September 13, 2019

Dear Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of the California Community Colleges, I write to share my higher education policy priorities—common-sense initiatives that will improve the success rate of today’s learners. I appreciate your leadership on these issues and thank you in advance for your consideration of this 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; in the California Community Colleges, which serve 2.1 million students annually, 40 percent of students are over the age of 25.

Working adults 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, federal higher education policy should be modernized to reflect the real needs of today’s community college students and to prepare our country for the changing needs of our economy. I encourage 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. It also prevents postsecondary institutions from responding to future changes economy where new knowledge and skills rapidly change.

Due to this “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) introduced the Jumpstarting our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act (S.839); a bipartisan bill that expands Pell grant eligibility to students enrolled in short-term programs that are at least 150 clock hours of instruction over a period of at least 8 weeks. The bill aims to create opportunities for working adults to secure a recognized postsecondary credentials that can unlock career advancement opportunities including connecting to higher skilled credentials valued in the labor market. The JOBS Act, when paired with accountability provisions that ensure short-term programs lead to greater economic mobility, helps to provide key resources to working learners consistent with their needs and can 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

The existing legal restrictions on the collection of student-level data means today’s students have no reliable and nationally comparable way of knowing what they can expect from specific programs especially related to post-college employment and earnings. This blind spot often obscures the highly consequential financial decision that are top of mind for prospective students, particularly working adults, who are weighing the risk of their educational opportunities relative against their current and future circumstances.

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) introduced the College Transparency Act (S.800). 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 and the use of this data by law enforcement or outside entity. Increasing data transparency at the federal level is an essential step towards empowering individuals working hard 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
Faced with changing job requirements that necessitate education or training beyond a high school diploma, an increasing number of working adults and other nontraditional students will need to enter our higher education system. Community colleges must be at the ready to respond to the changing demographics in higher education where support services such as career counseling, childcare and transportation assistance are critically important to ensuring learner success. 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. California Community Colleges 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 TAACCCT 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, Congress should 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). Introduced by Senators Duckworth (D-IL), Durbin (D-IL), Feinstein (D-CA), Smith (D-MN), Shaheen (D-NH) and Van Hollen (D-MD), 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 education and training programs.
Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations as Congress moves towards a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the success of our nation’s students.

Sincerely,

Eloy Ortiz Oakley
Chancellor