

June, 21, 2016

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor & Pensions
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20002

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor & Pensions
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20002

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

As advocates for students, consumers, veterans, service members, faculty and staff, civil rights, and college access, we urge the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions to ensure any changes to the Higher Education Act (HEA) prioritize policies that advance student outcomes above all else. We are concerned by reports that the Committee is moving forward with a bill, based on the Task Force on Government Regulation of Higher Education, which would loosen accountability for institutions at a time when countless students are leaving college without a credential or with crippling debt far beyond the value of that credential.

We are deeply concerned about proposals stemming from the Task Force on Government Regulation of Higher Education because its recommendations do little to help make college more affordable or make institutions more accountable for the quality of their programs. **Not a single student, consumer advocate, or non-industry representative served as a member on the task force.**

We understand that Congress may have created some unnecessary requirements over the years—such as the need to celebrate Constitution Day in September or develop a policy on file sharing. However, we believe most of the recommendations in the task force report are thinly veiled handouts to higher education institutions that will not improve student outcomes or yield better returns on taxpayer investments.

Three examples cited by the report as red tape are particularly troubling: state authorization, financial responsibility, and the gainful employment rule. All of these offer critical protections for students and taxpayers. State authorization ensures states share in the responsibility of overseeing institutions that operate in their borders in tandem with the federal government. Financial responsibility scores identify institutions that may close with no warning, leaving students stranded and taxpayers on the hook for loan discharges. And gainful employment is a crucial regulation for protecting students and taxpayers from low-quality career programs that leave graduates with too much debt relative to their earnings.

We strongly believe that higher education regulations and oversight need to be strengthened and improved to better protect students and taxpayers, and to reduce unnecessary burdens on colleges that serve students well. The current one-size-fits-all approach to regulation and oversight tends to over-regulate the best colleges and under regulate the worst, which means the current system needs to be reformed and improved, not gutted. Schools that pose greater risks to students and taxpayers deserve more oversight and scrutiny, not less.

Any conversation on burden in higher education must include students. Today, graduating from college is essential to making it in America, yet it is becoming more out of reach. In real terms, tuition and required fees at public four-year colleges are up 289 percent since 1980. Today, nearly 70 percent of today's graduating seniors borrow for college, with an average balance of almost \$29,000. And Americans collectively owe around \$1.3 trillion in student debt. Any higher education bill that fails to address college affordability and quality in a significant way is a missed opportunity to unburden students and families.

The Committee has a responsibility to ensure that the needs and interests of students and families are paramount. We stand ready to work with the Committee to develop legislation that is responsive to the needs of students and that ensures taxpayer dollars designed to support their educational pursuits are well spent.

Sincerely,

American Association of University Women (AAUW)
Center for American Progress
Center for Responsible Lending
Consumer Action
Consumers Union
Demos
Faculty Forward Network
Generation Progress
Higher Ed, Not Debt
Institute for America's Future
League of United Latin American Citizens
Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition
National Association for College Admission Counseling
National Association of Consumer Advocates
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients)
National student debt jubilee project
One Wisconsin Now
People's Action
Progress Virginia
Project on Predatory Student Lending at the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law
SEIU
SEIU Local 500
Student Debt Crisis
The Institute for College Access & Success
Veterans Education Success
Young Invincibles