

Advance CTE Recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

As Congress considers the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315), the challenges facing our nation's economy, most notably the skills shortage, must be central to these debates. Our nation's higher education system must become more responsive to the evolving demands of an ever more competitive global economy. Too many employers report a shortage of qualified workers, while university and college graduates burdened with tremendous debt are unable to find work related to their fields of study. This calls for a major realignment of our nation's higher education policies. The forthcoming reauthorization process will provide Congress a critically important opportunity to achieve this vision for investing in America's workforce.

Advance CTE, representing the state leadership for secondary, postsecondary and adult Career Technical Education (CTE) in all 50 states and U.S. territories, offers the following recommendations for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA):

Higher Education Is Workforce Development:

- **Strengthen Connections to the Labor Market:** While there are many important purposes for higher education, we must acknowledge and bring to the forefront the system's responsibility and role in preparing the nation's future workforce. The U.S. higher education's system is one of the nation's largest investments in its workforce. Acknowledging this, Advance CTE recommends that future HEA legislation prioritize support for education and training programs that lead to high-growth and high-demand occupations and industry sectors.
- **Foster Job-Driven Postsecondary Partnerships:** Community and Technical Colleges have a long history of working with employers of all sizes to meet the talent pipeline needs of the American economy. However, more can be done to ensure that these employer-education partnerships are more common. The Trade Adjustment and Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program most recently supported such partnerships with targeted investments for several years. Unfortunately funding for this initiative has run out, reducing these institutions' ability to effectively engage with the employer community. Advance CTE therefore recommends that new HEA legislation include annual funding over the law's authorization period for new investments comparable to the TAACCCT grant program focusing on high-growth, high-demand occupations and industry sectors provided at community and technical colleges. Such funding should be provided above and beyond existing investments the law makes into the postsecondary education system.
- **Reconceptualize Accreditation:** The U.S. postsecondary education's system for quality assurance should seek to ensure a transparent, accountable framework for educational institutions and consumers alike. Unfortunately, the accreditation structure currently in place to achieve this is not adequately meeting this responsibility and holds subsets of postsecondary institutions to different sets of expectations. As lawmakers consider the current accreditation framework, they should ensure

that institutions are held to the same sets of expectations to ensure that students, no matter where they choose to enroll, are adequately prepared for life and career following program completion. As such, Advance CTE recommends that future HEA legislation direct accrediting bodies to take into account additional program quality elements, such as the labor market outcomes of students, to ensure that federal investments in higher education are used efficiently and effectively to foster a more accountable postsecondary education system.

Eliminate Barriers to Financial Aid Program Access

- **Affirm the Importance of All Postsecondary Credentials:** A large and rapidly increasing portion of all postsecondary students enroll in “noncredit” courses, and this figure is expected to continue to grow. These programs typically lead to a postsecondary credential that often has a more immediate connection to an occupational skill or competency than most associate or baccalaureate degree programs and are frequently offered at a substantially lower cost to students. Despite this, postsecondary students enrolled in many short-term education and training programs are ineligible to access federal financial aid under current law due to overly burdensome program length requirements. Advance CTE recommends reducing current program length requirements for student financial aid eligibility under Title IV of HEA for programs that lead to a recognized postsecondary credential, as defined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and demonstrate a connection to a high-demand or high-growth occupational sector.
- **Increase Support for Non-traditional Students to Succeed in Postsecondary Education:** Through the implementation of career pathways and CTE programs of study, an increasing number of nontraditional students (those over the age of 24) are enrolling in postsecondary education to acquire additional skills to stay competitive in the labor market. These adult learners often face barriers to postsecondary completion and federal higher education policy has not kept pace with the additional needs of these students. Where possible, HEA should support efforts that afford greater opportunities to earn credit for prior learning — either from experiences on the job or in the classroom. Moreover, to effectively support these nontraditional students, Advance CTE recommends that HEA legislation support equitable access to federal financial aid and other wrap-around institution-based support services such as child care, tutoring and job search assistance.
- **Reinstate Ability-to-Benefit:** Education and training beyond high school is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for entry into today’s modern economy. Yet since 2012, students who do not have a high school diploma but have demonstrated the capacity to take postsecondary coursework have been prevented from accessing federal financial aid. Students of all ages, experience levels and backgrounds should have the opportunity to accelerate their learning and work towards a postsecondary credential while simultaneously acquiring other necessary academic or basic education and knowledge. The I-BEST program in Washington state, for instance, facilitates this type of learning and new legislation should elevate and promote this concept where possible as Congress has already done through the passage of WIOA. To accomplish this, Advance CTE recommends reinstating the “Ability-to-Benefit” provisions in Title IV of current law to support low-skilled adults and youth seeking to attain a recognized postsecondary credential and improve their career prospects.
- **Restore Year-round Pell:** Since 2010, the ability to award two Pell Grants in a single award year, known also as “year-round Pell” has been eliminated. This has prevented students who are continuously enrolled in a program from receiving the necessary financial resources to earn their postsecondary degree or credential at a faster rate. These resources are vital to ensuring uninterrupted student learning, increasing student persistence and promoting program completion

rates. As such, Advance CTE recommends reinstating year-round Pell as a way to empower students to use aid resources more effectively tailored to the pace of their studies.

Streamline Data Collection and Ensure Cross-systems Alignment

- **Adopt Common Performance Metrics:** Programs supported through federal legislation such as HEA, WIOA, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have unique purposes but oftentimes serve overlapping populations. Each law maintains distinctive accountability and performance metrics that, taken together, create a reporting burden for states and institutions while decreasing the value and integrity of the data collected. Advance CTE recommends the creation of common measures, where practical, to align workforce and education programs as well as the adoption of related common terminology and measurement methods.
- **Promote Cross-systems Collaboration:** State education systems should support seamless student transitions between the secondary and postsecondary education levels to ensure that they work together collaboratively rather than in isolation. To build upon existing state efforts, Advance CTE recommends that future HEA legislation promote a smooth transition to postsecondary education, and ultimately the workforce, by incentivizing program models such as dual or concurrent enrollment, programs of study and career pathways wherever practical.
- **Develop and Expand Statewide Data System Capacity:** The ultimate role of postsecondary education is to prepare students for rewarding careers that promote economic self-sufficiency and align the nation's talent pipeline needs. . To achieve this, a newly reauthorized HEA must be able to hold programs and institutions accountable for the employment outcomes of their students. However, current law restricts the collection of the information necessary to do this and prevents adequate program evaluation of other critical student outcomes. To that end, Advance CTE recommends repealing the law's ban on the creation of a student unit record system. Relatedly, future legislation should incentivize the development of state longitudinal data systems that enable sharing of data within and among states.

Increase Flexibility for Innovative Educational Models

- **Promote Competency-Based Learning:** Postsecondary CTE programs have been on the forefront of one of the most important innovations in education delivery— competency-based education. Such an approach emphasizes the importance of attaining specific skills and knowledge in a postsecondary educational setting, tailored to each student's unique pace for learning, rather than on units of time to measure coursework. The Experimental Sites Initiative, contained in current HEA law, supports such programs in limited instances and should be expanded to further demonstrate the efficacy of competency-based postsecondary education programs. To build on these efforts, Advance CTE recommends greater flexibility be given to states and postsecondary institutions to implement innovative programs and strategies that use a competency-based learning approach.
- **Expand Career Guidance and Advisement:** Given the changing nature of the workplace, students need greater opportunities to explore various career pathways to familiarize themselves with the career options available — and their related educational and skill requirements — before and during their postsecondary education program of choice. Supplemented with robust guidance and advisement, these activities help students make more informed choices regarding which postsecondary education program will best prepare them to successfully transition into a rewarding career. Advance CTE therefore recommends that future HEA legislation support and encourage career exploration, guidance and advisement throughout the entire educational spectrum.

- **Increase Opportunities for Experiential Learning:** More than ever before, employers are valuing real-world work experiences as a core component of a student’s qualifications for employment. Experiential learning opportunities provide students the opportunity to apply what they have learned in the classroom to the real world and foster the development of employability skills that enhance their ability to successfully transition into the modern workplace. Advance CTE recommends that future HEA legislation encourage and support opportunities for students to participate in experiential learning activities such as internships, mentorships and other forms of real-world work experiences.
- **Eliminate Distance Learning Ban:** Advancements in technology have enabled education programs and institutions to connect with students virtually rather than through the traditional classroom. These programs typically cost less than traditional classroom-based programs and can help foster closer, personalized connections between instructor and student. They can also provide students access to programs regardless of where they live— a critical component to ensuring equitable access to postsecondary education. Despite this, current law arbitrarily prohibits area CTE centers from using student aid if a portion of the program is distance learning-based. Advance CTE recommends lifting this ban on area CTE schools from being eligible institutions for students to use federal aid programs supported by HEA.

Develop and Nurture the CTE Teacher Workforce

- **Prepare and Support Quality CTE Educators:** Across the country, State CTE Directors consistently report a persistent shortage of CTE instructors. To address this shortage and to develop the CTE instructor workforce needed to meet the growing demand for CTE programs, teacher preparation activities authorized in current law should afford prospective teachers the opportunity to gain relevant technical training in the industry area where they intend to teach. Moreover, greater flexibility should be given to teacher preparation programs to recruit and support mid-career professionals seeking to transition into the classroom. To effectively support these efforts, Advance CTE recommends that future HEA legislation include funding and support services for CTE teacher preparation and related professional development.

Advance CTE represents state and territory leaders of CTE through leadership and advocacy that supports an innovative and rigorous CTE system that prepares students for both college and careers. State CTE Directors lead the planning and implementation of CTE in their respective states and these recommendations reflect their priorities.

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