February 27, 2020

The Honorable Jim Cooper
United States House of Representatives
1536 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Cooper,

As the House of Representatives considers H.R. 4674, the College Affordability Act, Vanderbilt applauds congressional efforts to make postsecondary education more affordable and more accessible for students, particularly graduate and professional students. However, we are concerned that this reauthorization of the Higher Education Act would also fundamentally change federal student aid from an individual benefit to one that benefits certain types of postsecondary institutions. We look forward to working with policymakers as the legislation moves through the process to ensure that, ultimately, we are increasing access to high-quality, post-secondary education for students regardless of their financial background.

Federal Student Aid Programs
We are particularly supportive of efforts to ensure academically talented students are able to attend Vanderbilt at the undergraduate as well as the graduate level, regardless of their financial situation. Our resolve to make a Vanderbilt undergraduate education accessible and affordable to all admitted students is stronger than ever thanks to Opportunity Vanderbilt, which encompasses three important commitments:

- Vanderbilt's admissions process is need-blind.
- Vanderbilt will meet 100 percent of a family's demonstrated financial need.
- Financial aid awards do not include loans. Instead of offering need-based loans to undergraduate students, Vanderbilt offers additional grant assistance.

Vanderbilt is among a small number of U.S. universities to adopt these philosophies and allocate the resources necessary to make a premier college education a reality for students and their families. Last year, we committed over $135 million in institutional resources to Opportunity Vanderbilt. As a result of this commitment, we have seen a tremendous drop in total student debt upon graduation. Compared with 2008–09 borrowing figures before the program launched, our students' total amount borrowed has decreased by 71 percent. Additionally, the number of need-based borrowers has decreased by 70 percent over the same time period.

Our commitment to low-income students does not stop with our undergraduates. We are doing our part to keep tuition increases to a minimum, and provide institutional financial aid to our graduate and professional students through the Russell G. Hamilton Scholarship program, a $125 million graduate student scholarship program that will ultimately cover the full tuition of approximately 100 graduate students each year.
Solving society's greatest challenges requires creative interdisciplinary thinking, which comes part and parcel with a world-class graduate education. What our graduate students learn at Vanderbilt prepares them not just to become exceptional academics, but also visionary leaders in business, industry, the arts, and public service.

We are grateful for the overall increases to the federal student aid programs in H.R. 4674, particularly the increases provided for the Pell Grant program. In addition, we are very pleased that the College Affordability Act rewards students who complete their undergraduate degrees in a timely way by allowing them to carry their unused Pell eligibility into their graduate and professional studies. This benefits not only undergraduate students by encouraging on-time completion but also low-income graduate and professional students. We also strongly support provisions that would simplify the FAFSA, particularly for Pell-eligible students; require the use of prior-prior year tax data; remove the annual filing requirement for Pell Grant recipients; and enhance data sharing between the IRS and Department of Education. We also applaud efforts to extend Title IV eligibility to DACA recipients and Dreamer students.

While Vanderbilt is pleased that the bill preserves the campus-based aid programs, SEOG and Federal Work-Study, we would urge Congress to expand institutional participation in the programs through the increased authorization levels as opposed to changing the allocation formula. Vanderbilt received $2.7 million in campus-based aid funding in the 2018-19 academic year which aided 1,040 undergraduate and graduate students. This has leveraged over $1.25 million in institutional matching funding through the required cost-share match. If the existing formula is altered, we are concerned that our students could lose access to campus-based aid programs at the same time that the overall authorization level is increasing. We would also encourage Congress to direct the proposed SEOG emergency grant program to institutions that have a strong track record of graduating Pell recipients.

Vanderbilt applauds Congress for taking strong steps to lower the cost of borrowing for students. By eliminating origination fees for federal loans and restoring subsidized loans, graduate and professional students have seen a continual erosion of federal aid in recent years. These changes will dramatically decrease the cost of education for our students. Last year, our students paid $2.31 million in loan fees, and we estimate that number to be $2.35 million for the current year. We also applaud Congress for retaining the existing federal loan limits. We would encourage policymakers to include advanced practice nursing programs as a health program eligible for higher direct unsubsidized loan limits alongside medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, public health, chiropractic health, and naturopathic medicine. We would also encourage Congress to ensure TEACH grants are not limited to undergraduate students. At Vanderbilt, TEACH grants are only awarded to graduate students who fully understand the commitments they are making in accepting the grant.

Vanderbilt supports efforts to retain and streamline the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program to ensure young people are able to pursue their passions. Countless Vanderbilt graduates choose to enter lower-paying public service jobs because they are committed to the missions of those organizations and to serving their communities. Our graduates are advocating for students with disabilities at risk of
involvement in the juvenile justice system. They are serving as social workers, public defenders, nurses, teachers, and civil servants. Absent PSLF, many of them would not be able to afford to pursue careers that provide critical services to our communities.

While the College Affordability Act makes a historic commitment to improve undergraduate and graduate student access, we are deeply concerned by the fundamental changes the bill makes in how federal student aid is awarded. To date, federal aid has largely flowed directly to individual students, allowing students to choose the right institution for their educational needs. However, the proposed America's College Promise program would fundamentally change this and by directing federal resources to one sector of higher education. Vanderbilt strongly opposes this proposal. Instead, we would encourage Congress to significantly increase the Pell Grant which could, effectively, eliminate costs for community college. We believe that students, particularly low-income students, should retain their ability to choose the best institution for them, whether that is a community college or a four-year institution that offers strong supports for first generation and low-income students.

We support provisions that would require consumer testing to determine standard terms, definitions, and clear grouping of aid types on aid offers. We also support flexibility for institutions to capture nuances and variation in aid packages. We urge Congress to give careful attention to the differences between undergraduate aid offers and those for graduate and professional students. Institutions should be afforded flexibility to design aid offers in a way that best suits their particular student population and avoids unintended consequences of overly prescriptive standardization. Finally, Vanderbilt has concerns with provisions that would require the Department of Education to prescribe at least one method that institutions must use to determine the cost of room and board for students living off campus. Calculations for off-campus room and board are most appropriately made by institutions, not the federal government.

**Accreditation**

Congress should look for ways to improve accreditation, as a valuable piece in the process of helping to ensure academic quality and public accountability. Potential reforms should avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and should seek to develop more effective measures of preventing fraud and abuse and holding poor performing institutions accountable without infringing on the academic freedom and autonomy of institutions with a proven record of success. Vanderbilt supports efforts to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly, support students that attend high-quality institutions, and hold institutions accountable for ensuring students complete in a timely way and are prepared to meaningfully contribute to their community after graduating. We share concerns that there are too many institutions that fail to meet these minimum standards.

Any proposed expanded role for the Department of Education to set minimal accreditation standards must be done in a highly collaborative way with institutions. The focus on educational outcome metrics should also expand beyond income, particularly income earned immediately after graduation, which may not fully reflect an individual's full career potential or intentional choice to pursue public service careers. While those metrics can be useful, they can also miss a broader picture of an
institution's mission and programs. We support a system in which all institutions—working with their institutional accreditors—should be expected to provide evidence of student success in three areas: student learning experience, student academic experience, and post-graduation outcomes.

Vanderbilt has long supported changes to accreditation such as risk-based accreditation and mission- or sector-based accreditation. We believe the concept of a geographically based regional accreditation system is outdated, especially with the growth in online education across states. A movement towards risk-based, as well as sector- or mission-based, accreditation would lead to better self-policing and more rigorous standards for each sector, allowing the accreditation system to respond appropriately to the varying degrees of risk that different institutions present.

**Accountability**
We believe that colleges and universities should be held accountable for ensuring students receive a high-quality education and students should be able to repay their federal loans when they graduate, ensuring accountability for taxpayer dollars. By all accounts, Vanderbilt meets these standards. While the cohort default rate has provided a measure of accountability, it may not be sufficiently effective at ensuring institutions are providing their students a strong return on their investment. However, any new accountability measures should not increase undue burden on high-quality and low-risk institutions and should take into account the diversity of the higher education community. We look forward to working with policymakers as the reauthorization moves forward to ensure that any new accountability standards, such as a new cohort default rate and on-time repayment rate meet these criteria.

**Student Unit Records**
We recognize that there is a strong interest in lifting the existing federal ban on federal student unit records and there could be potential positive benefits of lifting this ban. Vanderbilt appreciates that the proposed student unit records system in H.R. 4674 incorporates important privacy and guardrails including: the data are accurate, reliable, and reproducible; the system is sustainable over time; the system is flexible; and the system is secure, only allowing authorized access and use, including parameters for how the data can be used. For instance, we would oppose using such a database for the purpose of ranking institutions. We also appreciate that the new database would provide notice to students that their data is being collected; provide an opportunity for students to inspect and correct their records; include data retention and destruction protocols; and include requirements that data may be made available only for vetted research purposes. We expect these criteria will be preserved throughout the implementation of the system, which we believe will be enormously complex and will require the Department to collaborate closely with a variety of stakeholders, including institutions, students, and other entities.

**Regulatory Issues**
Vanderbilt supports smart and effective federal regulations that hold institutions accountable and protect students, families, and taxpayers. We have also long-supported efforts to streamline duplicative, out of date, and overly burdensome regulations.
We are concerned that the College Affordability Act imposes many new regulatory and reporting requirements on institutions as well as one-size-fits-all mandates that institutions create specific offices and roles on campus. For example, the bill would require institutions create an Office of Accessibility and hire a coordinator to oversee compliance with our existing obligations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Vanderbilt is committed to serving students through our existing office of student access services and mobility and currently has a designated employee to coordinate our compliance with Title VI; we would be concerned if the bill would require us to duplicate our existing efforts.

Vanderbilt appreciates our obligation to report to the Department of Education on a regular basis on certain foreign gifts and the recent increased interest in these disclosures. We would encourage the Department of Education to clarify institutional responsibilities in this reporting through a negotiated rulemaking process that includes extensive stakeholder input. We have serious concerns about proposals put forward by the Department to significantly expand these reporting requirements, to include providing copies of gift and contract agreements and names of all donors, including those who wish to remain anonymous. We support efforts to retain the current $250,000 reporting threshold and to exempt tuition payments and related fees from such disclosures. We take seriously our responsibility to comply with Department reporting and disclosure requirements but also take seriously our commitments to our donors and those with whom we have entered into contracts.

**Campus Safety**

Vanderbilt is committed to supporting all students impacted by sexual misconduct and providing a process that is fair to all parties. Having the ability and flexibility to address these difficult cases in a compassionate and effective way for the individuals involved and for our campus community is also important. Because of the vast diversity among institutions of higher education, we urge Congress to refrain from mandating one-size-fits-all prescriptive policies with respect to campus safety. Instead, the federal government should encourage campuses to adopt policies that make sense for their campus community. While sexual assault is a serious crime, colleges and universities are not courts, nor should they be. We do not have the resources, personnel, or expertise of the criminal and civil justice system. We do not have subpoena powers or the ability to hold an attorney in contempt. Our disciplinary process is designed to determine whether an individual has violated our code of conduct—not whether someone is guilty of a crime. It is also meant to serve as an educational process, appropriate for the nature of potential violations and sanctions, while furthering our commitment to education and the development of students.

Vanderbilt encourages policymakers to consider ways the federal government can help support campuses in their prevention efforts. No matter how effective and fair our campus disciplinary processes are, our ultimate goal is to prevent sexual misconduct from occurring in the first place. We are required by the Clery Act to provide primary and ongoing sexual assault education and prevention programs for students and employees. Vanderbilt is committed to robust prevention programs, including our bystander intervention training and over 20 other prevention programs addressing a
broad range of behaviors that constitute sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating and domestic violence, stalking, hazing, and sexual exploitation.

The College Affordability Act places a spotlight on hazing, a serious problem on many college campuses. However, we have some concerns with creating a new federal definition of “hazing” and “harassment” when neither are currently considered crimes under the Uniform Crime Reporting currently used for Clery Act reporting. We also have some concerns with provisions that would establish new reporting categories for each that would require far more detail than we provide for any other crime category in our annual security report, including the disclosure of names of student organizations. As currently structured, that report is, appropriately, a compilation of crime statistics, not a report on internal processes and outcomes.

Vanderbilt strongly supports a periodic campus climate survey that will help campuses better understand the scope and nature of sexual assault and help institutions improve their policies and protections. However, we oppose a mandated, one-size-fits-all survey developed by the Department. Campuses should have control over survey administration and ask questions that pertain to their student population. Vanderbilt currently conducts a campus climate survey every four years, which allows us to respond to the survey with changes to internal practices and policies before surveying our students again. Campuses also cannot be held responsible for ensuring an “adequate, random, and representative sample size of students” complete a survey—particularly one that is anonymous.

We believe that our students should be afforded international opportunities that offer high-quality academic programming, an enriching international cultural experience, and are as safe as possible. We currently accept academic credit from well over 100 study abroad programs, although only a small number of those are run by Vanderbilt. We believe that any required study abroad reporting should be limited to crimes reported to Vanderbilt that affect our students participating in programs we administer and can control. We would also suggest that this sort of reporting should replace existing Clery reporting requirements related to foreign locations.

Thank you for considering my views on this important piece of legislation. I know we all share the goal of ensuring our students have access to high quality, affordable education that prepares them for a successful future. Our country’s future depends on it.

Sincerely,

Susan R. Wente
Interim Chancellor and Provost