

Pell Grants

March 3, 2007

The hallmark of any democracy is an educated citizenry that is capable of engaging in a dialogue with itself and with the government. Additionally, in today's global economy, the need for America's youth to receive a college education has never been greater. Education of our young men and women is necessary to ensure that America remains a world leader. Unfortunately, many young Americans must forgo this opportunity because of economic hardships.

To this end, I have proudly introduced the Increasing Access to Higher Education Act (H.R. 722). This legislation increases the cap on Federal Pell Grants from \$4,350 to \$4,810 per year for eligible students. Additionally, I supported H.R. 990, the Pell Grant Equity Act, which the House of Representatives recently approved. This bill repeals the so-called tuition sensitivity provisions of the Pell Grant program which penalize students, most of whom are from lower-income families, simply because they attend lower-cost institutions of higher education, including community colleges. This unfair and unwise policy punishes schools which keep their costs low and the deserving students who want to attend them.

Tuition costs continue to spiral ever-higher, making financing a college education extremely difficult - especially for the middle class. This is unacceptable. Today, America's students are no longer competing against themselves. They are competing against the world.

I have the greatest faith that America's youth will rise to this challenge, but they need and deserve to have all the opportunities possible to follow their intellectual curiosity wherever it may lead them. America's youth, and their parents, should not make determinations of the most important commodity based solely on economic factors.

Unfortunately, economics do drive many of our decisions, including college decisions. According to recent data, the average cost (tuition and other associated costs) for a four-year private college is about \$30,000 per year. The average cost for a four-year state college is almost \$13,000 per year. Both of these figures represent a growth of over 5.5% from the previous academic year, while the average rate of inflation during the same time period hovered around 3.3%.

The data clearly shows that affording a college education is growing at a faster rate than the average American's paycheck. While the cost of a quality college education is incalculable, its impact on America's families force people into making difficult decisions that not only affects the present but their children's futures.

We need to work together to solve this problem before it spirals out of control. I know this legislation is not the final solution to solving the crisis facing this nation, but it is a first step. I invite all parties to put forth ideas for solutions to ensure that college is affordable to all Americans and that the dream of higher education becomes the reality of higher education.

Federal and state governments, along with the private sector and the education community need to come together to ensure every American has the right to earn the opportunity to pursue a college education.

Today's students are tomorrow's leaders, and we need to invest in them for the sake of everyone's future.

The author is Congressman
Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Palm
Harbor)
Representative for Florida's
Ninth District.