



October 28, 2019

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Chairman
Education & Labor Committee
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Ranking Member
Education & Labor Committee
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx,

As the Committee on Education and Labor moves ahead with its consideration of federal funding and oversight of higher education, I write on behalf of the Opportunity America Jobs and Careers Coalition to outline our priorities for postsecondary education.

The Opportunity America Jobs and Careers Coalition is a Washington-based business group focused on career education and workforce development. Members include employers and employer associations from a broad range of industries experiencing skills mismatches and worker shortages – IT, manufacturing, construction, retail and hospitality, among others.

We have three priorities for federal legislation pertaining to postsecondary education.

Workforce Pell. The economy is changing and with it, Americans' need for education. Not every student needs a four-year college degree. But there are fewer and fewer good jobs for workers with only a high school diploma.

Innovative institutions of higher education are stepping up to address this growing skills gap, providing career-focused programs to prepare learners for jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree.

The best programs are developed in partnership with employers who know the skills in demand in their changing industries. Effective offerings meet local labor market demand, culminate in industry-recognized credentials and serve the needs of students – often less advantaged students – in a hurry to learn the skills they need to get a job or a better job.

But because they are often shorter than a semester, programs of this kind are frequently ineligible for Pell Grant funding, shortchanging students, employers and the regional economy. Our coalition believes this must change.

Federal Work-Study. The employers we represent tell us again and again in surveys and by other means: troublingly few of the workers they hire to fill jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree come to the workplace prepared for work.

Sometimes they lack technical preparation, but more often – and just as detrimental – they lack workplace or “employability” skills. They don't show up on time. They don't know how

to work in a team. They don't know how to conduct themselves in the face of a request or constructive criticism from a supervisor.

Nothing prepares students better for what's required on the job than previous work experience. Yet far too few young people today acquire work experience while pursuing secondary or postsecondary education.

Institutions of higher education are ideally positioned to provide workplace experience and expose students to work – through apprenticeships, internships, co-op jobs and clinical practicums, but also, potentially just as important, the Federal Work-Study program.

Several recent proposals floated in Congress and implemented on an experimental basis by the US Department of Education would overhaul the Federal Work-Study program to better serve students and employers – expanding opportunities for off-campus employment in private-sector jobs, opening the program to a wider range of learners and aligning work experience more closely with what students are being taught in class. Our coalition strongly supports these proposed reforms.

Data on employment outcomes. As business people – owners and managers – shaped by the demands of the marketplace, the employers we represent are staunchly committed to quality assurance.

We believe the key to better quality assurance is information about outcomes – in the case of career education, employment outcomes. Do students who complete a given program of study get better jobs, earn higher wages and move up over time to still better, higher paying jobs? This is the true test of quality. Yet all too often, no one knows.

More transparency would benefit students, taxpayers and institutions of higher education, helping students make better choices and enabling institutions to allocate educational resources more efficiently. Policymakers would be better positioned to make decisions about spending and oversight. And ultimately, employers too would benefit as better-informed learners make shrewder decisions, getting the preparation they need to succeed in a complex, changing labor market.

Existing postsecondary data systems disserve students, schools and policymakers. Information gathering is incomplete and inefficient. Data is often too broad-brush to be useful. Large categories of students and postsecondary programs are left out of the count. Our coalition believes this must change.

Taken together, we believe, these three reforms would have a significant impact on American higher education, improving outcomes for students, taxpayers, employers and, ultimately, the US economy, spurring faster, more inclusive economic growth.

Members of the Jobs and Careers Coalition thank you for your attention to postsecondary education – critical for our industries and for opportunity in America. We look forward to working with you and other lawmakers, Democrat and Republican, to enact these important reforms.

Yours sincerely,



Tamar Jacoby
President
Opportunity America