



November 30, 2020

Dear distinguished members of Congress,

Higher learning—education beyond high school—is the foundation for rebuilding our economy. It will allow thousands of Americans to return to work, increase their salaries, and support their families. Higher learning is happening everywhere: through new credentials and models available on campus, online, at home, and at work, especially in a world changed by COVID-19.

And, in the face of the pandemic, higher learning is that much more challenging for today's students, who will be the drivers of our recovery and growth. Today's students are more diverse than any previous generation of students—they are more likely to be people of color, adults, first-generation, and low-income—and many have work and family responsibilities that extend beyond the classroom. Twenty-four percent of students are parents. Forty percent attend school part-time, and sixty-four percent work while in college.

Unfortunately, our nation's higher education system currently fails too many of today's students, who must work around the structural barriers to their success. And, the pandemic disrupted the lives of many students. One-third of students have reported that they suffered an unexpected job loss due to the pandemic. Nearly three in five of today's students are reporting that they have struggled with basic needs insecurity. This is not a story of taking a gap year; this is a story of survival.

But, this structural mismatch must, and can, change—our recovery depends on it. Their—and our—success requires refocusing federal policies and connecting bipartisan ideas to transform higher learning into an inclusive, equitable system that empowers today's students.

While a large-scale overhaul of higher education policy is sorely needed, in the meantime, there is an urgent need for reform to ensure that current federal policies help students in need, not create barriers or confusion. The good news is many clear solutions are known and can be accomplished in a quick timeline. To that end, attached is a playbook of smart solutions for today's students recently published by Higher Learning Advocates. These policies will widen the path to and through higher learning.

By attending to students' basic needs, supporting student parents, ensuring equitable access to education, connecting higher education and the workforce, and improving



accountability, the nation's system of higher learning will work better for students, employers, and the country as a whole. We stand ready to work together to ensure today's students have the opportunity to succeed.

Sincerely,

Julie Peller, Executive Director, Higher Learning Advocates,

and the Members of the Higher Learning Advocates Board of Directors

Dr. Chris Bustamante

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Former Congressman Luke Messer

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