

August 7, 2019

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education
Labor & Pensions
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education
Labor & Pensions
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Ranking Member
Committee on Education and Labor
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx:

As community college leaders dedicated to serving students of all backgrounds, we write to share our higher education policy priorities—common-sense initiatives we believe will improve the success rate of today’s learners. We appreciate your leadership on these issues and thank you in advance for your consideration of our feedback.

As you may know, community colleges serve approximately 9 million students every year across the United States—most of whom can be classified as non-traditional. In fact, 75 percent of community college students work either full-or-part-time, 30 percent are parents and 17 percent are single parents. Additionally, many of our students fall outside of the age range of “traditional” students, with an average age of 28 and nearly one in seven students being over the age of 40.

As you can imagine, these individuals often enroll in the higher education system with a different set of objectives than the first-time, full-time students who have consistently been the focus of our nation’s higher education policies. Recent research suggests that 60 percent of today’s postsecondary students identify job or career outcomes as their primary motivation for enrolling in higher education, and a growing number of students are attending school while balancing work and family obligations.

For these reasons, we strongly believe that federal higher education policy should be modernized to reflect the real needs of today’s community college students and we urge you to consider the following legislative proposals:

Eliminate the bias against working learners in need of federal financial aid

In 1973, only 28 percent of all jobs called for education or training beyond the high school level. Today, approximately 80 percent of all jobs require some form of postsecondary education or training—including the more than 50 percent of jobs that are “middle-skill,” requiring more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. Despite this demand for skills, most federal financial aid is reserved for programs that are at least 600 clock hours of instruction over a minimum of 15 weeks. This policy is at odds with the realities of today’s postsecondary education landscape, where many students are seeking to enroll in short-term programs that lead to in-demand credentials.

Due to this arbitrary “seat-time” requirement in the Higher Education Act (HEA), working adults and other students who choose to enroll in short-term credit or noncredit programs must pay out of pocket to cover the cost of attendance or commit to an academic program that meets financial aid requirements—even if it will not help them succeed in their chosen field. To address this inequity, Senators Kaine (D-VA) and Portman (R-OH) and Representatives Richmond (D-LA-02), Levin (D-MI-09), Horsford (D-NV-04), Gonzalez (R-OH-16), Herrera-Beutler (R-WA-03) and Katko (R-NY-24), introduced the Jumpstarting our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act (S.839; H.R. 3497); a bipartisan bill that expands Pell grant eligibility to students enrolled in high-quality, short-term programs that are at least 150 clock hours of instruction over a period of at least 8 weeks. The bill contains several notable quality assurance provisions aimed at ensuring student protection—including requiring that approved programs lead to a recognized postsecondary credential,

be evaluated by an applicable accrediting body and articulate to a longer-term academic or workforce program contingent on student demand. If signed into law, legislation like the JOBS Act would pave the way for more individuals to fill in-demand jobs in our 21st century economy.

Make higher education and workforce outcomes data comprehensive and transparent

As educators and administrators, we do our best to help students make the best decisions for their futures. However, due to existing legal restrictions on the collection of student-level data, today's students have no reliable way of knowing what they can expect from specific programs in terms of employment and earnings.

Currently, postsecondary institutions are required to report information to the Department of Education through multiple surveys rather than sharing consistent student level data; a practice that is both burdensome and ineffective. Additionally, the federal government only requires colleges to report data on students receiving Title IV financial aid—leaving the public without a clear picture of program outcomes.

To help provide consumers with better data and relieve institutions of duplicative reporting requirements, Senators Warren (D-MA), Cassidy (R-LA), Whitehouse (D-RI) and Scott (R-SC) and Representatives Mitchell (R-MI-10), Krishnamoorthi (D-IL-08), Stefanik (R-NY-21) and Harder (D-CA-10) introduced the College Transparency Act (S.800, H.R. 1766). This proposal would establish a secure, privacy-protected postsecondary student level data network administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), to which colleges would be able to safely and easily report their data. The bill also protects students by barring the sale of any student data, collection of this data by any other federal agency, the use of this data by law enforcement or outside entity, and the creation of a Federal ranking or ratings system. Increasing data transparency at the federal level would serve to equip individuals working to improve their lives through education and training with the comprehensive information they deserve.

Ensure the success of today's college students by strengthening support services

Since the majority of today's jobs require workers to have education or training beyond a high school diploma, an increasing number of working adults and other nontraditional students are entering the higher education system—a trend that is even more pronounced at community colleges. Due to the diversity of this growing student population, support services such as career counseling, childcare and transportation assistance are increasingly important. While the HEA currently authorizes some student support programs such as the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) and TRIO, they lack the capacity to remove the wide range of barriers working students can face.

In an effort to bridge this “opportunity gap”, states and higher education leaders across the country are stepping in to implement innovative career pathway models that provide nontraditional students with the services they need to succeed in the postsecondary education system, including educational and career guidance, access to housing, transportation and childcare, and basic skills instruction to help working adults shorten their program completion time.

To strengthen and expand career pathway models at the federal level, Senators Hassan (D-NH), Young (R-IN), Kaine (D-VA) and Gardner (R-CO) recently introduced the Gateway to Careers Act (S. 1117). This bill would make federal funding available on a competitive basis to institutions that are working in partnership to serve students experiencing barriers to postsecondary access and completion. As community college leaders, one of our core missions is to provide access to education for all students regardless of their backgrounds; and initiatives such as the Gateway to Careers Act would help us build upon our ability to do so.

Provide targeted funding for valuable partnerships between community colleges and businesses

Community colleges across the nation work with industries every day to provide high-quality training and academic instruction to future workers. However, Congress has not invested in these community college-business partnerships at a scale that would sustain economic competitiveness since the expiration of the Trade Adjustment Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program in FY 2014.

The purpose of the TAAACT grant program, which allocated \$2 billion in funding to states from FY 2011-2014, was to increase the capacity of community colleges to address the challenges of today's workforce through job training for adults and other nontraditional students. Despite the fact that students enrolled in TAACCCT-funded programs earned more than 240,000 industry-recognized credentials over four years, Congress has not allocated additional funds for this program.

Due to the proven impact of community college-business partnerships, we would strongly support any effort by Congress to increase the resources available for these collaboration models —an example of which is the Community College to Career Fund in Higher Education Act (S. 1612, H.R. 2920). Introduced by Senators Duckworth (D-IL), Smith (D-MN), Feinstein (D-CA), Durbin (D-IL), Shaheen (D-NH), Van Hollen (D-MD) and Representative Kelly (D-IL-02), this legislation aims to provide academic institutions and businesses with competitive grant funding so that they can continue to work together to deliver valuable educational or career training programs to students and workers.

We greatly appreciate your consideration of our recommendations as Congress moves towards a comprehensive reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the success of our nation's students.

Sincerely,

MJ Dolan, Executive Director

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