Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

November 1, 2016

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Departments of
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Departments of
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Departments of
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Departments of
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairmen Cochran, Rogers, Blunt, and Cole and Ranking Members Mikulski, Lowey, Murray, and DeLauro:

The Pell Grant program is the bedrock of the federal student aid system, yet today's maximum Pell Grant award now covers less than 30 percent of college costs at public universities – the smallest share since the 1979-1980 academic year when the grant covered 77 percent – forcing low-income students to more heavily rely on loans. As the Senate and House Committees on Appropriations and Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Subcommittees work to advance Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 appropriations, we urge you to ensure all available resources in the Pell Grant program are used to improve college access and affordability for low-income students.

Due to lower-than-expected program costs, the Pell Grant program has amassed a surplus of more than $7.8 billion. The surplus rescissions of $1.2 billion and $1.3 billion in the Senate and House FY 2017 Appropriations bills, respectively, threaten Congress' ability to meet future needs of students. While the current fiscal climate makes the Pell Grant surplus an attractive funding vehicle for Congressional priorities outside of the Pell Grant

program, we write to remind you that this funding is intended to serve the postsecondary educational needs of our nation's low-income students. Specifically, we urge you to utilize the FY 2017 appropriations process as an opportunity to further the goal of the Pell Grant program by using a portion of the surplus to lessen the burden of college costs for needy students through restoration of year-round Pell and an increase in the maximum discretionary award. And, we ask that you protect the remainder of the surplus for the sole use of the Pell Grant program.

Research suggests that making the Pell Grant available to students during the summer term leads to higher levels of persistence and degree completion. The elimination of year-round Pell in 2011 has impacted nearly 800,000 Pell Grant recipients each year. Equally concerning is the expiration of the annual inflation adjustment to the Pell Grant which was established under the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act. Without the adjustment, the value of the Pell Grant will continue to go down at a time when the cost of higher education is increasing. It is important to note that simply reinstating year-round Pell eligibility without also increasing the maximum discretionary award only allows students to exhaust their lifetime eligibility more quickly without seeing any new dollars to help pay for college. Increasing the maximum discretionary award from $4,860 to $5,000 will put much needed money in the pockets of low-income students and, when paired with the supplemental funding provided in statute, set us on a path to restore the purchasing power of Pell.

Both restoration of year-round Pell and an increase in the maximum discretionary award in the FY 2017 appropriations vehicle will bolster efforts during reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to safeguard the value of Pell for current and future students, all while preserving enough program surplus funding to guarantee solid financial standing of the program for future years.

While we recognize and understand FY 2017 budgetary constraints, decisions to fund priorities outside of the Pell Grant program should not be made on the backs of low-income students. Any rescission to the Pell Grant surplus is a direct threat to educational opportunity for our nation's low-income students. We urge you to honor Congress' promise that all individuals, regardless of income, should have an opportunity to further their education by opposing any and all rescissions to the Pell Grant program surplus.

Sincerely,

ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Ranking Member
Committee on Education and the Workforce

RUBÉN HINOJOSA
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training

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Chairwomen
Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus

G.K. BUTTERFIELD
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