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Opinion: The Pell Grant is worth defending



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By Tom P. Foley
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There's a lot of disagreement on higher education these days. One exception to all the discord, at least so far, is Pell Grants—a program that is especially critical for first-generation college students.

Is it bipartisan? Historically, absolutely yes. Though it bears the name of an education-focused Democratic Senator, Claiborne Pell, it came into existence with strong support from then-President Nixon, and benefited in the floor debate from the leadership of Republican Senators like Jacob Javits.

That bipartisanship continues in the current administration. When he signed the Executive Order dismantling USDoEd, the President specifically underlined the importance of Pell Grants, [saying](#) they “will be fully preserved” — [consistent](#) with his first term expansion of Pell. Similarly, during her confirmation hearing, Education Secretary Linda McMahon [said](#) that “Defunding is not the goal here. I’d actually even like to see an expansion of Pell Grants.”

And when an OMB circular attempted to *pause* billions in funding, this Administration [made it clear](#) that, “Federal student aid funds (for example, Direct Loans and Pell Grants) were not impacted by the initial [OMB] guidance, and we continue to award and disburse federal student aid.” 81% of Republicans in a recent [poll](#) support Pell Grants (and don’t want to see them “in the crosshairs”).

How does Pell help people? Financial aid for post-secondary education is open to anyone regardless of political affiliation, so far to 158 million Americans. The Pell/FAFSA application doesn’t contain any questions that would hint at political affiliation, nor do programs like Work Study and the GI Bill. The right-leaning American Enterprise Institute [reaffirmed its value](#) when it wrote that “Pell ...appeals to both the left and the right. For Democrats, it offers no-strings funds to low-income students. For Republicans, it funds students rather than colleges, providing a voucher that students can use at the accredited institution of their choice.”

How does Pell help the country? It spreads opportunity across all classes and backgrounds. Grants like Pell are a big part of the reason that the United States is number one in the world in both *higher education* and *research*. On *higher ed*, “many Americans don’t realize just how exceptional the country’s university system actually is,” [observed](#) former Treasury Secretary and Wall Street wunderkind Robert Rubin. “Although the United States can claim less than 5% of the world’s population, it is home to 65% of the world’s 20 highest-ranked universities (and 28% of the world’s top-200 universities). Americans can get a quality education at thousands of academic institutions throughout the country.”

Because of programs like Pell, any American—not just the wealthy ones—can access a world-class education. Vice President Vance [funded his college education](#) in part with federal financial aid, including the GI Bill. I am a first-generation college grad with not a single grandparent who had the chance at a high school diploma. All 11 of my siblings had the chance for higher ed, and federal financial aid helped me to graduate from the same law school as Vance.

As to research, it is no accident that higher education is “among America’s most competitive international exporters.” The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis [found](#) that, “In dollar terms, last year, the United States sold more educational services to the rest of the world than it sold in natural gas and coal combined.”

Lost in the tangle about tariffs and trade is the fact that higher education is an answer to, not a cause of, trade deficits. That is because of the quality of research that fuels not just exports, but innovations which lead to trillions of dollars for profit industries that use those discoveries to make improvements in medicine, science, and national defense.

Reasonable people may disagree about how much, how, and when to disperse federal financial aid. The bottom line is that Pell works. Financial aid isn't a handout. It is an investment—one that pays incredible dividends for all Americans, as higher education propels prosperity like nothing else in our economy.

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