

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, including:

- Support the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program through provisions in the College Affordability Act that streamline eligibility so that artists, arts educators, and arts administrators with various types of federal loans can be more successful in having loans cancelled after meeting program requirements.
- Support continuation of financial aid that encourages students to study the disciplines where they have the most interest and talent.
- Support equitable inclusion for arts teachers for teacher loan forgiveness programs.
- 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.
- Support provisions in the College Affordability Act that can provide funding for the preparation of arts teachers with an emphasis on inclusive practices and culturally responsive teaching.

TALKING POINTS

- **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.
 - 35% of all recent arts degree graduates said that debt levels had a “major” impact on their educational and career decisions, compared to only 14% of non-recent grads.
- **Higher education in the arts is a valued investment in a career.** According to the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), 90% of respondents rated their arts school experience as good or excellent, and 81% said their training is at least somewhat relevant to their current work regardless of whether or not they are a professional artist. Furthermore, according to SNAAP, 87% of master’s level respondents who intended to work as artists have done so with 62% working as artists and 72% working in a career related to the arts (artists, arts administrators, and arts educators).
 - In addition, 92% of SNAAP respondents continue to support the arts in ways other than creating or performing (e.g. attending an arts event, volunteering at an arts organization, teaching, serving on an arts board), and SNAAP reports that a substantial portion of the art being seen in our communities is produced and performed by individuals who are not paid artists.
- **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 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.
- **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.

- **We strongly encourage Congress to continue supporting a student-centered approach to funding higher education.** Current federal financial aid policies equally support all students regardless of what they study or where they choose to obtain a higher education. Degree completion, regardless of major, is the most important factor to future success, and students should be encouraged to concentrate their studies where their interests and talents lead them. Regardless of career path, the arts contribute to the success of individuals in a variety of fields and the national economy.

BACKGROUND

The last comprehensive reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) was in 2008. The HEA is the single most important piece of legislation overseeing the relationship between the federal government, colleges and universities, and students. It authorizes various federal aid programs within the Department of Education that support students pursuing a postsecondary education, including grant programs that support efforts to expand and increase access for low-income and first-generation students, such as Pell Grants.

In 2018, Congress funded Temporary Expanded PSLF (TEPSLF) to help borrowers who faced barriers obtaining PSLF loan forgiveness because they were on repayment plans that were ineligible for PSLF. According to the September 5, 2020, GAO Report on Public Service Loan Forgiveness, only 1% of PSLF requests were approved, even under TEPSLF, due to lack of marketing the expansion and an unclear multi-step process.

In December 2019, Congress approved, and the President signed, the FUTURE Act. This bill garnered strong bipartisan support to restore a vital funding stream for Minority Serving Institutions, to make significant improvements to the federal student aid process, and to provide additional funding for the Federal Pell Grant program. While this was an important piece of legislation for the higher education community, essential work remains to strengthen access and affordability for arts education through federal programs and policies.

The College Affordability Act, which would reauthorize HEA, has passed out of the House education committee. That bill would increase current programs for students and borrowers; increase funding levels for Pell Grants, TRIO, and GEAR UP; and make loans more affordable. The bill also proposed reviving the Perkins Loan Program, which expired in 2017, and restructuring the Federal Work-Study and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant programs. However, it may also add significant new requirements for institutions, increasing reporting and regulatory burden.

Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), who is retiring at the end of this term, has called passage of a higher education reauthorization bill a priority, but it's unclear if the Senate will take action this year.

Arts advocates are eager to work with Congress on ways to reduce cost, increase accountability, and ensure an arts education is strengthened in higher education.