



July 20, 2009

The Honorable George Miller
Chair, Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller,

On behalf of The Workforce Alliance—a national coalition of business, labor, colleges, community-based organizations, and representatives from the workforce and higher-education systems—I am writing to express our strong support for H.R. 3221, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act. The bill will significantly expand the capacity of community colleges to respond to rising demand for job training, and will help many workers gain critical skills so they can help begin rebuilding our economy. This bill moves our nation one step closer toward recognizing the vision articulated by President Obama that every American obtain at least one year of training past high school, “be it at a community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship.”

No nation can compete in today’s global economy when less than half of its workforce has a postsecondary credential. This bill is a crucial step toward making 21st century skills available to every working American and changing how we think about “public education” in this country. In particular, we commend the committee for its efforts around the following issues:

- Better addressing problems associated with persistence and completion among students underrepresented in higher education through the creation of the College Access and Completion Innovation Fund;
- Making college more affordable for many students by increasing the Pell Grant and indexing it to inflation;
- Further simplifying the application for financial aid; and
- Creating a new Community College Initiative that supports innovative programs or programs of demonstrated effectiveness that lead to the completion of a postsecondary degree, certificate, or industry-recognized credential.

Although the bill makes significant advances in ensuring more workers will obtain the skills they need to succeed in today’s labor market and to maintain our nation’s competitiveness in a global economy, we feel that it could be strengthened in the following ways:

- Clarifying what is meant by the term “underrepresented students”, to ensure that nontraditional students such as older adults, including working adults, students with dependents, and out-of-school youth without a high school diploma are included under the College Access and Completion Fund and the Community College Initiative.
- Strengthen the language in the purposes of the College Access and Completion Fund to ensure that the fund focuses *solely* on underrepresented students (as defined above) rather than “particularly for students from groups that are underrepresented in postsecondary education.” Issues of access and completion affect these students far more than any other group, and limited investments should be targeted to have the greatest impact for those with the highest need.
- In the College Access and Completion Fund, clarify what is meant by completion. As in the Community College Initiative, postsecondary education should be defined to include programs “that lead to a postsecondary degree, certificate, or industry-recognized credential leading to a skilled occupation in a high-demand industry”.
- In the Community College Initiative, expand the use of funds for articulation agreements to include non-credit coursework and to otherwise ease the transfer of credit between non-credit and credit coursework.
- Ensure that low-skill and low-income individuals can benefit under the Community College Initiative by expanding the focus on “high-wage occupations” to include occupations that may reasonably be expected to lead to such wages. Many very low-skilled or low-income individuals cannot obtain high-wage occupations initially, but the creation and promotion of career pathways can ensure that they move steadily toward higher wages. A focus on high-wage occupations exclusively may have the unintended consequence of excluding low-skill and low-income individuals, as well as certain industries that have pathways to higher-wage occupations, from these programs.
- In the Community College Initiative, include language to explicitly allow funds to support Sector or Industry Partnerships. Toward this end, the allowable use of funds could include “Expanding, enhancing, or creating designated capacity for community colleges and other postsecondary education providers to work with Industry or Sector Partnerships to better meet the skill needs of local industries and employers and to promote strategies proven to help students obtain the skills to access high-wage occupations, or occupations that may reasonable be expected to lead to higher wages, in high-demand industries.”

Thank you for your efforts to begin addressing our nation’s skilled workforce needs. Most of the jobs now and for the foreseeable future will require some kind of technical training past high school, but not necessarily a four-year degree. Community colleges have been a tremendously undervalued national resource, and in partnership with other education and training providers—including community-based organizations, industry

training partnerships, union and apprenticeship programs—are a logical place to begin to address that middle-skill workforce demand. H.R. 3221 is an extraordinary first step that has the potential to fundamentally change the nature of postsecondary education.

We look forward to working with you and your staff on this effort.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rachel Gragg". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Rachel" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Gragg".

Rachel Gragg, Ph.D
Federal Policy Director
The Workforce Alliance