

Opinion: Invest in college students by doubling Pell Grants

By Rev. Brian J. Shanley
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As a native Rhode Islander, the name Clairborne Pell evokes vivid memories of the far-reaching influence of Rhode Island's longest-serving U.S. Senator. As President of St. John's University, I see up close and personal the transformative impact of the federal grant program that long bears his name—a program created to provide opportunity for students who lack the means to afford college.

Anyone familiar with the Pell Grant knows that it comes with a financial value, and anyone who knows a Pell Grant recipient better understands the incalculable worth of the largest grant program offered by the Department of Education to undergraduate students.

Created in 1972 as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) and later renamed for Sen. Claiborne Pell, the Pell Grant is the cornerstone of federal financial aid for postsecondary education. Pell Grants serve more than 6.7 million students (or 40 percent) of all undergraduate students in higher education. The majority of Pell Grant recipients are students with high financial need.

Historically a bi-partisan effort, the Pell Grant has broad political appeal because it helps needy students; the resources are directed to the students first and not schools; and the program allows students to apply the funds to the cost of an accredited public or private institution (or a training program) that best fits their individual educational needs.

The federal Pell Grant Preservation and Expansion Act of 2021 would more than double the maximum annual Pell Grant award from \$6,495 to \$13,000 over the next five years. In addition, it would shift the lifetime eligibility from 12 to 18 semesters or six to nine years. Thus, the renewed effort to double Pell effectively triples the current maximum lifetime award from about \$39,000 to \$117,000. As college students around the country—with a mix of excitement and anxiety—return to campuses amid an enduring global pan-



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dem, Congress should double Pell before the program reaches its 50th anniversary in 2022.

Critics will assert that the high cost of college is a deterrent, and that colleges will simply raise tuition as federal student aid increases. However, leading higher education economists on both

sides of the aisle have examined and refuted this hypothesized relationship and the idea of the causal relationship between increases in federal student aid and tuition prices. There are few all-encompassing policy prescriptions for improving college affordability when considering differenc-

es between institutions and their student aid incentives. Indeed, most private institutions provide to their students generous institutional aid that far exceeds the combined amount of state and federal student aid.

Additional grant aid is a sound investment in economic mobility for all students, most especially low-income students, as those with college degrees earn higher incomes as adults. Like the GI Bill that preceded it, the Pell Grant is a lifeline to supporting post-secondary access for not only low-income students, but for historically underrepresented student populations—the same people now most disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At St. John's University, a global and metropolitan University, thirty-seven percent of first-year students are Pell Grant recipients. Our enduring Catholic and Vincentian mission is to provide access, opportunity, and upward mobility to our students. During the 2019-20 academic year, ninety-nine (99) percent of undergraduate students received \$417million in financial aid, including generous institutional aid to complement the support of government grants that have, over time, lost some of their purchasing power.

With the COVID-19 pandemic now impacting yet another academic year, students need financial assistance now more than ever. Doubling Pell will put much-needed money in the hands of students first and is a wise investment in the short and long-term success of the next generation. Pell Grants were created to ensure that every student, regardless of financial circumstances, can afford a college education. Doubling Pell Grants now will increase student access and college affordability; help to reduce the burden of college debt; help meet students' basic needs; increase educational access and degree completion; and most importantly, help move our country in the direction of a larger and long-term post-COVID economic recovery.

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