

Testimony of Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart
President, Amarillo College
Amarillo, Texas

Prepared for the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

United States Senate

Hearing on “Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act:
Financial Aid Simplification and Transparency”

January 18, 2018

SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY ON FINANCIAL AID SIMPLIFICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Students attending Amarillo College, and community colleges across the country, define the future of our country, and its capacity for economic growth and prosperity in a global society. Today's community college student is dramatically different from the "traditional" college student of the past. She is often the first in her family to attend college, has children or supports other family members, work multiple jobs for minimum wage and frequently during the graveyard shift, and yet still has to turn to financial aid not only for tuition and books but also to cover basic living expenses. But community college is far from free—the price is still a driver of dropout. In Texas, community college students must borrow \$16,000, often on top of working, to finish their degrees.

Financial Aid Increases Education Attainment and Economic Growth

- Financial aid increases degree completion rates; without it more students would drop out of college.
- Economic growth is directly linked to education attainment in urban and rural communities: only 30% of citizens have any post-secondary credential, putting the economy at risk, and for every 10% increase in education attainment, GDP increases 22%.

Shifting Student Demographics Make Financial Aid More Important

- The typical student at Amarillo College is a 27-year old Hispanic mother who is a first-generation student going to college part-time while working two jobs.
- In Texas, 54% of all college students are enrolled in a community college. And, 35% of Bachelor's degree graduates transferred to a Texas university from a community college. 60% of Amarillo College students leverage Pell grants, student loans and scholarships to succeed.

Financial Aid Addresses Barriers to Student Success

- Funds from financial aid help keep students focused on school rather than work.
- Financial aid not only helps parents in college but also their children.
- But data—including from "secret shoppers" reveals that financial aid's ineffective processes, regulations, and bureaucracy make it hard to get the dollars and create confusion, frustration, and even fear for students.

Fixes for Financial Aid

1. Simplify the FAFSA application process to obtain aid and curtail the Verification process.
2. Increase the maximum Pell grant award by an additional \$4,500 per year. Current Pell awards fund less than 50% of today's real higher education costs.
3. Increase funding for specialized programs that assist college students with housing, food, childcare, and transportation needs.

Testimony on Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Financial Aid Simplification and Transparency

The students attending Amarillo College, and community colleges across the country, define the future of our country. I want to introduce you to this important student because her future impacts your own. We call her “Maria.” She is smart, determined, hardworking, church-going mother and she is dramatically different than the typical higher education students from the past century.

Maria faces significant barriers to success, including a bewildering financial aid process. She needs you to truly see and understand her. Mostly, Maria, and the communities in which she resides, need you to advocate for her as if our country’s future depends on her success – because it does.

Financial Aid Increases Education Attainment and Economic Growth

The education attainment for students like Maria will determine which of our communities flourish or perish. When Maria is successful, we are all successful. In fact, “As the share of the population with college degrees increases by 10 percent, per capita gross metropolitan product rises by 22 percent” according to economist Edward Glaeser (2011, p. 27). To grow our economy, we must grow the education attainment of our citizens. Yet, only 30% of our country hold any postsecondary education credential or degree (U.S. Census). Our country is becoming less educated and less capable. This educational crisis will have a lasting, generational impact on our country.

In 1973, Senator Claiborne Pell and his colleagues understood that our economy would depend on an educated middle class. The Pell Grant fundamentally created the world’s largest middle class (Goldrick-Rab, 2016.) Almost 50 years later, with economic inequality on the rise, and low-income and middle-class Americans under pressure, this generation must meet the challenge of making one of the best ways out of poverty and into the middle-class – a college education – affordable for all” (Goldrick-Rab, 2016, p. 260.)

We triumph as a country when we advocate for Maria’s college education by understanding and adapting to her. When we make Maria the focus of our processes, policies, and partnership, our country and economy wins. In fact, students who complete an Associate’s degree are more employable. The unemployment data for citizens with an Associate’s degree is a full 4% lower than those with a high school diploma. These same students make, on average, \$42,600 a year – a living wage in almost every community in the country (Data Points, 2017). These students move from poverty to self-sufficiency.

Federal Financial Aid is the single greater contributor to moving students out of dependence and into a robust economic contributor. With an economy on the verge of changing through automation, robotics, and biogenetics, our communities and this country will suffer severe economic consequences if we are not able to guide more students through completion of a degree. Currently, 72% of all students in higher education require financial Aid (Data Points, 2017.) If we cannot simplify these financial aid systems for a more effective interface, Maria will

more likely be sitting on the sidelines needing more government assistance, when she desperately wants to earn a living wage.

At Amarillo College, we have adopted a No Excuses philosophy in serving Maria and the thousands of students just like her. We know that if we cannot dramatically shift our effectiveness in ensuring more students finish what they start, our Texas Panhandle will suffer serious, long-term harm.

Amarillo College was the first higher education institution in the country to implement the No Excuses University philosophical framework developed by Damen Lopez's TurnAround Schools organization (see <http://noexcusesu.com/about/>). The framework has prompted college leadership, faculty, and staff to take responsibility for the whole student by setting high expectations and assisting students in reaching these expectations. When our students are not successful, we explore the reasons for their lack of success; but **WE, Amarillo College, ultimately bear the responsibility for having the right people, processes, or policies in place to support our students. As a college, we have No Excuses for student failure.**

As the Amarillo College president, I am ultimately responsible for ensuring excuses do not derail our ability to more creatively, effectively, and efficiently serve our students and community. I am not asking our Federal Financial Aid systems to improve without a deep understanding and commitment that my college and all higher education institutions must also take responsibility. We need innovation throughout the higher education sector with business and industry guiding us and the U.S. Federal Government as a full, faithful partner. Our country's economic future depends on our ability to ensure more of our neighbors obtain a post-secondary credential. Together, we will improve all of our systems. This innovation and improvement starts with understanding who our students really are and what they need from us.

Shifting Student Demographics Make Financial Aid More Important

As president for Amarillo College, I implore my colleagues to serve the student we have, rather than the student we thought, or wished, we had enrolled. Maria is the student we have. She is capable of shouldering our nation's future. Yet, Maria is often ignored or dismissed. Much of the political attention and funding center on the traditional, 18-year-old university freshman. The reality is our higher education student landscape looks dramatically different.

Community colleges serve nearly every square inch of the country. Community colleges serve as the job training center of a region as well as open the door to the higher education pipeline for most individuals to attend a university. Community colleges are critical to the health and wealth of the United States. Public 2-year community colleges enrolled 51% of all undergraduate students attending a public higher education institution in 2015-2016 (Ginger, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). Per the 2017 Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Almanac, 54% of Texas higher education students are enrolled in community colleges. Moreover, 75% of Texas bachelor's degree earners in 2015-2016 attended a community college. Nationally, 49% of all students who completed a Bachelor's degree attended a community college (Snapshot Report, 2017).

Realizing today's college students either attend or did attend a community college is critical to understanding the challenges these students face in higher education. Today's college student looks like Maria, a 27-year old Hispanic mother who is a first-generation student going to college part-time while working two jobs. Today's students IS Maria. And, Maria is remarkable. She demands our attention. She deserves our support. Maria holds the future of America's economic growth and prosperity in her hands.

Table 1: Community College Student Profile	Amarillo College	Nation
Full-Time Enrollment	40%	38%
Receive Financial Aid (PELL, Student Loans, Scholarships)	60%	58%
Transfer-Focus	51%	59%
First-Generation	71%	36%
Female	65%	56%
Minority	54%	52%
Average Age	27	28

Data Sources: Amarillo College Report Card, 2017; American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts, 2017

As a college president, I spend a great deal of time talking with our students. I am desperate to understand the ambitions and challenges of our students, our Maria. Maria works hard and struggles to experience the fruits of her labor. "Today, the promise of a college degree in exchange for hard work and dedication no longer holds true" (Goldrick-Rab, 2016, p.1). Instead, Maria is drowning in bureaucracies and processes designed for a different type of student.

Per the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, "the FAFSA represents a significant hurdle that students from many families must overcome in order to attend and pay for college. Research indicates that the complexity of the application and the difficulty of the process involved in completing it may prevent some students from obtaining financial aid." This same report declares 28% of community college students spent between one to three hours completing the FAFSA, not the 20-minutes touted by the U.S. Department of Education. Six-percent of community college students spent over 3 hours completing the form.

Maria also faces a cost to college not captured in our laws and regulations. Our national and state financial aid bureaucratic requirements unintentionally extend Maria's time to degree – if she can afford the degree at all. The percent of students receiving aid increased from 70% to 77% between 2009-2010 and 2014-2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The student need is growing and my rural community's economic future rests in our ability to leverage financial aid to ensure students complete a degree and find a job paying a living wage.

Financial Aid Addresses Barriers to Student Success

At Amarillo College, we have restructured our entire college around Maria's needs and removing the barriers to her success. As a first-time college president, I wanted to truly understand the student experience with Amarillo College. I hired two dozen first-time students to secretly experience the entire college onboarding process and give me feedback on what worked and what became a barrier. What I learned from these students changed who I am professionally and

personally. After listening to student voices for months, three major barriers to student success emerged.

→ *Barrier One: First-Generation students feel isolated and fearful.*

From the parking lot to the graduation stage, first-generation students are afraid they do not belong in higher education. Their initial experience with higher education is with confusing forms and unfamiliar language. Many of these secret shoppers felt they were the only student who did not understand how to navigate through the higher education processes. Much of higher education processes are built with an erroneous expectation that students and their families bring “culture capital” to any college interaction (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

Traditionally, families who experienced college themselves, help their students navigate college admission, enrollment, finances, and social connections. For first-generation students, the lack of cultural capital leaves students with little familial and social support. Because these students do not have a cultural sense of what behaviors and choices lead to classroom and social success, they often experience lower academic achievement and lower degree attainment.

My first-generation “secret shoppers” are 71% of the entire student body for Amarillo College. They often thought they were the only students unable to find a class, understand written instructions for financial aid applications, or anxious when interacting with faculty. As such, these students often felt embarrassed, insecure, and alone.

For Amarillo College, the most powerful No Excuses impact on our students is two-fold: culture shift and relationship. I asked our students to tell what their “ideal” college looked and felt like. Their responses were insightful. Because they are first-generation students they wanted a college that served them with the effectiveness of some of our country’s greatest companies. These students needed responsive, honoring customer service.

As a college, we knew we needed to embrace a culture of good service and intense caring. We looked at the values of companies known for great service. We asked students to review the list of values from a dozen companies (some local and some national.) Our students identified college values that focused on understanding the first-generation college student experience and responding with a culture of caring and service. The new Amarillo College Values our students chose were not typical “higher education” lingo: Caring through WOW, Innovation, Family, Fun and Yes.

These values are written into every employee job description and merit pay evaluation. The first week of classes, we put these values on significant display by placing employees all over our campuses – from parking lots to classrooms – to ensure students have someone to walk them to their class, take them to the bookstore, guide them through advising, and serve them as if our community’s future depended on it. Our most at-risk students receive a “coach” to support them through their first year in college.

The No Excuses Culture of Caring values and relationships are working. Our college retention and completion rates are improving dramatically because we listened to our students and looked

to our business partners for best practices. Our Federal Financial Aid systems would be well served to take the same approach to service, effectiveness, and efficiency.

→ *Barrier Two: Student poverty derails educational dreams.*

As a good, strong “academic,” I thought the greatest barriers to student success were poor academic preparation and study skills. I was wrong. In talking with my secret shoppers (and subsequently hundreds of other Amarillo College students,) the Top 10 barriers to student success in the classroom had nothing to do with the classroom. The most powerful and debilitating barrier to success in the classroom for our students is poverty related issues with transportation, childcare, food, housing, healthcare, utilities, and legal services. Good will and caring was not enough to help Maria succeed. She, like many of her peers, live in the war zone of generational poverty (Beegle, 2007).

According to the 2014 U.S. Census report *Dynamics of Economic Well-Being*, 32% of the U.S. population lives in poverty for at least two months annually. “When students cannot cover their living expenses through financial aid or other benefits, they often compensate in ways that make them less likely to graduate” (PD&R Edge, 2015, p. 1). When Maria cannot cover her living and educational expenses, she tries to pick up extra shifts from her current two jobs and avoids not purchasing course supplies and textbooks. When students like Maria face these difficult choices, they are much more likely to drop out, default on their loans, and never complete a degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2016.) When Maria has a sick child, her car breaks down, or her employer changes her shift times, she is often trapped between her educational goals and meeting her basic needs. Our current financial aid system is not helping Maria find her path forward and achieve educational success.

No Excuses opened the door for us to recognize that our preconceived notions did not match reality. In the past, we held a narrow view of our students, believing that their college experiences were similar to our own. We did not see poverty as an issue demanding action. Yet we came to see that fulfilling the college’s mission—which focuses on changing lives, educating students, meeting industry needs, and serving the community—requires us to fully understand our students and the barriers they face. Our students were working two jobs and still struggling to pay their bills.

With intentional community partnerships, Amarillo College developed a robust social-services system to ensure students are able to finish the education they start. With food pantries, clothing closets, case-management systems and direct connections to social service-providers, Amarillo College connects students to resources and emergency aid. If Maria’s child needs health care or Maria’s car needs repairs she could not afford it, she would drop out of school and take a third job or work an additional shift. She focuses on meeting her immediate needs rather than fulfilling her long-term educational and career goals.

With intense community support and college employee buy-in, we have a system that removes life barriers when our students have no other options. Maria stays in school and defeats poverty by completing her degree. In Fall 2017, our social services system connected over 1,400 students (15% of our entire student body) to services in one semester. The needs our students bring to

campus can be overwhelming. As a No Excuses college, we can understand their poverty, but we cannot use it as an excuse. We see, every day, where greater financial aid and a more simplified, user-friendly interface, would ensure more students completed degrees.

→ *Barrier Three: Financial aid does not cover educational costs and living expenses*
I was stunned when my Amarillo College students explained how they managed their finances. Many students did not need “financial literacy” – these students are well equipped to make a dollar stretch well beyond expectations.

The Federal Financial Aid system leverages grants and loans to assist students. Yet, even with two jobs, students are unable to afford the cost of college. **In 1979, Pell grants covered 99% of all community college costs. By 2014, Pell grants only covered 52% of college costs (Data Points, 2016).** For Maria, and those like her, parents are unable to contribute to her education. In some cases, my own Amarillo College students reported their obligations to help support their parents and siblings. The reality of our student lived experience is not covered by the financial aid grants and loans available.

Table 2: Typical Amarillo College Student Budget	Income	Expense
Pell Award	\$6,000.00	
Financial Aid Loans - Reduced due to Pell Award	\$8,914.00	
Part-Time Job #1 -19 hours at \$7.25/hour	\$6,612.00	
Part-Time Job #2 -19 hours at \$7.25/hour	\$6,612.00	
Tuition & Fees - Fall		\$ (1,335.00)
Tuition & Fees - Spring		\$ (1,335.00)
Tuition & Fees - Summer		\$ (534.00)
Books - Fall		\$ (836.00)
Books - Spring		\$ (836.00)
Books - Summer		\$ (335.00)
12-Months Rent - \$781 per month		\$ (9,372.00)
12-Months Utilities - \$150 per month		\$ (1,800.00)
12-Months Food - \$550 per month		\$ (6,600.00)
12-Months Childcare - \$600 per month		\$ (7,200.00)
<u>12-Months Transportation - \$250 per month for gasoline</u>		<u>\$ (3,000.00)</u>
Totals	\$28,138.00	\$(30,183.00)
Net Income	\$(2,045.00)	

Maria is full Pell eligible. Even with two part-time jobs at 38 hours a week, Maria must take out a loan for her education. **After securing Pell grants and student loans, Maria is STILL unable to pay for her living expenses and college.** What my secret shoppers helped me understand, as a college president, is their “budgets” are built on smoke and mirrors.

For the budget in Table 2 to work, Maria will have to go hungry on some days, forgo some books for classes, potentially drop a course and prolong her time-to-degree, and ration her

transportation. Maria must hope and pray her child does not get sick, her car does not break down, gas prices do not surge, and cross her fingers that her utilities and rent do not increase.

This is not a sustainable model for education attainment. The financial barriers of life do not prioritize the completion of a degree.

At Amarillo College, we know we must accelerate Maria's time-to-degree and hold costs down for her. The longer Maria takes to complete her degree, the more costly it becomes and the less likely she is to graduate. With an intentional system to graduate every student in three years, Amarillo College innovatively accelerates Maria's learning. By transitioning over 80% of our classes to an accelerated, 8-week format, Maria is not only completing her degree on time, she is learning more in the process. Maria was taking, on average, six hours a semester, 12 hours a year. Best case scenario, Maria would graduate in five years. Most students at Amarillo College were taking over six years to complete – if they completed at all.

Our data indicates that the overwhelming majority of our students dropped out of school in weeks 10 to 12 as their "life" barriers became too much to bear. They cannot see the finish line to completion and drop out to take additional work and meet their immediate needs. Our social services combined with a transition to 8-week learning model changed everything about our student success. (Please see Amarillo College Report Card, pages 17-18.)

Now, Maria is able to take six hours each Fall Term I and II and six hours each Spring Term I and II. By doing so, Maria has become a full-time student, taking 12 hours over a "semester." She is in her 8-week class the same number of hours as the traditional course. She just goes to class every day of the week. Not only is Maria accelerating her time-to-degree. She is learning. Students in our 8-week classes increased their course success rates by over 12% compared to the traditional class. When our first-generation, poverty-ridden students can see the finish line, their hope carries them to success.

→ *Barrier Four: Long-term planning is often derailed for short sighted reasons*
 Students, especially those living in the war zone of poverty, are all too adept at financial effectiveness. Their poverty is not because of poor financial planning skills. Their poverty is because of too little resources (Beegle, 2007). Generational poverty, however, does teach the need to solve the immediate need rather than plan for long-term success (Beegle, 2007). The loans available to students are critical to ensuring education is a possibility. Many of our students are debt adverse and avoid loans – even when they would be the best option. We need more robust loans for students, but wrapped in fewer, easier to understand options.

At Amarillo College, our Money Management Center is dedicated to counseling students about their loan options. Yet, we often do not have enough time or resources to more carefully guide students through a long-term financial planning process. One of our students helped me understand how desperately we need easier to understand financial aid information.

"Harrold" worked for a large, national retail/grocery box store. They offered Harrold a 29 hour a week job as an assistant manager making \$12 an hour. He excitedly told his family. They begged

him to take the job and drop out of Amarillo College. He attempted to drop. No Excuses prevented this attempt. Through money management counseling, Harrold told us that if he worked as the Assistant Manager for two years, he could be promoted to Manager and make \$15 an hour and potentially receive benefits. When counseling a student whose family has been mired in generational poverty, the promise of benefits and \$15 an hour is too great an offer to turn down. Yet, Harrold was 18 months from completing a degree in computer science. When he successfully completed his degree, he could start in a job, with benefits, at \$35 an hour.

We had to help Harrold understand that he was sacrificing long-term success for a short-term fix. We literally had to map out his financial future on paper and show him what his financial future would look like if he dropped out of school and if he stayed and graduated.

Harrold was excited and frightened. He knew the raise and promotion in his current position would help his family. He had not considered, if he stayed the course, he could actually be costing his family financial freedom long term. With his new reality, Harrold started crying and asked one question: “Would you come with me and explain this to my family?”

We are not just educating a student. We are charting a path for entire families. Greater financial information about potential jobs and what they would pay is critical the helping students stay in school, focus on developing their skills and planning for their careers. When you are hungry, lack of transportation and access to healthcare, talking about careers a few years down the road can seem frivolous and silly.

If we remove these four barriers to our students’ success, and Amarillo College is making strides, we can ensure a robust economy for everyone – especially for rural communities in the “fly-over” regions like the Texas Panhandle. We need the U.S. Department of Education and Federal Financial Aid as partner on this journey. Maria and Harrold’s futures hold in the balance.

How Students Experiences the Federal Financial Aid Process

For Maria, the cost of higher education is far more than money. Current Federal financial aid covers only a fraction of what it costs to complete a college degree. Tuition costs are only a fraction of a student’s payments. Thus, all current Federal loan programs are a necessary evil. When students are counseled to avoid loans, they end up dropping out of college all together because, even if full Pell eligible, Maria has no way to pay for the true cost of a degree. When she drops out, she is not only hurting her family, she is hurting employers and communities. Maria works two jobs. She is trying to get her education. Yet, she needs more financial aid, not less.

To curb the loans (and debt), Maria must complete her degree. She needs more access to Federal work-study programs so that her job is on campus, with inherent support, and a greater likelihood of success. Currently, funding levels for Federal work-study programs could not begin to support the need that currently exists in community colleges across the country.

The process of completing the FASFA is so complicated, many students give up before completing application. Many students simply do not think they can afford college and do not

believe they would be eligible to receive aid. As a result, students and their families opt out, choosing a life limited without a certificate or degree. According Data Points (2016), the overwhelming reason students do not complete the FASFA is they think they are ineligible. Over 44% of all community college students do not complete the FASFA.

At Amarillo College, we have reduced this number significantly with robust relationships with students and their families starting early in high school. Through our Money Management Center, the college starts financial counseling early and often so students learn of their eligibility well before they graduate high school. Still, these efforts are laborious and costly. Because the process is so confusing, many of my “secret shoppers” thought if they were not smart enough to complete the form, they would not be smart enough to complete a degree.

Maria is drowning in bureaucracy. Verification is confusing, time consuming, and has no real savings to the Federal government. According to The Institute for College Access and Success study (Ahlman, Cochrane, & Thompson, 2016), over 95% of all verified applicants saw no change to their eligibility, nationwide. For Maria, this is time wasted. When Maria needs real counseling about her options and help mapping out a financial plan, she finds her financial aid staff spending their time on verification bureaucracy.

Many of my Amarillo College students simply misunderstand the verification process. For so many “Marias” verification is seen as punishment. Maria questions whether she did something wrong and the process create needless fear and anxiety. I had one student and his father ask me if the family had done something wrong. My students and their families simply do not understand what verification means. When the U.S. Department of Education selects them for verification, these students do not receive any communication explaining verification. For my low-income, first-generation college students, verification is one more bureaucratic process that affirms they do not belong in higher education.

For many students, their verification process conflicts with payment deadlines and they face having their classes dropped. They have to make a payment and their aid is not available to them in time to secure their schedule. These layers of bureaucracy create additional barriers that push students out of higher education. Yet, our economy and country cannot afford to lose these students. The economic viability of our country depends on their success in college.

When Maria survives the verification process, she often does not have time for full counseling on her loan options. When she does visit with her financial aid officers, she learns of nine different loan options. She is confused. Her counselor does not have the time to spend at a minimum a full hour explaining each option and helping Maria decide which option is the best for her. Critically, Maria must have these loan options.

Simplifying the loan options and narrowing the choices will help Maria and college financial aid staff. But in doing so, we cannot reduce the amount of aid available to students like Maria. If aid is reduced because loan options are reduced, Maria will not be able to enroll in college and achieve her educational aspirations.

We certainly should simplify the loan program and curb student debt. To do so, we must reduce expenses for housing and food by helping college students' access affordable food and housing via other state and Federal programs. Students, like Maria, learn it is harder to get affordable food and housing if you **ARE** enrolled in college.

Per the Wisconsin HOPE Lab report, *Hungry and Homeless in College*, studies indicated “substantially higher rates of food insecurity among community college students than previously reported. Our 2015 report indicated that about half of community college students were food insecure, but this study found that two in three students are food insecure. Both surveys revealed that about half of community college students were housing insecure, and 13 to 14 percent were homeless” (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). At Amarillo College, 54% of our students are food insecure, and 11% are housing insecure. Per the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report, *Housing Barriers to College Success* (PD&R Edge, 2015), “more than 56,000 college students indicated they were homeless on the FAFSA in 2013—and that figure *almost certainly underestimates the true total.*” This is particular true given we know low-income, first-generation students are less likely to complete the FAFSA because they believe they will not qualify for assistance.

Maria needs support to complete her degree. She and her peers do not need one more reason to push them out of attaining a degree and achieving their educational dreams. Rather than increase their fears of they do not belong in higher education, we must help them overcome poverty barriers hindering their success. We must help them navigate higher education and provide financial support in drastically different ways than have been provided in the past. We owe this to Maria. We owe this to our country's economic growth and viability.

At Amarillo College, we leverage our Texas Panhandle P16 Council, with all 62 school districts and all four higher education partners to dramatically increase the FASFA completion with trained college employees to guide families through the application.

We know the financial aid system is laborious and ineffective. Yet, we are a No Excuses college. We are working to build intentional partnerships with all 62 Texas Panhandle school districts to guide families more effectively through the FASFA process. This past year, our Panhandle P16 Council created a FASFA Scholarship competition for all area high schools. The rules? Every high school with 100% FASFA completion would receive a scholarship from the Amarillo Area Foundation to be distributed to one of their students.

Amarillo College Financial Aid Office employees and a plethora of trained college employees traveled the Panhandle helping families complete the FAFSA – literally morning, noon and night. With 5,224 graduating seniors Panhandle-wide, we ensured 3,522 submitted their FAFSA. Our goal is to guide 100% of our graduating seniors through this process. It is difficult. Simplifying the Financial Aid process is critical to our ability to get students a post-secondary credential.

Additionally, we work with our Independent School District partners to start talking with families the moment they arrive in high school. With our Money Management Center, we are

able to counsel students about their financial aid options. We work with local banks to assist our students in opening their own accounts. In our First Year Seminar course, we help students develop a budget. Financial Aid opens the door to a larger system of financial literacy – for our students and their families.

Yet, these efforts are not enough. We need a more robust partnership with the U. S. Department of Education for a user-friendly FASFA interface, a more simplified form, a more limited verification process, and a realistic gainful employment accountability.

Fixes for Financial Aid

Education is the most reliable predictor to economic growth and education policy is an important factor (Glaeser, 2011). In order to help Maria and students like her, I recommend changes to our financial aid system. And by simplifying the Federal financial aid system and making a more robust funding stream to support today's college students, America's Maria will graduate from college and drive America's growing economic prosperity in the 21st century.

1. Simplify the FAFSA Application and Verification Process.

Base Pell awards on a limited number of data elements that are already available from the IRS so that eligibility is easier, more transparent and then a separate application is not needed. Equally as important would be to create a multi-year award for easy of student counseling, planning, and funding without the need for yearly reapplications. Summarize family and student eligibility in a simple, easy to read format that schools, counselors, and community partners easily distribute. Consider using IRS information to preemptively communicate with potential students and families about their likely Pell eligibility so students know they would qualify for financial aid earlier and see college as a real and viable option for them. Finally, eliminate the verification process or at least limit it to a single verification with better communication. Once a student is subjected to verification with no changes to their status, they should be exempt from verification in the future.

2. Increase the maximum Pell grant award by an additional \$4,500 per year.

Current Pell awards fund less than 50% of today's true costs to obtaining a higher education degree. By increasing Pell awards, we can offset student loan debt, decrease a student's time-to-degree, and increase college completion rates.

3. Increase funding for specialized programs that assist college students with housing, food, childcare, and transportation needs.

College students today need financial support to meet basic life needs. And by offering financial assistance to meet these needs, we are overcoming poverty barriers hindering Maria, and students like Maria, from enrolling in a college much less completing her college degree. Increased funding for financial assistance programs will decrease a student's need for student loans to pay for basic life needs like housing, food, childcare, and transportation. Without financial assistance programs like these, students will continue to rely on student loans at alarmingly high rates.

Specific Federal policy changes could directly raise the education attainment rates in communities across the country. Identified by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, please consider (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017, p. 24):

- Promote degree completion by expanding the SNAP eligibility requirements for college students to allow all work-study eligible students (not only those receiving the very limited pool of work-study funds) to meet the work requirement, and reducing or eliminating the 20 hour per week requirement affecting many other students (or, count college attendance toward the work requirement).
- Simplify the FAFSA application process for establishing independence, particularly for homeless students.
- Create incentives for community colleges to offer benefits access opportunities on their campuses (including employing a dedicated staff member if there is sufficient demand) and work to align social and educational policies to ensure that access for students is as seamless as possible.
- Encourage state and Federal investment in targeted aid programs that reach students with the most financial need, and/or Promise programs that help students who otherwise would not access financial aid for fear of the price being out of reach.
- Re-institute year-round Pell so students have access to summer support to make progress in their studies and to contribute to living expenses.
- Change American Opportunity Tax Credit (AOTC) requirements so that students who receive Pell can access AOTC as well.

The future of our communities, urban and rural, rests on our abilities to more completely and effectively support our students from the enrollment to graduate to employment. With important shifts in Federal Aid policy and processes, students will complete degrees and meet employer needs – no excuses.

Reference/Bibliography

Ahlman, L., Cochrane, D., & Thompson, J. (2016.) *On the Sidelines of Simplification: Stories of navigating the FASFA Verification Process*. The Institute for College Access & Success. November, 2016.

Bailey, T., Smith Jaggars, S., & Jenkins, D. (2015). *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A clearer path to student success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Bartlett, V., Bugg-Levine, A., Erickson, D., Galloway, I., Genser, J., & Talansky, J. (Eds.) (2017.) *What Matters: Investing in results to build strong, vibrant communities*. Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco & Corporation for Enterprise Development. San Francisco: Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

Beegle, D. M., Ellis, D., & Akkary, R. (2007). *See poverty-- be the difference!: Discovering the missing pieces for helping people move out of poverty*. Tigard, Or: Communication Across Barriers, Inc.

Bok, D. (2017). *The Struggle to Reform our Colleges*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Brown McNair, T., Albertine, S., Cooper, M.A., McDonald, N., & Major, Jr., T. (2016). *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A new culture of leadership for student success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Choi, L., Erickson, D., Griffin, K., Levere, A., & Seidman, E. (Eds.) (2015). *What It's Worth: Strengthening the financial future of families, communities and the nation*. Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco & Corporation for Enterprise Development. San Francisco: Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

Cushman, K. (2005). *First in the Family: Advice about college from First-Generation students*. Providence, RI: Next Generation Press.

Data Points. (2016). *The value of Pell*. American Association of Community Colleges. Vol. 4, 14.

Data Points. (2017). *More education = better jobs*. American Association of Community Colleges. Vol. 5, 19.

Dubick, J., Mathews, B., & Cady, C. (2016). *Hunger on Campus: The challenge of food insecurity for college students*. http://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf. October, 2016.

Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. New York: Broadway Books.

Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2017). *Postsecondary Institutions and Cost of Attendance in 2016–17; Degrees and Other Awards Conferred, 2015–16; and 12-Month Enrollment, 2015–16: First Look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2017-075rev)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved January 13, 2018 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

Glaeser, E. (2011). *Triumph of the City: How our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier*. New York: Penguin Books.

Goldrick-Rab, S. (2016). *Paying the Price: College costs, financial aid, and the betrayal of the American dream*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Long, A. (Ed.) (2016). *Overcoming Educational Racism in the Community College: Creating pathways to success for minority and impoverished student populations*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

PD&R Edge. (2015). "Housing Barriers to College Success." *Insights into Housing and Community Development Policy*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1 Feb. 2015, www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr_edge_featd_article_030915.html.

Snapshot Report. (2017). *Contribution of Two-Year Public Institutions to Bachelor's Completions at Four-Year Institutions*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Spring.

Taylor, P. (2014). *The Next Generation: Boomers, Millennials, and the looming generational showdown*. New York: PublicAffairs.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *The Condition of Education 2017* (NCES 2017-144), [Sources of Financial Aid](#).

Ward, L., Siegel, M., & Davenport, Z. (2012). *First Generation College Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wyner, J. (2014). *What Excellent Community College Do: Preparing all students for success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.



NO EXCUSES 2020 is focused on completion, labor market demands, learning, equity, and financial effectiveness. It requires a comprehensive system redesign – from students walking in the front door to students walking across the graduation stage. **Our goal is 70 percent completion rate by the year 2020.**

Data Sources: AC Office of Institutional Research, THECB Almanac, AC CCSSEE

completion

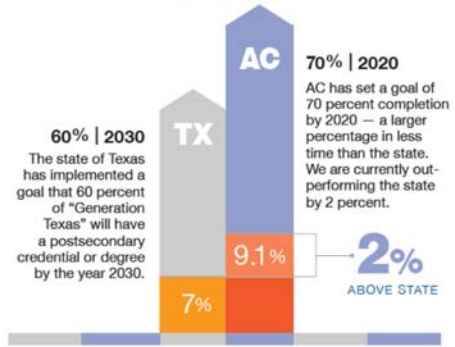
FIVE YEAR COMPLETION GOAL



INCREASE IN CERTIFICATES AND DEGREES 2008-09 to 2016-17



GROWTH IN ASSOCIATE DEGREE AWARDS 2014 - 2016



labor market demands

TOP 5 AREAS OF OCCUPATIONAL GROWTH Texas Panhandle Per Texas Workforce | 2014 – 2024

124%	Healthcare	1
115%	Transportation	2
114%	Education	3
112%	Computer Science/Information Technology	4
110%	Environmental Science	5

TOP PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH LABOR MARKET DEMANDS

1	Associate Degree Nursing Emergency Medical Services
2	Truck Driving
3	Education
4	Business Management
5	Horticulture



student success

Infuse and Scale High Impact Practices

- Increase student engagement
- Increase performance on student learning outcomes
- Adjust programs and courses based on competencies

demographics	success rate
71% First-Generation	INCREASE IN OVERALL COURSE SUCCESS 105% ↑
60% Part-Time	INCREASE IN HISPANIC COURSE SUCCESS 107% ↑
54% Minority	INCREASE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN COURSE SUCCESS 110% ↑
65% Female	INCREASE IN GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE SUCCESS 107% ↑
67% Designated Developmental Education	INCREASE IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION COURSE SUCCESS 112% ↑
21% Enrolled in Developmental Education	
51% Transfer-Focus	
60% Financial Aid	

2012-13 TO 2016-17

financial effectiveness

AFFORDABILITY

↓ **29%**
BELOW
NATIONAL AVERAGE

Annual Tuition Cost 2017
Amarillo College — \$4,799
National Median — \$16,300

AC Foundation Scholarships Awarded
 2016 – 2017 **\$1,250,000**

AMARILLO COLLEGE ECONOMIC IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

\$660.1
MILLION
TO LOCAL ECONOMY
FY 2013

\$71.6 MILLION
OPERATIONS SPENDING IMPACT

\$274.8 MILLION
STUDENT SPENDING IMPACT

\$588.2 MILLION
ALUMNI SPENDING IMPACT