

Priorities for the Reauthorization of the

Higher Education Act

*A Joint
Statement
from*

The American Federation of Teachers
The National Education Association

April 2007

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), which together represent more than 90 percent of America's unionized higher education faculty and professional staff, jointly support the following priorities for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA).

Joint Statement of Priorities

for the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

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Since its inception, the core goal of the HEA has been to increase access to a college and university education and make higher education affordable for students regardless of their financial circumstances. Any reauthorization proposal must build on that goal. Along with access, the Act addresses issues of quality, accountability and student services to ensure that federal aid dollars finance only soundly managed and high-standard colleges and universities, and that all students receive the educational support they need to succeed in college and beyond. The HEA also recognizes the importance of providing educational opportunities to meet the growing diversity of students, faculty and institutions. Finally, the Act has always recognized the importance of safeguarding academic freedom by observing a policy of non-intervention in educational decision-making on campus.

In keeping with these priorities, AFT and NEA make the following joint recommendations regarding the reauthorization. These recommendations express our major interests and concerns regarding the Higher Education Act, and our effort to provide them jointly indicates that the faculty and other education professionals at a wide range of our nation's postsecondary institutions are in strong agreement on these issues. Each organization may well provide additional material on specific aspects of the bill during the congressional reauthorization process.

ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY AND DIVERSITY

Since 1965, the HEA has embodied the nation's commitment to ensure, as a matter of basic fairness, that no one is denied a college education because of his or her financial circumstances. Millions of students have attended higher education institutions because of the financial assistance programs offered by the HEA—a fact that both reflects and contributes to the growing diversity of the U.S. student population. Today, however, the decreased purchasing power of federal student aid and the increasing reliance on loans rather than grants, particularly by financially disadvantaged students, is putting this 40-year commitment in jeopardy. Therefore, we propose the following:

access and affordability

Ensure, first and foremost, that students with the greatest financial need receive sufficient federal aid to attend college.

Provide more grant aid to the lowest income students and restore the lost purchasing power of the Pell Grant so that students are not overburdened with loan debt.

Bring stability to Pell Grant funding by ensuring that it is provided to all who are entitled to it based on eligibility requirements, rather than subjecting it to the politics and fluctuations of annual funding battles.

Ensure that the federal system for analyzing student need addresses fairly the financial needs of working and nontraditional students, including child care needs.

Improve the federal student aid system to be more efficient and effective in delivering timely and predictable support to students.

Ensure that a diversity of federal student aid programs remains accessible and viable, including supplemental grants, college work-study, direct lending, fixed rate loan consolidations and Perkins loans.

Ensure greater access to student loans and lessen the debt burden students must shoulder. Student loans should be as inexpensive to obtain as possible; fixed-rate loan consolidations should be preserved; and incentives should be created enabling institutions of higher education to switch to the federal Direct Loan Program, which deserves additional funding.

Ensure that students in good standing who otherwise qualify for student financial aid are not excluded from the programs based on their legal status, or that of their parents.

Broaden the scope of loan forgiveness for educators in high-need public schools to include all subject areas as well as other job categories.

Remove “tuition sensitivity” language, which decreases a student’s Pell Grant award based on the school’s tuition rather than focusing on a student’s need or expected family contribution.

diversity

Maintain funding for institutional aid programs currently authorized under Title III and Title V that provide aid to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribally Controlled Colleges and Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Expand access and funding levels for institutions serving large numbers of recent immigrants and students for whom English is not a first language.

Strengthen programs that support institutional policies seeking to recruit and retain diverse undergraduate students, graduate students and faculty.

Support a separate program that provides funding for institutions serving a large number of Asian and Pacific Islanders.

QUALITY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND STUDENT SERVICES

In order to make sure that “access” is not a meaningless term, federal aid dollars should finance only institutions that exhibit a basic level of quality and integrity, and students must receive the educational support they need to succeed. The following, we believe, are the building blocks of that obligation:

quality

Continue private institutional accreditation as a condition for participation in federal programs.

Oppose direct and indirect federal intervention to promote or impose standardized student testing in higher education. Given the tremendous diversity of higher education institutions and student educational goals, standardized tests are very unlikely to expand and improve student learning. In fact, there is a very real danger that curriculum and teaching will become narrower and more uniform if institutions are constantly scrambling to achieve high standardized test results.

Enact a new program to improve student persistence through grants to colleges with large numbers of nontraditional students. Grants would enable such institutions to provide education and advisement services for students who have dropped out of full-time college participation or who are at risk of doing so. Colleges should not be rewarded or punished on the basis of their graduation rates, because graduation rates are not an accurate measure of either persistence or success. However, a combination of greater financial aid and more support services will enable financially and educationally at-risk college students to complete their education successfully.

Require accrediting agencies to implement rigorous quality standards in the area of distance education, and require institutions to maintain a strong system of shared governance and a substantial corps of full-time tenured faculty.

financial accountability, fraud and abuse

Provide controls to guard against fraud and abuse at institutions run for a profit, particularly distance education programs where the possibilities of abuse are multiplied.

Use recommended language from a GAO audit of a model distance- education program to provide stronger safeguards against fraud and abuse.

Retain the “90/10” rule, which ensures that institutions participating in the student aid programs have a sound and independent financial base.

Oppose a change in the definition of an “institution of higher education” that would allow for-profit institutions to participate in the total range of federal higher education programs, not just student aid.

student support services

Retain and expand campus-based educational support programs such as TRIO, Upward Bound and Gear-Up to ensure that educationally and financially disadvantaged students have the support they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Increase support for the International Studies programs in Title VI, including those programs providing instruction in foreign languages.

Provide increased support for faculty development by strengthening and supporting increased funding to graduate education programs under Title VII of the HEA.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Academic freedom in speech, teaching and research is a core focus and guiding principle in postsecondary education:

Oppose any proposal to establish federal intervention or oversight of the educational policies and practices of accredited institutions of higher education, including the processes of academic hiring, curriculum development, classroom teaching and student evaluation. Such proposals are often put forward using deceptive names such as the “Student Bill of Rights,” the “Academic Bill of Rights” or “intellectual diversity.”

Ensure that international scholars and students visiting this country continue to have full access to institutions of higher education so they can build on the many contributions they have already made to advances in American science, engineering, medicine and other disciplines.

Maintain the independence of Title VI international studies programs and oppose the creation of a federal oversight board.

TEACHER EDUCATION [HEA TITLE II]

The HEA offers an opportunity to improve teacher quality by providing resources to schools of education to refine teacher preparation programs and ensure that prospective teaching candidates are properly trained for the classroom:

Enact comprehensive teacher preparation programs to ensure that teacher candidates are prepared in core teaching areas and can demonstrate subject matter knowledge in those areas—and a relevant academic major, as well as in professional and pedagogical skills, knowledge and ability.

Ensure that teacher candidates participate in supervised clinical practice via an internship, student teaching and/or mentoring program, and participate in an induction program for new teachers that includes mentoring from a qualified teacher and other school and university personnel.

Fund strong liberal arts-based teacher preparation programs and support effective models in student teaching, transition to the classroom and early career support services.

Enhance the role of community colleges in teacher education.

Promote accreditation of the entire school, college or department of education by entities committed to the profession itself, as well as reviews of individual programs based on professional standards set by practicing professionals. Standards should be set publicly, with the input of all stakeholders.

Align licensure standards and teacher preparation programs with principles developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium. Support strong, comprehensive approaches to teacher preparation and licensure. Discourage “testing-only” approaches to licensure that do not include structured clinical experiences, demonstration of pedagogical and content knowledge and skill, and participation in high-quality mentoring programs with experienced teachers for the entire period prior to receiving full state certification.

Reject programs such as the Adjunct Teacher Corps or similar programs that are based on the false assumption that anyone with subject-matter knowledge can be a good teacher. Teachers also need to know how to best teach their subject matter, including knowledge of pedagogy based on the best research on how students learn. Further, proven programs that support teacher recruitment and retention, such as Title II Teacher Quality State Grants or loan forgiveness programs, should receive greater priority, rather than focusing on untested programs.

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