



#RealCollege Statement on Build Back Better Proposal

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Yesterday, [the Biden Administration](#) and [Congressional leaders](#) released a framework agreement on budget reconciliation legislation. We believe this to be a crucial opportunity to modernize our safety net and invest in #RealCollege students, and we look forward to working with Congressional leaders to include and implement proposals that address the twin crises of college affordability and basic needs insecurity.

We are disappointed that cornerstone proposals, including a federal-state partnership for tuition-free community college, have been eliminated in the course of budget negotiations. As [leaders](#) in the movement for free public college, we believe it is a transformative proposal whose time has come and is tailor-made to revitalize the working class and invest in underserved and minoritized students. We strongly urge Congressional leaders to include tuition-free two-year public college in future legislation, including through future budget reconciliation or a long-overdue authorization of the Higher Education Act.

Similarly, while we applaud the Build Back Better framework's expansion of Pell grants to students with DACA and Temporary Protected Status, and the proposal to make Pell Grants tax-free, the \$550 increase in the maximum grant proposed by the bill means that low-income students are still less able to afford college even a decade ago. Even a \$550 increase in the maximum award will cover barely a quarter of the price of public 4-year colleges, and slightly over a third of the total price at community colleges. Further, according to our most recent #RealCollege survey, [half of students](#) who do not receive Pell Grants still experience basic needs insecurity, so any marginal increase in Pell Grants will still leave out many students experiencing hunger and housing insecurity. The continued failure of federal lawmakers to expand Pell Grants to cover a substantial portion of college prices requires us to think differently about the very structure of our federal financial aid programs.

The proposal also makes targeted investments in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and other minority-serving institutions, and includes nearly \$500 million in retention and completion grants. We hope these investments are down payments on much greater resources that will repair centuries of disinvestment on the part of state and federal policymakers and ensure that students attending these schools have the academic and basic needs support that will ensure their success. The Hope Center has worked tirelessly to [identify practices](#) that tackle basic needs insecurity and promote retention and attainment, and encourage lawmakers and institutions to put real resources into these types of supports.

We are encouraged by other investments within the bill that could help #RealCollege students. Under the framework, students who received, or whose family participated in, a means-tested benefit program will automatically be considered as having the largest possible need under the new Student Aid Index, and thus

potentially receive the maximum Pell Grant. This has the potential, if implemented properly, to encourage institutions of higher education to connect existing students with public benefits for which they may be eligible.

We also look forward to working with lawmakers to make sure that investments in safety net programs reach students, especially parenting students and those facing food and housing insecurity. We applaud investments in universal pre-K, housing supports, the continued expansion of the Child Tax Credit, and investments in child care. In particular, we are encouraged that enrollment in postsecondary education is considered an eligible activity to receive expanded child care benefits, though we urge lawmakers and regulators to severely minimize the administrative burden and red tape students will face in accessing child care benefits.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress has made historic investments in emergency aid, and the Department of Education has [recently worked](#) to clarify and dismantle harmful restrictions that prevent students from receiving the emergency and other financial support they need. Now is the time to take the next step and make the investments across higher education and safety net programs that meet the scale of the problem, secure basic needs for all families, and finally embrace #RealCollege students.