PELL GRANT

BUILDING BLOCK OF STUDENT-BASED AID

DOCUMENTARY FILM SERIES
Looking Back to Move Forward: A History of Federal Student Aid

VIEWING GUIDE
In *A History of Federal Student Aid*, a documentary series produced by Lumina Foundation and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, key policymakers, their staff and education researchers provide insight into the evolution of federal student aid through their first-hand experiences with the policymaking process. This short film on the history of Pell Grants is one in a series of several that illuminates past seminal moments and offers instructive lessons and building blocks to guide newer policy innovations.
Pell Grant: Building Block of Student-Based Aid chronicles the history of the program from its bipartisan legislative origins through its various selected subsequent iterations. This 14-minute film documents several key changes to the Pell Grant program including efforts to broaden and limit student eligibility, ebbs and flows in funding, increases in the maximum award levels, and the creation of supplemental programs for Pell recipients.1,2

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Originally known as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG), the Pell Grant program was established in the 1972 re-authorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) as the result of bipartisan effort steered by Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI) and Senator Jacob K. Javits (R-NY). This landmark program shifted the federal financial aid system from institutions awarding federal grant dollars to the federal government awarding grants directly to students. This allowed full- and part-time students the flexibility to use the grants at any eligible postsecondary institution including public, private and vocational colleges.1,2

Congress largely funds the Pell Grant program though the annual appropriations process, although legislators also provide some funding through other mechanisms.3,4 Because the appropriations process takes place well before the start of an academic year, funding decisions are made based on estimates that approximate program costs. Costs are calculated using an expected number of recipients and their expected grant sizes—largely determined by the maximum award for that year.5 This estimation process typically leaves the Pell Grant program either underfunded (known as a “shortfall”) or overfunded (known as a “surplus”) in a given year. During a shortfall, the U.S. Department of Education borrows from future years’ funding, and Congress must provide sufficient funds to cover that deficit in the next spending cycle. When the program experiences a surplus, the U.S. Department of Education is able to use the money to fund grants the following year, pending Congressional action.

Policymakers have debated the balance between managing program costs and maintaining or expanding college access since the late 1970s. As a way to make Pell funding palatable and strengthen its political base, Congress voted to expand eligibility to middle-income students through the 1978 Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA). MISAA dramatically increased access by providing Pell Grants to 2.7 million students in 1980, up from 1.9 million in 1977.6 Although the legislation was repealed in 1981 to decrease program costs,
Congress made moves to expand student eligibility again in the 1986 HEA reauthorization by making technical changes to the formula that determines a student’s financial need.7

Driven by both environmental and policy changes, Pell Grant program expenditures increased by 158 percent (see figure 1) between 2006 and 2011.8 College enrollment increased, and more students became eligible for more money due to the economic downturn that impacted students’ ability to pay for college. At the same time, legislative changes increased the maximum award substantially, expanded student eligibility through changes to the needs analysis formula, and created supplemental Pell Grant programs, contributing to the increase in program costs.9

Beginning with the 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA), Congress has directed supplemental funds to the program through mandatory budgets and supplementary spending legislation.10 These funds were used to maintain or increase the maximum award, expand student eligibility, and account for funding shortfalls from prior years. Subsequently, Congress has rolled back some of these expansions and imple-

The CCRAA really was born out of, I think, increasing anxiety, interest, and need for addressing affordability and a federal strategy around how to support our neediest students.

Hon. Margaret Spellings

The Pell Grant remains the foundation of the federal student aid system, but it now covers the smallest percentage of costs at public and private four-year colleges and universities since the program’s creation, despite recent increases in the maximum award (see Figure 2). The program is ever-evolving, as policymakers continue to debate its structure, funding, and eligibility rules. Nevertheless, experts agree that the Pell Grant program has been instrumental in making college more affordable and accessible for low- and moderate-income students.
And we decided that it was more important to maintain the size of the award so students could access resources that would keep up with inflation as opposed to maintaining the year-round Pell program. And that would allow us to save literally billions of dollars. Again, not an easy decision, but the weighing and balancing of the kinds of decisions that we had to make at that time.

_Melody Barnes_

**FIGURE 2:**
Inflation-Adjusted Maximum Pell Grant and Published Tuition and Fees at Public and Private Nonprofit Four-Year and Public Two-Year Institutions, 1994-95 to 2014-15 (2014 Dollars)

PELL GRANT PROGRAM

TIMELINE

1972
HEA Reauthorization
» Created the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG, later renamed the Pell Grant).16 The award amount was not to exceed 50 percent of the actual cost of attendance at the institution of enrollment.16
» Expanded Title IV eligibility to include for-profit institutions.17

1973
First year of BEOG
» BEOG began with $47.52 million18 to the freshman class of 1973 (i.e., 170,000 students).19

1976
HEA Reauthorization
» Adjustment to eligibility criteria.20

1978
Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA)
» Expanded student eligibility by limiting the rate at which parental discretionary income was assessed in the needs analysis formula.21

1980
HEA Reauthorization
» BEOG renamed Pell Grants after Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI).22

1981
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act
» Many provisions in the 1980 HEA Reauthorization (including MISAA) were repealed.

1986
HEA Reauthorization
» Codified the needs analysis formula in statute to limit the Executive Branch's involvement.23

1990
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act
» Elimination of student aid eligibility at high default schools.24

1992
HEA Reauthorization
» Changed definition of an independent student.25,26

1994
Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act
» Eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners.27

2005
Higher Education Reconciliation Act
(HERA, part of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005)
» Created two grant programs for Pell-eligible students – the Academic Competitiveness Grant (ACG) and National Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent (SMART) Grant.28

2007
College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA)
» Redirected savings from the federal loan program to the Pell Grant.29
» Provided mandatory spending add-ons through 2017. Mandatory add-ons increased Pell maximum award, but only for students who qualified for the maximum discretionary award.30
» Eliminated the tuition sensitivity provision.31
» Changes to Pell eligibility: Increased the amount and types of income excluded from the formula.32

2008
Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA)
» Authorized year-round Pell Grants (second grant in an award year).33
» Eligibility limited to 18 full-time semesters or equivalent.34
» Set new minimum award: Students must qualify for at least five percent of the maximum Pell Grant in order to receive an award. Students qualifying for five to 10 percent of the maximum grant will receive 10 percent.35
**American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA, known as the economic stimulus bill)**

- Provided additional funding to the Pell Grant program.36

**Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act (HCERA)**

- Savings from the elimination of the federally-guaranteed student loan program (known as FFELP) were redirected to the Pell Grant program.37
- Provided mandatory add-ons to all Pell recipients and indexed the maximum Pell Grant to the Consumer Price Index for five years.38

Last year for ACG and SMART grant awards. HERA of 2005 only provided funding through the end of academic year 2010-2011.39

**Budget Control Act (BCA)**

- Provided additional funding to the Pell Grant program by eliminating subsidized federal loans for graduate students and Direct Loan repayment incentives. Money was used to backfill a funding shortfall.40

**Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act**

- Provided additional funding to the Pell Grant program. Money was used to backfill a funding shortfall.41
- Eliminates more than one Pell in award year.42, 43

**Consolidated Appropriations Act**

- Provided additional funding to the Pell Grant program by making temporary changes to the federal loan program.44 Money was used to backfill funding shortfall.45
- Pell lifetime eligibility reduced to 12 semesters.46
- Set new minimum award: Students must now qualify for at least 10 percent of the maximum Pell Grant in order to receive an award.47
1. The 1972 HEA reauthorization made part-time students eligible for federal financial aid and expanded Title IV eligibility to career and vocational education and trade schools.


7. Prior to 1992, students could be considered independently if they were not claimed as an exemption on their parents’ income tax return for two years. Students also had to provide evidence of self-support. Starting in 1993, students could claim independence by meeting at least one of today’s criteria (e.g., 24 years of age or older, orphan, veteran, married, etc.).


29. Affiliations of documentary cast members correspond to the policy period discussed in the film.
Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina’s outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization committed to promoting access to and success in higher education for all students. Based in Washington, D.C., IHEP develops innovative policy- and practice-oriented research to guide policymakers and education leaders, who develop high-impact policies that will address our nation’s most pressing education challenges.