



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

AFT FAQ on Workforce Pell Program

Tucked into the Big Ugly Betrayal (aka Public Law 119-21, the budget reconciliation bill enacted on July 4, 2025) is an expansion of the Pell Grant program to learners pursuing short-term job training programs. This Workforce Pell Grant program is scheduled to begin being available to students in the 2026-27 school year.

For the AFT, making Pell Grants—and as a result, workforce training programs—more accessible to a wide range of career training programs, is promising. But we are concerned that money could go to predatory institutions that could take advantage of students without giving them meaningful training toward legitimate careers. We are advocating for sufficient guardrails to keep out low-quality, high-cost programs.

The Intent

Historically, Pell Grants have been restricted to programs lasting at least 600 clock hours and 15 weeks. Expanding access to Pell for shorter programs aims to:

- Strengthen workforce pipelines in high-demand fields such as healthcare, IT and skilled trades;
- Address affordability gaps left unfilled by state programs or the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; and
- Support working adults and career changers who need to require additional workplace skills.

The Expansion

- **Shorter Programs:** Eligible programs are shorter and more intensive, lasting as little as eight weeks or 150 hours.
- **Quality Standards required by the law:**
 - **High-Demand Alignment:** Training must be in high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand industry sectors.
 - **Recognized Credentials:** Programs must lead to a recognized, stackable credential or prepare for a single recognized occupation.
 - **Performance Rates:** Programs must achieve at least a 70 percent completion rate and a 70 percent job placement rate within 180 days of completion.
 - **Track Record:** The program must have been offered by the school for one year.

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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- **Skills Focus:** The intended recipients are adult learners seeking to quickly gain or update skills for in-demand jobs, making these pathways more affordable and accessible.
- **Potential for All Bachelor's Degree Holders:** Students who have already obtained a bachelor's degree (but not a graduate credential) could be eligible.

Federal and State Role

- The federal government is responsible for tracking earnings, completion and placement of program graduates.
- States are responsible for ensuring programs meet labor market and credentialing requirements.

AFT Efforts will Focus on Addressing Potential Risks and Protecting Students

Pell eligibility is limited, and using Workforce Pell will count toward students' overall limit of 12 semesters of full-time study or the pro-rated, part-time equivalent. It is critical to make sure this limited grant aid goes to programs of value.

- **Risks to Watch For**
 - Programs that overpromise employment outcomes or inflate credential value.
 - Institutions that target vulnerable populations with aggressive marketing practices.
 - Providers that fail to deliver credentials recognized by employers.
- **Oversight**
 - States, workforce boards and accrediting agencies can monitor program quality and prevent fraud.
 - The federal Department of Education will also have a role to play in interpreting the law and determining where additional safeguards are appropriate. Congress may likewise pass additional legislation to clarify some of the intended oversight.
- **Student Recourse**
 - Students should be informed of their rights if they believe they were misled or defrauded.
 - Congress should encourage the U.S. Department of Education and states to support strong student protections, including by requiring programs to meet the law's outcome metrics *before* becoming eligible for Workforce Pell and by establishing clear guidance directing students to file complaints with their state attorney general's office, state higher education agency, or the Education Department's Federal Student Aid Ombudsman Group.
 - Federal policy should require prominent disclosure of complaint pathways as part of program enrollment materials.

What's Next?

- **Implementation Timeline:** The authorizing law (PL119-21) dictates that the Workforce Pell program should be implemented by July 1, 2026.
- **Rulemaking:** The Education Department will draft rules (or regulations) on program details as part of its negotiated rulemaking sessions in December 2025 and January 2026. More details are available [here](#) (go to the section called “Accountability in Higher Education and Access through Demand-driven Workforce Pell (AHEAD) Committee”). The rulemaking sessions are open to the public, and there will be opportunities for public review and comment on these details.
- **Union Impacts:** Workforce Pell may impact your union. Increased demand for workforce training could bring new faculty and/or staff to campus. But high-demand, high-wage workforce sectors can struggle to find qualified faculty if the pay is not comparable. The requirement that programs lead to a “portable, stackable” credential could impact course offering and course sequencing. Local leaders should review their collective bargaining agreements and used shared governance processes to ensure students using Workforce Pell receive an education of the same high quality as traditional degree programs.