

March 5, 2025

The Honorable Linda McMahon
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary McMahon,

On behalf of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), I congratulate you on your confirmation as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education (the Department). We look forward to working collaboratively with you and your team to develop policies and implement strategies to strengthen public higher education and provide equal opportunity for every student.

AASCU represents a critical higher education sector, a cohort of 520 regional public universities (RPUs). We aim to actively partner with you and your team to find feasible solutions to the myriad policy challenges confronted today by students, administrators, faculty, and staff to further increase public higher education's affordability and accessibility.

As a graduate of East Carolina University, you already know and understand the unique characteristics that set RPUs apart from the private nonprofit and land-grant sectors of higher education. From the sunny shores of Florida to the pristine mountains of Alaska, from Los Angeles' urban center to the farmlands of Iowa, RPUs empower communities and students across the country. As stewards of place, RPUs represent 86% of all public four-year institutions and enroll nearly 4.9 million undergraduate students; our institutions are the engines of economic development and the future of social prosperity.

Students at RPUs come from the institution's surrounding region and overwhelmingly stay there after graduation. These graduates fuel the next generation of entrepreneurs, small business owners, and the necessary labor force required by a thriving economy and a safe nation. The lasting impact of RPUs is undeniable. Seventeen of the top 20 institutions listed in the *Social Mobility Index* rankings are members of AASCU, and all 20 institutions are RPUs.

In the 2022–2023 academic year, RPUs awarded 66% of all bachelor's degrees and 67% of all master's degrees at public four-year institutions. Similarly, these colleges and universities also award 79% of all bachelor's degrees in health fields and 79% of all bachelor's degrees in education earned at public four-year institutions.

In the fall of 2024, AASCU, with support from the Gates Foundation, sponsored a cohort of member institutions to participate in the National Alumni Career Mobility (NACM) survey. The survey focused on their career satisfaction and mobility five and 10 years after graduation, providing insights into long-term career outcomes. While the data is still preliminary, the following key findings have already stood out:

- 84% of alumni respondents indicated they were satisfied with their degree educational experience.
- 83% of alumni respondents indicated they are satisfied with their current career.
- 78% of alumni respondents expect to earn more in the future than the household in which they grew up.

Many of our institutions began as “normal schools” or “state teachers colleges,” tasked with preparing a growing nation’s educator and nursing workforce. Then, as now, we view this charge as central to the mission of RPUs; educating the workforce required by local businesses and regional industries while providing the teachers needed to develop the next generation of social, political, and economic leaders. As you take the helm of the Department, it is our hope that you will be a partner in strengthening schools of education. AASCU has long supported educator preparation grants such as the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence (Hawkins) and Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Programs that seek to supplement state and local efforts to expand the pool of high-quality teachers.

During your confirmation hearing, we were heartened by your commitment to the viability and vitality of both the Pell Grant program and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The Pell Grant represents the most successful, means-tested investment made by the federal government in aiding all students with financial needs to afford and complete their postsecondary education. Its importance to students at RPUs cannot be understated. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, 37% of students at RPUs were Pell Grant recipients. The continued health of the Pell Grant program is a priority for current and future students at RPUs.

HBCUs are only one example of the federally designated Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) among RPUs. In addition to the 40 four-year public HBCUs, our sector is equally proud and supportive of the other 139 RPUs (179 in total) eligible to apply for designation under one or more MSI types in FY24. More than any other higher education sector, private or public, regional public universities ensure that the opportunity available through an affordable, high-quality education is accessible to all Americans.

Among RPU institutions, you will find many of the nation’s public four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), Native American Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs), Tribal Colleges (TCUs), and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Among the nation’s total public four-year undergraduate enrollments, RPUs educate 86% of all Black students, 78% of all Hispanic students, 71% of all American Indian or Alaska Native students, 67% of all Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students, and 58% of all Asian students. RPUs ensure that students from overlooked and historically underserved communities are provided with the opportunity of an affordable, high-quality education.

AASCU strongly supports the institutional development programs contained within Title III and Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The development grants these programs award is an important component of the ability of these institutions to accomplish the ongoing success and lasting impact for which they are recognized. The grants allow for improving student support services, providing educator development opportunities, and acquiring laboratory equipment, to name a few examples. These funds are for the betterment of the institutions, and such improvements are accessible by and for the benefit of all students.

As your experience as an undergraduate student demonstrated, RPUs are an important component of the nation's vitality and prosperity and its ability to provide a fair opportunity to lift oneself, one's family, and one's community. RPUs have been described as the "workhorses" of higher education committed to developing America's workforce of the future and providing an accessible, affordable, and high-quality educational experience. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues in the Trump-Vance administration to advance this important higher education sector and deliver America's promise to all our citizens.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles L. Welch". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Charles" being the most prominent part.

Dr. Charles L. Welch
President and CEO
American Association of State Colleges and Universities