



Advancing Personalized Learning through the Higher Education Act

November 2017

Federal Policy Recommendations

Modernization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) is an essential step to establishing an aligned education system where personalization helps learners progress along the education continuum to college and career success. Local innovators, including postsecondary institutions, states, school districts, employers, and community partners, are already designing new strategies that better respond to the needs of each learner while also addressing complex challenges such as college access, affordability, and completion. These innovations are disrupting the traditional system while catalyzing improvements in postsecondary outcomes for learners across demographics and geographies.

The continued growth and success of personalized learning, however, depends on the federal government's commitment to create an aligned policy environment at all levels of the education system. HEA reauthorization, in particular, provides policymakers with an opportunity to explore new strategies for improving postsecondary transitions, increasing personalized pathways to a credential, and creating a new pipeline of educators to help propel the transformation to personalized learning in K-12 settings. A modernized HEA can address each of these priorities by emphasizing learner-centered policies that appropriately balance local flexibility with a deep commitment to improved postsecondary and economic outcomes nationwide.

A modernized HEA law should support personalized learning experiences for all learners by emphasizing the following goals:

1. Increase college enrollment and persistence by incentivizing effective 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.
3. Prepare K-12 educator candidates to take on new teaching roles in personalized learning environments.

Who We Are

KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing personalized learning that empowers every child to take ownership of their success. With nearly 20 years of experience exploring the future of learning, growing educator impact and working with state and federal policymakers, our passionate team partners with schools and communities to grow a system-wide approach to sustain student-centered practices so that every child graduates ready for what's next.

GOAL 1

Increase college enrollment and persistence by incentivizing effective transitions between K–12 and higher education.

With only 40% of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolling in college, and one-third of those learners placing into remedial coursework, Congress must improve the transition between the nation’s K–12 and higher education systems. A federal strategy must remove barriers to college access and create seamless pathways to attainment of a postsecondary credential and meaningful employment.

This strategy should leverage high-impact public-private partnerships in the following ways:

- 1. Enable colleges to leverage existing funding streams to establish and expand early college high schools and dual enrollment programs serving low-income students** — Create funding and policy incentives within existing HEA programs to encourage more colleges and universities to establish early college and dual and concurrent enrollment programs. Additionally, include priorities for early college and dual and concurrent enrollment in competitive federal funding aimed at increasing college access, affordability, and/or completion.
- 2. Launch a Postsecondary Transition Innovation Fund** — This initiative, which would be administered jointly by the Office of Postsecondary Education and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, would invest in partnerships of postsecondary institutions, employers, school districts, and intermediaries to implement programs that will strengthen the transition between secondary and postsecondary education and the workforce.

This fund should emphasize the following strategies:

- Strategies that disrupt traditional uses of time, such as those that enable students to advance through competency-based pathways while pursuing high school and college credit or industry certifications simultaneously.
- Strategies that enable students to master the full range of skills and competencies to ensure success in postsecondary and career, including collaboration, critical thinking, communication, creativity, and persistence.

GOAL 2

Support personalized learning pathways toward a postsecondary credential by making the federal financial aid system more flexible.

Congress should modernize the federal financial aid system to reflect the realities of today's postsecondary learner. Full-time, 12-credit semester enrollment in postsecondary education is no longer the norm as individuals increasingly seek access to postsecondary opportunities as early as middle or high school, while working and raising a family, or later in life as part of a career change. Due to the need for higher education to meet the needs of an increasingly different cross-section of students, HEA should ensure the federal financial aid system is more flexible and reflective of the nation's increasing interest in personalized education.

Key modernization strategies should include:

- 1. Dual and Concurrent Enrollment** — Low-income high school students enrolled in postsecondary coursework through a dual or concurrent enrollment or early college high school program should be able to earn Federal Pell Grants for completion of postsecondary credit. Specifically, HEA should permit Pell Grant funding to cover the costs of college credits earned by high school students in an early college program offered by an accredited postsecondary institution. Early colleges should receive this reimbursement of tuition and fees retroactively, based on college credits completed up to an associate's degree or four semesters of college coursework. Further, the law should protect students who may decide to change majors or concentrations later in their postsecondary experience by ensuring that postsecondary courses completed in high school do not count toward a student's maximum number of Pell Grant awards.
- 2. Competency Education Demonstration Program** — Postsecondary education programs that organize instruction around mastery of core competencies offer students many benefits, including greater transparency of learning outcomes and increased personalization that responds to student needs. But despite these benefits, competency-based programs face barriers conforming their programs to meet traditional credit-hour based requirements for accessing federal financial aid. HEA should address these barriers by creating a demonstration program to explore strategies for modernizing Title IV eligibility for competency-based postsecondary programs.

This demonstration should offer selected postsecondary institutions federal flexibility balanced with appropriate guardrails:

Flexibilities

- a. Flexibility from requirements that competency-based programs at postsecondary institutions demonstrate credit hour or clock hour equivalencies and from methods of disbursing student financial aid to carry out competency-based education programs.
- b. Flexibility from definitions that attempt to restrict a timeframe for learning including the terms academic year, full-time student, term (including standard term, non-term, and non-standard term) and flexibility to redefine the terms satisfactory academic progress, educational activity, and payment period to align to competency-based programs.

- c. Flexibility from time-based operational requirements such as documenting attendance, weekly academic activity, or demonstrating minimum weeks of instructional time. This flexibility could support experiential, performance-based opportunities that are integrated into an instructional program.

Guardrails

- a. Evidence that a Title IV accreditor has approved the postsecondary institution to operate a competency-based program including validation that the institution has met the following requirements:
 - Evidence that all postsecondary degree and certificate programs are aligned to current labor market needs and rigorous enough to ensure successful employment.
 - Evidence that the postsecondary institution has systems in place to provide students with sufficient supports and resources to ensure success including instructional support from faculty that engage in “regular and substantive interaction” with students.
 - If the postsecondary institution has a history of operating a competency-based program, evidence of quality through graduation rates and positive feedback from students, graduates, and local employers.
 - A description of the processes and measures in place to monitor and continuously improve the program.
- b. An assurance that no student will receive less aid than they would otherwise receive (through a non-competency-based program).

GOAL 3

Prepare K-12 educator candidates to take on new teaching roles in personalized learning environments.

A rapidly changing economy requires a shift in the way we educate students to succeed. Educator preparation programs must respond to this shift by modernizing their programs to ensure teaching candidates graduate with the knowledge and skills to help learners navigate a dynamic workforce.

HEA can help catalyze this shift through adoption of the following strategies:

- 1. Ensure educator preparation programs align to competency-based learning models —** Despite the significant growth of K-12 competency education models nationwide, most educator preparation programs continue to prepare their graduates for success in traditional settings. As a result, many personalized or competency-based K-12 schools face the burden of creating lengthy induction and training programs to ensure their workforce has the skills for success. HEA can address this disconnect by ensuring that Title IV institutions incorporate competency-based strategies or models into teacher preparation programs so candidates deepen their understanding of competency education and have an opportunity to progress through a continuum of instructional competencies that align to the expectations of K-12 competency education models.
- 2. Ensure educator preparation programs emphasize the full range of skills and competencies that students need for success in postsecondary and the workforce —** To prepare students for the emerging world of work, educators will need to understand and integrate programming into their instruction that emphasizes critical postsecondary and workforce readiness skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, communication, creativity, and persistence. Since postsecondary and workforce readiness skills are strong predictors of success and adaptation, HEA should ensure that educator preparation programs at Title IV institutions provide students with training on strategies for developing these critical skills.
- 3. Increase the number of educators with credentials and certifications to teach in dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school settings —** With a majority of states incorporating completion of advanced coursework into their K-12 accountability systems, states and districts will need to increase the pool of instructors with the qualifications to teach college courses to high school students. HEA can address this need by prioritizing the development of programs that help high school teachers become certified to teach college courses and college professors to become certified to teach high school courses. Strategies to prioritize these efforts could include a modernized TEACH grant or Teacher Quality Partnership program.

Additional Information

KnowledgeWorks welcomes the opportunity to engage in conversations with Congress to explore these opportunities in depth and help craft policies to expand personalized learning opportunities for learners across the education continuum. You may access additional policy resources from KnowledgeWorks at www.knowledgeworks.org/policy.