

Event Discusses Ways the Federal Work Study Program Could Better Support Low-Income Students

By [Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)

As Congress works toward a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and looks to fund federal student aid programs for fiscal year 2020, a panel of higher education experts gathered this week to discuss what makes a “good” college, the college rankings system, and how changes to the Federal Work-Study (FWS) program could better serve low-income students.

During [the event](#), hosted by New America on Thursday, two panels of higher education experts argued that the [U.S. News & World Report College Rankings](#) reinforces homogenous norms around what defines a good college and fail to take into account colleges with alternative education models or differing missions to better serve more diverse student populations.

According to Chauncy Lennon, vice president for the future of learning and work at Lumina Foundation, “we live in a world where the popular definition of a good college or university has a lot to do with uniformity; exclusive, wealthy and prestigious that serves one type of student: affluent, white, age 18 to 22.”

Another panelist, President of The Evergreen State College George Bridges, asserted that a good college is made up of four main attributes. “First, it has to empower students, to focus on them and be student-centered; second, there must be academic preparation that readies students for the complexity of the real world, challenges that we as a society are facing; third, a commitment to serving the greater good, the greater public good; and finally, a learning that links theory to practice, such that it isn’t purely academic, but that it links to real world experiences,” he said.

FWS, which gives students some real world job experience, is often an asset to low-income college students who might otherwise struggle to balance their studies around an off-campus job. On-campus jobs typically offer more flexibility around class schedules and exam periods, such as midterms and finals. However, panelist Grace Gedye, associate editor at Washington Monthly, pointed out that many on-campus work-study jobs are often unrelated to a student’s career interests.

Gedye suggested that lawmakers could help support college students by making much-needed updates to the FWS program, specifically to ensure that it better helps students prepare for the workforce. According to Gedye, FWS is an optimal focus because it has a larger impact on the graduation rates than any other financial aid program, including the Pell Grant program, which is [better funded](#).

While students from wealthier backgrounds are able to spend their summers doing unpaid internships in expensive cities, building out their resumes, and making connections, other college students aren’t able to do that,” Gedye said. “If [FWS] is modified to help students find jobs in their field of interest, either on-campus or off, that could really open doors.”

Even though the FWS program has bipartisan support, including from the Trump administration, it often fails to provide financial support and career experience to the students that need it the most. A [NASFAA focus group](#) conducted in 2016 found that more students are awarded FWS

than accept FWS positions, in part due to perceptions that students could make more money at non-FWS jobs. To rectify this, NASFAA recommended offering returning students a higher wage and a wider range of job opportunities.

Panelists also took issue with the way FWS funds are divvied up.

“A disproportionate share of the [FWS] money goes to schools like Harvard — elite, private, four-year institutions with big endowments that tend to educate wealthier students,” Gedye said. Whereas less FWS money is sent to public institutions and community colleges.

Gedye described the allocation of funds for the FWS program as a “policy failure” that hasn’t been corrected. “Congress put that initial inequity into policy,” Gedye added, by grandfathering in the elite, private schools that were awarded large amounts in the 1960s so that their funding allotments won’t decrease over time; that money makes up over half of the FWS budget.

Funding for the FWS program has not kept pace with inflation and rising tuition rates. While Congress has recently proposed slight increases for the Pell Grant program, the Senate's proposed budget for fiscal year 2020 [level-funds](#) FWS at \$1.1 billion.

In addition to modifying the structure of FWS, Gedye argued that Congress should increase funding for the program and update regulations to ensure that more low-income students can access the program.

“To unleash the potential of [FWS] Congress needs to increase the program’s budget right now,” Gedye said. “The total is only about \$1 billion, which is only a tiny fraction of federal spending on higher education and as a result many of the students who would benefit from the program don’t have access to it.”

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