

STRENGTHENING THE ARTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

PUTTING STUDENTS ON A PATH FOR AN AFFORDABLE FUTURE

ACTION NEEDED

We urge Congress to strengthen access to higher education in the arts through reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, including:

- Support the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.
- Support efforts to improve the affordability and accessibility of higher education for all students.
- Support continuation of financial aid that encourages students to study the disciplines where they have the most interest and talent.
- Ensure for-profit colleges, a substantial number of which offer arts degrees, are properly monitored to reduce their incentive to maximize profits over student success.

TALKING POINTS

- **Congress enacted the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program with bipartisan support in 2007**, partly to create incentives for motivated and committed individuals to pursue careers in service to the public. PSLF is a vital tool in allowing talented and highly trained employees from all socioeconomic backgrounds to work at organizations that make an impact in their community.
- **Student loans should be a tool for accessing and enhancing education—without limiting career and educational options.**
- **The number of college arts degrees conferred annually rose steadily from 75,000 to 139,000 from 1997 to 2013—promising news for business leaders looking for an educated and creative workforce.** At the same time, according to the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) the overall debt levels for arts students have increased substantially among recent graduates (up to five years out), both in terms of the percentage of those with any debt as well as in the amount of debt incurred. Strikingly, 35% of all recent graduates said that debt levels had a “major” impact on their educational and career decisions, compared to only 14% of non-recent grads.
- **The cost of providing a college degree in the arts, as described by SNAAP reporting, is particularly sensitive to increasing costs.** This is due to the teaching-intensive curricula, low student-teacher ratios, and the added costs of materials and equipment.
- **We strongly encourage Congress to continue supporting a student-centered approach to funding higher education.** Current federal financial aid policies equally support all students regardless of what they study or where they choose to obtain a higher education. Degree completion, regardless of major, is the most important factor to future success, and students should be encouraged to concentrate their studies where their interests and talents lead them.

BACKGROUND

The last higher education reauthorization was in 2008, enacted through a bill known as the Higher Education Opportunity Act. The HEA is the single most important piece of legislation overseeing the relationship between the federal government, colleges and universities, and students. It authorizes various federal aid programs within the Department of Education that support students pursuing a postsecondary education, including grant programs that support efforts to expand and increase access for low-income and first-generation students, such as Pell Grants.

Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) has announced he is retiring in 2020 and has called passage of a higher education reauthorization bill this year a priority.

Under a Democratic majority in the House, the Aim Higher Act is likely to be the starting point in the 116th Congress. The Aim Higher Act would be significantly more generous than current programs for students and borrowers, increasing funding levels for Pell Grants, TRIO, and GEAR UP and making loans more affordable. The bill also proposed reviving the Perkins Loan Program, which expired in 2017, and restructuring the Federal Work-Study and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant programs. However, it may also add significant new requirements for institutions, increasing reporting and regulatory burden.

Arts advocates are eager to work with Congress on ways to reduce cost, increase accountability, and promote innovation in higher education. These are goals that arts advocates share with the members of the Congressional education committees.