



**NEW DEMOCRAT FUTURE OF WORK TASK FORCE, 21ST CENTURY SKILLS TRAINING & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
JULY 19, 2017**

Thank you for inviting me to speak this morning. My name is Julie Peller and I am the Executive Director of Higher Learning Advocates, a bipartisan policy and advocacy organization focused on federal policy changes to support a postsecondary education system that is student-centered, equitable, and outcomes-based. In order to increase the nation's postsecondary credential and degree attainment, Higher Learning Advocates believes federal policy must catch up with today's students and shift from a sole focus on 'higher education' to a broader focus on 'higher learning' – meaning education or training beyond high school that leads to a degree, credential, or employment. I applaud the Coalition's commitment to examining our current landscape of 21st century skills training, and today I will speak about the changing landscape of postsecondary education and its intersection with ensuring students gain the skills necessary to participate in today's economy.

According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, there will be 55 million job openings through 2020, over one-third of which will require at least a bachelor's degree, and thirty percent will require an associate's degree or some college. The fastest growing employment fields, including those in STEM and health care, require at least some college education.¹ As we've known for some time, a postsecondary credential is no longer an option; it is a necessary ticket to participate in the modern economy.

Yet, even holding a postsecondary degree or credential today does not guarantee employment or employability. Half of Business Roundtable CEOs say they are having trouble finding employees with the skills they need,² and the National Federation of Independent Businesses reports that while fifty-four percent of small businesses are hiring, forty-six percent report few or no qualified applicants for positions they're trying to fill.³

This skills gap can be addressed, in part, through improvements in our postsecondary learning system and updates to federal policy so that today's students are more likely to complete a credential, gain the skills they need to be employed, and realize value through their education.

For many, "college" paints a particular picture in one's mind of a young adult playing frisbee on the quad or debating the great works with classmates over coffee. But today's students look and

¹ <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>

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http://businessroundtable.org/sites/default/files/immigration_reports/2017.06.01%20BRT.Work%20in%20Progress.How%20CEOs%20Are%20Helping%20Close%20America%E2%80%99s%20Ski....pdf

³ <http://www.nfib.com/surveys/small-business-economic-trends/>

behave very differently. Thirty-eight percent of today's students are older than 25; fifty-eight percent are working while taking classes; and twenty-six percent are raising children while in school. We also know that full-time enrollment is not the reality for many of today's students, as almost one-third of four-year students and 60 percent of students at two-year institutions attend part-time.⁴ And, while employment has been a goal of graduates for some time, today's students see a clear and direct connection between postsecondary education and employment.

In the same way today's students look very different from students of the past, today's postsecondary educational landscape has also changed to adapt to technological advances and innovative delivery models. A study conducted by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association found alternative credentials are offered by 94 percent of higher education institutions.⁵ Online courses, modules, competency based programs, and work based learning are all commonly found in today's postsecondary programs.

Learning is also happening outside of institutions of higher education. For example, consider the twenty-five-year-old veteran returning home after serving as a medic who then needs to enroll in a nursing program. We are seeing an informal economy of learning that must be recognized and formalized. Too often we ask people to repeat learning in order to certify their knowledge, wasting time and money. Our systems must adapt to ensure there is a way for all learning to be counted.

However, many federal policies surrounding postsecondary education and training were developed in an era in which most students went immediately to a four-year university or trade school after high school. As a result, policies governing postsecondary education often fail to recognize these new ways of earning a degree or credential – sometimes pegged to students' acquisition of knowledge rather than time spent sitting in a lecture hall. Today's students, and today's providers of postsecondary learning, require different supports, policies, and incentives to achieve success. It is time for federal policy to catch up.

Building on the bipartisan passage of the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act, a holistic review of our workforce and higher education systems with the goal of harmonizing and bettering connections between them is needed. We must create complimentary policies and systems that prepare people for long-term job success.

Federal postsecondary education, workforce and training programs need to be more compatible with one another, as learners intersect with multiple programs and systems in a lifelong learning path. To the extent possible, common definitions should be agreed upon and shared in order to benefit individuals who flow in and out of different programs. The federal government should encourage and acknowledge the regional identification of workforce needs and goals. And accountability and transparency metrics and systems should work together to ensure those seeking education and skills training know the potential return on investment of the programs they're entering and that we are recognizing successful programs and their potential to scale.

Next, an increased focus on the intersection of work and learning can increase the relevance of learning for today's students, shorten the time to a credential and help to close the skills gap. Our higher education system enables this through programs such as Federal Work Study and other modes of experiential learning. Beyond our higher education system, apprenticeships are a valuable work-based learning tool. While our current apprenticeship structure isn't perfect, any

⁴ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csb.asp

⁵ <http://upcea.edu/pioneering-study-reveals-90-percent-colleges-universities-embrace-alternative-credentials/>

expansion of apprenticeships should continue to include robust protections for the apprentice and demonstrate outcomes such as employment and value.

Additionally, delivery models such as competency-based education, on-the-job training and prior learning assessments build off experiential learning in order to minimize the time it takes to obtain a degree or credential and maximize the application of their skills in the workforce. However, current policies, mainly in the Higher Education Act, restrain the growth of programs where credit is based on learning, rather than time.

It is time for federal policy to catch up and enable providers of postsecondary education to expand and strengthen strategies that enable students who have valuable work experience to receive credit for their skills and allow students to earn on their own time table, which may make earning a degree or credential less costly or duplicative.

In the same way competency-based education and prior learning assessments are responding to the ever-changing landscape of postsecondary education, new providers of higher learning have also begun to provide skills training in new ways – from coding boot camps to MOOCs to libraries and job training centers. Sometimes these providers can more quickly respond to changing skill requirements, often because traditional providers of postsecondary education may need to gain approval from their regional accreditor to create or change programs that would be eligible for federal financial aid.

As this marketplace emerges, it is important that all learners – regardless of income – have access to the skills training they need, and that policies support the growth of high-quality programs that provide learners with value. Therefore, it is worth examining ways of both extending federal financial aid to alternative providers with high levels of evidence, and enabling existing institutions to make changes in response to workforce demands more quickly.

This more robust and complete system of higher learning will require students and taxpayers to know which programs of study – whether at a traditional or nontraditional provider – are effective and offer a positive return on investment. Here too, federal policy can be improved to be sure that transparency and accountability are centered on outcomes, such as completion, employment, equity and value, and measure all students.

To conclude, I would like to again thank the Coalition for inviting me to participate in such an important and timely discussion on 21st century skills training. This examination of how our current federal policies and programs support or hinder skills development – through workforce, job training, or postsecondary education – is necessary to make improvements so that today's students can be successful. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.