

THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

STRENGTHENING THE ARTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION
PUTTING STUDENTS ON A PATH FOR AN AFFORDABLE FUTURE

ACTION NEEDED

We urge Congress to strengthen access to higher education in the arts through reauthorization of the Higher Education Act:

- Support efforts to improve the affordability and accessibility of higher education for all students.
- Oppose elimination of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness programs
- Oppose inclusion of provisions that allow higher education institutions to vary their financial aid based on future earning potential.
- Ensure for-profit colleges, a substantial number of which offer arts degrees, are properly monitored to reduce their incentive to maximize profits over student success.

TALKING POINTS

- **The number of college arts degrees conferred annually rose steadily from 75,000 to 139,000 from 1997 to 2013 - promising news for business leaders looking for an educated and creative workforce.** At the same time, according to the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) the overall debt levels for arts students have increased substantially among recent graduates (up to five years out), both in terms of the percentage of those with any debt as well as in the amount of debt incurred. Strikingly, 35% of all recent graduates said that debt levels had a “major” impact on their educational and career decisions, compared to only 14% of non-recent grads.
- **Student loans should be a tool for accessing and enhancing education—without limiting career and educational options.**
- **The cost of providing a college degree in the arts, as described by SNAAP reporting, is particularly sensitive to increasing costs.** This is due to the teaching-intensive curricula, low student-teacher ratios, and the added costs of materials and equipment.
- **According to SNAAP data, arts graduates are more entrepreneurial than the general population of higher education graduates.** In 2015, 80% of all respondents to the SNAAP survey reported they currently or in the past had been self-employed or freelanced. Overall 16% of arts graduates have founded a nonprofit or for-profit at some point in their lives. In contrast, only about a third of American workers earn at least some of their income outside a traditional job as an employee with a company, and only 1 in 25 Americans are trying to start a business.
- **The PROSPER Act proposes to eliminate the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program.** Students who went into public services jobs, or specific K-12 teaching jobs, could receive loan forgiveness as part of their service to the public. This elimination proposal includes the TEACH Grant programs, which give additional grant aid to undergraduates who get a bachelor’s degree in hard-to-staff teaching areas, such as special education, STEM and foreign language, and who pledge to work in schools that serve students from predominantly low-income families.

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- **Congress enacted the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program with bipartisan support in 2007**, partly to create incentives for motivated and committed individuals to pursue careers in service to the public. PSLF is a vital tool in allowing talented and highly trained employees from all socioeconomic backgrounds to work at organizations that make an impact in their community.
- **The PROSPER bill proposes eliminating several federal aid programs, including the Stafford Loan program.** The bill proposes significant consolidation within the federal aid programs. It eliminates the Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant, which provides \$732 million in aid to 1.6 million students each year. It also ends subsidized Stafford Loans, which do not accumulate interest while the borrower is in school. This change affects 6 million borrowers and would cost students \$27 billion over the next decade.

BACKGROUND

At the end of 2017, the U.S. House Education & Workforce Committee approved legislation to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. The legislation, H.R. 4508, named the "Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Reform Act" (the "PROSPER Act") was introduced and approved by the committee in a period of just a few weeks and seeks to make changes in how student aid is provided, and the appropriate federal role in supporting higher education institutions.

The PROSPER legislation provides a small boost to Pell Grants for certain students and seeks to expand apprenticeships and streamline regulations. However, it would also eliminate subsidized loans, PSLF, and the Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant program while making income-driven repayment slightly more expensive for low-income workers.

Arts advocates are eager to work with Congress on ways to reduce cost, increase accountability, and promote innovation in higher education. These are goals that arts advocates share with the members of the Congressional education committees, however the current PROSPER legislation approved by the House Education & Workforce Committee does not achieve these goals.

While the Senate education committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) has called higher education legislation a priority for his committee, the Senate committee has not taken action on reauthorization legislation as of this printing.