

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Rising GOP Senator Takes Aim at Higher Ed and 'Elites'

Josh Hawley, a freshman senator from Missouri and rising GOP star, has targeted the "higher ed monopoly" in new legislative proposals. But some observers don't see much impact beyond rhetoric.

By [Andrew Kreighbaum](#)

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[Missouri senator Josh Hawley](#)

Freshman GOP senator Josh Hawley has sought to make a name for himself in recent weeks by going on the attack against liberal elites.

He's gone after **tech giants** in public comments as well as "anti-flag" **shoe brands**. His most recent target is traditional higher ed. Hawley introduced two bills earlier this month aiming to shake up the academy. One would remove most eligibility standards for short-term training programs to access Pell Grants and instead assess them based on student outcomes. Another bill would put colleges on the hook for defaulted student loans.

"You shouldn't have to take on a mountain of debt and get a four-year degree you don't want in order to get a good job in our state and in our country," the Missouri Republican said in touting the bills.

Neither idea is original in higher ed policy circles. There's already bipartisan legislation backed by community colleges and business groups that would open Pell eligibility to programs as short as eight weeks, potentially turning the program into the biggest supporter of job training in the country. And lawmakers have offered a slew of "risk-sharing" proposals in recent years. Senator Lamar Alexander, the GOP chairman of the Senate education committee, said earlier this year he wants to make higher ed programs accountable for loan repayment rates.

Hawley's proposals, though, combine those ideas with the rhetorical attacks favored by other up-and-coming Republicans in the past. A graduate of Stanford University and Yale Law School, he apparently had traditional higher ed in mind when he critiqued "cosmopolitan elites" in a **speech** at the National Conservatism Conference.

They make up a class, Hawley said, that live in the United States but "identify as 'citizens of the world.' They run businesses or oversee universities here, but their primary loyalty is to the global community."

(At the same conference, University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax offered a "cultural case" for limiting immigration to the U.S. that **stirred a backlash** from many connected to her university.)

Before his election to the Senate last year, Hawley worked as a lawyer for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and as an associate professor at the University of Missouri Law School, and he served briefly as Missouri attorney general.

It's not clear that college groups will pay much attention to the Hawley bills for now. Growing student debt and poor outcomes for students has become a preoccupation for members of both parties. The proposals, though, are unlikely to make a significant impact on legislative discussions soon.

Similar Ideas, Different Framing

Hawley doesn't sit on the Senate education committee, and neither of his bills has added a Senate co-sponsor so far. They also didn't receive endorsements from organizations that are influential on higher ed policy. It would be unlikely any bill introduced under those circumstances advances far, said Jon Fansmith, director of government and public affairs at the American Council on Education.

Legislation introduced with broader support also has benefited from extensive back-and-forth with other members and groups who advocate on postsecondary issues, he said.

"There's an understandable interest in holding institutions accountable for outcomes of students," Fansmith said. "The point here is it's an attack on a perception of what higher education is that's not in line with reality."

Federal aid programs like Pell Grants already support students pursuing alternatives to four-year degrees like associate degrees and certificate programs, he said. And Fansmith said the accountability measure Hawley offered would likely penalize the kinds of colleges that serve high numbers of low-income and minority students.

The **Pell Grant bill** would make any program in existence for at least five years eligible for federal aid as long as it met a number of benchmarks for student outcomes, among them: completion rates, job placement rates and starting median salary of graduates. The **accountability legislation** would require colleges to pay off half of borrowers' defaulted student loans. And it would prohibit colleges from raising prices to offset costs.

Observers are skeptical about how the federal government would enforce those provisions. But the bills have excited some conservatives who are critical of traditional higher ed. Mary Clare Anselem, a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, wrote in **an op-ed** that the legislation "could be life-changing for many students."

"Currently, the outdated accreditation system allows only traditional colleges to access federal dollars, maintaining a status quo that discourages innovation in higher education," she wrote.

Heritage wants the federal government out of the student loan system entirely. Anselem said Hawley's accountability proposal would be a positive step by pressuring colleges to improve their performance.

His proposal to open up the Pell Grant program lands in the midst of **an ongoing debate** about short-term Pell. Senator Tim Kaine, a Virginia

Democrat, and Senator Rob Portman, an Ohio Republican, introduced legislation in March that would allow students to use Pell for short-term programs designed to help them quickly land jobs in industries that don't require a college degree. The bill, known as the JOBS Act, is co-sponsored by 14 other senators, including Democrats and Republicans.

Kaine has made similar arguments to Hawley about supporting a broader range of postsecondary programs. In [a letter](#) to *The New York Times* in March, he wrote that many Americans "feel alienated" by a federal higher ed system that places so much value on four-year degrees.

The JOBS Act would require that short-term programs meet requirements of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and be approved by state workforce commissions and the Education Department. The Hawley bill, however, would do away with most front-end eligibility requirements, including state authorization or minimum seat time. Instead, it would use student outcomes entirely to assess programs' eligibility for aid.

"Senator Hawley believes that by busting the higher education monopoly and opening Pell to any program that has a proven track record of success preparing students to get good jobs, we will see more innovation and competition in the postsecondary education and job training, which will create more opportunities for students at lower costs," a Hawley aide said.

On college accountability as well, members of Congress have offered multiple plans targeting outcomes on student loans, including some with bipartisan support. A 2017 GOP proposal to reauthorize the Higher Education Act would have blocked federal aid to colleges if 45 percent of borrowers weren't in repayment on their loans within three years. And a proposal from former Senator Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican, and Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a

New Hampshire Democrat, would cut off funding to colleges where 15 percent of borrowers hadn't begun paying their loan principal within three years. Alexander and Senator [Chris Murphy](#), a Connecticut Democrat, have also pushed their own accountability frameworks for inclusion in a potential HEA reauthorization.

"The idea of risk-sharing is not groundbreaking," said Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor of higher education at Seton Hall University. "It has bipartisan support. The two parties just haven't been able to agree on the details."

He said the concepts being pushed in the Hawley bill aren't especially new. "The framing is just different," Kelchen said. "The framing is 'breaking up the higher education monopoly.'"

Kelchen noted the institutions that might suffer the most under Hawley's accountability proposal are community colleges and for-profit colleges that serve more low-income and minority students. But he said when lawmakers who aren't on a relevant committee introduce legislation, it often amounts to messaging rather than something likely to become law.

A Hawley staffer said the bills are "important first steps towards reducing costs, increasing accountability and maximizing opportunities for students, but there's more to be done."

Ben Miller, vice president for postsecondary education at the Center for American Progress, said new lawmakers often look for policy areas they can make their signature focus.

Higher education has often been that issue. Hawley isn't the first up-and-coming GOP senator in recent years to question the value of a traditional degree or argue the federal government should do more to emphasize vocational education. Senator Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, famously **argued** during the 2016 GOP presidential primary that "we need more welders and less philosophers."

Welders, Rubio claimed in one debate, make more money than philosophers - a claim belied by data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The Florida Republican's arguments didn't carry the same sharp undertones as Hawley's attacks on liberal elites and the higher education monopoly. But he nonetheless **changed his tune** on the need for philosophers last year.

Read more by [Andrew Kreighbaum](#)

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