If Not for Pell...

AASCU presidents and higher education leaders discuss what Pell funding meant for their educational prospects and how it has shaped their leadership

By Gayle Bennett

Dennis Shields grew up in an orphanage, a boys’ home and a series of foster homes in Iowa. He had no parents or financial resources, but he had a decent ACT score. Today he is the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville.

Aaron Thompson’s coal miner father had no formal education, and his mother had to leave school after the eighth grade. Though they had no money to send him to college, his parents nonetheless encouraged him to go. Thompson is now the executive vice president and chief academic officer for the Kentucky Council on Higher Education and a tenured professor at Eastern Kentucky University.

Sandra Woodley married at 18 and by her early 20s had two children. Recognizing that a college education could help her economically struggling family, she started attending classes at her local community college. Ten years later, she had earned her undergraduate degree, and she didn’t stop there. Today she is president of the University of Louisiana System.

Through a program intended to increase the geographic diversity of its students, the University of California, Berkeley admitted Joseph Castro, who lived among the farmworkers of California’s Central Valley. In filling out the federal and state financial aid forms, Castro discovered that his single mother was supporting the family on the $15,000 a year she made as a beautician. He is now back in the Central Valley—

as the president of California State University, Fresno.

With little financial means, Beverlee McClure wasn’t on the college track. After enrolling in the local community college to become a paralegal, she was encouraged to continue on to a four-year institution. McClure was recently appointed the president of Adams State University in Colorado.

Jack Thomas ran track at his high school in rural Lowndes County, Alabama. His coach, who was also his high school counselor, told him that there were financial aid programs that could help him become the first person in his family to earn a college degree. Thomas is now the president of Western Illinois University.
As an emancipated minor, Susan Borrego didn't see herself going to college. But as a joke, she sent her name to a college, and the college wrote her back. Though she couldn't get financial aid her first year because she hadn't had a permanent address the previous 12 months, she made it through and applied for aid thereafter. Borrego is currently the chancellor of the University of Michigan-Flint.

Every one of these higher education leaders received Pell Grants, or Basic Educational Opportunity Grants, as the funding was called before the name was changed to honor Senator Claiborne Pell in 1980. The grants were created as a part of the Higher Education Act of 1965, allowing students with little means to access higher education. Every one of these leaders unequivocally say that without this funding, they would not have been able to go to college, much less reach their current leadership positions.

Today, almost 9 million students receive some amount of Pell Grant funding, but it’s higher education purchasing power continues to decrease: The maximum Pell award in 2014-15 covered less than 33 percent of the cost of tuition, fees, and room and board at public four-year colleges, according to the Institute for College Access and Success. This is the lowest percentage since the start of the program in 1972.

That means something to these leaders, whose Pell funding covered 50 percent or more of their total costs as undergraduates. These leaders not only empathize with students who are struggling to string together enough aid, work hours, and loans to stay in school, but also they do what they can to ease the burden.

**How Their Experiences Translate**

Between his Pell Grant money, the National Achievement Scholarship for black students, his work-study job, and the $1,200 to $1,500 he could save from working in the summer, Dennis Shields was able to pay for his undergraduate education. “The Pell Grant money now, even for those who are fully eligible at access institutions, probably covers a good portion of the tuition, but it doesn’t come close to covering the other living expenses,” he says. He estimates that the unmet need for students at UW-Platteville is about $6,000. “You figure out what it takes working at minimum wage to make $6,000, and it’s 20-plus hours a week.”

He notes that working that much can impinge on the college experience, which for him included playing on the basketball team. “If I was placed in that same circumstance today, I couldn’t play basketball because I would have been working. That’s what happens with many of our students now. They spend 20 to 30 hours a week working, and that has a tremendous impact on the nature and quality of the educational experiences they have.”

This drives Shields to find new efficiencies and revenue streams to keep education as affordable as possible. “For many AASCU schools, fundraising has not been a major
portion of what they’ve done,” he says. “With the obvious challenges that state governments have, we can’t afford to wait for when good times come and states can afford to invest more in higher education. We have to tell our story and get private philanthropy to fill the void of the reduction in support from the state.”

Castro uses a significant portion of his President’s Circle Fund for student scholarships. They might not be large awards, but he knows that $500 can sometimes make the difference between staying enrolled and dropping out. “It definitely is something that has stayed with me, in terms of the importance of every dollar,” he says.

As a student, Susan Borrego relied on her college’s financial aid office to help her apply for Pell and the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant in her freshman year, allowing her to stay in school. So at each institution she’s worked at, she’s tried to streamline financial aid application and disbursement. “When a financial aid officer is going to be late with an award for some reason when a student’s been on time, the student may not have money for rent or food. I’m pretty sensitive to the service level,” she says.

And no one understands the pressures nontraditional students face better than Sandra Woodley. Over the course of her career, Woodley has held senior-level executive positions in five different higher education systems. More than once the conversation has turned to requiring students to finish in four years as a cost-saving measure. “I would speak up and say, ‘That couldn’t be more beside the point that it was less expensive for me to have finished in four years. It was impossible. So you are telling me you are going to let these students get almost to the goal line, and then you are going to take the ball away from them because it’s less expensive?’ It’s a lack of perspective from very well-meaning people who have a totally different experience.”

Hopes for the Future

Pell funding received an infusion at the beginning of the Great Recession but has been cut back since. While virtually every higher education leader would like to see Pell funding increase, Congress doesn’t seem eager to comply. But without an increase, leaders worry that fewer nontraditional and minority students will be able to attend college. According to the Institute for College Access and Success, more than 60 percent of African-American and 50 percent of Latino college students receive Pell Grants. “It’s becoming more challenging for certain populations to get an education,” Jack Thomas says. “For me, that is unacceptable.”

Aside from increased funding, higher education leaders have other Pell-related items on their wish list. Most would like to see the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) simplified. “We forget when we’ve been here how complex and confusing that process can be, especially if you are a first-generation student,” Borrego says. Students who receive their full Pell
award in the fall and spring terms are ineligible for summer term Pell funding. “While legislators thought it was a cost-saving measure to make that cut, they also hammer the fact that students need to be able to complete in six years,” Beverlee McClure says. “We totally agree, but without that Pell funding for summer, these students can’t complete in that time. The unintended consequence of that is pretty significant.”

And while Woodley supports incentivizing students who can do so to complete in four years, she would like to see the six-year lifetime limit on Pell funding abandoned or extended for students who can’t attend full time. “Why does it matter if it takes someone eight years to get through?” she says. “Why these artificial limits? It’s counterproductive for students who have to go through college in the way that I did.”

Aaron Thompson would like to see an increase in work-study funding, since “students who work on campus have a greater likelihood of succeeding than those who work off campus,” he says. He’d also like to see Pell funding increase as completion nears. “With some of the new data we’re getting, there’s a lot of unmet need that happens in the junior and senior year,” he says. “There needs to be a way to add money on as people move through the system to allow them to start handling student course fees that grow larger as you get into some of the specific programs.”

And Joseph Castro, a supporter of the federal DREAM Act, which would grant residency status to undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, is hopeful that someday Pell Grants will be available to those students. Fresno State has about 600 “Dreamers,” and to better support them, the campus has opened the Dream Center. “Many of them are children of farmworkers who have achieved at a high level,” he says. “We want to give them the opportunity to get a higher education.”

Like most everything, it comes down to priorities. “We can’t talk out of both sides of our mouth,” McClure says. “If we want our population to have social and economic mobility, we have to be willing to invest in it. Pell is still one of the best ways to augment student financing for education.”

Gayle Bennett is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.