



Senate Democratic Caucus Higher Education Act Reauthorization Principles

“Go back and say to your children and to your grandchildren, and those who come after you and follow you—tell them that we have made a promise to them. Tell them that the truth is here for them to seek. And tell them that we have opened the road and we have pulled the gates down and the way is open, and we expect them to travel it.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks upon Signing the Higher Education Act of 1965

The Higher Education Act (HEA) was enacted in 1965 to throw open the doors of economic and educational opportunity to all future generations of students, regardless of their income. While our nation’s higher education landscape has changed drastically over the last five decades, our core values have not. The reauthorization of the HEA must focus on four key principles: **affordability, accountability, access, and protecting the rights and safety of all students**. Democrats believe that any reauthorization of the Higher Education Act must:

- Make college more affordable and tackle the crushing burden of student loan debt. It is critical to address this massive challenge, which is the overwhelming concern of students and their families.
- Make colleges more accountable to students and taxpayers by ensuring they are providing a quality education that leads to a real chance of getting a good job with a living wage and that allows families to afford to repay their student debt if they take out loans.
- Make college more accessible to working families and the middle class. It shouldn’t just be the wealthy who are able to send their kids to four-year universities and who make it to graduation day. Instead, higher education should be truly inclusive, fully accessible for historically underrepresented students, reducing economic inequality, and providing a pathway to opportunity and success for all students.
- Make higher education safer for all students. The scourge of campus sexual assault and violence is real and must be addressed, and the rights of students of color, women, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students must be vigorously protected.

① Affordability and Student Debt

This reauthorization must address the skyrocketing costs of higher education, because too many students have to sign up for a lifetime of debt to be able to attend and complete higher education or training. Students should be able to climb the ladder of opportunity through education without taking on unmanageable debt.

- **REDUCING COLLEGE COSTS:** The HEA reauthorization must focus on providing a path for students to graduate from college debt-free. Student debt shouldn’t hold students back from gaining the skills they need to succeed in today’s economy, including debt that students have to shoulder for costs of living like food, books, childcare, transportation, and housing. A crucial part of this effort is a federal-state partnership to stop and reverse the tide of states from disinvesting in public higher education which has driven most of the increase in tuition and fees. Additional options, such as tuition-free public college, community college, or two years of postsecondary education, are important to lowering costs for students who struggle to afford college and proposals in this area should continue to be considered.

- **PELL GRANTS:** The HEA reauthorization must include a commitment to low-income students by strengthening the Pell Grant program. Regular shortfalls and surpluses have put the program on unstable footing, and this must end. The HEA must help low-income students build a better life for themselves by increasing access to the Pell Grant program, increasing the value and reach of a Pell Grant, and protecting the Pell Grant program for current students and generations to come.
- **DEBT RELIEF:** The HEA must help existing borrowers reduce the burden on their private and federal student loans. Current borrowers should be able to refinance their student loans similar to a borrower's ability to refinance a mortgage or auto loan. Borrowers with high-interest rates should have access to the same rates as today's students. Students who have been defrauded should be discharged from and receive refunds on their loan debt. Seniors, veterans, and other individuals with disabilities should be afforded a true path to debt relief or loan discharge and should not be subject to aggressive collections and benefit garnishment.
- **STUDENT LOAN REPAYMENT AND SERVICING:** The process to repay student loans is far too complicated and poorly managed. The system of student loan servicing regularly fails the 43 million borrowers with federal student loan debt. The interest of borrowers must come first, and they deserve better access to loan repayment information, a simpler process for enrolling in income-driven repayment plans, clearer and more reliable paths to loan forgiveness, and dramatically better customer service. The HEA should hold student loan companies and debt collectors to higher standards to ensure they're giving borrowers the help they urgently need and explore automatic payroll deduction to streamline this burdensome process.

② Accountability and Transparency

Students deserve to know they can receive a quality education and that schools are doing everything possible to provide students with a degree or credential that won't leave them drowning in debt. The HEA reauthorization must include increased accountability standards for universities and postsecondary education programs that close loopholes in the law, correct market failures, stop predatory behavior, and hold all schools accountable for how they are performing and serving all students when they receive significant taxpayer subsidies. Our system of oversight should work harder to protect students from high-cost, high-debt programs that do not lead to a livable wage. Colleges should be incentivized to improve rates of persistence and completion, close equity gaps, and assist their student loan borrowers who fail to graduate and are therefore at a much higher risk of delinquency and default. The federal government, states, and accreditors should work closely together to deter bad actors, protect consumers, increase educational standards, and promote continuous quality improvement.

- **OUTCOMES AND DATA:** Students paying for climbing college costs through work, savings, and taking out mountains of debt deserve to know what their return on investment will be. The HEA reauthorization should include provisions that require more transparency in school performance, overturn outdated restrictions on student-level outcome data, and crack down on worst-performing and predatory schools. Colleges that pose clear risks to students—for instance, those with rapid or unusual changes in enrollment, total or per capita federal aid, student complaints, investigations, lawsuits, educational delivery models, marketing and advertising, financial stability, default rates, or loan repayment outcomes—should be quickly reviewed in a targeted manner and penalized for any misconduct or behavior that doesn't put the interests of students first. Colleges should also disclose more information on the outcomes and equity gaps for underrepresented subgroups, similar to information that guides accountability in elementary and secondary education.

- **CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT:** Colleges with low student loan repayment rates and high default rates should be held accountable for their use of federal student loan dollars, and colleges with poor access, persistence, or completion rates should be accountable for their use of grant aid. The “triad” system of the federal government, states, and accreditors must be strengthened to meet its obligation to protect consumers, focus on outcomes, and promote continuous quality improvement at all institutions of higher education. In particular, accreditation must be improved to serve as an effective gatekeeper of federal dollars and a centralized mechanism for improving college quality. Accreditors must identify, collect, and analyze key data indicators on student achievement, avoid conflicts of interest, and rigorously hold low-performing institutions to high standards.
- **FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES:** In the wake of major collapses of Corinthian Colleges and ITT Tech, it is more important than ever to ensure for-profit colleges receive extra scrutiny to reduce their incentive to maximize profits over student success, prevent them from taking advantage of their students, and correct the disproportionately low performance in this sector overall. For-profit colleges enroll just 9 percent of all students but receive 17 percent of student aid dollars and account for 35 percent of all loan defaults. The HEA must include strict rules to ensure institutions are not taking advantage of their students.

③ Access and Success

Students from wealthy families are dramatically more likely to obtain a college degree than lower-income students. If the HEA doesn’t close the widening enrollment and completion gap in higher education, economic inequality will only deepen. Reauthorization should close equity gaps by supporting students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education and assisting institutions that serve them.

- **SERVING LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND STRENGTHENING CAMPUS-BASED AID:** The HEA should help enroll and graduate more Pell Grant recipients, and clearly communicate options for these students to obtain a college degree or credential with little or no debt. Schools that serve large populations of students with financial need and at an affordable cost should be supported. Colleges should be incentivized to improve student success, including persistence, completion, earnings, and job placement. The campus-based aid programs— Federal Work-Study, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and a successor to the Perkins Loan program—should be protected, expanded, and targeted to low-income students.
- **CLOSING COLLEGE PIPELINE GAPS:** The HEA should address the high school graduation to college enrollment gap for low-income and first-generation college students by supporting strategies such as dual enrollment and early college high schools. College access programs like TRIO and GEAR UP should be protected. The HEA can better serve and focus on the outcomes of veterans and servicemembers who are transitioning from military service into postsecondary education. And, the law must improve the transfer process that causes untold numbers of students to lose academic credit or drop out of higher education entirely by strengthening articulation agreements, academic advising, and reverse transfer initiatives.
- **HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS:** The HEA reauthorization should build on past successes to promote access and shared prosperity for groups of students that have been historically underrepresented in higher education. This includes students of color, first-generation students, homeless and foster youth, LGBTQ students, justice-involved individuals, veterans, servicemembers, and many others. For example, the HEA should ensure students with disabilities are provided the accommodations and supports they need to gain admittance and succeed in college, and programs that support students with intellectual disabilities should be expanded to support their transition from public

education to college. Equal access to campus resources must be provided to all students, and colleges must provide faculty assistance in complying with our civil rights laws.

- **IMPROVING TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS:** Given the need to improve the diversity of our teaching workforce, reform teacher preparation programs, and address teacher shortages, the teacher preparation provisions in HEA should be preserved and expanded.
- **SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS:** The HEA should also continue to ensure support for students at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) which serve 20 percent of all students in higher education, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs).
- **TODAY'S STUDENT:** Financial aid policies and student support services under the HEA should actively work to attract, engage, and care for a student population that is fundamentally different than it was during the last reauthorization and is increasingly made up of adults, students who work part-time, and student parents.

④ Protecting Student Safety and Rights

The HEA should contain clear and rigorously enforced safeguards for students and ensure all institutions of higher education meet their obligations under federal laws protecting their safety and civil rights. Federal dollars should never be used to subsidize discrimination on the basis of race, country of origin, religion, immigration status, sex, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Students should be assured their campuses and programs will enforce all safety and civil rights laws.

- **CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT:** Every student deserves to be safe on campus. The HEA must include guidelines for schools and universities to prevent campus sexual violence, investigate and respond appropriately when incidents occur, and provide a supportive environment for survivors.
- **LGBTQ STUDENTS:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students should never be subjected to bullying and harassment because of who they are or whom they love, and the HEA should include strong nondiscrimination requirements.
- **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** Students with all types of disabilities, including mental health needs, must have access to all materials and services provided by institutions of higher education. Their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act must be upheld in higher education settings.
- **HAZING:** Dangerous and sometimes deadly student hazing practices often go unreported and are not dealt with far too often. The HEA should promote transparency and a comprehensive agenda to support institutions struggling to address the issue of hazing.