facilitate college students’ ability to vote in order to foster a lifelong commitment to engaging in the policy process at the local, state and federal level.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Encourage AASCU institutions to facilitate their students’ participation in the elections process to the maximum extent possible; and
- ◆ Oppose state legislative interventions that unnecessarily and inappropriately limit college students’ ability to vote.

### ***Campus Diversity***

As the nation has become more ethnically, culturally and intellectually diverse, so have institutions of higher education. Indeed, minority communities are experiencing the greatest rate of growth, a fact that is directly reflected in the growing diversity of the student population on public campuses. But diversity goes beyond mere ethnicity, and includes other important attributes of specific populations of students. Students

with disabilities, for example, represent another growing enrollment trend at public institutions. This is also true of older “non-traditional” students and veterans. Public institutions will strive to provide the appropriate level of accommodation and support to all student groups.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Defend the constitutionality of campus diversity efforts; and
- ◆ Support outreach and targeted support programs for underserved populations.

### ***Educating Underserved Students***

While the nation has come far in addressing unequal access to higher education for previously excluded and underserved groups, much work remains ahead before the promise of equal opportunity can be claimed as a concrete reality for all students. AASCU institutions remain committed to the importance of equal access not only as a moral imperative, but also as a matter of workforce preparation, economic development and international competitiveness. It is in the nation’s interest as a whole that every member of our society be provided the opportunity to develop and thus contribute to the greater common good.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Defend the legality of university admissions, financial aid and faculty appointment policies intended to promote diversity;
- ◆ Support minority-serving institutions; and
- ◆ Promote policies that maximize an inclusive campus environment for all students, faculty and staff.

### ***Improve Educational Opportunities for Veterans and Servicemembers***

AASCU and its institutions have had a decades-long tradition of serving the educational needs of veterans and active-duty members of the Armed Forces. This partnership is all the more needed now, as the Armed Forces downsize and begin the orderly transition of servicemembers to productive and fulfilling civilian lives. AASCU is committed to working with the U.S. Departments of Defense (DoD), Education and Veterans Affairs to ensure optimal access and successful educational outcomes for servicemembers and veterans.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Support the continuation and proper funding of the DoD Tuition Assistance Program;
- ◆ Ensure that active-duty servicemembers and veterans continue to have access to educational programs and credentials that are broadly recognized and have value within the civilian sector;
- ◆ Support the maintenance and improvement of the GI Bill educational benefits;
- ◆ Improve institutional accountability and oversight for institutional participation in GI Bill educational benefits;
- ◆ Improve coordination among the agencies with regard to the unique needs of servicemembers and veterans; and
- ◆ Support Executive Order 13607—Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members.

### ***Support DACA Dreamers***

Many of the more than 11 million undocumented individuals within the U.S. were brought into the country as children, and know no other homeland than America. This group deserves access to higher education and a pathway to legal status. AASCU supports the passage of state and federal legislation to enable such students to participate in higher education and map out a strategy for legalization. In addition, states should have the full authority to set tuition policy for undocumented students.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Support legislation to create a pathway for legalization for individuals brought to the U.S. as children.

### ***Promote International Education***

AASCU is deeply committed to the value of international educational exchanges and opposes efforts to arbitrarily restrict the participation of entire categories of prospective students or scholars in American higher education solely based on religion or places of origin. As such, AASCU joins the rest of American higher education in

opposition to arbitrary travel bans and other restrictive policies that undermine the ability of our institutions to recruit top students and scholars, serve as academic destinations of choice for the rest of the world, and promote American values to future world leaders.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Advocate for international exchange programs and reasonable international student and scholar visa policies; and
- ◆ Oppose inappropriate restrictions on travel to the U.S. by international students and scholars

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## **Quality, Accountability and Outcomes**

AASCU strongly supports calls for transparency and outcomes-based accountability as important guarantors of quality. As the public and the policymakers who represent it are getting more alarmed about costs and outcomes of higher education, colleges and universities need to better articulate their contributions to the lives of their students and value to the nation. Better data, reasonable and adequate oversight, and sufficient resources and autonomy for institutions to act in the best interests of their students are critical ingredients for success.

### ***Institutional Autonomy of Public Institutions***

Academic autonomy is the central ingredient of educational quality. As public institutions, AASCU members respect and understand the public's right to exercise oversight and demand accountability in exchange for their support. In the interest of preserving the integrity of the credentials granted by public institutions, however, it is critical that policymakers allow public colleges to exercise their best academic judgment on educational matters. Political interference with academic freedom and institutional autonomy would inevitably undermine public institutions and diminish the value and credibility of their credentials.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Preserve and protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy at public institutions;
- ◆ Oppose state efforts to politically micromanage academic decisions regarding admissions criteria, the faculty, curriculum and instruction at public institutions;
- ◆ Oppose political interference with research and the academic peer-review process;
- ◆ Encourage strong state engagement with P-12 and higher education in the implementation and assessment of the Common Core State Standards or equally rigorous state standards; and
- ◆ Encourage state policymakers to recognize issues of institutional/system governance, equity and academic quality in all policies associated with the state role in higher education financing.

### ***Accreditation and Quality Assurance***

AASCU strongly supports the uniquely American tradition of quality assurance in higher education through non-governmental peer review, also known as accreditation. The logic behind deference in the HEA to accrediting bodies to evaluate institutional academic integrity continues to be valid and should be preserved. However, a number of shortcomings in accreditation should be addressed by policymakers. AASCU will actively support efforts for accreditation to be more risk-based, data-driven, more timely and more accommodating of promising innovations.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Work with all stakeholders in reviewing and revisiting accreditation's role within the triad: the federal government, states and accrediting bodies;
- ◆ Preserve the American tradition of political non-interference in academic judgments about programmatic quality;
- ◆ Reduce unnecessary costs by more tightly defining the accreditation process and its expected outcomes;

- ◆ Work with Congress and the administration on devising reasonable financial aid policies to reward institutional accountability and effectiveness, including a properly configured risk-retention policy on student loans; and
- ◆ Promote completion and graduation initiatives that support reasonable access and academic quality.

## ***Competitiveness***

Public colleges and universities play a central role in expanding the nation's human capital and boosting our competitive advantage in today's global marketplace. This is accomplished, in part, by providing quality preparation for the majority of the nation's P-12 teachers. It is also accomplished by producing graduates in a variety of fields who have the knowledge and skills needed to meet the needs of business, nonprofit and public sector employers. This includes health care workers, scientists and engineers, business leaders, and others essential to the nation's economy.

AASCU believes the federal government must play an essential role in supporting institutional efforts to meet national, state and local workforce needs. The federal government can provide incentives for individuals to enter high-demand fields and to work in hard-to-staff areas, support scientific research and education, and streamline efforts to attract international talent. State and local governments can also support institutional efforts to educate teachers, healthcare workers, scientists and engineers, and others. The nation's economic competitiveness, security and prosperity depend in large measure on how well the nation's colleges prepare citizens for a knowledge-based economy.

## ***Policy Actions***

### **Economic and Workforce Development for Rural Institutions**

- ◆ Provide appropriations for the Rural Development Grants for Rural Colleges and Universities program. These grants encourage partnerships between rural colleges and universities and local entities that promote greater access to college for rural high school students, increase the number of adults in rural communities with a bachelor's degree or higher, enhance training opportunities, and stimulate technological innovation; and
- ◆ Support continued funding for rural broadband enhancements that provide greater access to postsecondary education.

### **Urban Institutions**

- ◆ Support efforts to reauthorize, authorize and fund programs that encourage research and partnerships between urban and metropolitan anchor institutions and their communities. These efforts are designed to promote economic and workforce development, community revitalization, teacher recruitment, and greater access to college for urban high school students.

### **STEM Research and Workforce Preparation**

- ◆ Increase funding for the programs in the America COMPETES Act and support specific funding designations to public four-year institutions for research and workforce development in energy and sustainability fields, including the Professional Science Masters program;
- ◆ Recognize the contributions of each sector of higher education in the strengthening of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. The resources of the entire community must be tapped when creating, funding and implementing STEM programs that educate future scientists, engineers and mathematicians, as well as create research opportunities for students studying in the STEM fields;
- ◆ Support and improve basic and applied scientific research and education activities for undergraduate programs in order to complement established graduate and research programming;
- ◆ Advocate for programs that recruit and support traditionally underrepresented populations into STEM fields, such as students of color, low-income students and women; and
- ◆ Support the creation of institutional incentives (e.g., in performance-based funding) to graduate students in fields associated with high-need jobs identified by state workforce service agencies.

### **Federal Research and Development**

- ◆ Continue support for undergraduate research and mentoring in STEM fields, and for STEM pipeline programs promoting P-20 partnerships and articulation agreements;

- ◆ Support programs that meaningfully engage students in applied research that addresses the nation's innovation plans for healthcare, energy and national security;
- ◆ Support technology transfer and workforce training programs that link institutions of higher education with the manufacturing sector and incentivize corporate and private sector investment in these partnerships; and
- ◆ Fund the development and renovation of laboratory facilities and support equipment acquisition that will promote innovative, collaborative scientific and technical research at all institutions of higher education.

### **Sustainability and Energy Efficiency**

- ◆ Expand federal efforts to support institutions of higher education in improving efficiency in the physical plant, campus transportation and other institutional operations; and
- ◆ Advocate for grant funding at the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other federal agencies that support university research in sustainability, renewable energy and green technology.

### ***Promote Innovation in Higher Education***

Innovation and continual improvement have been and remain important elements of the historical success for public colleges and universities. As the need for higher education grows much faster than traditional means of delivery, the higher education community must point the way forward through the development of innovative models of content delivery and credentialing. AASCU supports promising efforts to innovate and reinvent various aspects of higher education through new policies, programs and practices. It is, at times, difficult to distinguish breakthrough innovation from passing fads that may undermine the integrity of academic credentials. Therefore, it is essential for new and previously untested initiatives to be thoughtfully examined, and to balance the embrace of the new with a demand for evidence-based assurances of likely success. An important policy tool for proper testing and evaluation of new ideas is the experimental site provision of Title IV, which can be expanded to allow more regulatory flexibility for carefully accommodating innovative practices on a limited basis to determine their broader utility.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Support new and emerging forms of instructional and program delivery;
- ◆ Support net neutrality to ensure that institutions and students continue to have access to an open Internet; and
- ◆ Support campus adoption of new and emerging technologies, particularly for students with special needs.

### ***Strengthen Teacher Preparation***

AASCU institutions are deeply committed to teacher education, preparing more than 50 percent of all teachers certified annually in the United States. The growing national alarm about the rigor and performance of the P–12 system certainly concerns institutions as well. Too many students come to college unprepared and in need of remediation, and the problem is worsening. The shortcomings of our P–12 system contribute to the already daunting challenges that colleges and universities face regarding cost, outcomes and accountability. Federal policy on teacher preparation can improve these outcomes through appropriate financial aid incentives for future teachers, providing resources for high-quality teacher preparation programs, and partnering with states in support of improved teacher licensure standards.

### ***Policy Actions***

- ◆ Continue to work with Congress and the administration to chart a workable federal policy on teacher preparation;
- ◆ Urge policymakers to align teacher preparation requirements with the 2015 reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act;
- ◆ Support the Teacher/Educator Quality Partnership Program;
- ◆ Encourage state efforts to develop appropriate licensure standards on the basis of valid, reliable and objective data, and align assessment of teacher preparation programs with those standards; and
- ◆ Ensure that states evaluate all teacher preparation venues using the same standards.



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