

**Opening Statement of ECESE Subcommittee Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)**

Full Committee on Education and Workforce Hearing

*"U.S. Universities Under Siege: Foreign Espionage, Stolen Innovation, and the National Security Threat"*

Thursday, March 26, 2026 | 10:15 a.m.

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

A college degree remains a sure path to the American Dream, and it's the most reliable engine of economic mobility we have. With job numbers [falling] and the cost of living rising, it is vital that we protect and uplift pathways to economic opportunity. College graduates earn more, experience lower unemployment rates, and are better positioned to support their families and contribute to their communities and the economy.

Right now, our country is in the midst of a college affordability crisis. Students and families are being forced to take out crushing loans that may take them decades to repay. Today's hearing is ostensibly about espionage and foreign influence in higher education, something we have discussed in this Committee numerous times. Unfortunately, I fear that today's discussion will once again focus on xenophobic conspiracy theories and culture war debates instead of addressing real barriers students are facing.

Allow me to be blunt: the greatest threat facing students today is not foreign influence or espionage in higher education. Although these problems may exist, we can't easily quantify how or even whether they affect student life. And according to the testimony submitted today, which I have read, processes are already in place to address any foreign threat. They seem to be doing a decent job — I read your testimony. And there doesn't seem to be anything close to a university "under siege," which is what the title of the hearing portrays.

What we can quantify, however, is the enormous and detrimental effect of the Trump Administration's attacks on higher education, on student borrowers, and on their families, which is why Committee Democrats have invited a representative from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) today to provide us with real data and facts.

Since the Trump Administration returned to office, Secretary McMahon has been trying to carry out President Trump's stated goal of dismantling the Department of Education (ED) to devastating effect. To date, ED has signed at least ten interagency agreements to transfer its programs away from the experts at the Department to other agencies. These moves are inefficient, wasteful, and harmful to students and families who are now being forced to deal with multiple agencies. These programs have been thrust upon agencies that do not have the knowledge or the expertise about complex topics like student financial aid, and they do not understand the importance of successful programs like TRIO and GEAR UP that increase the educational success of first-generation college students.

Recently, the GAO released a report showing that the Department's Office of Federal Student Aid has actually stopped key oversight on loan servicers. In its oversight of the \$1.6 [trillion] student loan portfolio, the Department is required by law to ensure that student loan servicers provide borrowers with accurate information about their loans. And when they do not, borrowers can either overpay or be placed in the wrong student loan

repayment program. So, the Department's refusal to conduct robust oversight of student loan servicers is a dereliction of duty. Importantly, when the Department conducted oversight during the Biden Administration, it issued penalties to four out of five servicers because they failed to meet accuracy standards. Now, without that oversight, the government is likely paying servicers for subpar or even illegal performance.

And just last week, the Department transferred its portfolio of defaulted student loans to the Treasury Department. Borrowers in default need support, but now they will have limited access to the Department's subject-matter experts. This transfer means that student borrowers who may be eligible for total discharge or other relief will need to discuss their situation with people who frankly don't have a clue about how the program works.

The Department has also announced it intends to hand over other student aid responsibilities to Treasury, despite its lack of expertise. It certainly looks like the Trump Administration's goal is to intentionally create chaos and confusion for these borrowers, many of whom are already in dire financial straits.

Furthermore, the 'Big, Ugly Law' is about to make major changes to Income-Driven Repayment, changes that will affect millions of Americans. But because of the reductions-in-force (RIFs), there are not enough staff left at the Department to implement these changes and help borrowers navigate them. Starting on July 1<sup>st</sup>, millions of Americans will be left in the dark with no resources to help them.

And to make things worse for students, the Trump Administration's dismantling of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has undermined our ability to address discrimination in schools. In March 2025, OCR's staff was cut in half, and seven of its twelve regional offices were forced to close. This move was not only devastating for students seeking recourse for discrimination on campus — it was also inefficient and wasteful. A recent GAO report revealed that these layoffs may have cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$38 million. If that does not qualify as 'waste, fraud, and abuse,' I'm not sure what does.

It is irresponsible and shortsighted for this Committee to focus on vague threats of espionage, which seem to be addressed by the universities, instead of addressing the real problems in front of us. It is time for Congress to step up and do its duty to protect students and families from the overreaches and abuses of the Trump Administration. I urge my colleagues to listen to the unbiased reporting of GAO and consider whether blind loyalty to this Administration is worth the costs outlined today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.