

April 1, 2014

The Honorable Harold (Hal) Rogers  
Chairman  
House Committee on Appropriations  
H-307, The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jack Kingston  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and  
Human Services, Education and  
Related Agencies  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Appropriations  
1016 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and  
Human Services, Education and  
Related Agencies  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Lowey, Subcommittee Chairman Kingston and Subcommittee Ranking Member DeLauro:

As Members who remain committed to ensuring students of all backgrounds have access to higher education opportunities, we urge the Committee to consider reinstating eligibility for federal Pell Grants and student loans for students without a high school diploma or recognized equivalency (i.e., a General Educational Development (GED) certificate) in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 appropriations process.

Removal of Pell Grant and federal student loan eligibility by Congress for this socio-economically vulnerable subset of individuals, who are more likely to be low-income, parents, minority, and unemployed, was a departure from this nation's decades-long commitment to the broadest access possible to postsecondary education. Moreover, given the fiscal stability of the Pell Grant program for this fiscal year and next, now is an opportune time to examine the state of the program to ensure it is appropriately serving our neediest students.

As you know, Section 309(c) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (the Act) ended access to Pell Grants and federal financial aid for individuals without a high school diploma or equivalency as of July 1, 2012. The underlying statute allowed individuals without a high school diploma or equivalency to qualify for Pell Grants or student loans by demonstrating their "ability to benefit." Students could demonstrate this ability by either: (1) passing an ATB test or (2) completing at least six credit hours or

the clock hour equivalent at a Title IV eligible postsecondary institution. The six credit option had recently been enacted by Congress in 2008 as part of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), Public Law 110-315, based on the positive student outcomes evidenced in a Department of Education 2006/2007 Award Year Experimental Sites Initiative. The Department of Education research data showed students participating in the experiment who did not have a high school diploma or equivalent compared very favorably, both in number of units completed and GPA, to financial aid recipients who had attained a high school diploma before beginning postsecondary education. Barring those without a high school diploma or its equivalent who have proven their ability to benefit from accessing federal financial aid to assist with the cost of continuing their education is simply not supportable from a policy standpoint.

Moreover, the elimination of ATB funding has hit urban areas and areas with elevated high school drop-out rates the hardest, including areas of high Hispanic/Latino, minority, and low income populations such as New York, New Jersey, Florida, Puerto Rico, California and Texas. Data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) shows that students who enrolled in postsecondary institutions through the ATB or 6-credit options were more likely to be minority, more likely to be independent, twice as likely to be unmarried with dependents, and more likely to be younger (under 18) or older (over 30) than other students. Finally, they are more likely to have a family income in the lowest quartile, more likely to attend school part-time due to other responsibilities, and more likely not to be working. In other words, these are the individuals who stand to gain the most from an opportunity to improve their skills for the job market.

We appreciate the difficult task you as appropriators have, but we believe it is necessary to re-consider the 2012 appropriations decision that has led to harsh consequences for the neediest individuals. Thank you for your understanding of the importance of this matter to our constituents and for considering our request in terms of the broader economic impacts of access to Pell Grants for ATB students.

Sincerely,

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Chris Gibson

Member of Congress

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Carolyn McCarthy

Member of Congress