

DEFENDING AAPI ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION : A Playbook for Informed Action

June 2025 — First Edition

With various threats facing higher education and our communities, it is time to take meaningful action—one that is informed by the insights of good policy and the realities of public opinion. This playbook, jointly developed by the leadership of Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) and AAPI Data, offers an overview of various threats to higher education in 2025, demonstrates the ways that federal programs and policies have benefited Asian American and Pacific Islander students, and offer options for strategic policy engagement at the state and federal levels. This playbook for informed action will be updated with successive versions in the coming months, as the policy landscape continues to shift in ways that require our continued interest and collective engagement.

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I. Varying Threats to Higher Education

The U.S. system of higher education, which includes community colleges, universities, professional schools and technical institutes, faces an unprecedented array of challenges in 2025. In addition to recent legislative action through the federal budget process, which we detail further below, many federal actions on higher education have involved the executive branch, ranging from presidential executive orders to decisions by individual agencies like the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Education, and AmeriCorps.

Executive Actions

Below is a summary of various announcements and actions by the executive branch.¹

1. **Ending diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI):** President Trump signed an executive order on January 21, 2025² directing all federal agencies to end DEI preferences, mandates, policies, programs, and activities and directing the Secretary of Education to issue guidance to state and local educational agencies and institutions of higher education that receive federal funds or participate in the Title IV federal student loan assistance program on “the measures and practices required to comply with *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*.” This executive order was followed by a Dear Colleague letter from the U.S. Department of Education threatening loss of funding for noncompliance,³ and federal courts subsequently provided a preliminary injunction (or temporary halt) to this action in April 2025.⁴
2. **Enabling immigration enforcement to operate in sensitive areas:** In January 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a directive that rescinds an October 2021 DHS memorandum on Enforcement Actions in or Near Protected Areas,⁵ and enables Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) action in “sensitive” areas including churches and schools.
3. **Various actions targeting international students in the United States:** The DHS directive on immigration enforcement, in addition to subsequent executive actions such as the executive order targeting antisemitism and protests on U.S. campuses,⁶ has led to widespread arrests, detentions, and deportations. In April 2025, the Associated Press tracked over 1,200 international students who have had their visa status revoked or their legal status terminated.⁷ In addition, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced on May 28, 2025 that the State Department “will work with the Department of Homeland Security to aggressively revoke visas for Chinese students,” and “will also revise visa criteria to enhance scrutiny of all future visa applications from the People’s Republic of China and Hong Kong.”⁸

4. **Cuts to research funding and federal government contracts:** Several federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, and Department of Energy, have announced across-the-board reductions in research overhead rates to 15 percent,⁹ and federal science agencies have enacted an estimated \$3 billion in cuts to research funding,¹⁰ \$350 million in cuts to Regional Educational Laboratories and Equity Assistance Centers,¹¹ and the termination of research contracts with the National Center for Education Statistics.¹²
5. **Reduction in force at U.S. Department of Education including critical research entities:** President Trump has taken measures to reduce over 50% of the U.S. Department of Education's workforce. These cuts are across the entire department including components responsible for ensuring compliance with civil rights protections (Office for Civil Rights) and data collection (NCES and IES) requirements.¹³ President Trump has indicated that existing statutory required responsibilities would migrate to other federal agencies (for example, with student loans to be administered by the Small Business Administration, and special education and nutritional programs to be migrated to the Department of Health and Human Services).
6. **Closing the U.S. Department of Education:** President Trump signed an executive order on March 20, 2025, intending to close the U.S. Department of Education and return authority over education-related matters to the states and local communities.¹⁴ In addition, this executive order states that any program or activity receiving federal assistance pertaining to "diversity, equity, and inclusion" be terminated.
7. **Cuts and threats to various programs supporting college students:** In April 2025, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) had reportedly cut about \$400 million in AmeriCorps grants to states and put 85% of its staff on administrative leave,¹⁵ and on April 28 the White House issued an executive order on immigration that empowers the Attorney General to take action against states offering in-state tuition to undocumented residents of the state.¹⁶

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Budgetary Actions

On top of various policy threats and challenges emanating from executive actions, many AAPI communities also stand to be harmed by recent budget actions in Congress. On May 22, 2025, the House of Representatives passed HR1, the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act”, by a single-vote margin. HR1 extends or makes permanent various tax provisions enacted as part of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) that are set to expire under current law and introduces various new provisions. Provisions relevant to higher education include:

- 1) **Financial aid changes.** Some of the biggest changes in HR1 involve changes that will disproportionately harm low-income students and the higher-education institutions serving them.
 - a) **Pell grants:** The bill increases the minimum number of course hours for Pell grant recipients from 12 semester hours to 15 semester hours, cutting Pell funding by 20% among those who continue with 12 semester hours, and eliminates entirely Pell funding for those taking courses less than half time, or 8 semester hours. The American Association of Community Colleges estimates that about 20 percent of all community college students would lose Pell grants under this measure.¹⁷
 - b) **Eliminating subsidized loans:** The bill eliminates federal subsidized loans for students while they are pursuing their undergraduate degrees and eliminates Direct Plus loans for graduate students beginning July 1, 2026. It also limits Parent Plus Loans by capping how much parents can borrow and only allowing them to take out loans if their dependent student has already taken out the maximum in unsubsidized loans.
 - c) **Risk sharing by higher-education institutions:** Requires higher-education institutions participating in federal student loan programs to make annual risk-sharing payments based on the nonrepayment balance of student loan cohorts. The American Association of Community Colleges opposes risk sharing because of the likely disproportionate financial impact on smaller institutions.¹⁸ There are additional concerns that this risk-sharing system could disincentivize colleges from accepting lower-income and historically marginalized students.
- 2) **Increased tax on college and university endowments.** Creates a tiered system based on the size of the endowment on a per-student basis. The current tax rate of 1.4% could rise to as high as 21% for the largest endowments. There is some analysis that approximately 50% of endowment funds are utilized for student financial aid. There are concerns that this tax could damage the long-term mission of colleges and lessen the resources relied upon to recruit lower-income students.

Finally, the President’s FY26 Budget released on May 30, 2025 contains several changes to higher-education funding, including a proposed reduction in federal work study from \$1.24 billion to \$250 million and a nearly \$10 billion reduction in Pell grant spending to \$27.7 billion.¹⁹ Notably, the proposed budget maintains funding for Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions at \$23 million.

II. The Critical Role of AANAPISIs

The Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) designation represents one of the most significant federal investments in supporting the education of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AA&NHPI) communities—a frequently overlooked population due to harmful misconceptions about these students’ educational experiences.

Established in 2007 by Congress as one of 11 Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), the AANAPISI designation enables institutions with substantial AA&NHPI student populations to apply for federal funding to create and implement culturally responsive programs and services. Federal support for AANAPISIs has been critical to closing educational gaps, increasing student achievement, and strengthening the U.S. workforce, thus spurring economic development. Without continued funding, these critical programs will be dismantled, leading to severe negative consequences for nearly one million undergraduate students nationwide.²⁰

In 2024, there were 198 institutions that were eligible for AANAPISI funding. Of these, however, only 54 were receiving AANAPISI funding from the federal government.²¹ While about a third of these funded programs are in California (19 out of 54 nationally), AANAPISIs can be found in a total of 14 states—including Washington (7), New York (4), Massachusetts, Minnesota and Virginia (3 each)—as well as the territories of American Samoa, Palau, and Northern Mariana Islands.²²

AANAPISIs Key Facts

- AA&NHPI students are one of the fastest-growing racial groups in U.S. higher education, with enrollment projected to grow 12% in the next four years.
- AANAPISIs enroll over 40% of all AA&NHPI undergraduates in the nation, playing a critical role in their access to and success in higher education.
- Funded AANAPISIs enroll over 980,000 total undergraduates in 2023, with nearly 1 in 5 being an AA&NHPI undergraduate.
- AANAPISIs award nearly half of all associate and bachelor’s degrees earned by AA&NHPI students.
- Although AANAPISIs represent the second-largest group of MSIs eligible for federal funding, they remain the least funded MSI designation.

III. Where AAPI Communities Stand on Education Policies

In the current political landscape, assessing public opinion on key policy areas is a critical factor to track community perspectives on timely issues, and to develop appropriate responses. AAPI Data conducts regular surveys with the Associated Press and NORC to help decision makers and advocates understand public opinion on important topics. An important perennial issue for AAPI communities continues to be education, and recent federal policy actions against education have been met with widespread disapproval by AAPI communities.

- **Most AAPIs Believe a College Degree is Important or Essential:** AAPIs strongly believe an education is essential or important for obtaining a job that can comfortably support a family (88%), having the ability to change jobs more easily in the long term (88%), increasing wealth and minimizing debt for the long term (86%), and being an informed and engaged citizen (78%). (AAPI Data | AP-NORC poll May 2025)
- **AAPIs are Concerned About Recent Cuts and Restrictions:** AAPIs are extremely or very concerned about increases in student loan debt (63%), restrictions to free speech on college campuses (57%), and federal cuts to university research (56%).
(AAPI Data | AP-NORC poll May 2025)
- **A Large Majority of AAPIs Oppose Federal Cuts to College and University DEI Programs:** 65% of AAPIs strongly or somewhat oppose cutting federal funding for colleges and universities with diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Among adults 18-29, 89% somewhat or strongly oppose cuts to DEI programs. (AAPI Data | AP-NORC poll May 2025)
- **A Strong Majority of AAPIs Support Teaching about the History of AAPI Communities in the U.S.:** 75% of AAPIs strongly or somewhat favor teaching about the history of AAPIs in the U.S. (AAPI Data | AP-NORC poll May 2025)
- **A Large Majority of AAPIs Oppose Arresting or Deporting Students Involved With On-Campus Protests:** 62% of AAPIs strongly or somewhat oppose arresting or deporting students involved With on-campus protests. Among adults 18-29, 87% somewhat or strongly oppose. (AAPI Data | AP-NORC poll May 2025)
- **A Strong Majority of AAPIs Believe Additional Investment in Education is Needed:** Many think that the federal government spends too little on key priorities, with education (64%) topping the list and military spending as a very low priority. (AAPI Data | AP-NORC poll Feb/March 2025)

IV. What's Next in Federal Policy, and What Risks Remain?

Congressional budget actions: HR1 (“One Big Beautiful Bill Act”) has headed to the Senate and faces considerable opposition from Senate Democrats and a small group of Republican Senators.²³ Republican leaders have set a deadline of July 4th to have the bill pass both chambers and send it to the president for his signature. It is likely that the process will extend to later in July.

The Senate is considering the legislation under a parliamentary procedure known as “budget reconciliation.” The process includes limited time for debate, limited amendments and provides that the legislation can be passed with a simple majority rather than the 60-vote supermajority needed to break a Senate filibuster. Republicans hold a 53-47 margin in the Senate, meaning they can lose up to three votes and still pass the bill (the vice president would cast the tie-breaking vote in the event of a 50-50 tie).

Currently, the bill is silent on the issue of Minority Serving Institutions, leaving the last legislation governing AANAPISIs in place. The AANAPISI program is authorized by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007. It will be important to track future Congressional actions pertaining to these laws. It will also be important to track future budget allocations to the AANAPISI program—even as the President’s FY26 Budget blueprint holds AANIPISI funding steady (see page 3)—as this administration has frequently shifted policy positions that require focused attention and action.

Administration actions: In addition to Congressional action in the summer 2025, there will likely be additional administrative actions that layer on top of existing measures, endangering the financial viability and educational mission of higher education institutions. These measures include cuts to overhead rates on federal grants and contracts (currently paused by a nationwide court injunction that may be swept aside in a pending Supreme Court ruling on national injunctions), additional cuts to research funding, termination of federal contracts in select colleges and universities, revocation of student visas from China and other countries, blanket travel bans on additional countries,²⁴ arbitrary revocation of student visas by the Secretary of State, and additional attempts to tie federal funding to campus policies on student protest and course curricula.

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V. Roadmap for Effective Action, and How APAHE Can Help

APAHE (Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education) was founded in 1987 in California and became a national organization in 2000. APAHE is dedicated to enhancing educational opportunities for Asian and Pacific American students, promoting and supporting the hiring, retention, and advancement of qualified Asian and Pacific American faculty, staff, and administrators, and creating a better understanding of issues affecting Asian and Pacific Americans in higher education.

APAHE has led advocacy efforts on multiple fronts, including federal programs, policy changes in testing, and hiring practices in government and academia. Despite the perception of AAPIs as a successful minority, their representation in leadership remains disproportionately low. As APAHE approaches its fourth decade, its mission to fight for equity and fair treatment in higher education remains as urgent as ever, calling for continued collective action and engagement.

APAHE has grown tremendously in the last decade, drawing on strength from a diverse set of members, including higher education leaders, faculty, administrators, staff, and students. APAHE is a member of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), a coalition of over 40 national organizations, and draws on strategic partnerships with NCAPA members such as AAPI Data. APAHE also partners with higher education associations such as the American Council on Education (ACE), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the Association of Community College Trustees (AACT), and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU).

Through its support of the federal AANAPISI program and the over 50 funded Institutions across the country and territories, APAHE has engaged in critical AANAPISI program advocacy with the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (WHIAANHPI), President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC). Additionally, APAHE has cultivated partnerships with over 100 Chancellors and Presidents who have championed the AANAPISI program.





Given its mission, its network of over 2,700 higher education practitioners, and its strategic partnerships within individual states and nationally, APAHE is ready and energized for the work ahead.

APAHE is committed to the following actions:

- Conducting intentional outreach via email, virtual and in-person engagement opportunities to its diverse set of constituents;
- Raising awareness in webinars, AANAPISI regional convenings, and in-person events, including in the leadup to AANAPISI week, September 22-28, 2025;
- Raising awareness at other education conferences and legislative and policy summits;
- Raising awareness via interviews for a variety of media outlets, including educational podcasts;
- Producing social media content that amplifies student and institutional stories - including in compelling video formats—for use before, during, and after AANAPISI week in September 2025;
- Organizing engagement with elected and appointed officials at the federal and state levels, including coordination of calls, emails, and virtual and in-person visits to federal elected officials, drafting memoranda to be submitted to Congressional leaders, field hearings with institutions and stakeholders invited to present/testify, and the production of an advocacy toolkit for higher education leaders, student leaders, and education partners.
- Increasing partnerships with civic engagement organizations such as the Asian Pacific American Leadership Institute (APALI), NCAPA members such as APIA Vote, OCA National, SEARAC, and EPIC, and student coalitions such as the East Coast Asian American Student Union (ECAASU), and the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU).

VI. Narrative and Messaging Strategies to Meet the Moment

Effective communication to shape policy depends on the following factors: 1) Getting clarity on goals, 2) Conducting a “power analysis” to inform strategies to attain those goals, and 3) Gaining skills and deploying resources that are focused on strategic communication and policy engagement.

Get clarity on goals, and find common purpose. The higher education system in the United States is incredibly diverse with respect to the degrees and credentials offered (from skill-based certificates to degrees in two-year, four-year, doctoral, and professional programs), the type of scholarly activity that is dominant (from those that are exclusively focused on teaching to those focused on a mix of teaching, research, creative activity, industry engagement, and community engagement), and the type of student populations they serve (part-time students vs. full-time students, students of varying immigration statuses, and students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds).

To effectively defend higher education from budgetary cuts and preserve the ability of higher education institutions to advance their core missions, it will be important to craft messages that are particular and authentic to the work of each institution and that can be part of a more coherent narrative about the importance of public investments in higher education. Such larger narratives will need to appeal to a more common purpose, addressing the American public’s concerns about affordability, economic mobility, and intergenerational progress as well as the concerns of key decision-makers with preferences that range from attending to the needs of their constituents, to pressures for maintaining party unity, winning primary and general elections, and passing good policy.

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Conduct a “power map” of policy decision-making. Once an organization or collective effort has aligned on a set of goals, the next step is to conduct a power analysis of decision-making. A power analysis is a technique to develop effective strategies to influence policy decisions by 1) mapping out the landscape of key actors, 2) assessing whether they are inclined towards or against a proposed solution, and 3) assessing the extent to which each has power or influence over the final decision or outcome.²⁵ Power mapping helps identify strategies that are tailored according to the target, including mobilizing and increasing the clout of policy champions, persuading those who are undecided, and diminishing the power of oppositional interests.

Gain skills and deploy scarce resources effectively in a collective manner. After establishing goals and effective strategies to attain them, it is important to build skills and deploy activities that advance the work of persuasion and mobilization. These include member communications, joint communications with peer organizations, media engagement at the national level and in particular legislative districts, and engagement with key decision makers identified in the power analysis. One effective resource for higher education advocates is the Scientist Advocacy Toolkit developed by the Union of Concerned Scientists, which includes guides on media engagement, science communication, participation in federal rulemaking, and the provision of public testimony.”²⁶



VII. Resources and Call to Action

Access to high-quality, affordable education is critical to economic mobility, intergenerational progress, and the strength of our economy and society. We call on organizations and leaders across various sectors—including in education, industry, government, philanthropy, and community—to join us in a coordinated, engaging, and impactful effort to ensure greater access to higher education.

In addition to plugging into the efforts of APAHE and its partners, we encourage individuals to take additional action to defend access to higher education by directly engaging with their elected representatives in Congress and in state legislatures, by writing letters to the editor, blog posts and opinion essays (“op-eds”), and by making effective use of social media platforms to raise public awareness and inspire collective action.

In our individual and collective efforts, the following resources can help us be better advocates for higher education.

The Scientist Advocacy Toolkit developed by the Union of Concerned Scientists, which includes guides and pointers to assist with policy engagement, community engagement, and media engagement.
<https://www.ucs.org/resources/scientist-advocacy-toolkit>

The Activist Toolkit developed by CALPIRG Students that is particularly attuned to the needs and interests of undergraduate and graduate students. <https://calpirgstudents.org/resources/activist-toolkit/>

The Basics of Op-Ed Writing developed by the OpEd Project, which supports under-represented experts “to take thought leadership in their fields.” <https://www.theopedproject.org/resources>

ENDNOTES

1 Our work draws on news coverage as well as policy trackers including the Education Executive Action Tracker by the University Council for Education Administration which has which has tallied over 180 education-related actions between January 2025 and May 2025 (https://www.ucea.org/executive_actions_tracker.php, accessed June 1, 2025).

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3 U.S. Department of Education. (2025, Feb 14) "Dear Colleague Letter: Title VI of the Civil Rights Act in Light of Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard." <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/dear-colleague-letter-sffa-v-harvard-109506.pdf>

4 Blake, Jessica. (2025, April 24) "Anti-DEI Guidance Letter Put On Hold, for Now." *Inside Higher Ed*.

5 "DHS Rescinds and Supersedes Guidelines for Enforcement Actions in or Near Protected Areas." 2025. Immigration Policy Tracking Project. Accessed May 31, 2025. <https://immpolicytracking.org/policies/dhs-rescinds-guidelines-for-enforcement-actions-in-or-near-protected-areas/>.

6 The White House. (2025, January 29) "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism." <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/additional-measures-to-combat-anti-semitism/>.

7 Ma, Annie. (2025, April 17) "More than 1,000 International Students Have Had Visas or Legal Status Revoked." *Associated Press*.

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9 See the Education Executive Action Tracker, fn 1. Importantly, federal courts have permanently enjoined these overhead cuts while legal challenges proceed.

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12 American Educational Research Association. (2025, January). "AERA and COPAFS Statement on the New Administration's Sudden Termination of National Center for Education Statistics Contracts."

13 Blad, Evie. (2025, March 27) "Dramatic Cuts to Ed. Data Programs Will Have Far-Reaching Consequences, Researchers Warn." *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/dramatic-cuts-to-ed-data-programs-will-have-far-reaching-consequences-researchers-warn/2025/03>

- 14** The White House. (2025, March 20) "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities." <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/improving-education-outcomes-by-empowering-parents-states-and-communities/>.
- 15** Padilla, Cecilio, and Joe Walsh. (2025, April 29) "Dozens of States Sue Over Trump Administration's Cuts to AmeriCorps." *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/sacramento/news/ameri-corps-grants-funding-cuts-lawsuit-doge/>
- 16** The White House. (2025, April 28) "Protecting American Communities from Criminal Aliens." The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/protecting-american-communities-from-criminal-aliens/>.
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- 18** Ibid.
- 19** White House Office of Management and Budget. (2025) "Technical Supplement to the 2026 Budget." Accessed May 31, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/information-resources/budget/supplemental-materials/>. These changes are also reflected in the U.S. Department of Education's Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Summary released in May 2025 <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/fiscal-year-2026-budget-summary-110043.pdf>
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- 23** Lebowitz, Megan. (2025, May 25) "Sen. Ron Johnson Says There's Enough Opposition in the Senate to Hold up Trump's 'Big, Beautiful' Bill." *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/ron-johnson-says-enough-opposition-senate-hold-trumps-spending-bill-rcna208973>
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- 26** Union of Concerned Scientists. (2023, June 27). *Scientist Advocacy Toolkit*. <https://www.ucs.org/resources/scientist-advocacy-toolkit>

ABOUT AAPI DATA

AAPI Data is a leading research and policy organization producing accurate data to shift narratives and drive action toward enduring solutions for Asian American (AA) and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities across the nation. AAPI Data aspires to transform public and private systems to ensure that all AA and NHPI communities are recognized, valued and prioritized.

Learn more at aapidata.com

ABOUT APAHE

Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education is dedicated to enhancing the educational opportunities for Asian and Pacific American students; promoting and supporting the hiring, retention, and advancement of qualified Asian and Pacific American faculty, staff, and administrators; and creating a better understanding of issues in the public affecting Asian and Pacific Americans in higher education. **Learn more at apahenational.org**

APAHE AND AAPI DATA VALUE WORKING WITH A VARIETY OF PARTNERS WHO ARE COMMITTED TO INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION.

To stay engaged, email action@aapidata.com and apainhighered@gmail.com

