

UC Student Association campaigns to double the Pell Grant maximum

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The association that represents University of California students is calling on President Joe Biden's administration to double the Pell Grant to make college more affordable.

The UC Student Association has met with federal representatives, nonprofit leaders and mobilized UC students to advocate for its Double the Pell campaign since the association initiated the campaign in August, said Joshua Lewis, the UCSA government relations chair and a student at UC Berkeley.

The Federal Pell Grant Program provides low-income students with funds to pay for college. Students apply for the grant by filling out the FAFSA. The maximum amount for the 2020-2021 school year is \$6,345. UCSA members are campaigning for that amount to be doubled.

UC students are lobbying their federal representatives as part of the campaign, said UCSA President Aidan Arasasingham. So far, UCLA students have met with more than 11 members of Congress, he added.

Inadequate federal investment is often the reason why many students at the UC and across the country cannot afford college, said Arasasingham, a fourth-year global studies student at UCLA.

UCSA plans to connect students with Congress members on Capitol Hill as part of the association's federal week of action to lobby for increases in the Pell Grant. UC students will advocate for the campaign on social media and meet with federal representatives in February, said Lauren Valles, who is the Fund the UC Campaign vice chair.

Arasasingham and the presidents of five West Coast student associations, including those of Washington, Arizona and Oregon, wrote to Biden's administration, urging the president to double the Pell Grant within his first 100 days in office, he said.

Biden should take immediate action to fulfill the promise he made during his campaign to double the Pell Grant, he said.

"There's a great deal of momentum behind this effort," Arasasingham said.

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said increasing the Pell Grant could cause colleges to raise tuition and spend money on extraneous expenses like new buildings.

To decrease the cost of higher education, the federal government needs to decrease student aid, McCluskey said. Congress should start by eliminating the aid that goes to higher-income students, such as the Direct PLUS Loans, he added.

“If we’re going to have student aid at the federal level, it should be a loan program really focused on low-income people, and that is it,” he said.

McCluskey said he would propose turning the Pell Grant into a loan instead of a grant because it would decrease government spending.

Increasing financial aid for students would make the UCs more equitable and affordable, Lewis said.

To reach the student body, UCSA is hosting virtual panels for each UC campus, said Valles, who is a third-year political science major at UCLA.

The campaign had to adapt to a virtual format because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Arasasingham said. UCSA typically sends hundreds of students to Washington, D.C. to meet with congressional offices, he said.

Though students would typically be traveling to the Capitol, the online format has made advocacy more accessible by removing economic barriers associated with travel, Lewis said.

For the UCSA student board, the inadequate funding of the Pell Grant is an issue that cannot be put off any longer, Lewis said.

“Every day that goes by that the immediate action isn’t taken on the Pell Grant is a day that another student loses access to the UC,” he said.