

Remarks of Ranking Member Bobby Scott
Education and Workforce Full Committee Hearing
“Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education”
Tuesday, February 7, 2017
2175 Rayburn – 10:30 am

Good morning Chairwoman Foxx, and members of the Committee. To the witnesses, thank you for being here, I look forward to your testimony.

Today’s hearing is an opportunity to hear directly from different sectors and voices within the higher education community. It’s important for us to continue to work with a diverse array of leaders who will inform the development of research-backed policy solutions as the committee works to reauthorize the Higher Education Act.

During the last Congress our committee enjoyed bipartisan collaboration on issues from ESSA to CTE and even on some discrete bipartisan higher education bills. I think there is room for more bipartisan collaboration in higher education, and in the past we have come together to produce bipartisan higher education bills addressing specific policy issues. That past success does not mean that the process of a comprehensive reauthorization will be a smooth and straight forward path, but I am committed to working with you, Madam Chairwoman, over the course of this Congress to see if we can get to a comprehensive bill.

To that end, House Democrats remain focused on ensuring that the Higher Education Act continues to provide pathways to a better life for all Americans. Quality higher education must be accessible and affordable to empower America’s working families to succeed in our economy. That means improving the system to work for all students and families.

That promise was made when President Lyndon Johnson signed HEA into law in 1965. He said, “[This] means that a high school senior, anywhere in this great land of ours, can apply to any college or any university in any of the 50 states and not be turned away because his family is poor.” Unfortunately, for too many working families, the promise of HEA has eroded. For far too many of our students, access to economic opportunity provided through higher education is in jeopardy.

Faced with borrowing substantial sums of money to enroll, higher education feels out of reach or not worth the cost for many students. This inequity of opportunity serves to limit lifetime prospects, especially for low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. Any action we take this Congress on higher education should increase the number of students who attend college, lower the cost for those who do, and help students complete a meaningful degree on time that will have value in the job market.

A logical place to start is with a renewed focus on the institutions of higher education that enroll 75 percent of students: two- and four-year public colleges. These schools are the only higher education options in many communities, and have a track record of both adapting to meet the educational needs of their communities and serving as engines of mobility into higher income careers.

Democrats remain committed to a higher education system that has multiple pathways to attaining a meaningful credential that is not necessarily a four-year on-campus degree, but we also remain committed to protecting access to a four-year on campus degree for any person qualified and desiring of one.

That will likely take a sustained, increased investment of resources. And while I understand that many Members claim we don't have the money to commit to higher education, I would counter that taxpayer money spent on higher education is a vital investment in our nation's security and workforce. We live in a global economy and other countries compete for business. And in our global economy, the main competitive advantage we have in America is our advantage in education. We certainly can't compete with other countries when it comes to the lowest wages, when many around the world may work for a few dollars or even a few pennies a day. Nor can we compete in terms of location. You no longer have to be located near your co-workers; with today's technology – video-conferencing, smartphones, tablets –if you can work across the hall from your co-workers, you can now work across the globe from your co-workers. Goods can be shipped around the globe in a matter of days if not hours, so there's no advantage for a manufacturer to build his factory near his customers. No, the main reason that America remains strong and continues to attract business investment is because we have well educated workers.

As the richest country on earth, we have the resources to ensure that all students have access to multiple, high-quality higher education opportunities. We can increase the maximum Pell Grant award. We can provide funds to help schools create the supports needed to accelerate completion. We can support the important work done at our Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions. We can devise loan repayment and forgiveness options that allow student borrowers to repay their loans without surrendering their economic freedom.

We can do all those things, but we have to make them within a system of priorities. In 2013, Congress renewed the Bush-era tax cuts, including significant benefits for the top one percent, and in the next week raised the interest rate on federal student loans. We gave tax breaks to millionaires and billionaires and then charged poor students more to borrow money to go to college. If the American people want our higher education system to remain the envy of the world, we can't do it on the cheap. That means we have to prioritize policy solutions that promote sustained investment at both the federal and state levels.

Unfortunately, some in higher education fail to deliver on a quality education, and so, to protect the robust and sustained public investment, we need a strong triad of federal regulation, state authorization, and private accreditation to guarantee institutional and program quality. All three play essential and necessary roles in ensuring the fitness of our higher education system.

Federal regulations protect the sizable investment in higher education, and provide consumer protections for students themselves. State authorizers, closest to students, must be a check to ensure that local actors provide quality instruction that is best suited for students in that state. And accreditors must be skilled arbiters of academic quality.

We will likely need to assess the duties of all three legs of the triad in a comprehensive reauthorization. But if we are going to protect students and taxpayers effectively, I think we need to realize that deregulation for the sake of deregulation doesn't make any sense.

Going to and graduating from college remains one of the most consistent methods for eliminating the many barriers to upward mobility facing millions of Americans. Former President Obama, raised by a single working mother and her family, parlayed his college education into a successful career leading all the way to the Oval Office. Similarly, you Madam Chairwoman, know the power of quality higher education has to change lives, having dedicated large portions of your life to the pursuit of higher education and its improvement. Mr. Norcross, a new member on this committee, got his start in higher education at a community college, before moving on to what he affectionately calls the "other 4-year degree," an apprenticeship with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW).

Each of these individuals is an example of what can be achieved when deserving students have access to a postsecondary education. They, and many others like them, prove that the opportunities opened up by a college education are limitless.

New models that provide the skills necessary to succeed in today's global economy may have the potential to be engines of upward mobility in the future. But, if we focus solely on economic outcomes to write higher education policies, and fail to look at the intangible benefits of higher education, we may be missing a lot of opportunities for a lot of people. A four-year college may not be for everyone, but it should be available to all who are academically qualified to attend and wish to pursue it. Protecting that access, while incentivizing new models that serve today's students, will make higher education work for all of America's working families. Thank you Madam Chairwoman, I yield back.