



August 13, 2014

Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
US Senate
Washington, DC

Dear Chairman Harkin:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on your draft discussion bill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, the “Higher Education Affordability Act. We applaud you for moving the reauthorization process forward by releasing this discussion draft. This letter is a follow up to our letter of June 20 where we provided a preliminary response to the draft. After having an opportunity to review it in greater detail, we offer the following thoughts.

Title IX: Higher Education Opportunities and Supports for Students with Disabilities

1. Multiple Programs

While the several initiatives proposed in Title IX are designed to address specific and important issues related to the success of students with disabilities in higher education, the multiplicity of programs makes it unlikely that all of them will receive funding. Perhaps some of the programs could be consolidated. For example, the two technical assistance centers could be merged into one. In addition, perhaps the ACCESS Board could incorporate the Instructional Materials Demo program.

2. National Data Center

This is a new center that would collect important data on the experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities in higher education. This is a much needed endeavor. However, given the many privacy concerns that have emerged as a result of many new K-12 data collection efforts, we urge caution in this area. For example, would students with disabilities know, that by virtue of signing up for disability support services, they are becoming part of a national data base? Perhaps the data collection could begin by focusing on the services and supports offered by the institution rather than on individual students. In addition, the data collection reflects the 13 categories of special education students that are utilized in IDEA. Might this be an opportunity to move away from label-based categorization to a consideration of students based on their level of accommodations and support provided? This center could support a pilot that would begin a data collection initiative that could experiment with ways of collecting data that do not reinforce stereotypes and labels.

Title II: Improving Educator Preparation

3. Educator Quality Partnership Grants

We are pleased that Title II reauthorizes and strengthens the Teacher Quality Partnership Grants, expanding them to become the Educator Quality Partnership Grants with a new focus on principal preparation. These grants support partnerships between high need K-12 schools and teacher and leader preparation programs in institutions of higher education so that one year residency programs can be developed. These grants require that all teacher candidates in all areas be proficient in instructing students with disabilities utilizing research-based strategies prior to becoming a teacher. In addition, they target special education as a shortage field. As the only federal investment in building capacity and supporting reform in university-based teacher preparation, we recommend that this program be authorized at the \$300 million level. This will enable systemic change throughout the country, rather than sporadic change at a few institutions. Given that only 5% of teacher preparation programs now offer a one year residency (See <https://aacte.org/news-room/press-releases-statements/145-aacte-releases-first-national-data-report-on-teacher-preparation-profession>), there is much room for growth. This program will continue to strengthen the way our nation prepares new teachers and leaders.

We are concerned about the new requirement for evaluating the program based on impact on student growth and teacher and leader evaluations that include student growth. As we note further below, the use of measures such as Value Added Models (VAMs) to determine teacher effectiveness, and by extension program effectiveness, are questionable. Given the considerable research that documents the limitations of this approach, we advise against continuing to build upon it in new legislation. We are also concerned about the new requirement for grantees to follow their graduates for five years after the grant and the resources expire. Perhaps an outside contractor secured by the Department of Education should be utilized for this function.

4. Educator Program Reform Grants

HECSE and TED oppose this new competitive state grant program as it is currently written, for several reasons. First, it prescribes a one-size-fits-all approach for every state to follow as they move to strengthen educator preparation. We believe that a more effective approach would be to invite states to put forward their own approaches within certain parameters so long as certain goals are reached. By prescribing the details of how every state must approach accountability for educator preparation, states will be forced into approaches that they may not be capable of delivering and that may not best serve the needs of the state or the students in the state.

Second, the grants would require states to rate all teacher preparation programs in the state using, in some part, standardized measures of student learning (such as Value Added Models) to judge the effectiveness of the preparation program. Research from organizations such as the American Statistical Association must give us pause in using VAM as a teacher effectiveness measure for educators or the programs that prepare them. Preparation programs that prepare teachers to instruct students with significant need (such as special education) will not fare well in such a system and unintended consequences, such as closing good programs and exacerbating shortages, may ensue. It is unwise to forge ahead in the continued use of student results on standardized test scores to evaluate teachers in the face of so much research that contra-indicates this approach.

Third, the use of teacher placement and retention data to evaluate program effectiveness is problematic, given that multiple factors beyond the control of the preparation program impact

employment decisions. There is no research that we are aware of that shows any link between preparation effectiveness and retention.

Fourth, this new program includes data elements that are different from the data elements required of all programs in the Institutional and Program Report Cards section of the bill. When different data elements are required for different states, confusion can result, particularly at a time when programs are eager for state to state comparability in data so that they can follow their graduates if they work in other states.

Finally, HECSE and TED support the creation of a state grant program that would generate program improvement and valid and reliable accountability measures for all programs. If states are provided the opportunity to design systems in collaboration with key stakeholders to meet their needs and address their challenges, such a program could be an important contribution to strengthening our nation's educator preparation programs.

5. Institutional and Program Report Cards

Multiple new data collections are added in this section which will yield even more data that will not likely be useful for program feedback or improvement. Despite years of data collection under this title, little is known about its use in generating program improvement. For example, year after year data have been collected on what programs do to prepare general education teacher candidates to instruct students with disabilities. Yet, those data are virtually impenetrable and unavailable. To our knowledge, the results of this data collection effort have never been analyzed and reported. We are unaware of any use of that information for program improvement.

Adding new data collection elements will not improve data usage and constitutes a significant new burden on institutions. Some data collection is repetitive and otherwise available. For example, when all programs require clinical preparation (which all programs do, depending on what definition is used), what will be learned by asking the percentage of candidates who participate in clinical preparation? Furthermore, for alternate routes it appears that serving as a teacher of record prior to program completion could be considered "clinical preparation." In other data collection elements, it appears that serving as the teacher of record prior to program completion will count as retention data. These sorts of confusions yield data that are not useful.

Finally, the new data collection requirements appear to envision a state rating system, much like the Educator Program Reform Grants. Data collection related to satisfaction surveys, teacher evaluations incorporating VAM and employment and retention data parallel data collection requirements in the Educator Program Reform Grants. The new criteria for low performing programs likewise reflect such an approach. HECSE and TED support data collection for purposes of transparency, accountability and program improvement. However, requiring all states to create a rating system will not yield the best results, as states differ in how they approach their responsibilities for program accountability.

6. Teach to Reach Grants

HECSE and TED wholeheartedly endorse the inclusion of this important program. Equipping general educators to effectively instruct students with disabilities is of paramount importance. We know that most students with disabilities receive most of their instruction in general education classrooms. We also know that students with disabilities are not achieving to their potential and

lag woefully behind students without disabilities. We are pleased that the discussion draft acknowledges this critical need through the inclusion of this program.

7. Graduate Fellowships to Prepare Faculty in High Need Areas at Colleges of Education

We regret that this important program was not included in the chairman's discussion draft. Extensive research documents the critical shortage of special education faculty – those who are developing the research base that supports the preparation of teachers and those who are preparing tomorrow's teachers. This shortage exacerbates the shortage of K-12 special education teachers and curtails the capacity of general education candidates to develop skills in instructing students with disabilities. We would like to work with you to find ways for the bill to address this critical need.

HECSE is comprised of 65 universities with doctoral programs in special education. Our member institutions are at the forefront of teacher education, research and development in special education. TED is one of 17 special interest groups comprised of CEC members who are dedicated to the preparation and development of future special educators. Over 2500 strong, TED members lead and support teacher education on behalf of students with exceptional needs and their families.

We thank you for your leadership and look forward to continuing to work with you to improve access and success in higher education for students with disabilities as well as the programs that prepare the professionals who instruct them.

Sincerely,



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