

# STRENGTHENING THE ARTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## Putting Students on a Path for an Affordable & Successful Future

### ACTION NEEDED

#### We urge Congress to:

Strengthen access to and affordability of higher education in the arts through supporting legislation that achieves the following:

- Funds federal financial aid at a level to ensure access to and affordability of higher education in a way that encourages students to pursue disciplines where they have the most interest and talent;
- Supports the Federal government's efforts to address diversity, equity and inclusion within higher education;
- Ensures the Department of Education's role in properly implementing the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program as well as its oversight of for-profit higher education institutions.

### TALKING POINTS

- **The Biden Administration supports doubling the Pell Grant maximum.** Recent Congressional efforts to streamline the FAFSA and broaden access to federal financial aid to more students are a welcome start, but funding for the Pell Grants must increase significantly to return its impact on low and moderate income students, in turn driving economic recovery.
- **We strongly encourage Congress to continue supporting a student-centered approach to funding higher education.** Current federal financial aid policies equally support all students regardless of what they study or where they choose to obtain a higher education. Degree completion, regardless of major, is the most important factor to future success, and students should be encouraged to concentrate their studies where their interests and talents lead them. Regardless of career path, the arts contribute to the success of individuals in a variety of fields and the national economy.
- **Closing racial equity gaps in education is good for the American economy.** As stated in the American Rescue Plan, "an analysis shows that closing racial gaps in wages, housing credit, lending opportunities, and access to higher education would amount to an additional \$5 trillion in GDP in the American economy over the next 5 years."
- **Student loan debt is disproportionately held by students of color.** Additionally, arts graduates have been overwhelmingly affected by the COVID-19 economic crisis. Meaningful debt forgiveness would both address previous inequities in support for federal financial aid and the particular economic stresses incurred recently by creative workers.
- **Congress enacted the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program with bipartisan support in 2007,** partly to create incentives for motivated and committed individuals to pursue careers in service to the public. PSLF is a vital tool in allowing talented and highly trained employees from all socioeconomic backgrounds to work at organizations that make an impact in their community, if implemented as intended.
  - 35% of all recent arts degree graduates said that debt levels had a "major" impact on their educational and career decisions, compared to only 14% of non-recent grads (from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), 2017).
- **For-profit colleges, a substantial number of which offer arts degrees, must be properly monitored to reduce their incentive to maximize profits over student success.** The highest percentage of the most extreme levels of student debt are held by those who attended for-profit institutions.
- **Higher education in the arts is a valued investment in a career.** According to the SNAAP, 90% of respondents rated their arts school experience as good or excellent, and 81% said their training is at least somewhat relevant to their current work regardless of whether or not they are a professional artist. Furthermore, 87% of master's level respondents who intended to work as artists have done so with 62% working as artists and 72% working in a career related to the arts (artists, arts administrators, and arts educators).

## BACKGROUND

The last comprehensive reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) was in 2008. The HEA is the single most important piece of legislation overseeing the relationship between the federal government, colleges and universities, and students. It authorizes various federal aid programs within the Department of Education that support students pursuing a postsecondary education, including grant programs that support efforts to expand and increase access for low-income and first-generation students, such as Pell Grants. Whether addressed through reauthorization of the HEA in whole, or through targeted legislation, we urge Congress to take action on the above items.

In 2018, Congress funded Temporary Expanded PSLF (TEPSLF) to help borrowers who faced barriers obtaining PSLF loan forgiveness because they were on repayment plans that were ineligible for PSLF. According to the September 5, 2020, GAO Report on Public Service Loan Forgiveness, only 1% of PSLF requests were approved, even under TEPSLF, due to lack of marketing the expansion and an unclear multi-step process.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 simplified the FAFSA and expanded access to Pell Grants to a broader segment of students through a new funding formula.

President Biden released an Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government in January 2021 that includes access to higher education as a critical role for the federal government in supporting racial equity.

*Issue brief prepared by the Cultural Advocacy Group, a collaboration of arts and culture stakeholders working collectively to advance federal policy. Updated 2022.*