

Favorable

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Senate Bill 662 Higher Education – Appointment of Secretary and Student Financial Assistance - Alterations

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On behalf of Maryland’s independent colleges and universities and the 56,000 students we serve, we thank you for the opportunity to provide this letter of support with amendments regarding *Senate Bill 662 - Higher Education - Appointment of Secretary and Student Financial Assistance - Alterations*. MICUA believes that there are many positive components in the bill that will help increase access for Maryland students, but also has concerns that some components on the bill, as introduced, will be difficult, if not impossible, to implement. As a result, there are several technical and practical changes to the bill that MICUA believes would strengthen the bill and create an easier and more predictable path for students to obtain a Guaranteed Access grant (GA).

First, MICUA believes that its member institutions can successfully administer the Guaranteed Access grant as a campus-based program. However, there are two cohorts of GA students that we don’t believe we can independently verify under the existing process and bill as proposed: (1) Next Generation Scholars Students, and (2) Dreamers that file the Maryland State Financial Aid Application (MSFAA) rather than the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The bill should be amended so that these two groups of students still have their GA grants verified and awarded by MHEC.

Second, MICUA would also like to see the bill amended to clarify the definition of the word “EACH applicant” on page 16, lines 24-28. The language should be clarified to ensure that the verification is based on the data submitted by a student as opposed to institutions verifying the accuracy of the data a student has attested to. Additional clarification is also needed to differentiate between an applicant’s award letter and an applicant’s admission on page 17, lines 13-15. The GA should be awarded as part of an applicant’s award letter, not at admission.

Third, MICUA’s members are particularly concerned about the duplication of effort and drain on collective resources that will inevitably arise from multiple institutions verifying the same student. Currently, an institution’s verification of a student can be utilized by a different institution to make a GA award but if the award is made in error, it is the initial verifying institution, not the institution that enrolled and awarded the GA, that is liable to reimburse funds.



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Lastly, MICUA also has concerns that the bill as drafted will result in awards for Educational Excellence award grants (EA) being made too late for them to be determinative or even useful to students. More importantly, the bill needs a provision that grandfather existing EA awardees, prior to the awarding of GA grants, so that the educational progression of existing EA awardees isn't negatively impacted or terminated due to a lack of funding.

MICUA appreciates that the bill acknowledges that shifting the verification and awarding of GA grants from the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) to a campus-based process will inevitably result in the need for additional resources for campus financial aid offices. Unfortunately, the bill only directs the Governor to provide funding for public institutions of higher education. MICUA member campuses will have the same additional responsibilities as public institutions of higher education and would greatly appreciate the General Assembly expressing its intent that the Governor include funding for financial aid offices at MICUA schools as well.

Overall, MICUA greatly appreciates the sponsor's willingness to work with the segments on many of the practical and logistical issues associated with a change of this magnitude. The two-year delay for the effective date is extremely appreciated. MICUA recommends that the bill also create a workgroup consisting of MHEC, MICUA, USM, MACC and member campuses financial aid offices to make regulatory and legislative recommendations over the next two years to ensure that the process is smooth and the transition results in better outcomes for future Maryland students.

For these reasons MICUA requests a favorable Committee report for Senate Bill 662.