



COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION & LABOR
REPUBLICANS

COMMITTEE
STATEMENT

**Rep. Lloyd Smucker (R-PA)
Republican Leader, Subcommittee on Higher Education and
Workforce Investment
Hearing on “Strengthening Accountability in Higher Education to
Better Serve Students and Taxpayers”
April 3, 2019**

Thank you for yielding.

A postsecondary education has long been one of the surest pathways to a good-paying job and lifelong success. Attending college is a dream for so many Americans and we’ve made great strides in reducing barriers to making that dream a reality. This is something we should celebrate but unfortunately as student access has improved, program accountability and completion of college have struggled to keep up.

We have a completion problem – and students are paying the price.

Even though we’ve poured billions of taxpayer dollars into postsecondary education, we’ve seen modest problems grow into significant challenges. Easy access to taxpayer-funded student loans has driven up tuition and fees.

Over the last 30 years, the cost of attending a four-year public institution has increased 213 percent.

Meanwhile, completion rates have lagged behind. Only 58 percent of full-time students at four-year colleges graduate within six years, and today, aggregate student debt stands at more than \$1.4 trillion, surpassing both national auto loan and credit card debt.

The absence of downward pressure on rising costs paired with the fact that postsecondary institutions don’t share in the risk of students’ noncompletion has harmed students’ chances at future success. Studies show that college is a worthwhile investment for graduates; but for the students who don’t complete their education, their prospects are worse than if they’d never attended college in the first place.

College has become a risk for many. Many students ask themselves: “Will enrollment put me on the path to success, or strand me with thousands of dollars in debt and no degree to show for my efforts?”

It’s clear that the federal, state, and accreditors roles in postsecondary education must be reformed to protect taxpayers and promote student success.

Accreditation agencies, independent bodies made up of members from accredited colleges and universities, provide quality control in the higher education space. Accreditors are responsible for judging whether institutions are fulfilling their duties and providing students with a high-quality education.

Unfortunately, accreditors are often on the back foot, having to focus on bureaucratic compliance more than on promoting innovation and academic integrity.

Committee Republicans believe the accreditation process should be reformed to foster institutional innovation and strong educational outcomes for students.

Preserving the current accreditation framework is important – the federal government is not and never should be responsible for prescribing academic standards for institutions. But there is room to reform the system for greater accountability and quality.

The Higher Education Act should be reformed to provide prospective students and their families with better information. Higher education is an investment, and students deserve access to metrics like graduate rates, average debt per pupil, and employment outcomes by university and field of study.

Choosing the right school and study area are decisions that will have a lasting impact on a student’s life. We should empower students with the information they need to make a fully-informed decision.

Today’s postsecondary education system looks a bit like a tangled ball of yarn. From rising tuition and student debt to lagging innovation and low graduation rates, every problem is interconnected.

But if we strengthen our accountability in higher education and reform accreditation to focus on quality and results, we can begin to restore the balance of flexibility for institutions to innovate and accountability for students and taxpayers.

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