

Campus Resilience and Student Supports After Federal Policy Shifts

ILASFAA Diversity & Inclusion Committee Co-Chairs:

- Davon Maxey–University of St. Francis
- Sam Nelson–Illinois Student Assistance Commission

What's Changed? Big Picture

- Department of Education staffing and scope have been reduced, and shifts at the federal level have left the agency smaller and less active in rulemaking and enforcement, producing mixed reactions from education leaders and families about the consequences for students and institutions
- The Pell Grant program is facing a multi-billion dollar shortfall, which could force cuts to awards, eligibility changes, or require emergency congressional action to avoid reductions that would affect millions of undergraduates who rely on Pell to stay enrolled
- Proposed federal budgets have signaled steep reductions in education spending, increasing the risk that maximum awards or program reach could be trimmed if Congress does not intervene

What's Changed? Big Picture

- Federal government has moved to expand “Workforce Pell” for short-term job training, but implementation is complex and slow; early rules and rapid timelines mean relatively few programs may qualify initially, limiting immediate benefit for students seeking quick reskilling
- Cuts and uncertainty reduce funding for student support services, disability services, mental-health staffing, and campus-based emergency aid, which disproportionately harms low-income and first-generation students and widens equity gaps
- Research and institutional grants are also at risk, pressuring public colleges and universities to scale back programs or shift costs to students through tuition or fees

Impact on Students

- **Reduced Access and Completion:** Students lose crucial support for navigating college applications, financial aid [e.g., Free Application of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®)], and academic challenges, leading to higher dropout rates and lower enrollment
- **Loss of Essential Support:** Participants lose access to tutoring, mentoring, and financial literacy workshops
- **Impact on Vulnerable Groups:** First-generation students, veterans, students with disabilities, and those in rural areas are disproportionately harmed, as they often rely on TRIO for guidance, the [Council for Opportunity in Education](#) indicates
- **Disruption of Services:** Abrupt cuts can immediately halt services, such as during crucial academic planning times

Impact on Colleges and Institutions

- **Strained Resources:** Institutions, particularly Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and community colleges, face increased pressure to support students without federal aid
- **Staff Layoffs:** Programs are forced to terminate or furlough staff, reducing the campus workforce dedicated to student retention
- **Forced Reorganization:** Institutions must try to replace lost services or, more likely, discontinue them, impacting overall student success metrics
- **Operational Uncertainty:** Funding freezes make it difficult for colleges to plan for future semesters

Impact on Students

- Higher out-of-pocket costs and enrollment risk: Students who depend on Pell or campus emergency funds may face increased debt or stop-out risk if awards are reduced or delayed
- Fewer campus supports: reduced federal funding and state/local budget pressure can mean fewer counselors, tutors, and retention programs that help students persist
- Opportunities and pitfalls in workforce training: Short-term training funded by Workforce Pell could help some nontraditional students, but limited approved programs and heavy compliance requirements mean benefits will be uneven and slow to arrive

Impact on Students

- Mis & Dis-Information – causes students to not make informed decisions
- Uncertainty of current policies and recent changes – lack of clear guidance
- Uncertainty of anticipatory changes – what might happen
- Attendance – Students not attending classes in person due to concern of immigration enforcement even if U.S. citizen

TRIO Programs

- **National Impact:** Federal funding delays for TRIO (\$660M) have led to staff furloughs and service reductions nationwide
- **Program Risks:** TRIO programs, which support low-income and first-generation students, are facing increased risks due to federal policy changes and scrutiny of DEI-related initiatives

Student Loans

- Pandemic Repayment Pause Ending – as wage garnishment and other collection efforts ramp up, many are left wondering how to absorb this renewed financial strain and reintegrate payments into already tight budgets
- One Big Beautiful Bill Act's (OBBBA's) changes to federal student loan programs
 - Including new lower limits on graduate, professional, and parent borrowing
 - Elimination of the Graduate PLUS Loan program
- More students likely turn to private loans due to OBBBA's new loan limits
 - Private loan market don't provide as many borrower defence protections and benefits, such as the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program and borrower defense protections are unavailable

No Quick Fixes to Uncertainty



How campuses are helping students

- Creating centralized resource hubs — Single websites and hotlines that aggregate mental-health, legal, immigration, and financial resources so students can quickly find help and reduce uncertainty
- Policy briefings and town halls — Regular briefings with legal experts and administrators to explain policy changes, answer questions, and reduce rumor-driven fear
- Targeted outreach to vulnerable populations — Proactive check-ins and tailored services for international students, undocumented students, first-generation students, and others most affected by federal actions, including multilingual resource pages focused on visa, travel, and enrollment concerns

How campuses are helping students

- Offering legal clinics and immigration advising — Free or low-cost legal consultations (including immigration, Title IX, civil-rights) that give students concrete answers about status, rights, and next steps
- Campus rapid-response legal hotlines and funds — Dedicated emergency funds to cover immigration, civil-rights, or compliance legal fees for students and staff
- Confidential reporting and safe-harbor policies — Policies allowing students & staff to report incidents confidentially and receive protections (housing, academic flexibility) while cases are reviewed

How campuses are helping students

- Emergency financial aid, housing support, and basic-needs — Expanded financial aid counseling and emergency budgeting — one-on-one financial counseling, microgrants, and tuition-hold relief programs — short-term grants, fee waivers, and housing assistance to relieve immediate economic stress caused by policy changes or funding cuts
- Crisis response teams and rapid-response protocols — Centralized case management teams and coordinated cross-functional teams (combine advising, counseling, peer program, emergency funds, housing) that can quickly address campus incidents, communicate clearly, and connect students to services
- Cross-institutional consortia for shared services — regional partnerships that pool counseling, legal, and career services across colleges to expand capacity

How campuses are helping students

- Public advocacy and coalition building — institutions join state or national coalitions to advocate for policy clarifications, funding, or protections for students
- Anonymous climate surveys and rapid feedback loops — frequent, short surveys to monitor student and staff wellbeing, sense of belonging, and emerging needs
- Integrated onboarding about rights and resources — mandatory orientation modules that clearly explain student rights, campus reporting channels, and available supports
- Transparent communication and rights education — clear, multilingual guidance on student rights, reporting processes, and available supports

How campuses are helping students

- Student activism support and civic engagement programs — Channels for constructive action (organizing, advocacy training) that convert anxiety into agency and building community connection, without campuses “dictating the right way to be an activist”
 - Expanding from student activism to coalition building and community organizing and community care
- Students understand how tools (e.g., codes of conduct) could be used against them (e.g., print a copy of what you see on screen in case it’s changed overnight)

How campuses are helping students

- Students feeling a mix of — uncertainty, fear, anxiety, a degree of terror for some
 - In fact, [60% of college students](#) meet the criteria for at least one mental health challenge
- Burn out by students and faculty and staff — current context so overwhelming
 - Emotional resilience may have increased but not enough to deal with excessive uncertainty and rapid changes — impacting students may not start education, mid-education students may change their trajectory or end it
- Staff and students getting Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training for students, as well as first aid instructors, with some campus embedding instructors across departments — from academic advising, to housing, to athletics

How campuses are helping students

- Peer support and mentoring programs — Trained student peer counselors and mentorship networks that provide relatable, near-peer emotional support and reduce stigma
- Partnerships with community providers — Contracts with local mental-health clinics and telehealth vendors to expand capacity beyond campus resources
- Campus mediation and restorative justice programs — trained mediators and restorative circles to address conflicts arising from policy-related tensions

How campuses are helping students

- Expanded mental-health and telehealth services – increased counseling staff, teletherapy options, and crisis lines; partnerships with community providers
- Wellness spaces and drop-in centers — Quiet rooms, meditation spaces, and staffed drop-in centers where students can decompress and access immediate support
- Protected spaces and restorative practices — designated safe spaces, facilitated dialogues, and restorative responses to incidents

How campuses are helping students

- Running resilience and preventative programs — Workshops on coping skills, stress management, and community resilience to prevent crises and teach practical tools for daily anxiety reduction
- Launching campus belonging initiatives — Support groups, facilitated dialogues, and belonging campaigns that reduce isolation and normalize shared concerns about policy shifts and provide a broader framework for staying connected, sharing guidance, and identifying opportunities (e.g., underground networks)

How campuses are helping students

- Academic flexibility and accommodations — Extensions, pass/fail options, alternative pathways, remote participation, competency-based credit, and leaves of absence policies to reduce academic pressure during periods of high stress
- Professors and campus offices trying to provide more certainty and routine and structure in areas they can control (e.g., classroom, office services) – without ignoring bigger uncertainty
- Faculty training on inclusive pedagogy and crisis response — short courses and toolkits that help instructors manage charged classroom discussions and support distressed students

How campuses are helping students

- Targeted career and transfer supports — micro-internships, employer partnerships, and transfer advising focused on displaced or anxious students
- Faculty and staff training — Training faculty to recognize distress, make referrals, and hold supportive classroom conversations to create safer learning environments and being more identity conscious in advising, teaching, and serving students
- Professors and campus offices trying to provide more certainty and routine and structure in areas they can control (e.g., classroom, office services) – without ignoring bigger uncertainty
- Faculty and staff wellbeing programs — peer support groups, workload adjustments, legal briefings, and mental-health resources for employees: *staff resilience is essential to sustain student services and campus climate*

How campuses are helping students

- Alternative credentialing and modular learning options — short certificates, stackable credentials, and competency-based modules that allow students to progress even if full enrollment is disrupted
- Partnerships with local employers for flexible work-study — employer agreements that offer flexible schedules, remote internships, and paid micro-internships

How campuses are helping students

Implementation Tips

- Combine universal and targeted supports so help is available to all while prioritizing the most vulnerable.
- Document decisions and legal guidance to protect the institution and reassure stakeholders
- Measure impact with simple indicators (retention, counseling utilization, incident resolution time) and iterate
- Data dashboards and rapid evaluation — real-time tracking of enrollment, withdrawals, counseling demand, and incident reports

How campuses are helping students

Implementation Tips

- Risks, trade-offs, and mitigation
 - Risk: Short-term fixes without sustainable funding; Mitigate: pair pilots with fundraising and budget reallocation.
 - Risk: Legal exposure from policy missteps; Mitigate: consult counsel and document decisions.
 - Risk: Stigma around supports; Mitigate: universalize access and normalize help-seeking.
- **Bottom line:** resilience comes from layering immediate, student-centered services with structural changes—shared capacity, clear policies, and data-informed decision making—that preserve access, equity, and belonging during policy turbulence

Student Actions

What students should do now:

- Check FAFSA and Pell status early and monitor campus financial-aid offices for contingency plans; apply for institutional emergency aid and local scholarships
- Advocate through student government and state representatives for protecting Pell and campus supports
- Explore approved workforce training cautiously — verify program eligibility for Pell before enrolling and confirm transferability or employer recognition
- Use local resources to bridge gaps while federal policy evolves

Resources

- The Chronicle of Higher Education – *The DEI Dilemma: Understand the Legal Landscape and Support Your Campus* [\$59]
- Mental Health First Aid (National Council for Mental Wellbeing)
<https://mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>
- Resources for Educators on Supporting Undocumented & Immigrant Students
<https://www.illinoisimmigrationinfo.org/know-your-rights>
- Bracing for Impact: How Medicaid and SNAP Cuts Will Reshape College Access – Report from National College Attainment Network (NCAN)
<https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=719075>