



**Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT), Chairman
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development Hearing:
“Postsecondary Innovation: Preparing Today’s Students for Tomorrow’s
Opportunities”
June 14, 2023**

(As prepared for delivery)

Welcome to today’s hearing on postsecondary innovation and thank you to the witnesses for coming to testify on such an important issue.

I think we can all agree that America’s colleges and universities play an integral role in shaping the direction of our country. They cultivate young minds as well as serve the pragmatic mission of preparing students for our nation’s workforce.

I also think we can all agree that this mission cannot be fully realized without colleges and universities graduating students at a consistent rate. This is the modern problem of the university system. Four in ten students do not complete their degree.

Our current system is unaffordable, inflexible, and outdated. One major reason is that the Higher Education Act (HEA), which provides the legislative framework for postsecondary institutions, hasn’t been fully updated since 2008.

This traditional framework is at odds with the modern university experience and student. Over 30 percent of today’s students are non-traditional, meaning they could be 25 years or older, part-time enrollees, full-time workers, or in other unique situations.

In order to promote access and completion for the modern student, the HEA needs to be revisited. Thankfully, universities are charting the path for Congress already.

First, universities are distancing themselves from the conventional wisdom that

measuring student learning should be based on a set number of credit hours.

Colleges are embracing competency-based education (CBE) to challenge the four-year, 120 credit hour orthodoxy. CBE redefines education by the meaningful standard of skills mastery versus the often-arbitrary standard of credit hour completion.

CBE is picking up steam on university campuses. Over 1,000 CBE programs are available at around 130 schools. Any reform to the HEA should recognize the alignment of the fundamental college mission with CBE and make it easier for these programs to exist.

Some pilot universities are even reevaluating the notion that the traditional undergraduate degree should require four years of schooling. Three-year degree programs are underway at institutions around the country. By overhauling curriculum in a way that allows students to learn the skills and material they truly need, these programs provide solutions to issues of student completion and debt.

Of the innovative practices being discussed today, the rise of online education is perhaps the most obvious institutional shift since the last HEA reauthorization. The post-pandemic world has a very different relationship to the internet than existed in 2008. Not only is the internet a means of communication, but it also now serves as a mass forum for remote jobs and education. We must avoid calls to overregulate online programs that connect students to critical opportunities in postsecondary education.

Lastly, universities are innovating through public-private partnerships. By engaging with private companies at every level of education, students gain irreplaceable hands-on career experience. In particular, HBCUs and MSIs are doing a fantastic job of partnering with private companies to ensure that their students have in-demand skills for the modern workforce.

In each of these areas, the institutional shifts have been slowed or constrained by the HEA. To the other side of the aisle, there is wide bipartisan consensus that we need to give students more pathways from a successful education to a successful career. Let's start today.

To the witnesses, we welcome your policy recommendations on how we can achieve this goal and strengthen America's education system to serve students, families, workers, and taxpayers better. I look forward to hearing from you and from my colleagues on this important issue.