August 2, 2013

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable George Miller
Ranking Member
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ruben Hinojosa
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Kline, Miller, Foxx, and Hinojosa:

Thank you very much for providing an opportunity for interested stakeholders to provide input as the committee begins the process of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act (HEA). On behalf of 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—I encourage the committee to pay particular attention to the following issues:

1. **Tuition assistance and other financial aid for nontraditional students.** Although federal tuition assistance policy has long focused primarily on traditional college students (i.e. dependent adults younger than age 24 attending 4-year institutions full-time), 7 out of 10 students enrolled in postsecondary education now have at least one attribute of a nontraditional student (i.e. independent older students, often with their own dependents, combining working and learning).

   It has always been difficult for nontraditional students to access federal financial aid. Working students are penalized for even very small earnings, and students seeking occupational skills through non-credit courses (more than 5 million community college students) and/or who are attending school less-than-half-time because they are balancing the demands of family, work, and school are often ineligible for financial aid. Recent policy decisions to eliminate year-round grants and the “ability-to-benefit” (AtB)
provisions under the Pell program have only exacerbated the problems faced by these students. National Skills Coalition urges the committee as part of HEA reauthorization to expand access to Pell and other federal tuition assistance programs for nontraditional students by, among other things: restoring AtB and year-round grants; increasing income protection allowances for working adults; and easing the ability to use Pell for non-credit, or other short-term occupational training courses or programs, or to attend less-than-half-time.

2. **Better data collection and reporting through inclusive, aligned and market-relevant data systems.** To ensure our nation is on a path toward economic growth and shared prosperity, we need education and training policies that collectively prepare all Americans for participation in a skilled workforce that will help U.S. industries compete in a changing 21st century economy. As a nation, we cannot determine if our human capital policies are up to that challenge without inclusive, aligned and market-relevant education and workforce data systems that are supported by state and federal policies. That is, we need publicly sponsored data systems that will provide useful information to the public, to the private-sector, and to policymakers about the skills, employment and earning outcomes of our students and workers, and about the ability of U.S. businesses to fill skilled positions with our education and training programs’ graduates. National Skills Coalition urges the committee to provide support for such improved data systems through HEA reauthorization. Toward this end, postsecondary data systems should:

a. **Include All Students and Pathways:** Beyond tracking student progress in K-12 or traditional postsecondary settings, data systems should include outcome and progress indicators for out-of-school youth, adult workers, and other individuals enrolled in job training, adult basic education and career and technical education programs supported by a range of public policies (e.g., WIA, Perkins Act, Higher Education Act, TANF, Trade Adjustment Assistance, SNAP E&T).

b. **Count Industry-Recognized Credentials as well as Degrees:** In addition to documenting traditional high school and college degrees, data systems should capture individual achievement of the wide range of industry-recognized credentials (including certificates, certifications, licenses, et.al.) and related competencies, including those awarded outside educational institutions by private industry.

c. **Assess Employment Outcomes for all Participants:** Data systems should be able to match student records to employment and wage records for enrollees across all of our education and workforce programs, including various postsecondary settings (e.g., non-profit, for-profit, credit, non-credit). Data systems should also be able to assess what combination of education and training interventions over
an individual’s lifetime have impacted his/her long-term employment and career.

d. Expand Use of Labor Market Information (LMI): Data on individual participant outcomes will have limited value if not brought together with the best information available about the changing structure of the labor market, including real-time openings as well as future projections. Labor market data must be current, available in a variety of settings, and made understandable to students, workers, and employers. LMI should also be used by policymakers to assess the market relevance of education and training policies.

e. Ensure Appropriate Data Access and Use: Aggregated, privacy-protected data on student outcomes can and should be made available to education and training institutions so they can assess their graduates’ outcomes and guide program improvements; to students and workers who want to choose the best programs for their respective career goals; and to policymakers who want to know more about the effectiveness of public education and training policies.

3. Strengthening partnerships between postsecondary education institutions and employers and industries. Without question, the majority of students enrolled in postsecondary education are there, at least in part, to meet employment goals—whether it’s young adults seeking their first job, dislocated workers seeking skills to move into a new industry, or the long-term unemployed seeking to strengthen or refresh their skills to re-enter the labor market.

Investments in education and job training programs that are linked to local industries are proven to be the most effective way to improve employment opportunities for workers, increase wages, and address the skills gap. Despite nearly 12 million workers unemployed, employers in key U.S. industries—such as manufacturing, energy, transportation and logistics, information technology, and health care—are reporting they cannot find the workers with the skills needed to grow and compete. To better align workers’ skills with the needs of businesses, sector partnerships bring together employers and other stakeholders connected to local and regional industries to address immediate skill shortages, while developing workforce pipelines to ensure the future of that industry. Sector strategies are among the few workforce interventions that statistical evidence shows to improve employment opportunities for workers and to increase their wages once on the job. Employers report increases in productivity, reductions in customer complaints, and declines in staff turnover, all of which reduce costs and improve the competitiveness of their companies.

Postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, are often a key stakeholder in these partnerships, often developing extensive training programs working in conjunction with local industry. However, much of this work has been
done in spite of federal policy, not because of it. Currently, federal policy does not explicitly support sector partnerships, making it difficult to take programs around the country to scale and drive the kind of system change that many policymakers want to see in the workforce development system. National Skills Coalition urges the committee to include designated funding and support for industry or sector partnerships as part of HEA reauthorization to ensure that students enrolled in postsecondary education can obtain the skills and credentials—including industry recognized credentials—that employers use to make hiring decisions.

4. **Improve remedial and adult basic education (ABE) programs associated with postsecondary education.** Far too many students enter postsecondary education ill-equipped to succeed, and often wind up accruing significant debt by taking remedial or ABE courses. Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that students who start postsecondary education in remedial courses are much less likely to ever obtain a degree or certificate.

National Skills Coalition urges the committee to include significant new support for career pathway models, bridge programs, integrated or contextualized instruction, and other learning models designed to help students persist and succeed in postsecondary education as part of HEA reauthorization. This should include capacity to partner with community-based organizations that can provide critical counseling and other wrap-around services; increased access to a full-range of supportive services for students; and clearly articulated pathways to ease transitions for students across programs (i.e. ABE, occupational training, and traditional postsecondary education) and institutions (i.e. CBOs, colleges, and universities).

If you have questions or would like to speak with us further on these issues, please feel free to contact me at 202-223-8991, ext. 102 or rachelg@nationalskillscoalition.org. Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gragg, Ph.D.
Federal Policy Director