March 13, 2012

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman, Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC  20510

Dear Chairman Harkin:

We are writing to express support for the amendment that you are offering to the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013 this week, that would provide explicit funding levels for programs under the Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Subcommittee’s jurisdiction, rather than depending on Continuing Resolutions to fund such critical programs year after year.

This amendment stays within the current budget parameters and includes an important provision to our organizations, the partial reinstatement of the Ability to Benefit provisions of the Higher Education Act for students who are co-enrolled in Adult and Postsecondary Education courses, as part of a Career Pathways program. The amendment further pays for the reinstatement through a funding offset to ensure its budget neutrality.

In today’s economy, postsecondary education has become a necessity for individuals to secure good jobs and for employers to meet their skill demands. Yet, on last July 1st of 2012, newly enrolled students who demonstrated college readiness but who did not have a high school diploma or its equivalent lost access to all federal financial aid. Formerly, these students qualified for financial assistance through “Ability to Benefit” (ATB) provisions in Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which were eliminated as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of Fiscal Year 2012. The loss of ATB threatens the economic mobility of low-skilled adults and youth who seek...
postsecondary credentials to improve their job prospects; and undercuts efforts to address America’s skills gap.

As national organizations that work with or represent state and local adult education, community college, and workforce investment systems across the country, we are deeply concerned about the impact of the elimination of ATB. Not only does the elimination prevent thousands of students from accessing much-needed postsecondary credentials, but it halts the development of innovative strategies in a growing number of states for helping low-skilled adults attain the postsecondary credentials needed to find good jobs and careers as quickly and efficiently as possible.

These innovative strategies such as career pathways and bridge approaches are particularly successful at helping low-skilled adults accelerate the time required to obtain credentials that meet employers’ skill needs. Recent studies show that students in these programs outperform similar students in earning college credits and certificates, and in persisting to program completion and good jobs.

Pell Grants are a critical source of funding for all ATB students, including those who participate in these promising initiatives, as the majority are low-income individuals who cannot otherwise afford to attend college.

Thank you for offering this amendment that would not only provide guided funding for Labor-HHS-Education programs, but would allow deserving students, who are working toward a postsecondary credential at the same time as they are building their basic or English language skills, to be eligible for federal financial aid.

Sincerely,

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)
Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT)
Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP)
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Community Action Partnership
Corporate Voices for Working Families
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)
The Corps Network
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL)
Insight Center for Community Economic Development (NSSP)
Jobs for the Future (JFF)
National Coalition for Literacy (NCL)
National College Transition Network at World Education, Inc (NCTN)
National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE)
National League of Cities (NLC)
National Skills Coalition (NSC)
Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law
Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW)