



December 14, 2017

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
House Education and the Workforce Committee  
2176 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Foxx:

I am writing to express KnowledgeWorks' views on H.R. 4508, the PROSPER Act. KnowledgeWorks is a national organization committed to providing every learner with meaningful personalized learning experiences that ensure success in college, career and civic life. With a presence in more than 30 states, we develop the capabilities of educators to implement and sustain competency-based and early college schools, partner with federal, state and district leaders to remove policy barriers that inhibit the growth of personalized learning and provide national thought leadership around the future of learning.

#### **Provisions We Support in the PROSPER Act**

Our organization supports several provisions in the bill which provide new or expanded pathways for students to access and complete a postsecondary education. First, we support the bill's provisions which make clear that federal student aid can be used for competency-based education programs and courses. For far too long, the rules and requirements around federal student aid have required postsecondary institutions with competency-based programs to create burdensome workarounds to access federal student aid. While some competency-based education providers have been able access student aid, the workarounds and additional steps necessary have been difficult, time consuming and insurmountable for many. We are pleased to see the PROSPER Act place competency-based education on an even playing field with traditional seat-time approaches while maintaining an important role for accreditors in monitoring program quality.

In addition to the focus on competency based education, the bill's recognition that postsecondary education doesn't always lead to a four-year degree is crucial. The bill authorizes funds for earn and learn programs and ensures that short term credentials can be achieved using federal student aid. Both additions are critical to ensuring that students have multiple pathways with federal assistance to completing higher education.

The emphasis on multiple pathways to postsecondary education is reinforced by the new authority for Impact grants under the TRIO program. The bill would reserve funds for

approaches to create, develop, implement, replicate or take to scale evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to serve individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and improve student outcomes. KnowledgeWorks has long emphasized the need for evidence-based approaches to postsecondary success. These much-needed grants will encourage innovation and help identify and scale proven postsecondary approaches.

The bill also includes two provisions which would help students who are struggling with student debt. First, the bill would permit individuals to twice rehabilitate their defaulted student loans. This additional chance for loan rehabilitation will ensure that students who have defaulted on their student loan can get back on track and eliminate any blemishes on their credit record. Second, the bill's proposal to eliminate origination fees on a One loan would protect students from borrowing funds that are redirected to cover other federal costs.

### **Our Concerns with the PROSPER Act**

While we appreciate the inclusion of the items we mentioned above, several of the bill's provisions cause us concern. First, the bill would eliminate the existing Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) program along with other current Title II requirements. The TQP program represents an important stake in how the Federal government helps drive state and local reform of teacher preparation. As states and school districts increasingly turn to personalized and competency-based learning approaches, our nation needs teachers prepared with the knowledge and skills to succeed in these environments. Title II should be maintained and strengthened to ensure greater alignment between the nation's educator preparation programs and the growing demand in K-12 education for personalized and competency-based models and practices.

Second, the bill's elimination of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program (PSLF) will only make it more difficult to attract high quality educator candidates into the teaching profession. With a growing shortage of teachers, especially in critical subjects and disciplines, the Higher Education Act needs to provide incentives to increase the number of effective teachers in our nation, as well as ensure they remain in the profession. PSLF is an important tool in these efforts and should be maintained.

Third, we are concerned that disadvantaged youth with college potential may be hurt by the requirement that TRIO programs provide a 20 percent match from non-federal funds. This requirement will impact which organizations can apply and provide services using TRIO funding. We would urge the Committee to consider reducing this match, or eliminating it all together for economically challenged organizations.

Lastly, we are concerned that the bill makes a number of changes to current law which would negatively impact the ability of students, especially low-income students to pay for college. Specifically, the bill would eliminate the subsidized student loan and Grad PLUS programs. These two loan programs provide the means for students to borrow at low rates that minimize the amount of college debt. In addition to the loan changes, the bill would eliminate the

requirement to forgive any remaining loan balance after a 15 or 20-year period, as required under existing income-based repayment plans. The cancellation of any loan balance after this period ensures that graduates are not saddled with debt for decades, especially for long-time graduates that may need to prioritize college savings for their own children.

### **Our Recommendations for Modernizing the Higher Education Act**

KnowledgeWorks looks forward to working with you and your staff to advance a Higher Education Act reauthorization bill where personalization helps learners progress along the education continuum to college and career success. I have enclosed our organization's higher education recommendations for your reference which emphasize the following goals:

1. **Increase college enrollment and persistence by incentivizing effective transitions between K–12 and higher education.** This should be accomplished by enabling colleges to leverage existing funding streams to establish and expand early college high schools and dual enrollment programs that serve low-income students. In addition, the bill should launch an innovation fund that prioritizes models and practices that improve transitions between K-12 and higher education.
2. **Support personalized learning pathways toward a postsecondary credential by making the federal financial aid system more flexible.** This should be accomplished by modernizing the financial aid system to align with competency-based programs and to enable low-income high school students enrolled in dual enrollment or early college high school programs to earn Federal Pell Grants for completion of postsecondary credit.
3. **Prepare K-12 educator candidates to take on new teaching roles in personalized learning environments.** This should be accomplished by modernizing Title II to ensure educator preparation programs align to competency-based learning models and emphasize the full range of knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in postsecondary and the workforce.

We appreciate your consideration of these recommendations and look forward to working with you and your staff as the legislative process continues.

Sincerely,



Lillian R. Pace

Senior Director of National Policy

CC: Robert, C. "Bobby" Scott, Ranking Member, U.S. Committee on Education and the Workforce