

PELL GRANTS ARE AMERICA'S INVESTMENT IN NEEDY YET PROMISING COLLEGE STUDENTS – WHY NOT TELL THEM?

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When millions of American soldiers returned home from World War II, a nation grateful for their service greeted them with the famous GI Bill of Rights – which included grants to allow veterans to attend college. Letters were sent to returning servicemen and women to explain the benefits to which they were entitled, making it clear that they came from a nation that had their backs. Beneficiaries knew from whom the money came, and why. They understood the hopes all Americans had for their future educational attainment and success in life.

The educational provisions of the original GI Bill cost about \$14.5 billion over eleven years and served about eight million veterans altogether. Today, through a program called Pell Grants, the United States spends much more, about \$25 billion annually, to serve about eight million students from needy families each and every year. Pell Grants are need-based; they go to young people from low-income families that really need help to pay for part of the cost of getting a college education. But in contrast to what happened with GI benefits, America does not clearly tell Pell Grant recipients that we are backing their education and have high hopes for their future attainments and contributions.

An Invisible Gift Delivered in a Technical Maze

Pell Grant money is not being wasted on people who could afford college anyway. Yet unlike the widely celebrated GI Bill, Pell Grants are sometimes derided by politicians. Part of the reason politicians feel that they can do this may be the sense that high school graduates from poor families have not “earned” public help to go to college the way military veterans obviously have earned help. But another part of the explanation may lie in the near-invisibility of Pell Grants – including to the young people who benefit from them.

Americans in general understand little about these grants – which are caught in a maze of financial aid policies that help students cover rising college costs that are themselves unclear. Even more worrisome, needy student recipients of Pell Grants often do not know themselves where their aid comes from or what it means. The Pell Grant program has widespread name recognition but little more. In a recent longitudinal study my research team conducted with 3,000 Pell grant recipients in Wisconsin, we found that 80% of those undergraduates could select the grant from a list of items they might have in their financial aid packages, but that was all. In-depth interviews revealed a lack of knowledge about how any part of their financial aid, including the Pell Grant, was funded or what it meant. As one undergraduate recounted, “The aid officer just basically sends you an email saying this is what you're getting. But they don't really tell you where it's coming from or why you're getting it, so I don't know.”

When Money Means More

As we all understand from daily life, receiving a gift of money means more when you know who has given it to you, and why. The wedding gift from parents intended to help newlyweds purchase their first home; the loan from a best friend to help a buddy fix a car; and the token allowance parents give their children – all of these monetary gifts carry symbolic meaning that gives them social meaning and power far beyond their sheer pecuniary value.

U.S. policymakers understood this social reality when they fashioned the first GI Bill of Rights – and America should rediscover the power of symbolic gift-giving today, by improving the clarity and moral force of the messages we send to the needy college students helped by federal grants.

A Letter from the President of a Nation with High Expectations

Here is an easy way to make the Pell Grant more than just a check to be cashed or a line item in a bigger financial aid package: **Have the President of the United States send an annual letter to each and every Pell recipient** – explaining that the Pell program represents the investment of America’s taxpayers in the student’s college education, made possible because families across the country worked hard in their jobs and paid taxes to make sure all young people who are prepared can have a fair shot at achieving a college education. The Pell Grant, the letter should spell out, promises continuing support in return for “your” continued hard work and good faith effort to complete college. In essence, the letter would declare, the nation cares about you and is investing in you – and wants you to work hard and make good on our investment.

Today’s typical award letter is much more mechanical. It comes from some office, and says only that the Pell is a federal grant for students with significant financial need, that eligibility is determined by calculations about how much the student’s family can afford to contribute, and that the grant need not be repaid. Since award letters to college students contain a vast array of information, perhaps a few dry lines in bureaucratic language are all that seem appropriate. But a bolder message could be communicated if the President, a national leader who impresses students, explained to each recipient of the Pell Grant in particular the larger message America means to send – about the investment being made by all Americans who expect, in return, hard work, completion of the degree, and future personal success and contributions.

Many Americans would approve that sort of message – especially the part that says what we expect in return for aid. And the message could help students, too. According to the best available research, financial aid has psychological as well as monetary benefits. It can reduce stress for students and reinforce calm determination. One of the needy students in our study explained that he has gone through periods of constant worry, anger, and frustration at how hard it is to make ends meet, until he “can’t even think anymore.” Receiving financial aid, he explains, allows him to “be more calm, so I don’t have to worry all the time, and still get my schoolwork done.”

The assurance and confidence provided by college financial aid can be strengthened – and capitalized upon – by sending a clear national message along with the checks, letting needy students on Pell Grants know that the nation has their back, is proud of their achievements, and values their pursuit of higher education. Such a clarion, morally resonant message could go a long way toward making our nation’s investment count for even more – for aid recipients and for all of us.