Dear Chairs and Ranking Members,

National Skills Coalition—a broad-based coalition of business leaders, union affiliates, education and training providers, community-based organizations, and public workforce agencies advocating for policies that invest in the skills of U.S. workers—urges you to enact final, omnibus spending legislation for fiscal year (FY) 2015 before the end of the calendar year. An omnibus bill would reflect the important work done by your committees and honor the bipartisan budget agreement reached by the two chambers in 2013. A long term Continuing Resolution (CR) would abdicate congressional responsibility to make program-by-program funding decisions and provide necessary guidance to the Administration in FY 2015. Furthermore, a long-term CR denies veterans, young adults, dislocated workers, adult learners, migrant and seasonal workers, older Americans, and the long-term unemployed, among others, the benefit of targeted funding increases included in the Senate Labor-HHS-Education (Labor-H) Appropriations Subcommittee-passed bill or proposed in the Labor-H bill released by Representative Rosa DeLauro.

Federal policy, including the budget caps and sequestration created under the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011, has reduced the federal deficit by more than $4 trillion since 2011. Unfortunately, more than three-quarters of this reduction has come from spending cuts—primarily from discretionary programs—while less than one-quarter has come from revenue increases. While the Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) provided some limited relief from these cuts, it is now set to expire and unless Congress takes action through an omnibus appropriations bill, we will revert to these extremely unbalanced policies. Rather than allow this to happen, we urge Congress instead to:

1. Pass omnibus legislation to complete appropriations for FY 2015—No country runs effectively on autopilot. The annual budget and appropriations process is vital to the American government’s ability to respond to the ever changing challenges that
Americans face. During the lame duck session, Congress must pass a true omnibus bill (not a CR/omnibus that includes a Labor-H CR) to make the funding adjustments that reflect changing priorities and find a balanced alternative to the budget caps and sequester cuts under the BCA.

2. **Reinvest in the skills of America’s workforce, including fully funding the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**—Despite recent improvements in the labor market, more than 18 million U.S. workers remain unemployed or underemployed. Countless workers and jobseekers continue to rely on federal services and supports to increase their skills and succeed in the labor market, while employers rely on these programs to find the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy. Yet federal workforce development programs have been cut by more than $1 billion since just 2010. While we urge Congress to restore funding for federal employment and training programs to at least 2010 levels, at a minimum Congress should fully fund programs under WIOA, legislation reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), at congressionally authorized levels. WIOA passed overwhelmingly in both the House (415-6) and Senate (95-3). Members of Congress should stand behind their votes and at least fund WIOA authorized programs at the authorized levels they just approved.

3. **Restore “ability-to-benefit” under the Pell grant program**—since July of 2012, students who do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent, even if they can demonstrate college readiness, are no longer eligible for any federal tuition assistance. Formerly, these students qualified for financial aid under the “ability to benefit” (AtB) provisions in Title IV of the Higher Education Act. These provisions were eliminated as a cost-savings measure as part of the FY 2012 omnibus legislation. 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. Importantly, the bill passed by the Senate Labor-H Appropriations subcommittee partially restored this provision, while it is unlikely that such a policy change would be included under a CR.

4. **Provide necessary funding to implement WIOA**—WIOA creates a number of new demands on states and local communities, and will require significant additional resources if states are to successfully implement the legislation. States and local communities will need to increase coordination and alignment across programs and institutions; develop new expertise in best practices such as career pathways and industry partnerships; engage employers at a much deeper level; develop new data systems to improve accountability and support continuous program improvement; provide extensive technical assistance and professional development for both front-line staff and education and training providers; and improve and increase access to education and training for workers and job seekers, among other things. It is both unrealistic and unfair to expect states and local communities to fully pay for the costs associated with these activities solely out of the existing formula funding—which has been slashed repeatedly at the federal level in recent years. We urge Congress to provide
at least $250 million in additional WIOA implementation funding above and beyond any regular program appropriations.

It is critical that we continue to invest in the skills of our nation’s workforce, so that workers can support themselves and their families and so that employers have access to the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy. Congress must act now to provide the workforce development system with the resources necessary to continue to meet this vital need.

We appreciate your consideration of these important issues.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gragg, Ph.D.
Federal Policy Director