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Committee on Education and the Workforce

House Education & the Workforce Committee

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FACT SHEET

Higher Education in Crisis: How Congressional Republicans are Working to Keep the Dream of a College Education Within Reach

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America's higher education system is in crisis. Decades of uncontrolled cost increases are pushing the dream of a college degree further out of reach for needy students. The crisis requires a dramatic response.

According to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, cost factors prevent 48 percent of college-qualified high school graduates from attending a four-year institution, and 22 percent from attending any college at all. The statistics are similarly bleak for middle-income students and families. At this rate, by the end of the decade, more than 2 million college-qualified students will be completely denied the opportunity for a postsecondary education.

This is a disturbing trend, and one which cannot be allowed to continue. Education is the great equalizer in this nation. It can bridge social, economic, racial, and geographic divides like no other force. It can mean the difference between an open door and a dead end. And nowhere is this more true than in higher education.

A college education has long been viewed as a ticket to prosperity, the gateway to the American dream. And today, higher education is playing a more vital role than ever in shaping our nation's competitiveness. Before our very eyes, the manufacturing economy of the 20th Century is being transformed into a knowledge economy, in which a nation's fortunes may be more directly linked than ever to the knowledge and know-how of its workers. Parents, students and taxpayers are investing billions in higher education each year, and institutions must be accountable for ensuring that they're getting a quality return on that investment. A college degree must be more than a piece of paper – it must provide the workers of tomorrow with the skills and knowledge they need to compete in the 21st Century.

In the 108th Congress, against this backdrop, the Higher Education Act (HEA) is due for reauthorization. The increasing importance of postsecondary education, coupled with the troubling trend of uncontrolled college cost increases that are jeopardizing the ability of low- and middle-income students to attend college, makes this reauthorization the most pressing item on the congressional agenda for education.

In July 2003, Republican members of the House Education & the Workforce Committee laid out four principles that will guide them as they complete HEA reauthorization and confront the college cost crisis head-on. These principles place a renewed emphasis on opening the doors of higher education, particularly for low- and middle-income students

struggling to afford the skyrocketing cost of a college degree. Republicans in Congress believe we must: (1) hold colleges accountable for cost increases without over-burdensome federal intrusion; (2) remove barriers for non-traditional students; (3) improve quality and innovation by empowering consumers; and (4) realign student aid programs to ensure fairness for America's neediest students and families.

Congress enacted the Higher Education Act in 1965 with the intent of making the dream of college possible for low-income students who otherwise had little chance of a postsecondary education. In recent years, however, the Higher Education Act has been diverted away from this mission. Federal resources are increasingly subsidizing individuals who have long since earned their degrees and entered the workforce, instead of low-income students who are currently aspiring to go to college.

This trend must be reversed, and the federal investment must again be focused on increasing access for students, particularly because of the cost increases plaguing our nation's higher education system.

The primary federal investment in higher education, ringing in at roughly \$70 billion in 2003, is direct financial assistance to students - and the cornerstone of increasing access for low-income students is the Pell Grant. However, despite the ever-increasing federal financial commitment and record spending for Pell Grants under President Bush and a Republican Congress, skyrocketing college costs are depleting the purchasing power of the Pell Grant and putting college out of reach for many needy students.

Republicans will seek to make information about cost increases more available to parents and students, and to hold colleges accountable for their uncontrolled cost increases. Reauthorization of the HEA also provides Congress with an opportunity to realign student aid programs to ensure that they are fairly administered and meeting their fullest potential to serve students in need.

Though college costs are a significant impediment for many aspiring college students, they are but one of many unnecessary barriers to a college education in America. Congressional Republicans will make it a priority to remove these barriers, and make the nation's higher education system more accessible, consumer-friendly, and responsive to the needs of students and families. The reauthorization of the HEA also provides an opportunity to hold institutions accountable by adding new transparency so parents, students, and taxpayers know what they're getting for their multi-billion dollar investment. Choosing a college is a decision that will affect a student for the rest of his or her life. For that reason, Republicans believe, colleges should have an obligation to provide useful, easy to use, and understandable information so students and parents can make this monumental decision with all the facts in hand.

These principles will shape efforts to strengthen the nation's higher education system. Republicans believe that by following these principles, and putting the needs of students first, we will all be able to proudly state that America continues to offer the best opportunities for higher education in the world.