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CONGRESS PLANS TO BOLSTER TECHNICAL TRAINING

As lawmakers push to bolster short-term training, some raise concerns about quality and unintended consequences

By Michelle Hackman
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A bipartisan push to bolster short-term training and certificate programs has prompted a debate in Congress over how to ensure it doesn't spawn a proliferation of shoddy programs or steer minorities into lower-paying fields.

A Republican rewrite of the Higher Education Act, passed by a House committee last month, would provide more loans and grants for students entering these programs. The training costs less than traditional degrees and equips students with technical skills that translate directly into jobs, advocates say.

But many Democrats and higher-education advocates warn that without stronger standards, such an influx of federal money would allow the creation of low-quality courses that don't lead to solid jobs.

The push toward more career and technical training stems, in part, from concerns about **rising tuition costs**. It also reflects a larger backlash against the notion of a **one-size-fits-all path to college**, as millions of students rack up loans and many fail to graduate altogether.

"Our postsecondary education system has not done what they should to help students be prepared for the workforce," Rep. Virginia Foxx (R., N.C.), chairwoman of the House Education and Workforce Committee and the bill's author, said in an interview.

Conservatives in particular have become increasingly vocal in criticizing universities, whose faculty and student culture they often view as liberal. A **Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll** last summer showed majorities of certain groups—including men, people under 34, and those who define themselves as white working-class—think college isn't worth the cost, a reversal from four years earlier.

At the same time, a skills gap has left more than 6 million jobs unfilled in fields like information technology, manufacturing and health care, according to the Labor Department. Those jobs don't call for college degrees but do require technical training.

That has spurred some lawmakers from both parties to conclude that students need more access to short-term training. "I think we've sort of perpetrated a myth that post-high school has to be college," Sen. Tim Kaine (D., Va.) said at a recent hearing.

Faith Blamon, 22 years old, enrolled in a three-month medical assistant program at Advantage Career Institute in Eatontown, N.J., because it was shorter than other programs and roughly half the cost. But the program's short duration made it ineligible for federal student aid, so Ms. Blamon had to take out a private loan for the \$6,000 cost.

The program connected Ms. Blamon with an unpaid internship at a nearby cardiology office, which she hopes will lead to full-time work. But a grant instead of her loan, she said, “would have been hugely helpful.”

Still, the drive to popularize such short-term programs has sparked concern that their rapid proliferation could drive down quality. And some education advocates worry that low-income and minority students could be nudged toward such programs rather than pursuing traditional degrees, which they say ultimately open doors to higher-paying jobs.

House Republicans hope to vote on their higher-education bill in coming months, while Senators Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.) and Patty Murray (D., Wash.) have pledged to write a bipartisan bill.

It isn’t clear whether lawmakers headed into an election season will have the appetite this year to negotiate a bill that raises such sensitive issues.

In any case, officials aren’t waiting for the broader legislation. President Donald Trump signed an executive order in June [authorizing the expansion of apprenticeships](#), agreements between schools and employers that offer on-the-job training in exchange for pay. Sens. Kaine and Rob Portman (R., Ohio) recently proposed a bill expanding federal aid eligibility to shorter certificate programs.

The [Higher Education Act](#), which was last reauthorized in 2008, governs federal grant and loan programs, along with such rules as how colleges are accredited and what graduation and earnings data schools must publish.

Under the House GOP overhaul, students enrolled in short-term programs—currently ineligible for any student aid—could receive federal Pell grants and loans. Pell grants are awards of up to about \$6,000 a year that students can use to pay for college and aren’t asked to repay.

The House bill would require programs to be accredited, but many Democrats say that isn’t a strong enough safeguard. They advocate requiring programs to meet certain job placement and earnings benchmarks to be eligible for federal aid.

Some Democrats have also complained that low-quality programs would proliferate, potentially offered by for-profit institutions seeing a new market. For now, most certificate programs are run by community colleges.

“You’re opening the door to people more interested in student-aid money than student education,” said Terry Hartle, senior vice president at the American Council on Education, a higher education lobby.

Advocates are also concerned that easing the pathway to nondegree programs could unintentionally route more minority and low-income students in that direction. White students are already much more likely than black and Hispanic students to attend selective colleges.

Twenty-five percent of white students attend one of the country’s 500 most selective colleges, compared with nine percent of black students, according to a Georgetown University analysis of Education Department data.

While certificate programs can offer job stability, advocates worry they could cut students off from higher-paying jobs available to graduates with bachelor’s degrees.

"I fundamentally disagree with the GOP's premise that we must choose one of two sides, college or skills training," said Rep. Bobby Scott (D., Va.), the top Democrat on the House Education committee. "While not everyone will choose a four-year degree, every student must have the opportunity, regardless of income, to make that choice."