Expanding Opportunity for TODAY’S STUDENTS
Strategic Plan: 2022-2025
A MESSAGE FROM

Our Founder and Executive Director, Julie Peller

Higher learning — education and training beyond high school — is the foundation for rebuilding and strengthening our economy. It allows thousands of Americans to return to work, increase their salaries, and support their families. Today’s students are the drivers of our recovery and growth, and supporting them today will lead to our success tomorrow.

While more learners are participating in education and training beyond high school than ever before, there is a vast and growing disconnect between the systems we have and the needs of students, employers and communities. Four-out-of-ten students leave college before getting a degree, a benchmark that’s far worse for students of color. And, the COVID-19 global pandemic has further exacerbated these issues and threatens to leave a generation of learners behind.

Simply put, too many learners are facing a system of higher learning that doesn’t work for them. For the skills and strengthened economy that the country needs, we need a system where all learners can go — or return — to school, complete their programs and degrees, and enter the workforce. We need a society that values learning, whether it happens at a four-year college or on-the-job. Learners must not have to choose between work or learning; where short-term job training programs are not pitted against college degrees, but instead are building blocks that fit together in a life-long work and learning pathway.

We are excited to be launching this strategic plan at a critical time for today’s students. As students, and the country, turn the page from the pandemic, there is great opportunity — and a crucial need — to ensure that all of today’s students have the tools to succeed.
TODAY’S STUDENTS

Advancing the cause of today’s students is our work because too many students are not being served well by the systems and structures that were built for a very different type of student. And because we believe in practical, bipartisan, and systemic change so that all students have a chance to succeed. By putting the student — not the institutions and existing structures — at the core of our agenda, we have made significant progress on the policy changes needed to ensure that higher education can serve all of today’s students, not just those who fit a traditional mold.

By the very nature of the students we work for, it is often impossible to separate out the interests of various types of students. Parenting students are often working students. Student veterans are often returning adult students.

As HLA continues our work focused on today’s students, we are very aware that many of today’s students may not even consider themselves students at all. They are foremost parents, spouses, employees, and adults. But, to us they are learners, and they are students. At the community college, in the job training programs, or finishing bachelor’s degree programs, today’s students’ journeys are as varied as their backgrounds, and they must all be equally supported.

This strategic plan uses “today’s students” and “today’s learners” interchangeably to reflect that for some people and in some policy discussions a broader term of “learner” may be more resonant. But, “student” or “learner,” parent or employee, we continue working for the same population of people working hard to reskill, upskill, and educate themselves to improve their lives and those of their loved ones.
OUR FOCUS

CONNECTING OPPORTUNITIES
We advance policy solutions that create and sustain a system of higher learning that values all pathways to and through postsecondary learning, and that connects learners so that all learning is counted, valued, and transparent.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS
We identify and remove barriers in federal policy beyond the Higher Education Act that prevent students from accessing means-tested programs while they are enrolled in school and to recommend policy proposals to address the barriers to better serve today’s students.

DRIVING VALUE
We advance quality and accountability of institutions and programs for today’s students and recommend new policy proposals, advance efforts to protect quality in a variety of legislative and administrative contexts, and build the case that quality and accountability is critical to student success.
OUR THREE YEAR OBJECTIVES

ADVANCE REFORM
Advance policies and support programs that ensure opportunity for all learners to succeed through an equitable system of higher learning.

We will:
• ensure students of color, student parents and adult learners are supported in the higher education system
• enable students to access means-tested programs, such as SNAP and EITC, while they are enrolled in school
• continue and codify advancements in meeting the needs of students during the COVID response to meet the needs of students even after the pandemic
• advance a post-COVID vision of accountability that promotes the value of a postsecondary education for today’s students

CONNECT SYSTEMS
Define and advance a clear vision of interconnected higher education, workforce and training systems.

We will:
• pave pathways between workforce training, work based learning, and higher education so that knowledge from multiple sources can be built upon
• ensure learners can know, navigate and access higher learning options in pursuit of upward mobility
• enable low-income individuals to access funding for the multiple forms of learning that fit their life circumstances and goals
• shift the traditional national narrative to a comprehensive higher learning perspective for all of today’s learners, including the long-term unemployed and potential learners

RAISE PROFILE
Promote the value proposition for postsecondary learning as a critical issue in policy and politics.

We will:
• ensure today’s students voices are an integral part of the policy making process
• build a groundswell of people and organizations who join us in creating the change we seek
• amplify the support of champions, influencers, and funders aligned with our agenda
HLA STRATEGIC PLAN

OUR MISSION

Higher Learning Advocates advances policies and supports programs that ensure opportunity and promote inclusive pathways for all learners to succeed through an equitable system of higher learning, employment, and economic mobility.

WHO ARE TODAY’S STUDENTS?

16% Live on campus
22% Parenting
34% Over 25 years old
39% Attend part-time
56% First-generation student
OUR VISION

We must widen the path so that more learners can succeed.

We ensure that today’s students are supported now, and in the future, so that:

• All pathways to and through higher learning—including degrees, certificates, work-based learning, and more—are a choice of value to learners, educational providers, and employers.

• Students have a clearer path into higher learning to enable them to complete their education, enter the workforce, and realize opportunities for economic mobility.

• Student success—enrollment, completion, employment, earnings, and value—is no longer determined by the color of a learner’s skin or the zip code from which they come.

• Students are not held back from higher learning due to expenses beyond tuition and textbooks.
WHAT WE VALUE

WE ARE COMMITTED TO TODAY’S STUDENTS
At Higher Learning Advocates, we:
• Break down barriers and build up supports for today’s learners.
• Demand a higher learning system that puts learners’ needs first — and take the lead in providing solutions that will get us there.
• Eliminate harmful policies to create an equitable and inclusive system of higher learning.
• Create change and help others do so as well.

WE ARE COMMITTED TO AN EQUITABLE SYSTEM OF HIGHER LEARNING
We actively work toward a world in which everyone has access to real opportunity in an equitable and inclusive system of higher learning.
• Learner success — enrollment, completion, employment, earnings, and value — is no longer determined by the color of a student’s skin or the zip code from which they come.
• All of today’s learners, including students of color, low-income students, adult students, and student parents, are valued, respected, and supported by providers of higher learning.
• Pursuing higher learning is not systematically out of reach financially or culturally for communities of learners, especially Black and Latino learners.
• All pathways through higher learning — including alternatives to a four-year degree — are a choice of value to learners, institutions of higher learning, and employers.

WE ARE COMMITTED TO BIPARTISANSHIP
Our work is not partisan, but centered on who matters most: today’s students.
• We work with policymakers across the political spectrum who are willing to put learners at the center of policy.
• We are not afraid to take a stand for today’s learners based on party politics or controversy.
• We bring together partners and advance policy for the good of today’s learners.
• We are flexible, strategic, and advocate for long-term solutions to meet the needs of today’s learners.
 Achieving Victories for Today’s Students

Higher Learning Advocates’ first strategic plan focused on shifting federal policy to accelerate responsiveness to support the success of today’s students. This coincided with a turbulent time in our nation’s history — including political uncertainty, unrest, and an unprecedented global pandemic. However, we continued our advocacy for today’s students and:

- Identified federal policies that further state, institutional, and provider responsiveness to supporting today’s students.
- Expanded the universe of people and organizations committed to addressing the needs of today’s students through federal policy.
- Solidified the reputation of HLA as an indispensable advocacy-first organization.

Today, Higher Learning Advocates is the leading advocate for federal policy change for today’s students. Since our launch in 2017, we have seen a dramatic increase in recognition of the needs of today’s students evidenced by legislative and Administrative support for our policy recommendations. As well, we have galvanized more than 100 organizations to act in support of our recommendations and goals.

Because of our work:

- Pell students have access to discounted broadband service.
- Emergency aid funds exist and can be used for all services including repaying debts and mental health.
- More of parenting students’ income is protected — meaning they are eligible for more financial aid.
- Leading national organizations regularly come together to advocate for today’s students.
WHAT’S AHEAD: 2022-2025

BUILDING ON OUR SUCCESS

Today’s economic and political environment requires Higher Learning Advocates to take our approach and focus on today’s students into a broader context that recognizes a full spectrum of opportunities for learning beyond high school, that identifies opportunities for policy change at the federal and state levels, and that raises the profile of the change we seek.

ADVANCE REFORM:
We will advance policies and support programs that ensure opportunity for all learners to succeed through an equitable system of higher learning.

CONNECT SYSTEMS:
We will define and advance a clear vision of interconnected higher education, workforce and training systems.

RAISE PROFILE:
We will promote the value proposition for postsecondary learning as a critical issue in policy and politics.
HLA STRATEGIC PLAN

2022-2025

OBJECTIVE #1: ADVANCE REFORM

We will advance policies and support programs that ensure opportunity for all learners to succeed through an equitable system of higher learning.

Policy change must intentionally address the shortcomings of and inequities in our current system of higher learning while upholding the promise and talent of today’s students. We will continue to advance policy solutions that are at the same time transformative and practical; solutions that are centered on what matters most — supporting the success of today’s students, especially those who have been left behind for far too long.

We will:

• Ensure students of color, student parents and adult learners are supported in the higher education system.
• Enable students to access means-tested programs, such as SNAP and EITC, while they are enrolled in school.
• Continue and codify advancements in meeting the needs of students during the COVID response to meet the needs of students even after the pandemic.
• Advance a post-COVID vision of accountability that promotes the value of a postsecondary education for today’s students.
OBJECTIVE #2: CONNECT SYSTEMS

We will define and advance a clear vision of interconnected higher education, workforce and training systems.

Our mission requires reaching beyond traditional policy tables and eliminating barriers for learners across systems. It requires that all stakeholders are working together with the singular, centered goal of learner success. This work requires breaking down the barriers between higher education and workforce training and operating in the in-between space to address learners’ needs.

We will:

- Pave pathways between workforce training, work based learning, and higher education so that knowledge from multiple sources can be built upon.
- Ensure learners can know, navigate, and access higher learning options in pursuit of upward mobility.
- Enable low-income individuals to access funding for the multiple forms of learning that fit their life circumstances and goals.
- Shift the traditional national narrative to a comprehensive higher learning perspective for all of today’s learners, including the long-term unemployed and potential learners.
OBJECTIVE #3: RAISE PROFILE

We will promote the value proposition for postsecondary learning as a critical issue in policy and politics.

While critical to the nation, higher education and workforce training largely fail to dominate the national policy conversation. However, bold and sustaining change is often impossible to achieve without a compelling interest by policymakers and the public. By investing in critical messaging, exploring connections to the pressing issues of the day, and engaging in tough conversations, we will make the case that policymakers must pay critical attention to the success of today’s learners.

We will:

• Ensure today’s students’ voices are an integral part of the policy making process.
• Build a groundswell of people and organizations who join us in creating the change we seek.
• Amplify the support of champions, influencers, and funders aligned with our agenda.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS BETWEEN EDUCATION & THE WORKFORCE
HOW WE WILL GET THERE

Higher Learning Advocates approaches policy change through multiple means, including policy development, direct influence, partner engagement, strategic communications, and building awareness. We ground our policy proposals in an ongoing conversation, build champions for an issue, and lead policymakers to see that solutions can make a difference.

1. **Advance Our Agenda:**
   Focus on three strategic policy areas — Connecting Opportunities, Supporting Students, and Driving Value

2. **Develop Critical Relationships:**
   Invest in partnerships, coalitions, and champions

3. **Work Across Party Lines:**
   Retain our commitment to bipartisan policy change

4. **Amplify Today’s Learners’ Voices:**
   Explore and employ premier advocacy-based strategies to reach our goals
PILLAR #1: ADVANCE OUR AGENDA

Focus on 3 strategic policy areas — Connecting Opportunities, Supporting Students, & Driving Value

The system of higher education today’s students deserve must support all students’ needs regarding access, affordability, and their future success. Federal policy is a great catalyst in ensuring that such a system exists for all of today’s students.

We will:

• Advance policy solutions that create and sustain a system of higher learning that values all pathways to and through postsecondary learning, and that connects learners so that all learning is counted, valued, and transparent.
• Identify and remove barriers in federal policy beyond the Higher Education Act that prevent students from accessing means-tested programs while they are enrolled in school and to recommend policy proposals to address the barriers to better serving today’s students.
• Advance quality and accountability of institutions and programs for today’s students and recommend new policy proposals, advance efforts to protect quality in a variety of legislative and administrative contexts, and build the case that quality and accountability is critical to student success.
PILLAR #2: DEVELOP CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Invest in partnerships, coalitions, and champions

Policy change is rarely the result of one singular organization or advocate. As such, we believe that it is critical to work in deep partnership with key stakeholders to develop and advance policy solutions. Especially critical is sustained engagement with partners to develop and assess the policy needs and solutions on the ground.

We will:

• Intentionally seek new partnership and collaboration with those working on related issues outside of the higher education space and deepen our current partnerships, including those focused on anti-poverty and means tested program reform, workforce development, and skills. Such cross-sector collaboration will allow for new conversations, policy ideation, and collaboration.

• Operate and grow the Today’s Students Coalition—a cross-cutting group of more than 30 advocacy, membership, and student organizations that Higher Learning Advocates organizes and runs—as a powerful voice for today’s students and the go-to resource for policymakers and key stakeholders.

• Raise funds and attract supporters to ensure sustainable, growing organizational support.
PILLAR #3: WORK ACROSS PARTY LINES

Retain our commitment to bipartisan policy change

In today’s political environment, where too much is viewed as intractable partisan positioning, it is essential that we create opportunities to strategically engage Congress and the Administration in a manner that puts today’s learners at the center. By doing so, we will build on our proven track record to advance policy solutions that transcend party politics.

We will:

• Identify practical policy solutions for today’s learners that transcend party politics and can bring stakeholders together.
• Build relationships across the aisle with policymakers that are aligned with our agenda and who can work together to move our agenda forward.
PILLAR #4: AMPLIFY TODAY’S LEARNERS’ VOICES

Explore and employ premier advocacy-based strategies to reach our goals

Successful policy change is supported by an emotional connection to drive reforms, yet postsecondary advocacy is often disconnected from student experiences. Policy changes are more meaningful if policymakers have the opportunity to connect the issues and solutions to people and real-life situations.

We will:

- Highlight the unique challenges, paths, and successes of students, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, to federal policymakers and influencers.
- Create opportunities to strategically engage Congress and the Administration to strengthen the drumbeat surrounding our advocacy efforts.
- Engage with today’s learners, stakeholders, advocates, and champions to directly speak to the opportunities and challenges of today’s learners.
TODAY’S STUDENTS ARE TODAY’S LEARNERS.
#TODAYSSTUDENTS
higherlearningadvocates.org