

December 22, 2015

## The Promise of the Higher Education Act

This year is the 50th anniversary of the Higher Education Act (HEA), signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on November 8, 1965. Though not often the subject of campus or community conversations, the HEA has a profound and positive impact on students at Cal State San Marcos (CSUSM), as well as on college and university students throughout the San Diego region and across the nation.

The HEA is the source of federal student financial aid programs, including Pell Grants for low- and middle-income students, federal student loans, and various other programs that help disadvantaged students access higher education. With the HEA past due for reauthorization, it is important to appreciate its importance in the current higher education environment and to hold our Federal legislators accountable for giving it the support our nation's students deserve.

When he signed the HEA into law, President Johnson said it would “swing open a new door for the young people of America ... the most important door that will ever open – the door to education.” At CSUSM, every day we see the promise of the HEA being fulfilled in our diverse student and alumni populations.



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Higher Education Act on November 8, 1965 at Southwest Texas State College (now Texas State) in San Marcos, Texas as others look on, including Lady Bird Johnson.

**Credit:** LBJ Library photo by Frank Wolfe

Many of our students at one time thought, or perhaps were told, that college was not a place for them. For the last three years, over half our graduates have been the first in their families to achieve a four-year college degree, and over half our student body identifies as being a minority. One in 10 of our students is a veteran or military-affiliated, the highest per-capita number in the 23-campus CSU system. We also serve the highest per-capita number of American Indian students in the CSU system ... and more former foster youth per capita than any institution of higher learning in the United States.

The HEA is the strongest source of federal assistance to help students like these succeed. Importantly, programs such as the Pell Grant allow them to take on fewer student loans and thus graduate with lower debt. But the maximum Pell Grant per student has decreased over the years, as the number of awards has risen from 1.9 million Pell recipients in 1978 to 9.2 million in 2013. The failure of grant funding to keep up with inflation is causing many more students to borrow more.

The CSU system remains among the most affordable paths to a four-year college degree. And CSUSM, faced with declining state support, has engaged in innovative approaches with public and private partners to enhance educational access in the region and prepare students well for 21<sup>st</sup>-century jobs. But we also know that, nationwide, more students are graduating with educational debt than ever before. More than 9 million students took out federal loans last year, and many had to borrow from more expensive private loan programs on top of this.

Given this trend, it is my hope that Congress will reauthorize the venerable HEA with enhancements to better meet the challenges faced by today's increasingly diverse student populations – the leaders and change-makers of tomorrow.