

DATE

The Honorable Mike Fong
Chair, Assembly Higher Education Committee
1020 N Street, Room 173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for AB 789 (Berman)

Dear Chair Fong:

On behalf of [insert organization name], I write in strong support of Assembly Bill 789 (Berman). This bill will enable students who struggle academically to continue their education by removing barriers to maintaining financial aid and benefitting from institutional support.

[OPTIONAL - Include information about your organization, your mission, and why you're interested in this legislation]

The U.S. Department of Education requires academic institutions receiving federal financial aid funds to establish a “reasonable satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policy,” and many state programs, including the Cal Grant, are linked to these same standards. Students who do not meet SAP standards for two consecutive terms or one academic year are disqualified from receiving financial aid unless they successfully appeal to have aid reinstated. Yet, many institutions of higher education in California have SAP policies that impose stricter standards than federally required and unclear appeal processes that result in inconsistent treatment of students. This negatively impacts students’ ability to both meet their institutions’ SAP policies and successfully appeal to maintain financial aid.

Research conducted by John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) in collaboration with Educational Results Partnership in 2021 revealed that nearly 1 in 4 first-year California Community College students receiving a Pell Grant did not make SAP, jeopardizing their access to much-needed financial aid. Black (34%) and Native American (32%) students did not make SAP at a rate double that of white (15%) and Asian (15%) students. Of those who failed to meet SAP, just 13 percent remained enrolled and continued to receive aid. National data shows similar rates of SAP failure among low-income four-year university students.

Additional research comparing students who do not make SAP to those who do found no differences in the level of motivation between students who were making SAP and those who were not. Students who were not making SAP, however, had significantly more life responsibilities (childcare, employment, family responsibilities, etc.) and fewer resources (family support, reliable transportation, access to food and housing, flexible work schedule, etc.). Those not making SAP also had less access to cultural capital that could help them understand how to navigate college inside and outside the classroom. These students reported greater feelings of powerlessness stemming from experiences such as homelessness, child welfare system involvement, witnessing family abuse, and extreme financial hardship.

AB 789 will ensure that postsecondary institutions across California do not impose requirements stricter than those minimally required by federal law. In addition, the bill will ensure that institutions consider a broad range of extenuating circumstances as a basis for an appeal to reinstate aid that reflect the common struggles California’s students face while earning a degree. Finally, AB 789 will also create a pathway for students who have disenrolled while on SAP disqualification to regain aid upon re-enrollment. Given the

enormous impact of financial aid receipt on college enrollment and retention, these changes are important steps in narrowing graduation gaps among low-income students and students of color as well as supporting California's goal of increasing enrollment numbers across the state's postsecondary institutions.

For these reasons, our organization strongly supports AB 789 and asks for your AYE vote.

Respectfully,

Signature (letters must have a signature to be accepted)

Full Name

Title

Organization