

Public Policy Agenda

2026



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AASCU Policy Priorities

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) identifies the following public policy priorities to ensure that everyone who seeks it has an accessible, affordable, equitable, high-quality postsecondary education opportunity focused on the student's success. We support regional public universities (RPU) in fulfilling their missions as engines of social mobility, local and regional workforce development, and stewards of place within their communities.

AASCU:

- Supports 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.
- Supports federal policies that improve postsecondary value and student success, and make higher education more equitable, especially for historically underrepresented and low-income students.
- Works with Congress and the administration on devising impactful financial aid policies to reward institutional accountability and effectiveness.
- Promotes policies that maximize an inclusive campus environment for all students, faculty, and staff.
- Supports strengthening federal resources to all minority-serving institutions.
- Advocates for federal policies that seek to strengthen the educator preparation pipeline and diversify the teaching corps of tomorrow.
- Advocates for increased funding support for basic and applied scientific research and education activities for undergraduate programs to complement established graduate and research programming.
- Advocates for international exchange programs and reasonable international student and scholar visa policies.
- Supports efforts by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to improve the delivery of GI Bill educational benefits to veterans.
- Highlights the critical role of education in restoring and promoting the broad spectrum of civil discourse, which is essential to the health of our democracy.
- Promotes free exchange of ideas to the maximum extent possible in a manner that is consistent with constitutional principles.

Executive Summary

America's regional public universities (RPUs) serve a unique role as the portal through which many students and a significant portion of the nation's future workforce gain the necessary skills needed to face the economic challenges of the 21st century. Programs at RPUs offer more than 4.9 million students, who are increasingly from underrepresented backgrounds, low income, and/or first generation, the opportunity to achieve America's promise of an affordable, high-quality college education. Across the country, regional public four-year institutions serve as indispensable venues for access and civic engagement. In addition, as institutions created by and accountable to their states, they serve as catalysts for economic growth, workforce readiness, and social mobility within their communities, as well as engines of global competitiveness for the nation. Considering the challenges RPUs face, including shrinking budgets, increased demand for affordable postsecondary education, enrollment volatility, and onerous regulations, we must create opportunities for all students who would otherwise have few real options for realizing the American Dream—one of socioeconomic mobility and the pursuit of happiness.

In support of the critical role its members play in the development of their respective communities and the broader United States, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) updates and publishes this *Public Policy Agenda (PPA)* annually. 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 regarding 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 target audience for this document comprises various stakeholders involved in the policy process at both the federal and state levels. While AASCU does not engage in direct advocacy at the state level, this document provides state policymakers with an overview of the broad consensus of RPU leaders about state policies that govern the resources available to their institutions and impact their decision-making. At the federal level, the *PPA* serves as a roadmap for members of Congress and the administration, outlining policies that would advance the public higher education sector. Other stakeholders, including think tanks, associations, student groups, and public interest organizations, are among the entities this document aims to inform and assist. Most notably, the *PPA* is intended to distill a year's worth of conversations and deliberations within the AASCU Board of Directors, the CSR, and other committees, as well as provide the AASCU membership with a clear summary of the association's public policy positions.

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

financial vitality of RPUs and policies that would remove barriers for students, particularly those from historically underserved communities, to attain a baccalaureate degree. In this regard, the association's highest priority is to establish a federal-state partnership program that incentivizes continued state investments in public higher education and reverses the trend of state privatization over the past four decades. Additionally, targeted need-based aid will remain critical to helping low-income families afford college costs.

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

The final category of policy actions in the *PPA* relates to quality and accountability. Efforts to improve affordability and access must be equally matched by a commitment to providing high-quality academic programming and producing gainfully employed college graduates with clear standards for cost efficiency. This section outlines some of the most crucial requirements of a sustainable quality assurance system, as well as specific policy arenas in which RPUs are indispensable engines of progress, notably educator preparation and economic competitiveness.

Overview of Regional Public Universities

The term **regional public universities** (RPUs) encompasses 520 public four-year institutions that serve the “new majority” of students, enrolling a disproportionately higher number of historically underrepresented students—including students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, Pell Grant recipients, community college transfers, working adults, and veterans—compared with other public and private institutions.

- In 2023, RPUs awarded 66% of all bachelor's degrees and 67% of all master's degrees earned at public four-year institutions.
- More than one-third of the students entering RPUs were transfer students (33%). This is the highest rate among all types of four-year universities.
- Undergraduate students at RPUs were nearly three times as likely to be age 25 or older (17%), compared with students at non-RPUs (6%).
- RPUs are much more likely to be minority-serving institutions (MSIs). In FY24, 179 RPUs met eligibility requirements to apply for federal designation in at least one MSI type.

Source: AASCU analysis of College Scorecard and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

As pillars of their communities, the country's RPUs are fundamentally linked with the needs and development of their local workforces. RPUs historically produced the educators, nurses, engineers, accountants, entrepreneurs, data scientists, and other professionals needed to sustain and grow America's workforce.

In a globalized economy, businesses often struggle to fill shortages, with job openings far exceeding the number of qualified candidates. The mission and commitment of RPUs to regional stewardship directly align academic programs with the workforce needs of local employers. They achieve this success by partnering with local industry and community leaders to support economic and social growth, ultimately benefiting graduates, industry, and regional communities.

Regional public universities are engines of mobility for the American dream.

America's 520 regional public universities (RPUs) serve a unique role as the portal through which so many students and the nation's future workforce gain the skills needed to face the economic challenges of the 21st century. RPU programs offer 4.9 million students, who are increasingly from historically underrepresented backgrounds, low income, first generation, and working adults, the opportunity to achieve America's promise of an affordable, high-quality college education. Across the country, RPUs 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 to foster economic growth in their communities and as engines of global competitiveness for the nation. Considering the challenges RPUs 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—one of socioeconomic mobility and the pursuit of happiness.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) presents its *2026 Public Policy Agenda*. It highlights the most compelling policy issues affecting RPUs and promotes policies that help these institutions fulfill their unique role in educating America's workforce and strengthening communities. Each issue has implications for the state and/or federal levels of policy and law. Accordingly, we provide our state and federal policymakers with specific actions to take going forward.

Regional Public Universities Will Lead on Issues of Affordability, Campus Operations, and Quality Assurance

Among the many issues affecting our campuses, conversations about the cost and quality of higher education, fostering a secure and supportive campus environment for all students, and measuring our institutions' effectiveness and our students' success will continue to be at the forefront heading into 2026. The collective voice of our sector is integral to the work ahead, ensuring that state colleges and universities are heard and heeded in future and ongoing policy discussions, especially relating to amendments to the Higher Education Act, the cornerstone legislation for American higher education.

Access, Affordability, and Value

Regional public universities uniquely provide three essential components 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 due to their significant 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 a gateway to the American Dream are being eroded by a lack of adequate support, most notably through state disinvestment, overregulation, and economically regressive policies. Furthermore, these changes are occurring at a time when closing the opportunity gap for historically underrepresented and underserved students—the new American majority—is vital for our nation's future economic and social success. RPUs already operate as administratively lean organizations serving their students and communities. AASCU will engage Congress and the administration to mitigate any legislative or regulatory efforts that further erode public fiscal support for the sector.

The Federal-State Partnership

The top priority for preserving 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 deterioration of state support for public colleges and universities that include RPUs. 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 resulting from state disinvestment in public higher education.

For several decades, per-student state support for public higher education has fluctuated with every business cycle, typically resulting in large cuts to public institutions after every economic recession that are only partially corrected during recovery periods. 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 did 25 years ago. While the 2008 Great Recession triggered the greatest cycle of budget cuts in the post-war era, the 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 cuts to public higher education made in 2008. Before the recent COVID-19-driven economic recession, state appropriations for public higher education were 8.7% below pre-2008 levels. Only seven states had fully recovered from the budget cuts they had imposed over a decade before the pandemic's arrival. 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 received significant support from 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 the 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 defunding public higher education.

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 historically underserved populations and serve as engines of socioeconomic mobility in their surrounding communities.
- 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 student success, 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 federal grant aid.
- Focus grant aid on baccalaureate programs.
- Keep student debt manageable.
- Provide appropriate debt relief to victims of fraud and borrowers.
- 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 student loan tax deductions.
- Preserve employer-provided educational assistance benefits.

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 created a backlog of campus infrastructure needs, including building repairs, renovations, and replacements, 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 the West—are expanding and need new facilities to address student demand.

AASCU collaborated 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 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 on those institutions that 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 regional universities.
- 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 at an alarming rate over the years. Compliance costs are increasing faster than nearly all other institutional expenditures, contributing 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 changes to name, image, and likeness policies on students and collegiate sports.
- Support policies that reflect the nature of students as student-athletes of the institutions in which they play a sport.

Campus Climate: Supportive Learning Environments

Public institutions are responsible for providing 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 creating ideal environments for their students, faculty, and staff, and are particularly focused on the following challenges.

Campus Safety

Campus safety remains a top priority for RPUs. These public four-year institutions 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 preventing and properly adjudicating 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 fairly, equitably, and in a timely manner.

Campus safety extends beyond sexual violence and includes crime prevention and the implementation of policies that eliminate or mitigate hazing and physical violence. Ensuring institutions are provided with adequate legal authority and the means to maintain campuses as safe learning environments is a crucial priority.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Support policies and programs that emphasize 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 and discriminatory misconduct on campus.
- Ensure that federal action pertaining to campus disciplinary processes maintains a fair and equitable standard for 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 in response to unexpected incidents that imperil the free exchange of ideas in a secure learning environment.

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 rights of students, faculty, and staff to express themselves without prior restraints or fear of retribution. As creations 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 parties responsible for maintaining public safety and fostering a learning environment, they have a legal obligation to prevent violence and injury and sometimes must intervene in activities or planned events in those capacities.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Promote free exchange of ideas to the maximum extent possible in a manner that is consistent with constitutional principles.
- Support efforts that address and prevent all forms of verbal or physical harassment on campus.
- 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

A student's undergraduate experience involves much more than gaining knowledge and training in a discipline. It also entails inculcating a sense of civic responsibility and active community engagement in students. More than ever, it is increasingly important to educate our students on how democracy works. Across the United States, RPUs strive to embed learning opportunities that equip students to be the informed, engaged citizens our communities require. AASCU works with various 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, fostering a lifelong commitment to engaging in the local, state, and federal policy processes.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Highlight the role of education in restoring and promoting civil discourse, which is 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 RPUs to facilitate their students' participation in the election process to the broadest extent possible.
- Oppose state legislative interventions that unnecessarily and inappropriately limit college students' voting ability.

Campus Inclusion

As the nation becomes more ethnically, culturally, and intellectually diverse, so do 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 enrollment data at RPUs. As of 2021, more than 2 million students of color were enrolled at RPUs. However, diversity extends beyond race or ethnicity to encompass other important attributes of specific student populations, including religion, national origin, culture, gender, sexual orientation, thought, 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 have unique strengths and needs. RPUs strive to provide the appropriate level of accommodation and support to all student groups.

While the nation has made significant progress 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. RPUs 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 is provided with the opportunity for continuous learning and career advancement, and to contribute to the greater common good.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Advocate for the continued independence of university admissions, financial aid, and faculty appointment policies as allowed by federal and state law.
- Support all minority-serving institutions and protect their respective authorizing statutes.
- 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 to high-quality certificates and 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

RPUs 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), the Department of Education, and the 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—restrictive policies hamstringing students and create barriers to degree completion.
- Improve institutional accountability and oversight for institutional participation in GI Bill educational benefits.
- Support the VA's efforts to improve the 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 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 a valuable 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 supports the passage of state and federal legislation to enable such students to participate in higher education and to establish a strategy for legalization. Additionally, states should have the authority to set tuition policies 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 an RPU. Due to the lack of eligibility for federal student aid, these students must work and thus pay taxes to cover the cost of attending college and earning 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 recognizes that these individuals, faculty, scholars, and students have long contributed to the nation's higher education endeavors, research efforts, and the economy. Our country, and particularly RPUs, have welcomed and educated international students who have chosen to make this great nation their home and contribute in various ways to the well-being and prosperity of everyone. International education offers RPUs significant economic benefits, including increased tuition revenue that can offset costs and prevent higher tuition for domestic students, while also enriching the campus with diverse perspectives and preparing all students for a globalized world.

We oppose efforts to arbitrarily restrict the participation of entire categories of prospective students or scholars in American higher education solely based on religion or country of origin. AASCU does not support arbitrary travel bans and other restrictive policies that undermine our institutions' ability 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. We recognize that these policy goals must align with the confines of national security considerations.

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 20s 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, three times higher than other low-income children. Less than 3% of foster care youth earn a higher education degree by age 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 youth 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 policymakers representing them become increasingly concerned about the costs and benefits of higher education, colleges and universities must 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 a crucial component of educational quality. As public institutions, RPUs respect and understand the public's right to exercise oversight and demand accountability in exchange for their support. However, in the interest of preserving the integrity of the credentials granted by public institutions, it is critical that policymakers allow public colleges and universities to exercise primary academic judgment on educational matters. Outside involvement with academic freedom and institutional autonomy would diminish the value and credibility of institutional credentials.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Preserve and protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy at public institutions.
- Advocate for policies that support institutional independence regarding admissions criteria, faculty, curriculum, instruction, and transfer of academic credit at public institutions.
- Oppose outside influence within research and the academic peer-review process.
- Oppose arbitrary restrictions on international exchange, optional practical training opportunities, 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 without imposing unreasonable burdens on participating institutions.
- Encourage policymakers to recognize issues of institutional/system governance, equity, and academic quality in all policies associated with the states' 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. The Higher Education Act defers to accrediting bodies to evaluate institutional academic integrity, which remains valid and should be preserved. However, policymakers should address several shortcomings in federal accreditation policy. AASCU will actively support efforts to make accreditation more risk-based, data-driven, timely, and accommodating of promising innovations.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Work with all stakeholders to review and revisit accreditation's role within the triad: the federal government, states, and accrediting bodies.
- Preserve the American tradition of political deference to subject matter experts in academic judgments about programmatic quality.
- Reduce unnecessary costs by more tightly defining the accreditation process and its expected outcomes.

Strengthen Educator Preparation

RPUs 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 also concerns higher education institutions. Too many students come to college unprepared and need 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 enhance these outcomes by providing appropriate financial aid incentives for future teachers, resources for high-quality educator preparation programs, and partnerships with states to support improved teacher licensure standards. AASCU developed a comprehensive proposal supporting an affirmative federal role in educator preparation, known as the [Project to Revitalize Educator Preparation in America](#), which has served as a framework for developing federal 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

RPUs 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 partly by providing high-quality preparation for most of the nation's P-12 teachers. It is also achieved by producing graduates in various fields with the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of employers in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. This includes health care workers, scientists and engineers, business leaders, and others essential to the nation's economy.

AASCU believes the federal government is essential in supporting institutional efforts to meet national, state, and local workforce needs. The federal government can incentivize individuals to enter high-demand fields and 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 services that advance economic development and quality of life in communities across the country. RPUs are primarily engaged in applied research and discovering practical solutions to specific problems with direct real-world applications. They accomplish this by leveraging existing knowledge and theories to create new products, develop innovative technologies, or devise solutions to issues faced by society, industries, or organizations. As stewards of place, these institutions are well-positioned to engage their community and the surrounding region in this manner while also strengthening academic programs and research opportunities for students. State and local governments can also support institutional efforts to educate teachers, health care workers, scientists, 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

- Support 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 encouraging 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 higher education sectors.
- 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 to promote innovative and collaborative scientific and technical research at all higher education institutions.
- Support efforts to legislate a fair and transparent formula for essential institutional costs incurred in the conduct of federally sponsored research.

SUSTAINABILITY AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY

- Support the expansion of 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 content delivery and credentialing models. AASCU supports promising efforts to innovate and reinvent various aspects of higher education through new policies, programs, and practices. It is, however, at times difficult to distinguish breakthrough innovation from passing fads that may undermine the integrity of academic credentials.

Therefore, it is essential to thoughtfully examine new and previously untested initiatives, balancing the demand for evidence-based assurances of likely success with the need to embrace innovation. 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 completing their programs.