

**Testimony of Dr. DeRionne P. Pollard
President, Montgomery College
Montgomery County, Maryland**

**Prepared for the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
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**Hearing on Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act:
Improving College Affordability**

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SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY ON IMPROVING COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

Affordability is the biggest challenge facing community college students today. The American college student of 2018 is not the one that so many of us imagine: a recent high school graduate, at a four-year school, living in a dorm, and relying on parental support. Community college students today are people who grew up in households without a college graduate; they are low income people; they are displaced workers, returning workers, and immigrants; they are women; they are often people of color. Many of them are so daunted by the cost of higher education that they do not enroll. Others enroll, but do not complete their degrees because of the high cost of living. Two-thirds of the 8,600 Pell grant recipients at Montgomery College have an Expected Family Contribution of zero dollars. Their average income in 2018 is \$24,864. Community colleges like Montgomery College in Maryland expend extraordinary energy and resources trying to support students' financial needs beyond tuition so that they can complete their studies. Our college, like many others in the nation, has food pantries, a clothing library, loaner laptops, and free shuttle buses. We know that any of these extra expenses could break the budget of a student living on the edge. The College is supported by a foundation that even provides emergency aid to students for utilities and rent. The Montgomery College Foundation distributed \$2.4 million in scholarships in FY17, July 1, 2016, through June 30, 2017. The College also offers special academic support programs, financial aid coaching, and personal mentoring to help students navigate college while working and caring for family members.

The reason that so many students leave college without completing their degrees is not complex—it comes down to finances. Several strategies by the federal government could provide support that would transform these outcomes that cripple people's job prospects, their earning potential, and their ability to contribute to our nation's skilled workforce: increase the amount of Pell grants; tie Pell amounts to inflation; simplify the FAFSA and certification processes; and make workforce development training programs eligible for Pell. Increasing the buying potential of the Pell grant and making the FAFSA more accessible would work wonders in moving more students to degrees. As the Truman Commission on Higher Education saw so clearly in 1947 when it expanded the reach of community colleges, investments in higher education for more students benefit us all.

Testimony on Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Improving College Affordability

Affordability is the biggest challenge facing community college students today. As a college student from a low-income household myself, I worked three part-time jobs and relied on food stamps while attending college. Growing up on the south side of Chicago, I was the first in my family to go to college, and my father struggled mightily with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Ultimately, those federal loans and Pell grants got me through college, but they would not have enabled me to complete in today's economy.

The untold story of American higher education today is how many students leave college without completing because of costs. At Montgomery College, where I am president, there are 8,600 Pell grant recipients. Two-thirds of them have an Expected Family Contribution of zero dollars. The federal Pell formula has determined that their annual incomes—an average of \$24,864 in 2018—would not enable them to pay any tuition. In FY17, 65 percent of our Pell grant students had annual incomes below \$30,000 and 78 percent had incomes below \$40,000. These students live in one of the most expensive regions in the country, where a family of four is deemed sustainable on a minimum annual income of \$80,000. As income inequality continues to grow, students who start out in low-income families are less likely to be able to afford college, and more likely to start their own families while in poverty.

Tuition for full-time, credit enrollment at Montgomery College (MC) is \$5,000 a year, which is less than half of the tuition at the University of Maryland. So, while my college works hard to keep tuition increases to a minimum, this total still keeps some students from enrolling. For students who do enroll, usually with the help of Pell grants or other financial aid, many of them do not complete their education because they cannot afford their other academic and living expenses. Pell grants are invaluable to getting students in the door to college, but the grants' buying power has diminished so students must still work—many full time—to make ends meet. Twenty-two percent of full-time students at community colleges nationwide work full-time, while 40 work part-time, according to the American Association of Community Colleges data in 2017. Others, even further on the margin, decide not to enroll at all.

The cost of living has risen, workplace demand for post-secondary education has risen, but our national investment in a growing body of vulnerable students has not kept pace. At Montgomery College thousands of our students rely heavily on College-funded programs and partnerships to help them make ends meet: we have a food pantry on each of our three campuses because food insecurity is widespread. In addition, we have a partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank that has distributed 63,000 pounds of food on our campuses in the last five months. Two thousands students have visited these mobile markets for free food packages, which are sized according to the number of people in their households. The markets are staffed by College volunteers and travel to all three campuses.

We began running free shuttle buses among our campuses in 2015 because students struggle with the steep cost of commuting by local public transportation. The shuttle ridership increased 48 percent over two years, and we now transport about 2,000 students each week. The cost of textbooks is another barrier to affordability. Costs have risen three times faster than the rate of inflation and can reach \$1,500 a year. To lessen the burden, our faculty strive to use Open Educational Resources, free online teaching materials. MC

has begun offering courses with zero textbook costs. More than 330 sections of such courses benefited more than 6,000 students at MC in 2017. ¹ The College has also set up a loaner laptop program, because many students do not have computers. They still struggle to submit assignments electronically, though, when they lack internet service at home. At one campus, we have a “clothing library” where students who cannot afford clothes can come in and “shop” at no cost. This winter we had an extraordinary number of students looking for winter coats and boots because of the extreme cold. Many of these students already have Pell grants—in fact, 26 percent of our credit students have Pell grants and 53 percent have some form of financial aid—but it is not enough. These students are living on the edge. Poverty—*not lack of personal effort*—is the biggest barrier to their degrees. The Montgomery College Foundation provided \$2.4 million in scholarship that benefitted 2,000 students last year. The foundation helps dozens of students each month with emergency aid for utility bills, rent, and childcare costs, when some unforeseen expense—like a health care need—derails their tight budgets.

Despite the burdens that college costs entail for students, most enroll because they understand it will increase their employment prospects and their earning potential. Countless studies have shown that workers are more competitive when they attain more education. Having an associate’s degree, for example, can raise a worker’s average annual income in Maryland by almost \$17,000. A bachelor’s degree, adds \$30,000 to the average income in Maryland. Many fields that are predicted to grow significantly in the next decade, do not require a four-year degree. An associate’s degree or a technical certificate can move a person into an array of middle-skills job opportunities that can make a difference of \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year in income for a single worker. ²

Federal support has not kept up with need, in part, because our image of a typical college student needs updating. That 18-year old living in a dorm at a four-year college on his parents’ bill, is no longer the norm. While that student might have been worrying about money for entertainment, my students are budgeting for health insurance and childcare. The typical community college student is 28 years old, works while she goes to school, and takes an average of 5.6 years to attain an associate’s degree.³ Nationwide, a third of all community college students are the first in their family to go to college, and more than half are women. At my college, 72 percent are people of color. The provisions that the federal government has made to support college students no longer match the demographics or economics of our communities. At Montgomery College, the average income for our Pell grant recipients is \$24,800 in one of the most expensive regions in the country. In Montgomery County, a family of four needs \$80,000 a year to subsist without help. For students who are forced to take our loans because Pell grants are not available, default rates are high, according to a recent Brookings Institute study. Students’ explanation for these defaults is telling: the earnings of students who do not complete their degrees do not allow them to make the required payments. The report concludes that several factors would improve these outcomes—address more fully the challenges faced by students of color; improve degree attainment; and promote loan repayment that is tied to income, so that students are able to cover other expenses while they work.⁴

¹ A \$100,000 grant from Achieving the Dream in August of 2016 allowed the College to offer its General Studies degree free of textbook costs.

² *Montgomery College: The Workforce Development Anchor*, 2015

³ *Time to Degree: A National View of the Time Enrolled and Elapsed for Associate and Bachelor’s Degree Earners*, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016

⁴ Scott-Clayton, Judith “The Looming Student Loan Default Crisis Is Worse Than We Thought,” Brookings, January 11, 2018

Since the federal government promoted the expansion of community colleges through the Truman Commission, it has set the tone for the direction of higher education. Today it can do even more by increasing the maximum Pell grant award and pegging Pell grants to inflation. This would allow students to cover the true cost of living, stay in school, and continue making progress on their degrees. Research has shown that students who work too many hours while in school do not complete their degrees.⁵ A recent study of alternate tuition pricing at Montgomery College found that discounting students' fifth class at 50 percent of tuition costs would incentivize full enrollment.⁶ Students who enroll full time are more likely to complete.⁷

Making workforce development students eligible for Pell grants would help, too. Certificates are the fastest growing higher education credential. They are usually shorter and based on time in class rather than an industry exams required by certifications. They allow workers to fill gaps in our middle skills jobs and increase their earning potential, according to a study by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.⁸ Almost half of my college's students—roughly 27,000 students—are enrolled in these programs, where the average age is 35. These programs help students to get a good job at a good wage and to move up the career ladder. A home health care worker becomes a certified nursing assistant; an IT worker gets a Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) certification; a maintenance worker gets an HVAC certificate. Allowing Pell grants to be used for short-term trainings in high-demand areas would benefit students and our economy.⁹

Community college students form a rich tapestry of Americans working to advance themselves and contribute to their families and neighborhoods. They are workers who have been displaced by contractions in the economy. They are low-income students who are priced out of four-year colleges. They are immigrants and refugees who are learning English while they train for entry-level jobs. Their circumstances are different, but they are all part of a diverse fabric that makes up our nation. They are also essential parts of our labor force, filling critical gaps in middle skills job areas. In Maryland there are currently 20,000 unfilled jobs cybersecurity. Grants such as the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant are preparing students to fill them, among other jobs. Federal investments in community colleges shows that they already believe that community colleges are doing this work well.

Simplifying the overly complex FAFSA and certification processes, would draw in more students who are the first in their families to go to college. An in-depth analysis of MC enrollment patterns cited trouble with financial aid as a large barrier to students. It stressed more energy be invested in “assisting low-income prospective students to manage the financial aid application process. Many prospective students likely have demonstrated need, but do not finish the FAFSA or fail to send it to MC.”¹⁰ Once students get the FAFSA submitted, many face the hurdles of verifying the answers they gave on the FAFSA, most of which were

⁵ Carnevale, Smith, Melton and Price, *Learning While Earning: The New Normal*, Georgetown University, 2015

⁶ *Montgomery College: Strategic Enrollment Alignment & Tuition and Fee Pricing*: Study prepared for the College Enrollment Management Advisory Team, 2015.

⁷ *Even One Semester: Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success*, Center for Community College Student Engagement, University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

⁸ *Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees*, Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, 2012

¹⁰ *Montgomery College: Strategic Enrollment Alignment & Tuition and Fee Pricing*: Study prepared for the College Enrollment Management Advisory Team, 2015.

already confirmed by a federal agency. Verification is a process that has very little effect on the expected family contribution of most students, but further confuses students with additional paperwork. MC's financial aid staff spend over 80 percent of their time on verification processes, when they could be spending that time helping students through the aid process.

Lowering the barriers for students with special circumstances, such as a parent who is incarcerated or one who cannot be located, is another step forward. Giving Dreamers, like other Americans, the chance to advance themselves would also improve our nation's strength. Montgomery College has over 6,000 students who were born outside the United States. Community colleges are often the places they start to improve their English in order to work. About 6,000 students a year take some form of English as a Second Language at our college. ¹¹A specialized program that combines job skills training with English language classes, the Maryland Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MI-BEST) initiative, helps move non-native English speakers into employment more quickly by teaching targeted job skills while they improve their language capabilities.

Immigrants are among the most vulnerable of our nation's people. At MC, our Refugee Training Program offers language skills and acculturation to hundreds of refugees a year. The College also offers GED classes and other skills training in the Montgomery County Correctional Facility, so that inmate-learners will have at least the minimum needed to enter the workforce upon release.

Making college accessible is also about preparing at-risk students, who are almost always low-income, for post-secondary education. The Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success (ACES) program, now in its fifth year, begins preparing high school juniors in 13 of our local public high schools, for college finances and academics. Since 70 percent of its students are the first in their families to attend college, ACES coaches assist students while still in high school, to apply for scholarships and understand their financial aid options. In addition to teaching students how to navigate the College, ACES helps students transition to our partner, the Universities at Shady Grove, a higher education center of the University System of Maryland, to complete a four year degree. Since the program's inception, ACES has served more than 3,500 students.

Helping Pell-grant students keep their eligibility is another challenge that our college is tackling. Students who lose their eligibility for Pell grants because they cannot maintain satisfactory academic performance (SAP) is another way that needy students miss opportunities to succeed. Montgomery College is now creating financial aid coaches, who will help monitor students in danger of losing their funding due to violations of SAP.

Accountability is a core tenet at Montgomery College. We track our students' success on an annual, public scorecard. Factors such as time-to-degree, progress on benchmarks, course pass rates, and completion data are disaggregated by race and gender. From there we can see trends emerge, and target certain populations for special attention. The College's the Boys to Men mentoring program, for example, is designed for African American males who need support, offering academic and personal mentoring, to foster greater overall success.

¹¹ *Montgomery College: The Workforce Development Anchor*, 2015

These are just some ways in which Montgomery College goes to extraordinary lengths to prepare students to plan for college, make college financially accessible, and keep students in school by helping to meet their living expenses. These strategies have evolved from years of working closely with ambitious, talented students who want to earn degrees and certificates. They understand the value of higher education and its potential to transform their lives. But they face multiple challenges: rising income inequality, ignorance about financial aid programs, and the disadvantages of households in which no one has ever gone to college. Lowering the barriers to a postsecondary education is critical. For those who want to earn a certification, their financial options are limited as Pell grants are largely unavailable. All of these students are striving for opportunity, one of the fundamental values of our nation. As we invest in them, we are investing in our communal future.

When the Truman Commission on Higher Education produced its report in 1947, it realized that leadership was necessary to manage the significant changes in the economy and society in the post-war era. Expanding the reach of community colleges was its strategy for bringing more skilled workers into the labor market and building the middle class. At the crossroads of profound demographic and economic changes in the 21st century, our nation needs leadership again. Affordable higher education that closes the skill gaps will fuel America's economy. Students who are given clear paths to and up the ladder of opportunity will return that investment to their families and their communities. It is time to move from a K to 12 model of thinking to a K to J—from Kindergarten to Job paradigm. It's time to make college affordable for all.

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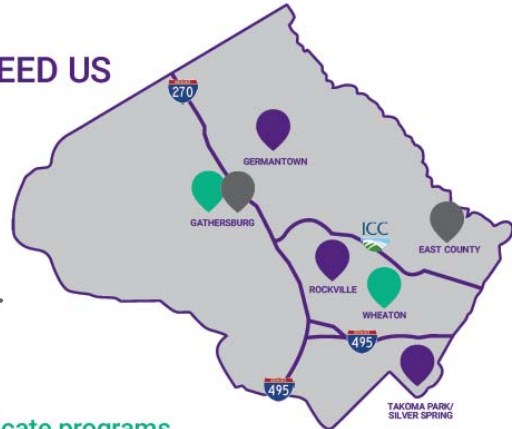
MONTGOMERY COLLEGE BY THE NUMBERS

55,243
STUDENTS

Maryland's largest
community college

WE'RE WHERE YOU NEED US

- 3 – Campuses
- 2 – Training Sites
- 2 – Community Engagement Centers
- Online



51%

MC students who receive
financial aid

\$27,000

Average household income for
federal Pell grant recipients

117

Degree and certificate programs

From mechanics to engineers and lab bench workers
to scientists: **we fuel the economy**

DIVERSE STUDENT COMMUNITY

- 30.5% Black
- 24.9% Hispanic
- 25.0% White
- 13.4% Asian
- 05.5% Multi-race
- 00.2% American Indian
- 00.2% Pacific Islander

\$4,974

annual tuition & fees
The most affordable
higher education option
for county residents

51%



Montgomery County Public
Schools graduates who stay
in state for college **attend MC**

9

Faculty members named
Maryland Professor of the Year
quality in classrooms

159

Countries represented



43%

New full-time students who
graduate or transfer within
3 years of entering MC



MC students
who attend
part-time



25
Average
student age

OUR MISSION

We empower students to change
their lives, and we enrich the
life of our community. We are
accountable for our results.



October 2017