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, sets 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

JUDY CHU
Chairwoman
Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus

LINDA T. SANCHEZ
Chairwoman
Congressional Hispanic Caucus

RUBÉN HINOJOSA
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training

G.K. BUTTERFIELD
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Congressional Black Caucus
PETER A. DEFAZIO  
Member of Congress

THEODORE E. DEUTCH  
Member of Congress

WM. LACY CLAY  
Member of Congress

YVETTE D. CLARKE  
Member of Congress

GWEN MOORE  
Member of Congress

MADELEINE Z. BORDALLO  
Member of Congress

GREGORY MEEEKS  
Member of Congress

BRENT FOSTER  
Member of Congress

BRENDA L. LAWRENCE  
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CHERI BUSTOS  
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CHRIS VAN HOLLEN  
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EARL BLUMENAUER  
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DAVID LOEBSACK
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XAVIER BECERRA
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ROBIN L. KELLY
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SEAN PATRICK MALONEY
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RAUL RUIZ
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DINA TITUS
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STACEY E. PLASKETT
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ROBERT A. BRADY
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TED LIEU
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JOAQUIN CASTRO
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JULIA BROWNLEY
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LORETTA SANCHEZ
Member of Congress