The University of South Carolina Student Government
Congressional Advisory Board

2015 Annual Report to the South Carolina
Congressional Delegation
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Mission Statement

The Congressional Advisory Board serves as the voice of the University of South Carolina’s student body to the federal government. The board researches the most critical issues pertaining to students and addresses South Carolina’s Congressional Delegation to find better solutions to academic, financial, and social problems.

The board works to solicit input from institutional constituents such as students, faculty, administrators and staff. The board strives to educate the university community about federal higher education initiatives and investments, enabling students to realize their potential for active involvement in national politics.

As student advocates, we believe we can transform both the state and the University of South Carolina by informing our elected leaders of issues that are relevant to our generation. By doing this, we can enhance their future—benefiting our community and leaving a lasting heritage for future students.
Acknowledgements

Without the assistance of several members of both Student Government and the Carolina community, this report would not exist. The entire Congressional Advisory Board thanks the following:

Mrs. Theresa Sexton, coordinator for Student Government, greatly assisted the board in scheduling visits with administrators and in planning the logistics of its travels. Mr. Jerry Brewer, associate vice president for student affairs, provided advice for the proposals and assisted with the board’s financial arrangements. Ms. Lindsay Richardson, student body president, provided valuable guidance in choosing worthwhile topics and coordinating meetings around the university. Mr. Ryan Harman, student body treasurer, assisted with the board’s financial arrangements and helped reserve meeting venues.

Individual board members would like to thank the following:

Natalie Pita, Connor Mitchell, and Matthew Price wish to thank Harris Pastides, University South Carolina President, Dennis Pruitt, University of South Carolina's Vice President of Student Affairs and Academic Support, Stacey Bradley, Associate Vice President for Administration, Bobby Gist, Executive Assistant to the President for Equal Opportunity Programs, and Chris Wuchenich, Associate Vice President for Law Enforcement and Safety, for their perspectives, experience, and guidance, and for volunteering their time in meetings.
Member Biographies

Jonathan Kaufman is a junior in the South Carolina Honors College, double majoring in Spanish and Political Science with a minor in business administration. He is originally from Frederick, Maryland and serves as the Secretary of Governmental Affairs for Student Government. After graduating, Jonathan plans to attend law school with aspirations to become a Naval J.A.G. officer.

Natalie Pita is a sophomore in the South Carolina Honors College majoring in international business, economics, and Spanish with minors in public relations and dance. She is originally from Richmond, VA and serves as a writer for University Communications and a Columbia-area stringer for The New York Times. During her breaks, she volunteers at the Richmond City Justice Center. After graduating, Natalie plans to attend law school.

Connor Mitchell is a junior dual-degree student at the University of South Carolina, earning a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics. He is originally from Lexington, South Carolina and also serves as a member of Student Government’s Legislative Advisory Board. After graduating, Connor plans to pursue law school and hopes to eventually have a career in politics.

Zach Griffin is a junior at the University of South Carolina who is studying Political Science and Business Administration. He is originally from Rock Hill, South Carolina, and he is actively involved on and off campus in extracurricular activities, including being a member of Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity and performing paralegal duties at the Strom Law Firm. After graduating, Zach plans to attend law school and aspires to a career in public service.

Michael Parks is a junior in the University of South Carolina, double-majoring in Finance and Economics and pursuing a minor in Political Science. A proud native of Columbia, South Carolina, Michael serves as the student intern for the Office of Legal Education of U.S. Attorneys at the Department of Justice's National Advocacy Center. After graduating, Michael aspires to attend law school.

Matthew Price is a junior at the University of South Carolina. He is majoring in Political Science and minoring in Public Health. Matt grew up in Asheville, North Carolina and is in his third year as a member of Student Government. He currently is interning with the Carolina Peace Resource Center and focuses on nuclear non-proliferation issues. After graduating, he plans to study international law.
Message from the Director

Dear Representative or Senator,

Over the past six months, members of the 2015 Congressional Advisory Board have vigorously researched issues pertinent to the University of South Carolina student body. They interviewed administration, debated commonly raised issues, and spoke to students across campus about their top legislative priorities. Their findings reflect the views of many, and included in this report are two policy proposals that address federal issues. These reports were unanimously supported by the Student Senate and have the backing of the student body.

All members of the board were selected on academic and extracurricular merit. Applicants were subjected to a rigorous interview process. Please note that many who wanted to join the board in this endeavor were not able to. The university’s Student Government chose the best students for the board, and I am confident that you will be impressed by their thoroughness, dedication, and intellectual curiosity.

It is with great honor and appreciation that the board presents this report for informing you of the issues that are most important to South Carolina students.

With sincerest gratitude,

Jonathan Kaufman, Student Congressional Advisory Board Director
Secretary of Governmental Affairs,
University of South Carolina Student Government
SEXUAL ASSAULT

A Proposal to Make Students Feel Safe from Sexual Assault on College Campuses

The issue of sexual assault on college campuses has recently been at the forefront of debate. President Barack Obama stated that “freedom from sexual assault is a basic human right,” and the White House has created an “It’s On Us” campaign to raise awareness and to involve men in the fight against sexual assault. The campaign led by President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden has recruited celebrities to speak about the cause and has been surrounded by a storm of new legislation on the issue; yet 88 schools are currently under Title IX investigation for possible violations of federal law in their treatment of sexual assault cases. One in five females is still assaulted while in college, usually by someone they know, but only 12 percent actually report the incident to the police. The following report presents recommendations based on student views and discussions with University of South Carolina administrators in the three tiers of the medical model of sexual assault: prevention, early intervention (or crisis intervention), and recovery.

Prevention

Often times, our culture teaches us that it is acceptable to blame victims in cases of sexually-based crimes. We instinctively ask what the victim did wrong in any given situation, or how they allowed that to happen to themselves. Very rarely do we immediately question the perpetrator or attempt to understand what led them to disregard the individual rights of another
human being. As a society, we have an obligation to rectify this mentality and to combat the underlying forces that shape our approach towards sexual assault and rape.

It is crucial to note that society’s general apathy and disregard towards victims is not simply a natural reaction; rather, it is learned through years of neglect towards the root of the problem and compounded by devastating questions such as, “Well, what was she wearing?” An underlying cause of rampant sexual assault, particularly on college campuses, is a society that is desensitized towards and untrusting of sexual assault allegations. Furthermore, general knowledge about what constitutes sexual assault is missing among many students. In tandem, lack of knowledge and lack of concern for the severity of sexual assault represents an enormous challenge for the United States in our effort to reduce the incidence rate of sexual assault.

**Recommendations**

Although societal conditioning and a lack of knowledge concerning sexual assault is a major obstacle to overcome, there is a long-term solution to this issue. Increased federal funding for programs that promote both education about sexual assault and general respect towards others will be a major step in the effort to eliminate sexual assault on college campuses and across the country.

More specifically, we recommend enhanced funding for two organizations: the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) and Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP). Both organizations offer education and awareness-based opportunities across the country and target populations that are at a high risk for becoming victims or perpetrators.

MVP focuses on student outreach and has worked in nearly 200 different high schools across the country, as well as 200 colleges and universities. Its program is highly replicable and gives participating schools the resources necessary to perpetuate the knowledge MVP provides in
its sexual assault prevention workshops. The program emphasizes “bystander awareness” and teaches participants the important role third parties can play in allowing or preventing sexual assault. The organization partners with the Department of Justice’s Office of Violence Against Women to empower colleges and universities to implement the training sessions provided by MVP in their respective communities.

The NSVRC is currently developing a comprehensive sexual violence prevention plan through its Rape Prevention and Education Grant Program. A core element of the program is education seminars aimed at preventing “first-time perpetration and victimization.” NSVRC utilizes culturally relevant seminars to combat sexually-based crimes and to alter the social norms that allow for sexual assault to occur.

MVP and NSVRC will be most effective when their reach is maximized across college campuses nationwide. A key strength of both programs is their outreach to both men and women and their tailored approach to each gender. We propose utilizing these resources at the beginning of each academic year to ensure students and staff are up-to-date on how to appropriately prevent and respond to cases of sexual assault. More specifically, we believe in educating students quickly in order to combat the “red zone,” or the first six weeks students spend on campus, when a student is most likely to find himself or herself in a high-risk situation.

**Early Intervention**

The current national attitude towards rape culture that has been allowed to grow at our institutions of higher education can only be defined as outrage. President Obama and Vice President Biden have publically issued statements of support for the implementation programs that would increase both university accountability and action in regard to student victims of sexual assault. This is an issue that has also gained traction in national media as major news
publications such as The New York Times, Time Magazine, and Rolling Stone have all featured prominent stories on campus sexual assault and the failing response of university officials and administration.

As both legislators and campus leaders, we must be work proactively to create a safer campus climate for our nation’s students; in order to do so, we must actively pursue change in the current apathetic culture and take honest accountability for our shortcomings thus far. It is our belief that the best course of action is to both implement and enhance primary prevention and awareness programs at our nation’s higher education institutions and create a single definition of sexual assault.

**Recommendations**

In order to best combat sexual assault on college campuses, we must honestly assess and proactively move to change the culture at our institutions of higher education. This can best be achieved by educating incoming and current students on both permissible and impermissible sexual conduct. The newly enacted Campus Save Act mandates that universities provide their students with primary prevention and awareness programs as well as ongoing prevention and awareness campaigns. These are groundbreaking first steps, and we firmly believe that these programs will go a long way in changing the current culture on college campuses. It is important, however, that we continue to strive and enhance the programs that we are using in order to more fully and effectively educate students.

The Campus Save Act mandates that primary prevention and awareness programs contain definitions of various acts of sexual violence; however, we have found that these definitions are not standardized across the country, making continuity between programs impossible and degrading their potential effectiveness. For this reason, we propose that these programs teach a
streamlined definition of sexual assault. In order to effectively implement this, it is imperative that all institutions of higher education, as well as the governing bodies they report to, operate under the same definition of sexual assault and consent. Until this is in place, cases will continue to be mishandled, misunderstood, and misrepresented. Additionally, these educational programs should go into detail on ways to effectively intervene if you are a bystander witnessing a potential sexual assault.

Once you have established this background it becomes increasingly important that you now breed an established culture of sexual safety on college campuses. In order to do so it is important that universities establish ongoing prevention and awareness campaigns as well as risk reduction programs so students can recognize and avoid potential abusive behavior. Steps to establish this culture have already been enacted at the University of South Carolina through campus involvement in the “It’s On Us” campaign. This initiative helps promote campus awareness while also encouraging students to pledge to step off the sideline and become part of the solution regarding sexual assault on college campuses.

**Recovery**

Almost half of the universities in the country reported no incidents of sexual assault during the last five years. Yet this does not mean these incidents are not taking place; instead, it means that victims are too afraid to report them. Common reasons for victims not reporting an incident of sexual assault include not wanting other people to know, not knowing what constitutes sexual assault, fearing that the police will not believe them, and not knowing how much control they will have over the case once reported.

Even when these incidents are reported, many universities are not equipped to deal with them properly. Across the country, 73 percent of schools do not have a protocol for cooperating
with the police, 21 percent do not educate faculty and staff members on how to address the issues, and 31 percent do not educate students on what to do in such a situation. vii

**Recommendations**

All universities need to have an established protocol for managing cases, when they are reported, to be instituted by spring of 2016. This written plan of action should establish how the university will respond to a report by including who the university will notify, what procedures the university will implement, and how the university will ensure that the rights of victims as well as accused students will be protected. Every university has a different way of handling sexual assault cases, but the Federal Government should provide suggestions through broad legislation. The University of South Carolina would best benefit from benchmark standards and examples of the best practices for sexual assault protocol and victim treatment.

A formalized procedure such as this will provide victims with the care and support they need and ultimately allow compliance with both school policies and legal mandates. Victims should be afforded a comprehensive service network that provides them with medical, legal, psychological, and advocacy services, as well as any other support services they will need. This network can include a combination of campus and community resources, but universities should at least be able to assist in connecting victims with these programs. The University of South Carolina supports the Survivor Outreach and Support Campus Act’s goal of requiring colleges and universities to establish an independent, on-campus advocate to aid victims. viii A requirement that every university have a Title IX Coordinator on all system campuses should be included with this legislation.
The university’s conduct code should pointedly address the growing issue of sexual assault by enumerating the rights and protections of victims and accused students. The goal of the conduct should be to inform the university community about policies and to prepare the university to take action in the case that a sexual assault incident does take place. The subsequent disciplinary procedures need to provide fairness to victims and accused students alike. If the victim does want to take the approach of a trial, the case should be brought before the criminal justice system, which is better equipped to handle such a case than the university judicial system. The university judicial system was created as an educational system, rather than a penal system. The university system does not have the resources to decide whether or not an individual committed a crime, only whether he or she violated a code of conduct.

A victim of alleged sexual assault should be assigned an advocate or counselor to help establish a support system and evaluate them on different protocols. A university’s Office of Sexual Assault Intervention and Prevention should provide an unbiased presentation of options for a victim of any sexual harassment incident, but many students do not have enough information to make an educated decision. Furthermore, many are not in the proper state of mind to make an educated decision. Through the experience of sexual assault they have been subjected to, victims feel like they are not in control. The university’s recovery process needs to emphasize giving victims at least some degree of control and empowering them to make their own decisions, while also making confidentiality one of its highest priorities.

**Conclusion**

It is extremely difficult to change a university’s culture from one that is apathetic about sexual assault to one that has zero tolerance for such conduct. We will continue to have a societal problem until we start educating at a young age, but there are many steps that can be taken at the
university level in terms of education, early intervention, and recovery. The Federal Government has been sending conflicting messages to universities on what they need to do and how they need to do it. Although students at the University of South Carolina agree with the principles addressed in the Campus SaVE Act and Campus Accountability and Safety Act, there is still work to be done. Congress should make establishing one definition of sexual assault and specifying a single reporting agency its top priorities. Instead of creating piecemeal legislation, we need to focus sexual assault policies into one central location. A bill that consolidates all standing legislation would help universities be more proactive with education and action plans, rather than waiting until cases are reported to act.
College Affordability and Accountability

Pell Grants

The Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students to promote access to postsecondary education. Grant eligibility is dependent upon a student’s expected family contribution (EFC), cost of attendance as determined by the institution, the student’s enrollment status (either part-time or full-time), and whether the student attends for a full academic year or less.\textsuperscript{ix} The average tuition of four year public colleges has increased by 17 percent in the past five years,\textsuperscript{x} while funding for Pell grants has only increased by 7.1 percent.\textsuperscript{x} This trend demonstrates the weakened purchasing power of Pell grants; tuition increases are outpacing grant funding increases. Students receiving Pell grants are forced to pay more out of pocket than ever before.

TRIO Programs

The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs, including Upward Bound, Opportunity Scholars, and Talent Search, each targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post baccalaureate programs. The recipients of the grants, depending on the specific program, are
institutions of higher education, public and private agencies, and community-based organizations with experience in serving disadvantaged youth and secondary schools. At the University of South Carolina, an average of 120 freshmen enter annually with support from TRIO programs, with 150 freshmen entering in 2013-14. In August 2012, the University of South Carolina received a federal grant of $1,168,610 to provide funding for its Ronald E. McNair program until 2016-17. The McNair program was designed to assist low-income, first generation, and underrepresented college students, and it is heavily dependent on this federal funding. Without Title IV funds, this program could not exist, thus decreasing college accessibility.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid**

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was authorized by Congress under the Higher Education Amendment of 1992. Since 1992, the application has served as the gateway to financial aid through the federal government for college students. In fact, approximately 22 million students use the FAFSA every year. However, the FAFSA is a complicated, ten-page document that is often difficult for prospective students and their families to navigate. This obstacle is faced most often by those with the least resources, who also happen to be students who qualify for Pell grants. Each year, as many as 2 million students eligible for Pell grants fail to even complete the application for federal aid.

**Dashboard and Transparency**

Despite countless attempts to enhance transparency in the higher education system, high school students and parents across the nation still lack a streamlined website or database to assist in the search for the college or university that best meets their needs. Currently, prospective college students and their families face an array of statistics that, while pertinent to higher educational entities, are often too confusing to be effective. Furthermore, the data available does
not generally pertain to many groups of students, such as part-time students, disabled students, and Pell grant recipients. Clear-cut and precise reporting of prices at each institution must be a top priority for legislators.

**The FAST Act**

The FAST Act was introduced by Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Michael Bennet (D-CO). The bill is a bipartisan effort that would replace the current ten-page FAFSA. The only questions students and their families would have to answer on the new form would be: “what is your family size?” and “what was your household income two years ago?” By allowing prospective students to use their parent’s income information from two years prior, juniors in high school will know how much financial aid will be available to them when they apply to college. Currently, students can only get a preliminary estimate regarding the amount of aid they may expect to receive.

**The Strengthening Transparency in Higher Education Act**

In order to thoroughly equip students and families with the information they need to make prudent choices, Representative Virginia Foxx (R-NC) and Representative Luke Messer (R-IN) have introduced the Strengthening Transparency in Higher Education Act. This bill will introduce College Dashboard — a consumer-tested, one-stop online resource for students that will replace the ineffective and confusing College Navigator. College Navigator does not provide accurate cost analysis between higher education institutions and is impeded by a confusing user interface. This legislation has already passed the Committee on Education and the Workplace with enormous bipartisan support. H.R. 4983 also requires the Secretary of Education to fully integrate the College Dashboard, thus including information on the completion rates of all students. Furthermore, College Dashboard would provide a link to the unique page of each
school listed on a student’s FAFSA. H.R. 4983 would also require additional, valuable data to be collected from institutions, improving the information students, parents, researchers, and policymakers have about various populations of students.

**Recommendations**

Because many students rely on the FAFSA to make college accessible, Congress should support legislation like the FAST Act that makes the application much simpler. This way, more students would be able to apply for the federal aid they deserve.

Congress should support legislation that reinstates year-round federal Pell grant access to decrease the amount of time necessary to earn a degree. Year-round federal grants would enable students reliant on federal funding to enroll in classes during winter and summer semesters, enabling them to enter the workforce at a younger age. Congress must also make a continued investment in federal Pell grant programs to ensure access to postsecondary education. Despite slow increases in Pell grant funding, federal aid is increasingly insufficient to cover students’ tuition and fees, which are skyrocketing at a rate that more than doubles the rate of federal funding increases.\(^{xiii}\) We need Congress to take urgent action that will equip students with the resources they need to attend a postsecondary institution.

The University of South Carolina is highly dependent on Title IV funding to extend accessibility to all students. We urge Congress to maintain, if not increase, funding to federal programs such as Title IV that allow underrepresented, first generation, and low-income students to pursue a postsecondary education. These programs will increase diversity on college campuses, improve the college education experience for all, and enhance social mobility among these groups after graduation.
We recommend that senators also support H.R. 4983, the Strengthening Transparency in Higher Education Act, since it would significantly improve consumer information to provide an accurate and complete glimpse of all student populations, streamline existing transparency efforts at the federal level, and relieve confusion for students and parents alike. With the vested interest the federal government has in higher education through various lending programs, prospective students and their parents deserve a resource that can accurately and concisely account for the costs and completion rates associated with the various schools they are considering.

**Job Market Background**

Students at the University of South Carolina believe that the status of the economy and the job market for college graduates is a top priority. Both unemployment and underemployment in recent years are evidence of students’ lack of potential employment that utilizes their educational investment after graduation and represent a waste of resources that is typically followed by the inability to repay student loans.

**Loan Cuts and Background**

The largest federal loan program authorized under the Higher Education Act is the Federal Direct Loan Program, which is found in Title IV, part D. The Direct Loan Program includes subsidized and unsubsidized Stafford loans for both undergraduate and graduate students, Parent PLUS and Grad PLUS loans, and consolidation loans.

During the 2013–2014 academic year, total loan volume in the Direct Loan Program, including consolidation loans, was nearly $135.6 billion. Approximately 24 million students received loans that averaged $5,560. Subsidized Stafford loans are available to low-income students, and interest does not accrue on these loans while the student is enrolled in school. For
eligible students borrowing under the subsidized Stafford loan program, the aggregate loan amount is capped at $23,000.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Unsubsidized Stafford loans, which do accrue interest while a student is in school, are available to students regardless of income. Unsubsidized Stafford loans are capped in the aggregate at $31,000 for dependent undergraduate students and at $57,500 for independent undergraduate students. Stafford loans are also available to graduate students, with aggregate borrowing capped at $138,500.\textsuperscript{xvii}

The Federal Perkins Loan Program is authorized under Part E of Title IV and provides low-interest loans to low-income students. Perkins Loans are capped at $5,500 for undergraduate students and $8,000 for graduate students, with aggregate caps of $27,500 and $60,000, respectively. Perkins is funded through three sources: federal appropriations, university matches, and past borrower repayments, but new federal funding for the Perkins Loan Program has not been appropriated since 2009.

At the University of South Carolina, 4,622 students earned a bachelor’s degree in 2013. Of that group of graduates, 45 percent of them had utilized the federal student loan programs during their undergraduate studies. Even at a university with a tuition bill of only $10,488, nearly half of the graduates relied on these programs in order to earn their degree. At a university such as Winthrop University, where the tuition is nearly $3,000 more than the University of South Carolina, the utilization of the federal loan programs increases greatly from 45 percent to 78 percent. These federal lending programs are crucial to students pursuing their degree.\textsuperscript{xviii}

\textbf{Loan Forgiveness Background}

The struggling economy and high unemployment rates have increased the difficulties working students face as they attempt to pay for college. The average student debt almost
doubled from $16,928 in 2000\textsuperscript{xix} to $29,400 in 2014\textsuperscript{xx}, and the number of students graduating with debt increased from 54 percent in 2008 to 70 percent in 2014.\textsuperscript{xxi} 7 percent of these students will graduate with over $54,000 in debt.\textsuperscript{xxii} This increasing debt is forcing many students to reconsider whether or not college is worth their investment.

\textbf{H.R. 3959 Background}

Due to an increase in college cost and a decrease in state funding, two thirds of college seniors graduate with an average debt of $26,600.\textsuperscript{xxiii} Combined with a sluggish job market, increased debt impairs the ability of college graduates to make a positive impact on the economy. H.R. 3959, the Pay It Forward College Affordability Act of 2014, and H.R. 4436, The Investing in Student Success Act of 2014, propose loan financing as a post-graduation contribution program rather than traditional tuition and fees repayment. Such a model empowers students to attend college without amassing debt which they may be unable to repay. Because loan repayment would be quantified by a portion of postgraduate income, students would always be able to repay their debt. Further, legislation such as H.R. 3959 would prevent unemployed and underemployed students from defaulting on their loans, should their career underutilize their substantial investment in a college degree.

\textbf{Recommendations}

Legislators must continue to appropriate federal funding for Title IV programs such as Perkins and Stafford loans that would ensure college access for low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students. These Title IV programs have not received any new appropriations in a number of years, although the cost of attending college has exponentially increased. Education is enhanced by diversity; thus, continued appropriation will enhance the academic experience,
especially at those institutions (such as the University of South Carolina) whose programs are reliant on federal funds.

We urge you to support H.R. 3959, H.R. 4436, and similar legislation that would significantly limit the debt burden on college graduates, thereby stimulating the economy in both the short and long term. Although the job market is steadily improving, we are still heavily impacted by the economic recession of 2008; students should not be discouraged from seeking postsecondary education because of unemployment or underemployment that would make their education loan debt unrepayable. Especially as the economy continues to recover and employment rates continue to increase, students who attend college should gradually become more capable of finding employment that utilizes their educational investment. Students at the University of South Carolina, and across the country, need immediate action from Congress to ensure continued access to higher education regardless of family income or social status, and to effectively utilize their college investment in the recovering economy.


Krebs, Christopher P., et al., 2014.


“Federal Pell Grant Program.” Federal Education Budget Project. New America Foundation


Blake Ellis, “Average Student Loan Debt.” CNN Money. 5 December, 2013.

xxi Bannon.

xxii Blake Ellis, “Average Student Loan Debt.” CNN Money. 5 December, 2013.