

# SAFRA aims for better aid

By Katrina Wehr  
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Government officials are banking on college students to get the nation's economy back on track in the form of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA), a historic \$60 billion investment in higher education.

SAFRA aims to make higher education more accessible and affordable for students, said Rep. George Miller, D-Cal., chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee during a conference call about the legislation held Wednesday.

It also aims to ensure that students not only go to college, but graduate as well, said Rep. Timothy Bishop, D-N.Y., a member of the House Education and Labor Committee.

The law, which was included in the health care reconciliation bill passed in March, simplifies the student loan process, therefore preventing students from accumulating unmanageable debt after graduation, Miller said.

"No one should have to mortgage their future to go to college," Miller said. "That's just unacceptable."

In an effort to meet President Barack Obama's goal of producing the most college graduates in

the nation's history by the year 2020, SAFRA introduced an increase in funding for Pell Grants — as the Consumer Price Index's cost of living increases, so will the monetary value of the grants.

He said the law also lowers caps on monthly loan repayments.

Beginning in 2014, borrowers who qualify for income-based repayment on their loans will be able to cap their payments at 10 percent of their monthly income, Miller said. Prior to the switch, the cap was 15 percent, Miller said.

Miller said the changes SAFRA brings broaden the career options students can consider upon enrolling in college.

"A lot of students think careers aren't available to them because of the debt they have to take on to get into those careers," Miller said.

The new act also allows for loan forgiveness if borrowers stay in public service careers for at least 10 years and consistently make their loan payments.

But the centerpiece of SAFRA, Bishop said, is direct lending, a borrowing option that Penn State has used since 2008.

The Direct Loan program replaces the Federal Family

Education Loan (FFEL) program, said Melissa Kunes, Penn State's Office of Student Aid senior director.

Under the FFEL program, students had the option of borrowing through a private lender, who then turned to the government for the funds, Kunes said. The new legislation eliminates the lender, allowing students to borrow directly from the government.

Penn State made the switch when the private lender servicing most students in the university went under as a result of 2008's economic turmoil, Kunes said.

"The only lender we knew would still be in business was the government," Kunes said.

With SAFRA now in place, all federal student loans are supplied by the government, and with a few modifications to existing systems, schools should face little difficulty accommodating the new policy, Bishop said.

"This is legislation that both simplifies the student loan application process and has freed up \$60 billion worth of student aid funds," Bishop said. "It was impossible to justify the old system when a better alternative exists."

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Courtesy of Ottawa Hospital Research Institute

Researchers have created a biosynthetic cornea that can be implanted into the eye to repair damage and restore sight.

# New artificial cornea restores, improves sight

By Lauren Neergaard  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — Scientists have created a new kind of artificial cornea, inserting a sliver of collagen into the eye that coaxes its own natural corneal cells to regrow and restore vision.

It worked in a first-stage study of 10 patients in Sweden, researchers reported Wednesday. And while larger studies are needed, it's a step toward developing an alternative to standard cornea transplants that aren't available in much of the world because of a shortage of donated corneas.

"We're trying to regenerate the cornea from within," said Dr. May Griffith, senior scientist at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute in Canada and a professor of regenerative medicine at Linköping University in Sweden.

Vision depends on a healthy cornea, the film-like covering of the eye's surface that helps it focus light. Corneas are fragile, easily harmed by injury or infection, and about 42,000 people in the U.S. receive transplanted corneas every year. While that's considered an adequate supply in this country, donated corneas aren't available in many countries for the estimated 10 million people worldwide with corneal blindness. Transplants also bring risk of rejection.

In addition, researchers are working to improve plastic-like artificial corneas and to create stem-cell treatments that could spur corneal growth.

The new work, published in the journal Science Translational Medicine, is a bioartificial cornea — an attempt to use the same natural substances that make up a real cornea to induce healing.

"I characterize this work as a major advance in the direction that we need to go," said Dr. Alan Carlson, cornea transplant chief at Duke University's eye center, who wasn't involved in the research. To "make this mimic donor tissue to the extent that your own cells ultimately become incorporated in this tissue, I think that's the most exciting aspect."

A cornea's structure is made up of a tissue called collagen. First, researchers took human collagen grown in yeast, made by San Francisco-based FibroGen Inc., and molded it into a contact lens-looking shape — the scaffolding, essentially, for a cornea.

Then Griffith, working with Linköping University eye surgeon Dr. Per Fagerholm, studied the bioartificial cornea in 10 patients with severe vision loss from damage to a corneal layer. Damaged tissue in one eye was removed, and the new biosynthetic cornea implanted. Soon, cells that line a healthy cornea started growing in the collagen. Tear production normalized, and even corneal nerves regrew, something researchers could test by measuring sensitivity. There was no rejection, and patients didn't need immune-suppressing medication.

Two years later, six of the patients had significantly improved vision with glasses.

# Families rally in favor of mosque

By Verena Dobnik  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEW YORK — The planned mosque and Islamic center blocks from the World Trade Center site got a new boost Wednesday from a coalition of supporters that includes families of Sept. 11, 2001, victims.

New York Neighbors for American Values rallied for the first time at a municipal building near the World Trade Center site.

"I lost a 23-year-old son, a paramedic who gave his life saving Americans and their values," Talat Hamdani said, and supporting the Islamic center and mosque "has nothing to do with religion. It has to do with standing up for our human rights, including freedom of religion."

Among the nearly 2,800 people killed when the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001 were

more than 30 Muslims, she noted.

Opponents of the Islamic center project argue it's insensitive to the families and memories of Sept. 11 victims to build a mosque so close. Supporters cite freedom of religion. The new coalition was started by members of 40 civic and religious organizations that "spontaneously called each other, because we had the feeling that something very negative was happening," said Susan Lerner, executive director of the New York office of the watchdog group Common Cause.

The controversy was triggered by "irresponsible politicians" using it as an election issue, she said. Names mentioned at the rally included former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Republican, and the highest-ranking Democrat in the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid. Gingrich has suggested that

building the mosque near the World Trade Center site is akin to putting a Nazi sign "next to the Holocaust Museum." Reid has broken ranks with President Barack Obama by saying he thinks the mosque should be built elsewhere.

Coalition members are now contacting officials, asking them to support the project as a reflection of religious freedom and diversity, and the rejection of "crude stereotypes meant to frighten and divide us."

They plan a candlelight vigil on Sept. 10, the eve of the ninth Sept. 11 anniversary.

"This is not just about Muslims; this is about who we are as Americans," said Lerner, adding that to oppose the Islamic center is "a slippery slope. There will always be people who are offended standing next to people who are different from others."

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