

December 8, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Majority Leader  
The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Senate Minority Leader  
The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader of the House  
The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

### **Congress Must Act to Save Students Now**

America's college students are in crisis. The next two months will be make-or-break for both the short- and long-term economic prospects of millions of current, former, and future postsecondary students already facing economic hardship. That's why in addition to passing another round of stimulus relief to students and institutions, we implore Congress to take concrete action during the lame duck session where there is already bipartisan support for helping students.

Most urgently, the CARES Act recognized the challenges student loan holders face as they navigate the pandemic by putting all federal student loans in forbearance, pausing interest charges, and halting the collection of all defaulted student loans through January 31, 2021. Yet this deadline is fast approaching without any noticeable change in the circumstances of the pandemic, as spiking COVID-19 cases around the country threaten new economic shutdowns. A new survey from the [Pew Charitable Trusts](#) finds that nearly 60% of borrowers who were aware of these paused payments said that, "it would be somewhat or very difficult to afford their payments if they had to begin making them in the next month." As a broad coalition of national and state advocacy groups has noted, financial challenges from restarting repayments would [disproportionately affect](#) women and Black and Latino borrowers. Without immediate action by Congress or additional administrative action, millions of borrowers will be hit starting February 1, 2021 with loan bills they simply cannot pay.

For prospective students, real-time tracking of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completions by high school seniors from the [National College Attainment Network](#) shows that as of November 27<sup>th</sup>, FAFSA submissions are down 16.7% from this time last year—resulting in 185,000 fewer prospective college students taking the steps they'll need to secure federal financial aid for the coming year. Further, new data from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) (NSC) show a 4.4% decline in overall postsecondary enrollment—as well as a notable 13% drop in freshman enrollment since last year. Undergraduate enrollment declines have been most severe among Native American (-9.6%) and Black (-7.5%) students compared to last year, with historically Black colleges and universities most impacted across sectors.

The NSC data makes clear that the pandemic is derailing college-going plans for millions of Americans who may never make their way back to higher education if they do not receive the proper support systems and resources they need to enroll now. Congress should act now to help, by passing [bipartisan legislation to simplify the FAFSA application](#) and make it easier for

all students—including those whose financial circumstances may have changed because of the pandemic—to receive the financial aid they need to begin or continue their postsecondary journeys before it's too late.

Following the Great Recession, we saw millions of Americans saddled with large sums of student debt and little to show for it after lax oversight led to the proliferation of predatory behavior at high-cost, low-value for-profit institutions. Many of those same predatory schools remain in operation and are ready to take advantage of the billions of new higher education dollars flowing into the system and the students enrolling to advance their career prospects. Specifically, without immediate congressional action, predatory for-profit colleges can and will continue to take advantage of a loophole that allows them to seek out veterans for their GI Bill money. These benefits currently count as federal aid, making it possible for predatory schools to operate fully on the taxpayers' dime and use our nation's veterans merely as a tool to manage an accountability measure without having to provide any real value to students. Congress must close that loophole, [known as 90-10](#)--a measure that already has broad bipartisan support.

Recognizing that all Americans should have the opportunity to access the training, skill development, and economic and social benefits postsecondary education affords, Congress should also act now to [restore Pell eligibility to incarcerated individuals](#), as higher education in prison has been proven to improve the lives of students, make corrections safer, and address inequities within the postsecondary education landscape—[a bipartisan change](#) that the Trump administration has supported.

For prospective and current students looking to enroll or re-enroll in postsecondary education to help them get back to work and upskill in light of COVID-19, gaping holes within our federal data systems make it nearly impossible for them to fully understand which programs or institutions will provide the best return on their investment. Further, the lack of disaggregated data at the federal level obscures the real racial and socioeconomic opportunity gaps that currently exist and are likely to widen as more colleges close and as higher education faces a potentially long-term shift to online and hybrid learning. There is overwhelming bipartisan momentum to overturn the archaic federal law that bans the creation of a student level data system. The bipartisan [College Transparency Act](#) has the support of 234 Representatives and 37 Senators, as well as the endorsement of more than 160 education, business, and veterans organizations. Students deserve the best information possible to find a program that aligns with their goals and to ensure a return on their investment of time and money; Congress should act now and bring better data within reach.

Congress can avert all these looming disasters through bipartisan action in the lame duck session. The steps outlined herein would be just the first in what will be a long process, but they are critical if the United States is to fully restore the promises of higher education. Fixing these problems now would be a service to students, families, and communities across the country and clear the way for the next Congress and administration to tackle a host of other major issues to make our higher education system more affordable and equitable while ensuring it better serves the students it enrolls.

We, the undersigned, urge Congress to act and use the lame duck session to take steps that are urgently needed to save students in this moment of dire need.

Sincerely,

Third Way

New America

Excelencia in Education

National College Attainment Network (NCAN)

BPC Action

Young Invincibles

Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)

Higher Learning Advocates