Dear Ms. Broad, Dr. Bumphus, Dr. Howard, Dr. Coleman, Mr. McPherson, and Dr. Warren:

Nearly one year ago, many of us sent a letter to then-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan urging him to utilize the Department’s authority under the Higher Education Act to take a critical step toward making it easier for more students to access federal financial aid and obtain a higher education. We were pleased when President Obama announced last year that that U.S. Department of Education would take this step and allow students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) using two previous years’ tax data, also known as “prior-prior year” data. Utilizing prior-prior year data means that the FAFSA can now be made available to students three months earlier than it is currently—beginning this October 1, rather than January 1, 2017—and students and their families have the potential to understand and consider their financial aid options sooner. Implementing this “Early FAFSA” will help millions of American families make more informed decisions about higher education and has the potential to significantly increase college enrollment and completion.

However, making the FAFSA available earlier through the use of prior-prior year data is only one piece of the puzzle. On March 25, Under Secretary of Education Ted Mitchell sent a letter to your member institutions urging them to take steps to support the Department’s FAFSA
improvements, and we echo that request for your assistance. In order to fully realize the potential benefits of Early FAFSA for students, colleges and universities should not simply move up their financial deadlines in ways that would disadvantage students who are most in need of the additional time to consider their financial options. Moving up priority aid deadlines would cause some students—particularly low-income students—to be unable to file their paperwork on time, and as a result these students could lose out on important sources of financial aid they need in order to be successful in higher education. To best serve students, we believe that institutions should strike a delicate balance between providing aid packages at least a few weeks prior to the May 1 admissions decision deadline and without significantly moving their priority aid deadlines forward, particularly into December.

As we noted in our letter to the Department last June, “use of prior-prior year data is an opportunity for swift and consequential action to support low- and middle-income students seeking a shot at the American dream through higher education, and would allow the federal government to simplify the process that millions of students and families experience when applying for aid.” Students and their families cannot fully access that opportunity without the support of colleges and universities across the country. While we appreciate that this positive change may cause some short-term complexity as colleges adjust to the new timeline, we believe the long-term gains for America’s students are well worth the effort.

The colleges and universities you represent do so much every day to ensure that the federal financial aid system serves students well. We ask you to help us ensure that the promise of using prior-prior year data is fulfilled and move toward our shared goal of increasing choice, access and persistence for every student, regardless of background.

Sincerely,

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Mark Pocan
United States Representative

Patty Murray
United States Senator

Robert C. “Bobby” Scott
United States Representative

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Frederica Wilson
United States Representative
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

Barbara A. Mikulski
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Jared Polis
United States Representative

Jan Schakowsky
United States Representative

Sam Farr
United States Representative

Gwendolynne S. Moore
United States Representative

Rubén Hinojosa
United States Representative

Lloyd Doggett
United States Representative

Mike Honda
United States Representative

Ron Kind
United States Representative

Cedric Richmond
United States Representative

Marcy Kaptur
United States Representative

Bill Keating
United States Representative

Mark DeSaulnier
United States Representative