

Public Policy Agenda

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American Association of State Colleges and Universities
1717 Rhode Island Avenue NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20036
ph 202.293.7070 • fax 202.296.5819 • aascu.org

 facebook.com/aascu

 twitter.com/aascu • @aascupolicy

 linkedin.com/company/aascu

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Executive Summary

America's regional comprehensive public institutions of higher education serve a unique role as the portal through which so many of the students and much of the nation's future workforce gain the skills needed to face the economic challenges of the 21st century. Programs at regional public universities (RPU) offer more than 4 million students, who are increasingly of color, low income, and/or first generation, the opportunity to achieve America's promise of an affordable, high-quality college education. Across the country, regional comprehensive public four-year institutions serve as indispensable venues for access and civic engagement. In addition, as institutions are created by and accountable to the states, they serve as catalysts for economic growth and social mobility in their communities and as engines of global competitiveness for the nation. Considering the challenges regional public universities face, including shrinking budgets, increased demand for affordable postsecondary education, enrollment volatility, and onerous regulations, we must persevere to create opportunities for all students who would otherwise have few real options for realizing the American Dream—a satisfying career and a fulfilling life.

In support of the critical role that its members play in the development of their respective communities and the United States as a whole, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) updates and publishes this *Public Policy Agenda (PPA)* on an annual basis. The *PPA* is intended to serve two substantive goals before multiple audiences. The first purpose of the *PPA* is to outline the affirmative policy preferences of the AASCU membership—the policies that we view as most beneficial to students at RPUs and to the nation—as articulated by the association's policy development body, the Council of State Representatives (CSR). AASCU's affirmative policy agenda defines the work of its government relations division before Congress and the administration. The second function of the *PPA* is to provide a framework to guide the association in responding to unanticipated policy and political developments. The fundamental principles articulated in this document about AASCU membership's policy priorities help the association securely navigate its way through day-to-day political developments and allow it to react quickly to policy proposals from various quarters.

The audiences for this document consist of the various stakeholders in the policy process at both the federal and the state levels. While AASCU does not engage in direct advocacy at the state level, this document provides state policymakers with a clear statement on the broad consensus of regional comprehensive university leaders about state policies that govern the resources available to the institutions and so many of their decisions. At the federal level, the *PPA* serves as a roadmap for members of Congress and the administration on policies that would advance the public higher education sector. Other stakeholders—think tanks, associations, student groups, and public interest organizations—are also among the entities that this document attempts to inform and assist. Most notably, of course, the *PPA* is intended to distill a year's worth of conversations and deliberation within the AASCU Board of Directors, the CSR, and other committees and provide the AASCU membership with a clear summary of what the association stands for regarding public policy.

The *PPA* groups the most pressing issues confronting RPUs into three broad categories: affordability, campus climate, and quality. The section on affordability focuses on the financial

vitality of RPUs and on policies that would remove barriers for students, particularly those from historically underserved communities, to attain the baccalaureate. In this regard, the association's highest priority is the creation of a federal-state partnership program to incentivize continued state investments in public higher education and reverse the state privatization trend of the past four decades. In addition, targeted need-based aid will remain critical to helping low-income families afford the total cost of attending college.

The second category of policy items in the *PPA* focuses on issues—mostly nonfinancial policy preferences—that enable public institutions, particularly regional comprehensive colleges and universities, to fulfill their mission. These include issues like campus safety, free speech, and civic engagement. They also encompass the unique needs and the policy support that specific groups of students—e.g., of color, first generation, undocumented individuals, veterans, working adults, or others—should receive.

The final category of policy actions in the *PPA* relates to quality and accountability. Affordability and access are only meaningful if they facilitate a high-quality educational experience, produce good outcomes, and do so in a cost-efficient and accountable manner. This section articulates some of the most important requirements of a sustainable quality assurance system, as well as specific policy arenas in which regional comprehensive institutions are indispensable engines of progress, most notably educator preparation and economic competitiveness.

State colleges and universities are engines of mobility for the American Dream.

America's regional public universities (RPU) serve a unique role as the portal through which so many of the students and much of the nation's future workforce gain the skills needed to face the economic challenges of the 21st century. RPU programs offer more than 4 million students, who are increasingly of color, low income, first generation, and working adults, the opportunity to achieve America's promise of an affordable, high-quality college education. And, across the country, regional comprehensive public four-year institutions serve as indispensable venues for access and civic engagement. In addition, as institutions are created by and accountable to the states, they serve as catalysts for economic growth in their communities and as engines of global competitiveness for the nation. Considering the challenges regional public universities face, including shrinking budgets, increased demand for affordable postsecondary education, enrollment volatility and onerous regulations, we must persevere to create opportunities for all students who would otherwise have few real options for realizing the American Dream—a satisfying career and a fulfilling life.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) presents its *2024 Public Policy Agenda*, which underscores the most compelling policy issues affecting regional public universities and promotes policies that help our institutions fulfill their unique role in educating America's workforce and strengthening communities. 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 affecting our campuses, conversations about the cost and quality of higher education, fostering a safe and supportive campus environment for all students, and measuring our institutions' effectiveness and our students' success will continue to be front and center heading into 2024. Our collective voice will be instrumental to our work going forward to ensure that state colleges and universities are heard and heeded in the policy discussions to come, especially considering deliberations for a comprehensive reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the cornerstone legislation for American higher education.

Access, Affordability, and Value

Regional public universities uniquely provide three essential ingredients of social and economic mobility—broad access, financial affordability, and the best return on investment for students, states, and the nation. They have rightly been called engines of social mobility because of their high impact in moving students from the lowest-income backgrounds up the income scale and propelling themselves, their families, 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, overregulation, and economically regressive policies. These changes, furthermore, are taking place at a time when closing the opportunity gap for historically underrepresented and underserved students—the new American majority—is vital for the future economic and social success of our nation. Regional comprehensive institutions already operate as administratively lean organizations in service to their students and communities. AASCU will engage Congress and the administration to mitigate any legislative or regulatory efforts to further erode public fiscal support for the sector.

The Federal/State 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 to keep public colleges affordable and high quality for all students, especially those from modest economic circumstances. Virtually all other higher education policy challenges that we face today—educational attainment; institutional quality and productivity; cost containment; financial aid; innovation in program delivery; and student access, persistence, and completion—stem from the erosion of state support for public colleges and universities that include regional public universities. While all stakeholders—the federal government, states, institutions, and students—play a role in financing a public college education, 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 fluctuated with every business cycle, typically producing large cuts to public institutions after every economic recession that are only partially corrected during periods of recovery. Factoring out the short-term volatility, the unmistakable trendline in state support for the public sector has been one of reduced per-student subsidies. Today, families are shouldering twice the share of total costs at public institutions than they confronted 25 years ago. While the 2008 Great Recession triggered the greatest cycle of budget cuts in the post-war era, the recent COVID-19 crisis threatened to further accelerate state disinvestment as increased public health costs and revenue shortfalls forced states to implement funding cuts. Even before the pandemic and the financial crisis it triggered, state spending had not fully reversed the draconian 2008 cuts to public higher education. Before the recent COVID-19-driven economic recession, state appropriations for public higher education were 8.7% below pre-2008 levels and only seven states had fully recovered from the budget cuts they had imposed more than a decade ago.

The devastating enrollment declines and revenue losses from the pandemic, combined with state budget cuts, continue to threaten the vitality of public institutions and require the federal government to step in with decisive interventions to preserve and maintain the nation's public higher education infrastructure.

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 important federal-state funding compact would leverage considerable federal monies, include a nonarbitrary state funding threshold, and contain a sound distribution formula. This approach would incentivize maintenance of state support during periods of economic recession and promote state reinvestment in public higher education during periods of economic expansion, thus mitigating and reversing the worrisome trend of privatization of public higher education.

An example of this collaboration is AASCU's proposed creation of a stewardship grants program that leverages federal funding and requires a partnering contribution from states. This investment from participating states must not reduce appropriations to participating public colleges and universities for access, enrollment, operations, or financial aid. The partnering grant would incentivize maintenance of state support for regional stewardship, especially during periods of economic recession, and it would promote state investment in public higher education during periods of economic expansion.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Support the authorization of a permanent federal/state matching grant program that promotes increased affordability, greater access, increased retention, and improved quality in public higher education by incentivizing increased state funding for public institutions.
- Support federal/state policies that direct greater operating subsidies to institutions that enroll, educate, and graduate underserved populations and serve as engines of socioeconomic mobility.
- Support all federal policies that promote adequate state support for all public institutions.
- Support collaborations with community colleges to contain costs and promote greater affordability.
- Support federal policies that improve postsecondary value and make higher education more equitable, especially for underrepresented and low-income students.
- Expand and support dual enrollment programs that are both tuition free and high quality.
- Simplify access to aid and revise need analysis to provide greater help to the lowest-income students.
- Preserve and increase federal grant aid.
- Support efforts to double the value of the maximum Pell Grant award to \$13,000.

- Focus grant aid on baccalaureate programs.
- Keep student debt manageable.
- Provide appropriate debt relief to victims of fraud and to overburdened borrowers.
- Protect income-based repayment and loan forgiveness options.
- Maintain tax provisions that support higher education.
- Eliminate tax liability on loan forgiveness programs.
- Expand funding for low-resource institutions that serve large numbers of low-income and underserved students to decrease and eliminate the opportunity gap.
- Preserve and expand student loan tax deductions.
- Expand employer-provided educational assistance benefits.
- Provide public institutions with direct federal funding through supplemental appropriations with reasonable and affordable state co-pays during an economic recession. Such support should require the states to maintain a fixed and significant percentage of their pre-pandemic per-capita operating subsidies for public institutions and require them to restore funding to at least the pre-pandemic levels one year after an economic expansion has been documented.

Tuition-Free College

Several states have been experimenting with “free college” policies within their public higher education sectors. And the Biden administration previously proposed a federal initiative to make community colleges tuition free through a voluntary federal-state partnership. While we support tuition-reduction proposals, we are concerned about unintended consequences of tuition-free proposals for public higher education and particularly on regional comprehensive colleges and universities. Tuition-free public higher education is an appealing concept in that it continues and expands the nation’s commitment to free, universal K–12 education, but there are 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 between the federal and state governments for any tuition-free proposals to be operationally and financially feasible, since neither the federal nor 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 enhance the academic quality of public higher education, it is critical for public funding not only to make up any lost institutional tuition revenues but also to provide adequate additional funding to maintain and improve educational quality. For more than three decades, 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 efforts to improve quality if the total amount of available federal and state support does not keep pace with the actual needs of public colleges and universities and their students, particularly those that are low income, first generation, and/or of color.

Third, the reduction or elimination of tuition should be independent of federal student aid eligibility, to enable low- and middle-income students to use existing aid programs to offset other components of their cost of attendance (e.g., books, transportation, food, day care services, and housing). Existing state tuition-free initiatives have, in contrast, been configured as “last-dollar” programs that allocate aid from recipients’ federal aid eligibility to tuition. These initiatives, 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 any free tuition model would only work through a federal-state matching mechanism such as the one developed by AASCU.

Finally, eliminating tuition in any sector of public higher education should not incentivize state disinvestment in other sectors of public higher education. This is especially critical in any federal programs that are intended to promote tuition-free higher education because limiting federal incentives to only one sector—e.g., community colleges—could result in the defunding and further privatization of other state institutions.

Regarding this latter issue, the tuition-free community college plan previously proposed by the Biden administration needed significant modifications to achieve its laudable goals. Beyond the reasonable concerns about the regressive nature of a free college plan and its impact on the enrollment decisions by students across socioeconomic groups, it is imperative that a national investment of this magnitude and for this purpose be equitable in its approach and impact. Notably, its sector-based approach to eliminating tuition costs will incentivize the most price-sensitive students to opt for community colleges, even when public four-year institutions represent better venues to the baccalaureate for them or provide the specific academic program they chose to pursue. In addition, many public regional universities play the same role as community colleges in regions that lack the latter institutions. Therefore, the most constructive modification to the administration's proposal would be to extend the tuition-free partnership to the first two years of college at any public institution. Not only would this level the playing field for students with the greatest financial need who seek to enroll in baccalaureate institutions, but it would also avoid the unintended consequence of incentivizing participating states to put every new state dollar into their two-year institutions at the expense of their four-year colleges to capture the federal matching funds.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Advocate for increased investment in public higher education and promote policies that align federal and state practices with greater affordability and improved access.
- Encourage and promote AASCU's proposed federal matching program and other strategies for leveraging federal resources to incentivize state public higher education funding, including the proposed stewardship grants program.
- Support proposals that promote federal-state affordability partnerships by providing federal incentives for increased state funding of operating costs at public colleges and universities.
- Ensure that any tuition-free or tuition reduction proposals are sector-neutral within the public system.

Infrastructure Investments

While much policy attention has been focused on financing the operating costs of public institutions, capital investments in infrastructure and maintenance have lagged. Inadequate state funding for public college and university modernization has left a backlog of campus infrastructure needs, including building repairs, renovations, and replacement, as well as technology upgrades. A significant share of public college and university facilities were built to accommodate the baby-boom generation in the 1960s and 1970s—the average college building today is more than 50 years old—and these facilities need to be repaired, updated, or replaced to best serve students. Many buildings from the 1990s are also in need of repair and upgrades. Some public college and university campuses—particularly those in the South and West—are growing and need new facilities to address student demand.

AASCU worked with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities to develop a [joint proposal](#) to encourage Congress to expand new infrastructure funding to all public four-year colleges and universities. The basic foundation of the proposal is adapted and modified language from the former Construction, Reconstruction, and Renovation of Academic Facilities title of the [1986 Higher Education Act Reauthorization](#). The proposal would focus the funding to those institutions who serve high populations of low-income students, as defined by Pell Grant eligibility.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Advocate for any higher education infrastructure funding package to include public four-year regional comprehensive institutions.
- Prioritize funding for public institutions that serve low-income students.
- Require states and U.S. territories to create plans to demonstrate how they would meet program criteria and administer the funding to institutions.
- Include a state matching component to ensure federal funding supplements existing state investment in higher education facilities.
- Place an emphasis on infrastructure support for public educational facilities.

Responsible Regulatory Relief

Although a regulatory framework is an 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 faster than nearly all other institutional expenditures and contribute to cost escalation as they divert resources from more productive activities. The federal government should comprehensively examine the regulatory burdens it has imposed on institutions, with an eye toward greater efficiency. Even as AASCU supports a deliberative approach to deregulation, we also recognize the role well-crafted regulations can and should play in protecting students, taxpayers, bona fide institutions, and the public from waste, fraud, and abuse. Any deregulatory process must address the costs and benefits associated with the regulations it seeks to rescind or alter and the specific consequences of any changes it seeks to make.

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.
- Support evidence-based regulations, oversight, and enforcement initiatives to target problem institutions.
- Work with Congress and the administration on devising reasonable financial aid policies to reward institutional accountability and effectiveness.
- Ensure any risk-sharing policies enacted by Congress are properly configured to account for student demographics and institutional missions.
- Promote and support completion and graduation initiatives that further reasonable access and academic quality.
- Engage stakeholders and policymakers on the economic, academic, or competitiveness impact of recent changes to name, image, and likeness policies for student-athletes in collegiate sports.

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, internet service providers, telecom providers, food service managers, athletic venues, event managers, and campus police forces, to name a few—the discharge of this responsibility is a complex and difficult task. Regional public universities 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 challenges.

Campus Safety

Campus safety remains a top priority for regional public universities. These public four-year institutions seek to create campus environments that are open, safe, and respectful for all students, faculty, staff, and visitors. 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 our members deal with are instances of campus sexual violence and other forms of sexual misconduct. AASCU believes greater emphasis, through education and outreach, needs to be directed at solutions to help prevent sexual violence, including more attention to this issue in high schools. Campuses must also have support services in place for victims and ensure that students are aware of these services. Lastly, AASCU and its members remain 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 the prevention of all forms of sexual violence and misconduct.
- Continue AASCU's engagement with the Department of Education and Congress to consult with higher education institutions in devising policies against sexual violence on campus.
- Ensure that federal action pertaining to campus disciplinary processes maintains a standard that is fair and equitable to all parties.
- Oppose federal intrusions on academic practices, including transcription.

- Harmonize the Clery Act's data reporting requirements with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting standards.
- Oppose legislation that prevents campuses from exercising discretion regarding events and scheduling choices that may lead to violence.

Protection and Promotion of Free Speech

Freedom of speech is a cherished American tradition enshrined in the nation's founding document. Open inquiry and academic freedom rely on the right of students, faculty, and staff to express themselves without prior restraints or fear of retribution. As creatures of their respective states, public colleges and universities are constitutionally barred from constraining or limiting free speech rights based on the content of the speech in question. As custodians of their facilities and as the parties responsible for maintaining public safety and fostering a learning environment, they do have a legal obligation to prevent violence and injury and at times must intervene in activities or planned activities in those capacities.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Promote free exchange of ideas to the maximum extent possible in a manner that is consistent with constitutional principles.
- Sponsor and support activities that educate the campus community about the value and central importance of academic freedom and open discourse.
- Ensure, promote, and protect broad intellectual engagement.
- Oppose micromanagement of constitutional campus operations through new "free speech" laws.
- Support and promote difficult dialogues and civil debate.

Promoting Civic Engagement Is a Critical Educational Responsibility of Public Colleges and Universities

The students' undergraduate experience involves much more than gaining knowledge and training in a discipline. It also entails inculcating in students a sense of civic responsibility and active community engagement. More than ever, it is increasingly important to educate our students on how democracy works. Across the United States, regional public 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 to foster a lifelong commitment to engaging in the policy process at the local, state, and federal level.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Highlight the role of education in restoring and promoting the practice of civil discourse as essential to the health of our democracy.
- Sponsor and support civic learning and engagement initiatives.
- Support programs that provide public service opportunities and learning for students and graduates.
- Support programs that build student civic and information literacy in online spaces through broad, cross-institutional projects that enable students to fact-check, annotate, and provide context for emergent news stories promulgated by social media.
- Educate students to critically analyze information and act as informed citizens.
- Encourage regional public universities to facilitate their students' participation in the election process to the maximum extent possible.
- Oppose state legislative interventions that unnecessarily and inappropriately limit college students' ability to vote.

Campus Diversity

As the nation continues to become more ethnically, culturally, and intellectually diverse, so have higher education institutions. Indeed, students of color are experiencing the greatest rates of growth, a fact that is directly reflected in the increasing diversity of the student population's enrollment data at regional comprehensive campuses. As of 2021, there were more than 2 million students of color enrolled at RPUs. But diversity goes beyond race or ethnicity to include other important attributes of specific student populations, including religion, national origin, culture, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, and life experiences. Students with disabilities, for example, represent a growing enrollment trend at public institutions. This is also true of adult learners and veterans, who each have their unique strengths and needs. Regional comprehensive institutions will strive to provide the appropriate level of accommodation and support to all student groups.

While the nation has come far in addressing unequal access to higher education for previously excluded and underserved groups, much work remains before the promise of equal opportunity becomes a reality for all students. Regional public universities remain committed to the importance of equal access not only as a moral imperative but also as a matter of workforce preparation, continued economic development, and increased international competitiveness. It is in the nation's interest that every member of our society be provided with the opportunity for continuous learning and career advancement and to contribute to the greater common good.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Defend the independence of university admissions, financial aid, and faculty appointment policies intended to promote diversity.
- Support all minority-serving institutions.
- Promote policies that maximize an inclusive campus environment for all students, faculty, and staff.
- Support and promote policies that assist underserved students in fully participating in and continuing their postsecondary education.
- Promote access not only to high-quality certificates but also to full-fledged academic credentials for all students seeking higher education.
- "Ban the box" on admissions applications and engage in any preventative due diligence and threat assessment based on past criminal convictions only after an academic judgment about applicants has been made.

Improve Educational Opportunities for Veterans and Service Members

Regional public universities have a decades-long tradition of serving the educational needs of veterans and active-duty members of the armed forces. This partnership is even more needed now, as the armed forces downsize and begin the orderly transition of service members to equally productive and fulfilling civilian lives. AASCU is committed to working with the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Education, and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure optimal access and successful educational outcomes for service members and veterans.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Support the continuation and proper funding of the DOD Tuition Assistance Program.
- Ensure active-duty service members 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 GI Bill educational benefits.
- Support less restrictive policies governing active-duty and veteran benefits—policies that hamstring students and put up barriers to degree completion.
- Improve institutional accountability and oversight for institutional participation in GI Bill educational benefits.
- Support and improve the VA's efforts to improve efficient delivery of GI Bill educational benefits to veterans.
- Provide active-duty and veteran students with specific support services to meet their unique needs.
- Improve coordination among federal agencies regarding the unique needs of service members and veterans.
- Support Executive Order 13607—Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members.

Support Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and “Dreamers”

Many of the more than 11 million individuals within the United States who entered the country without legal permission were brought here as children and know no other homeland than America. These “Dreamers” represent an asset to the nation that will contribute to our society and economy if allowed a fair opportunity for advancement. “Dreamers” deserve access to higher education and a pathway to legal status. AASCU strongly and unquestionably supports the passage of state and federal legislation to enable such students to participate in higher education and for legislation to map a strategy for legalization. In addition, states should have the full authority to set tuition policy for these students. Many of the “Dreamers” and other higher education students, who participate in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, are enrolled at, or have already earned a degree from, a regional comprehensive university. Because of the lack of eligibility for federal student aid support, these students must work, and thus pay taxes, to cover the cost of attendance to earn a higher education degree.

POLICY ACTION

- Support the enactment of the Dream Act.
- Protect work authorization for DACA recipients.
- Support legislation that allows “Dreamers” to be eligible for federal student aid and other financial support programs.
- Support legislation to create a pathway for legalization and citizenship for eligible individuals brought to the United States as children.

Promote International Education

AASCU deeply values 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 countries of origin. AASCU opposes 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.
- Oppose inappropriate restrictions on travel to the United States by international students and scholars.
- Oppose disruptive and unnecessary restrictions on legitimate international engagements by colleges and universities.

Support Foster Care Youth Students

Approximately 24,000 American teenagers in foster care turn 18 years old each year. Many of these students are still in high school and need jobs, a place to live, and a means of transportation to survive. Without the support or encouragement of a family member or guardian to rely on, many teens who age out of foster care at 18 (or adults in their early twenties who live in states that offer extended time in care up to 21) find themselves struggling to succeed on their own. The uncertainty and distress these young adults confront, combined with unmet mental health needs, present significant barriers to education, particularly access to and persistence in higher education. Only 53% of foster care youth graduate high school—compared with 83% of the overall population. These students are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school of any student group, or three times greater than other low-income children. Less than 3% of foster care youth earn a higher education degree by the age of 26.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Support federal grant programs, including the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and the Educational and Training Vouchers Program for Youths Aging Out of Foster Care, that help current and former foster care youths achieve self-sufficiency and provide resources to meet the education and training needs of youth aging out of foster care.
- Support legislation that would focus assistance for the educational needs of foster care youth and their transition to higher education.

Quality, Accountability, and Outcomes

AASCU strongly supports calls for transparency and outcomes-based accountability as guarantors of institutional quality. As the public and the policymakers who represent them are getting more alarmed about the costs and benefits of higher education, colleges and universities need to better articulate their contributions to their students' lives and the nation. Better data, reasonable and adequate oversight, the implementation of policies that increase and incentivize (not discourage) the enrollment of underrepresented students, and enough resources and autonomy for institutions to act in their students' best interests are critical ingredients for academic success.

Institutional Autonomy of Public Institutions

Academic autonomy is an essential ingredient for educational quality. As public institutions, regional public universities 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 primary 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 federal efforts to politically micromanage academic decisions regarding admissions criteria, faculty, curriculum, instruction, and transfer of academic credit at public institutions.
- Oppose political interference with research and the academic peer-review process.
- Oppose arbitrary restrictions on international exchange and collaborative research activities of public institutions.
- Support the collection of targeted, actionable data for accountability and program management purposes in compliance with fair information practices and in a manner that does not impose unreasonable burdens on participating institutions.
- Encourage 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 nongovernmental expert peer review, also known as accreditation. Deference in the Higher Education Act to accrediting bodies to evaluate institutional academic integrity continues to be valid and should be preserved. However, policymakers should address several shortcomings in federal policy on accreditation. AASCU will actively support efforts for accreditation to be more risk-based, data-driven, timely, and 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 noninterference in academic judgments about programmatic quality.
- Reduce unnecessary costs by more tightly defining the accreditation process and its expected outcomes.

Strengthen Educator Preparation

Regional public universities are deeply committed to educator education, preparing more than 50% of all teachers certified annually in the United States. The growing national alarm about the rigor and performance of the P–12 system concerns higher education 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 colleges and universities face regarding cost, outcomes, and accountability. Federal policy on educator preparation can improve these outcomes through appropriate financial aid incentives for future teachers, resources for high-quality educator preparation programs, and partnerships with states in support of improved teacher licensure standards. AASCU has developed a comprehensive proposal in support of an affirmative federal role in the preparation of educators, the [Project to Revitalize Educator Preparation in America](#) (PREP America, which has served as a framework for the development of legislation to propose improvements to current federal law.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Continue to work with Congress and the administration to chart a practicable federal policy that seeks to strengthen the educator preparation pipeline and diversify the teacher corps.
- Urge policymakers to align educator 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 based on valid, reliable, and objective data, and align assessment of educator preparation programs with those standards.
- Ensure states evaluate all educator preparation venues using the same standards.
- Support improved teacher salaries to enable states to recruit and retain qualified teachers.

Competitiveness

Regional public universities play a central role in expanding the nation's human capital and in boosting our competitive advantage in today's global marketplace. This is accomplished, in part, by providing high-quality preparation for most of the nation's P-12 teachers. It is also achieved by producing graduates in a variety of fields who have the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of private, 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 (both basic and applied) and education, and streamline efforts to attract international talent. In accordance with its mission, AASCU is committed to supporting applied research and service that advances economic development and quality of life in communities across the country. Regional public universities are largely engaged in applied research and the discovery of practical solutions to specific problems. These institutions, as stewards of place, are best positioned to engage their community and surrounding region in this manner while they also strengthen academic programs and research opportunities for students. State and local governments can also support institutional efforts to educate teachers, health care workers, scientists and engineers, and others. The nation's economic competitiveness, security, and prosperity largely depend on how well 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.
- 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 promote economic and workforce development, community revitalization, teacher recruitment, and greater access to college for urban high school students.

STEM RESEARCH AND WORKFORCE PREPARATION

- Recognize the contributions of each higher education sector in strengthening STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. The entire community's resources must be tapped when creating, funding, and implementing STEM programs that educate future scientists, engineers, and mathematicians.
- Create research opportunities for students studying in the STEM fields within all sectors of higher education.
- Advocate for increased funding support for basic and applied scientific research and education activities for undergraduate programs to complement established graduate and research programming.
- Advocate for programs that recruit traditionally underrepresented populations, such as students of color, low-income students, and women, into STEM fields and provide them with support.
- Support the creation of institutional incentives for 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 health care, energy, and national security.
- Support technology transfer and workforce training programs that link higher education institutions with the manufacturing sector and incentivize corporate and private sector investment in these partnerships.
- Fund the development and renovation of laboratory facilities and support equipment acquisition that will promote innovative and collaborative scientific and technical research at all higher education institutions.

SUSTAINABILITY AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY

- Expand federal efforts to support higher education institutions in improving efficiency in the physical plant, campus transportation, and other institutional operations.
- Advocate for funding at the U.S. Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, and other federal agencies that support university research in sustainability, renewable energy, and green technology.
- Support efforts to mitigate the impact climate change is having on institutions, students, and communities.

Promote Innovation in Higher Education

Innovation and continual improvement have been and remain important elements of the historical success of public colleges and universities. As the need for higher education grows much faster than traditional means of delivery, the higher education community must develop 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, however, 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 embracing innovation with the 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 institutions and students continue to have access to an open internet.
- Support campus adoption of new and emerging technologies, particularly for students with special needs.
- Support and promote efforts to connect all college graduates to career paths upon completion of their programs.