

Testimony of Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart
Chancellor, Austin Community College District
Austin, Texas

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Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and members of the Committee,

I am honored to serve my students, colleagues and community as the Chancellor of Austin Community College District (ACC) in Central Texas. The ACC District covers a service area of 7,000 square miles, which is larger than the state of Connecticut. We cover both rural and urban areas, serving about 70,000 students annually in the areas of academic transfer, workforce education, dual credit, continuing education, and adult basic education. We are the primary workforce-education institution in our growing region and are proud to be a foundational partner with local employers who hire our graduates. Together, we ensure the economic prosperity of our community by putting our students on a path to fulfilling careers where they can earn family-sustaining wages. Thanks to Ranking Member Sanders for inviting me here today to uplift the important work of community colleges, to discuss our free tuition program, and to elevate the importance of federal support for our students and their future employers.

Community Colleges are our Greatest Economic Agents

ACC and community colleges like us are not the same old model of higher education. We have evolved to become the primary source of talent fueling our local economies. With career academies offering certifications that move students directly into the workforce with marketable skills in high-demand/high-wage careers, we help students reduce the time from enrollment to that first significant paycheck. Community colleges, like ACC, glue employers and communities together so that every neighbor, and neighborhood, wins.

Our employers need our students to be successful, and our students need you to help ensure this success remains within their grasp. I am here today to request your wisdom, temperance, and deliberation as you consider the future of critical tools – such as Pell, the Childcare Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program, student loans, and wrap-around support – that unlock opportunity for our students and employers. These programs transform students from people who rely on wrap-around services for survival into people who can build wealth, pay taxes, and achieve the American Dream.

Higher Education is the best vehicle for upward social mobility in America and community colleges are central to that economic transformation. We are affordable, locally focused, and designed to meet the needs of our local economies. One of the most important decisions our elected Trustees made to ensure social mobility, was to initiate a free-tuition program – piloted with all Central Texas high school graduates. With this program launch, Enrollment of high school graduates at ACC jumped nearly 40% in fall 2024 compared to the previous year. The number of students enrolled in the free tuition program alone hit 4,982 in the fall, with retention looking strong – 81% of those students continued into spring 2025.

There are proposals before Congress, including cuts and limitations to the Pell program, that would close off affordable pathways to education for the people who need us most – men and women, working two part-time jobs, still living in poverty, who would not be able to access our college were it not for this program.

Community College Students are our Greatest Economic Hope

Let me tell you about our average ACC student. And when I tell you her story – you will understand that there is nothing “average” about her or her journey. In fact, she is extraordinary in what she has overcome to be successful at our institution. She is representative of most of the community college students across our great country.

We call her Ashley and she is a smart, hard-working, determined 27-year-old woman who works **more** than one part-time low-wage job, and has responsibility for at least one other person in her household – either caring for a child or someone else in her home. She is a first-generation college student, living with significant financial pressures. She cannot afford to take classes full time, so it will take her longer to complete her degree. She is continually in a state of stress because one flat tire or childcare falling through can mean the difference between succeeding or remaining consigned to a life of poverty and reliance on government programs.

Ashley isn't Red or Blue. She is not political, (although she votes). Our economic future is connected to her success, and the decisions you make about her are personal - to her and to us. This work, and these topics, are about economic expansion, meeting workforce needs, and offering a path to the American Dream for our students. There are significant obstacles in Ashley's way toward that dream.

Our collective futures are tied to changing Ashley's. Let me explain what her life is really like -- because it's different from the political frames that often ignore or misunderstand her.

Ashley lives in Austin. Almost 60% of our students couldn't access \$500 in an emergency; 48% are food insecure, 55% are housing insecure (often with dependent children.) According to ALICE Data, Ashley -- even as a SINGLE-person – would need to earn at least \$60,000 a year just to keep her head above water. And this is not living high on the hog, it's just surviving.

On average it costs Ashley nearly \$5,000 a month just to get by, with rent, childcare, utilities, transportation costs, and the basic necessities of food capturing all of her income. And in this scenario, she has no margin for error. She lives her life in the hope that her child doesn't get sick, and that everything works perfectly in navigating her two jobs while she tries to take an online class and an in-person class at the same time.

Ashely isn't struggling because she is terrible with money. She is struggling because she doesn't yet have the skills needed to be hired for jobs that would pay her the \$100,000 needed to thrive and build wealth in our community.

Despite documented barriers of child care, health care, housing, transportation and food insecurity, Ashley continues her education. She wants a better life for herself and for her family. She also wants critical workforce skills that will lead to a rewarding career. But without Pell, or without CCAMPIS, Ashley likely would never even come through our front door.

And that is the tragedy of Ashley – a tragedy that will play out across the country in millions of homes and apartments should Congress limit or cut these vital lifelines to economic growth. But I don't just want this for her because she is a student at my institution. I also want this for my community because it's good for business.

Everyone talks about the Texas Miracle and the unprecedented economic expansions we have seen in Austin. What you don't hear is that we have had to import talent from around the country and around the world to fill those jobs while local people like Ashley have been left behind. And what's made this situation worse is that Austin is also an expensive place to live, with working poor residents increasingly being squeezed to the margins, and pushed out - out of the community, the classroom, and then the workplace. And it's happening to more than just those ensnared by generational poverty.

We see this happening all over.

In fact, Senator Hawley, in addressing potential cuts to Medicaid, recently, and powerfully, wrote in a New York Times guest essay: "Our economy is increasingly unfriendly to working people and their families." This statement is also true of working people who are going to school for the purpose of getting a better job and climbing out of poverty. People like Ashley.

As a leader, I am interested in Ashley's well-being. I want my institution to surround her with love and help her lift herself up out of poverty. Our community's economic health and vitality demands smart, scrappy and hard-working people like Ashley – people who will go on to gain critical skills in nursing, welding, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, or any one of the dozens of in-demand middle-skill careers – to fill the jobs that are being created in Central Texas and around the country.

Federal Programs and Supports ensure a Skilled Workforce

This is exactly why limiting Pell would harm our community -- especially for part-time students. Requiring a minimum number of credits to be Pell eligible leaves out blue-collar advanced manufacturing, cyber security, software development, health care, mobility and infrastructure in demand programs that pay people \$75,00 - \$150,000 annually. Those are jobs that our economy needs filled. By requiring a minimum number of courses for Pell, you might

even be requiring students to sign up for more classes than they need, wasting taxpayers' money, students' time, and extending time to employability.

Pell is critical to ensuring students stay in school and shorten their time to skill attainment and employment. Yet, expanding Pell for unaccredited or for-profit programs almost always harms students. Predatory programs prey on our most vulnerable neighbors, leaving students with no employable skill or credential of value and a mountain of debt with no job through which they can pay it back.

Changing Full-Time Pell from 12 to 15 hours could keep some students out of the in-demand workforce. Last year, over 5,000 Pell-awarded ACC students were enrolled in 12-14 credits and would lose opportunities and support. For some workforce programs in trades and healthcare, 15 hours a semester may not even be possible. While we would not want to raise eligibility to 15 hours, institutions could make policy and procedural changes to lessen the impact on students.

For community colleges, part-time students are the overwhelming norm because of the life issues I've referenced. However, the Part-Time Pell proposed shifts from 6 hours to 7.5 hours would dramatically harm students and employers. Most academic and workforce programs usually take about 20 classes to complete an associate's degree. Level One and Level Two certifications leading to a family sustaining wage may require 5-10 classes. Each class counts as 3 hours towards a 60-hour degree. Part-time students, on average, will take six hours in each a fall, spring and summer term.

Almost 80% of our ACC students are part-time. Our students can make two classes a term (six hours of course work) work in their busy lives, especially for those workforce training programs necessary to meet employer demand. Because our classes are 3 hours, typically, the 7.5-hour requirement for Part-Time Pell could reduce enrollments in our most important workforce programs dramatically. Classes are not organized by single hours. This proposal would force students to take nine hours – three classes – each term to receive support. Raising a family, working two part-time jobs, while going to school is incredibly difficult – and the many who could not afford to take a minimum of three classes would fall through the cracks.

For the majority of our community college students, two classes a semester is their only option. Nearly 4,000 ACC students leveraged Pell by taking only 6-7 hours and would not be Pell eligible under the 7.5-hour requirement for part time. This is especially concerning for students who may be in their final six hours and would be forced to take an additional class they may not need. For ACC, this is an additional 1,500 Pell recipients taking fewer than six hours who would probably walk away from the very pathways solving critical workforce needs. Without the Pell support, these students, and their future employers, could find themselves close to the finish line with no way to cross it.

If Congress cuts CCAMPIS, students lose money to pay for childcare. If they can't pay for childcare they will have to drop out of school or they will take much longer to complete school. Supporting students with this critical childcare benefit is a great investment because if students receive the funds, they finish faster, get to work faster, pay taxes, and will no longer be dependent on government supports. Eliminating CCAMPIS for child care would ensure that at least 25% of our students needing this support would simply drop out of school - hurting employers by limiting the pool of talent from which they draw.

In fact, the CCAMPIS program allows ACC to lattice funding with other community partners to extend the impact and ensure greater access and produces a staggering 93% retention rate for those students receiving the support. This real-life scenario is not exclusive to Austin. The financial numbers may vary across our communities, but the experience of the financial squeeze students face is mirrored across the nation.

While Student Loan programs certainly need a deep evaluation, the lack of details on the risk-sharing approach to loans creates a great deal of concern and uncertainty. Currently, institutions have no authority or impact on the level of loans a student accepts. We can advise students, but we cannot limit the amount of loans for which they are eligible.

We counsel our students and work with them to ensure they understand the costs and pitfalls of overborrowing. But, we cannot control all the decisions they make or all the challenges they may face that could lead to a default. I fear an unintended consequence of this risk-sharing proposal will result in schools cutting back on loans, resulting in fewer students enrolling at a time when demographic shifts demand that we attract more talent into the training pipeline. Certainly, the loan system needs attention. There are ways to include schools in the risk-sharing legislative process as partners in crafting policy that ensures students are not over-borrowing, and institutions are still able to produce the skilled workforce needed in our communities.

Free Tuition Ensured Economic Mobility and Employer Profitability

At ACC, we have taken our community's affordability issues head on. A recent study we commissioned showed that 57 percent of students who stalled in their applications before enrolling at the college cited costs or affordability as a reason. To combat this, we launched a free tuition pilot program for graduating high school seniors starting with the class of 2024.

This program was made possible because state of Texas and its legislature passed a change to the community college funding formula in 2023 that budgets us based on success metrics such as completions, successful transfers, and degree attainment in critical workforce fields. These accountability measures have focused our work and are resulting in increased student success. With the increased funding due to better outcomes, ACC

leveraged those dollars to ensure college remains affordable and launched its Free Tuition program pilot.

This is a first-dollar-in program to allow students to use other forms of aid to cover living and emergency expenses such as rent and food so they can go to school, gain a credential, degree, and a hireable skill. This free-tuition cohort represented 40 percent of our new enrollments in the fall, returned ACC's enrollment to pre-pandemic levels, and these students are persisting and succeeding on their educational journeys. It's a good investment from our community that will have a significant return on investment for our economy and for the companies that are driving it. Employers support it because college affordability ensures they will have graduates with skills to hire.

In a political environment where "sides" are pushed to the edges, there is room for collaboration and partnership between the Federal Government and institutions. At community colleges, our aim is to graduate students with as little debt as possible and our best-case scenario is graduating them with no debt whatsoever. It's one of the reasons behind the free tuition pilot program, our commitment to offer dual credit for free, and our deep partnership with our local employers.

This is how education should work. The college, leveraging critical federal programs like Pell, CCAMPIS and Loans, collaborating with our local industries, serving our communities, all to surround our students – like Ashley – with the support they need to get over the finish line and get on the way to a fruitful career.

Supporting Students and Employers Elevates Communities

The questions before us are clear: Do we want Ashley to spend a lifetime in poverty accessing public programs just to get by? Or, do we want to surround her with the right support, at the right time, for a short three or four years, and at the end of her journey have a lifelong taxpayer who has built stability and generational wealth for her and her family?

ACC is leading the nation on making higher education more affordable. We are proud of our work. Our nation should be moving in the same direction and offering Free College from the federal level, as Senator Sanders has proposed. Long-term, this would move millions of people from low-skill, low-wage work into the industries that offer real career paths, family-sustaining wages, and are at the forefront of American innovation.

Instead, the proposals we are seeing considered in reconciliation to further restrict support for students who need it most are going to fundamentally harm the employers needing to hire skilled workers, harm the students I serve, and interfere with the programs our students, and their future employers, rely on.

It doesn't have to be this way. I urge careful consideration and support in efforts to preserve Pell, CCAMPIS, and other effective programs designed to support employers and the students they need to hire.

By maintaining and extending these supports, we can transform our poorest friends and neighbors into the taxpaying nurses, electricians, IT professionals, plumbers, and skilled workers who make up America's backbone.