



December 12, 2017

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the more than 170,000 bipartisan members and supporters, over 1,000 branches, and 800 college and university partners, of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), I write to urge you to oppose the Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity Through Education Reform (PROSPER) Act (H.R. 4508).

When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Act (HEA) into law on November 8, 1965, he made a prediction that the law would open new doors for the young people of America. Fifty years since the HEA's passage, Americans – especially women – are attaining more college degrees than ever before and higher education has become more of a necessity in today's economy. AAUW remains committed to the promise of HEA, advocating to ensure increased support for and access to affordable higher education for women and disadvantaged populations.<sup>1</sup>

Women currently make up 56 percent of college students and earn the majority of college degrees at all levels.<sup>2</sup> But that attainment comes at a cost. AAUW estimates that about 28 million of the 44 million Americans with student debt are women.<sup>3</sup> AAUW research has found that women take on 60 percent of initial student loan debt and hold 64 percent of outstanding debt.<sup>4</sup> And while the enrollment of women of color in college has skyrocketed in the past few decades, black and Hispanic college graduates take on disproportionate debt and are more likely to default on their student loans, permanently hurting their creditworthiness and their ability to pay for additional education.<sup>5</sup> Women but especially women of color need strong financial aid and support for repaying their student loans. The PROSPER Act falls short of this goal. Specifically, AAUW cannot support the PROSPER Act's provisions that:

- **Eliminate student loan forgiveness for public service employees and alter income-driven repayment options resulting in** increased debt burdens for struggling borrowers. In any given year, 44 percent of female undergraduate students take on student loans, compared to 39 percent of male undergraduate students.<sup>6</sup> On average women graduate with \$1,500 more in student debt than men.<sup>7</sup> Though data is not available on the gender of students who apply for Income Dependent Repayment (IDR) plans or Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), women's greater indebtedness, lower incomes after graduation, and higher rate of employment in PSLF-eligible fields such as teaching and nonprofit work suggest that any changes to IDR and PSLF will disproportionately hurt women. The PROSPER Act would eliminate the loan forgiveness and other benefits in the current student loan programs and increase tuition costs for students, especially women.
- **Fail to strengthen the Pell grant program.** The federal Pell grant program is the major source of debt-free aid for low-income college students. Sixty-two percent of the 7.1 million Pell grant recipients are female (4.4 million women).<sup>8</sup> AAUW advocates for the maximum Pell grant to be increased and for the entirety of the program to be moved to mandatory funding. This would remove uncertainty for students as they plan for college costs each year. The PROSPER Act fails to take these necessary steps to strengthen and expand the Pell grant program.

In addition, the PROSPER Act would weaken schools' requirements to prevent and end campus sexual assault and support survivors. When education environments are hostile due to sexual harassment, assault, or violence, students cannot learn and end up missing out on true educational opportunities. AAUW's own research revealed that two-thirds of college students experience sexual harassment.<sup>9</sup> In addition, many studies have found that around 20 percent of women are targets of attempted or completed sexual assault while they are college students.<sup>10</sup> Under the provisions of H.R. 4508, schools would have an excuse not to investigate sexual assaults on campus at the request of law enforcement, possibly undermining students' ability to seek justice and accommodation at their schools. In addition, this bill would give schools a pass on accurately disclosing annual crime data. The last thing students need is for schools to return to the days of sweeping sexual violence under the rug. Removing accountability for Clery Act crime reporting by allowing "good faith" to count negates the importance of this vital transparency law. Students must have all information about crimes on campus and expect full compliance. Finally, while AAUW has long championed the need for schools to conduct climate surveys to better understand reported and unreported incidents of sexual violence, as well as contributing cultural factors on campus, AAUW rejects the approach in H.R. 4508. Surveys must ask the same questions across schools and have similar methodologies and federal coordination on this issue is key. In addition, the results of climate surveys should be public so that students, parents, and community members can better understand the school's climate.

Other provisions, such as language allowing religious exemptions that could result in taxpayer-funded discrimination, changes to voter registration provisions, and a lack of expansion to the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program, are also problematic for students. Together, these proposals as well as others would limit women's access to and success in higher education. AAUW urges the Representative to oppose the Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity Through Education Reform Act (H.R. 4508).

Cosponsorship and votes associated with this legislation may be scored in the AAUW Action Fund *Congressional Voting Record for the 115th Congress*. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 202/785-7724 or Pam Yuen, senior government relations coordinator, at 202/785-7712, if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Anne Hedgepeth

Interim Vice President of Public Policy and Government Relations

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<sup>1</sup> AAUW. (June 2017). 2017–19 AAUW Public Policy Priorities. [www.aauw.org/resource/principles-and-priorities](http://www.aauw.org/resource/principles-and-priorities)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2016. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level of enrollment, sex, attendance status, and race/ethnicity of student: Selected years, 1976 through 2014. Digest of Education Statistics. [nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_306.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_306.10.asp)

<sup>3</sup> AAUW. 2017. *Deeper in debt: Women and student loans*. Washington, DC: Author. [www.deeperindebt.org](http://www.deeperindebt.org)

<sup>4</sup> AAUW. 2017. *Deeper in debt: Women and student loans*. Washington, DC: Author. [www.deeperindebt.org](http://www.deeperindebt.org)

<sup>5</sup> AAUW. 2017. *Deeper in debt: Women and student loans*. Washington, DC: Author. [www.deeperindebt.org](http://www.deeperindebt.org)

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2013. National postsecondary student aid study 2011–12. Data analysis system available from [nces.ed.gov/datalab](http://nces.ed.gov/datalab)

<sup>7</sup> AAUW. 2017. *Deeper in debt: Women and student loans*. Washington, DC: Author. [www.deeperindebt.org](http://www.deeperindebt.org)

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2013. National postsecondary student aid study 2011–12. Data analysis system available from [nces.ed.gov/datalab](http://nces.ed.gov/datalab)

<sup>9</sup> AAUW. (2006). *Drawing the Line: Sexual Harassment on Campus*. [history.aauw.org/aauw-research/2006-drawing-the-line](http://history.aauw.org/aauw-research/2006-drawing-the-line).

<sup>10</sup> Krebs, Christopher P. et al., National Criminal Justice Reference Service. (2007). *The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study, Final Report*. NIJ Grant 2004-WG-BX-0010. [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf). Kaiser Family Foundation. (2015). *Survey of Current and Recent College Students on Sexual Assault*. [kff.org/other/poll-finding/survey-of-current-and-recent-college-students-on-sexual-assault](http://kff.org/other/poll-finding/survey-of-current-and-recent-college-students-on-sexual-assault). Krebs, Christopher P. et al., Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2016). *Campus Climate Survey Validation Study Final Technical Report*. [www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5540](http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5540)