



**Please Restore the Ability to Benefit Provisions of the Higher Education Act.**

June 4, 2012

The Honorable Tom Harkin  
 Chairman, Subcommittee on  
 Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations  
 Committee on Appropriations  
 U.S. Senate  
 Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin:

In today's economy, postsecondary education has become a necessity for individuals to secure good jobs and for employers to meet their skill demands. Yet, on July 1, newly enrolled students without a high school diploma or its equivalent who demonstrate college readiness, will lose access to all federal financial aid. Formerly, these students qualified for financial assistance through "Ability to Benefit" (ATB) provisions in Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which were eliminated as part of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of Fiscal Year 2012* last year. The loss of ATB threatens the economic mobility of low-skilled adults and youth who seek postsecondary credentials to improve their job prospects; and undercuts efforts to address America's skills gap.

As national organizations that work with or represent state and local adult education, community college, and workforce investment systems across the country, we are deeply concerned about the impact of the elimination of ATB. Ability to Benefit students are a small, but increasing, part of the undergraduate student population, and come to campus with a variety of backgrounds and educational goals. Not only does the elimination of ATB prevent thousands of students from accessing much-needed postsecondary credentials, but

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it halts the development of innovative strategies in a growing number of states for helping low-skilled adults attain the postsecondary credentials they need to find good jobs and careers as quickly and efficiently as possible.

These innovative strategies such as career pathways and bridge approaches that enable co-enrollment in adult and postsecondary education and training are particularly successful at helping low-skilled adults accelerate the time required to obtain credentials that meet employers' skill needs. Recent studies show that students in these programs outperform similar students in earning college credits and certificates, and in persisting to program completion and good jobs.

Pell Grants are a critical source of funding for all ATB students, including those who participate in these promising initiatives, as the majority are low-income individuals who cannot otherwise afford to attend college. Without student aid eligibility, many of these low-income students who could benefit from accelerated pathways to credentials will be prohibited from doing so – having to first get a diploma or a GED, wasting precious time and taxpayer money.

As our workforce ages, we will become increasingly dependent on all segments of our population, including adults with low educational levels, to fill job openings and address the growing skills gap in the U.S. We cannot afford to shut the door to higher education and career opportunities for any students that are ready to move forward with their education including those who have not obtained a high school diploma or GED but have shown an “ability to benefit” (ATB) from higher education.

We urge you to support these effective innovations and either fully restore the ATB provisions, or at a minimum provide an exception for students participating in career pathway programs.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)  
Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)  
Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT)  
Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP)  
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)  
Community Action Partnership  
Corporate Voices for Working Families  
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)  
The Corps Network  
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)  
Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL)

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Insight Center for Community Economic Development (NSSP)

Jobs for the Future (JFF)

Legal Momentum

National Association of Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)

National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB)

National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP)

National Coalition for Literacy (NCL)

National College Transition Network at World Education, Inc (NCTN)

National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE)

National Council of La Raza (NCLR)

National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE)

National Education Association (NEA)

National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS)

National League of Cities (NLC)

National Skills Coalition (NSC)

National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN)

National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC)

ProLiteracy

Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW)