



A Strong Step for Students

House Higher Education Bill Promotes Innovation and Student Success

By Amy-Ellen Duke
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Last Thursday, the House of Representatives passed the College Opportunity and Affordability Act in a vote of 354-58. This legislation, H.R. 4137, moves Congress one step closer to the long-awaited reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which governs federal student financial aid and other programs that promote access for low-income and underrepresented students. The Senate passed its version of the legislation to renew the law in July. The bill now goes to a conference committee of House and Senate members where differences will be ironed out.

In general the House bill seeks to address the rising cost of college, simplifies the financial aid application process, increases the ceiling on the maximum Pell Grant, and requires states to maintain their financial support of higher education. The House Education and Labor Committee also recognized and addressed several key challenges faced by low-income adults and older youth pursuing postsecondary education. In particular, we commend the House for including the following provisions in H.R. 4137:

- Increasing the federal commitment to student persistence and completion by piloting a program to attach a Student Success Grant to every Pell Grant, to ensure that students receive the services they need to stay in college;
- Making college more affordable for low-income and nontraditional students by allowing eligible students to receive the Pell Grant year-around;
- Creating a Business Workforce Partnerships initiative that funds colleges, employers, and local workforce boards to collaborate on developing credit-bearing career and educational pathways;
- Providing Bridges from Jobs to Careers grants to colleges to increase lower-skilled workers' access to and completion of occupational credentials, through bridge programs and other innovations in remedial (developmental) education;
- Ensuring workers who have been laid off receive the financial aid to which they are entitled;
- Expanding access to postsecondary education for those in corrections institutions to help reduce recidivism;

- Directing the federal government to study the costs and benefits of making student aid available to students who attend college less than half time; and
- Simplifying the financial aid application process and making it more responsive to those in modular and compressed programs of study.

For more detail about these provisions see CLASP's HEA recommendations to the House Education and Labor Committee, available at:
http://www.clasp.org/publications/hea_recs_0407.pdf.

As members of the conference committee (made up of members of the Senate's Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee and the House's Education and Labor committee) begin the important work of reconciling the differences between the two bills, we urge conferees to adopt the above provisions passed by the House. They will further expand access to, and promote success for, low-income and nontraditional students in postsecondary education, while helping business and industry be competitive. In addition, we encourage the conferees to support two changes which the Senate is addressing in reauthorization:

- Allowing individuals who lack high school credentials to prove their readiness for college and qualify for federal financial aid by successfully completing six credits in lieu of taking an "ability to benefit" test; and
- Making a technical correction to the independent student definition change enacted in the College Cost Reduction and Access Act to clarify that the definition covers youth who age out of foster care and youth who are adopted or move into the legal care of a guardian from foster care after reaching age 13.

Congress started working on the HEA reauthorization in 2004 and passed important provisions that expand access for nontraditional students in the 2005 and 2007 budget bills. For more information about these changes, see the following CLASP analyses: *Congress Expands Access to Postsecondary Education and Training for Low-Income Adults*, available at: http://www.clasp.org/publications/student_aid_9.07.pdf and *New Student Aid Changes Help Nontraditional Students*, available at: http://www.clasp.org/publications/dra_studentaid.pdf.

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