



May 24, 2018

Dear Senator:

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'd like to urge you to consider the needs of women and of students who face barriers to success as you reauthorize the Higher Education Act.

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> Any reauthorization of the Higher Education Act must ensure full enforcement of civil rights laws, that campus climates are free from discrimination, and make college more affordable and accessible for all students.

### **Protect Student Civil Rights**

Congress' commitment to building a high quality higher education system also includes the responsibility to ensure all students are provided with a safe campus environment. Students deserve to attend school free from discrimination of all forms including on the basis of their race, color, national origin (including religion), sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), and disability.

In particular, AAUW knows that when campus environments are hostile because of sexual harassment, assault, or violence, students cannot learn and miss out on true educational opportunities. AAUW has long identified the need to end sexual harassment and violence on college campuses. Our own research revealed that two-thirds of college students experience sexual harassment.<sup>2</sup> In addition, several campus sexual assault studies have found that around 1 in 5 women are targets of attempted or completed sexual assault while they are college students.<sup>3</sup> AAUW supported the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013's updates to the Clery Act, which is a part of Title IV of the Higher Education Act. These updates should be maintained as schools work to implement prevention programming, provide annual statistics and policy disclosures, and provide fair processes to all students on campus. In addition, current laws that outline schools' obligations to protect student civil rights, such as Title IX, must be protected during HEA reauthorization. Any HEA proposal that undermines the rights of students should be rejected.

### **Make College More Affordable**

Women currently make up 56 percent of college students and earn the majority of college degrees at all levels.<sup>4</sup> But that attainment comes at a cost. AAUW estimates that about 29 million of the 44 million Americans with student debt are women.<sup>5</sup> AAUW research has found that women take on 61 percent of initial student loan debt and hold 65 percent of outstanding debt.<sup>6</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>7</sup>

To ensure that students who have already borrowed are able to manage their debt, programs like Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and Income Dependent Repayment (IDR) plans are critical and must be protected. During the 2015-16 school year, 41 percent of female undergraduate students took on student loans, compared to 35 percent of male undergraduate students.<sup>8</sup> On average women graduate with \$2,700 more in student debt than men.<sup>9</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.

In addition, to help ensure students who are currently enrolled and accessing our financial system, Congress should use this reauthorization as an opportunity to enshrine the consumer rights of borrowers into law. Student loan borrowers should have access to the protections that come with other types of consumer debt. Predatory for-profit colleges, student loan servicers, collectors and "debt relief" companies must operate within an accountability system that does not allow them to fleece students and taxpayers. Ensuring sufficient oversight and enforcement of the law for companies profiting off students and borrowers must be a core piece of any HEA reauthorization.

To support current and future students, the federal Pell grant program, which is the major source of debt-free aid for low-income college students, must be strengthened and expanded. Sixty-two percent of the 7.1 million Pell grant recipients are female (4.4 million women).<sup>10</sup> In addition, grant-based aid reduces the debt burden women have to take on to afford higher education. 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. Finally, HEA must invest in providing nontraditional students the non-tuition resources they need — on-campus child care, for example — to successfully complete college degrees.

AAUW looks forward to working with Congress to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. We remain committed to the promise of HEA, advocating to ensure increased support for and access to affordable higher education all students.

Cosponsorship and votes associated with this legislation may be scored in the AAUW Action Fund *Congressional Voting Record for the 115th Congress*. Please contact Anne Hedgepeth, director of federal policy, at 202/785-7724, if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Deborah J. Vagins  
Senior Vice President, Public Policy and Research

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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> AAUW. (2005). Drawing the Line: Sexual Harassment on Campus. [www.aauw.org/learn/research/upload/DTLFinal.pdf](http://www.aauw.org/learn/research/upload/DTLFinal.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher P. Krebs, Ph.D. ; Christine H. Lindquist, Ph.D. ; Tara D. Warner, M.A. ; Bonnie S. Fisher, Ph.D. ; Sandra L. Martin, Ph.D. (December 2007). The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study, Final Report. NIJ Grant No. 2004-WG-BX-0010. [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf).

<sup>4</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)

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<sup>5</sup> AAUW. (May 2018). *Deeper in Debt: Women and Student Loans*. <https://www.aauw.org/research/deeper-in-debt/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</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](https://nces.ed.gov/datalab)