Arnold Ventures

Priorities for HEA Reauthorization: Increasing Value for Students and Taxpayers

CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Data

Without better information about student completion and career success, we cannot answer basic questions about which institutions are serving students and the country well. But Congress has made it difficult to connect key information and provide students and families with the answers they need.

Accountability

The federal government invests over $115 billion annually in higher education but asks little of institutions in return. Our policies do not address student outcomes, and institutions aren't held accountable if, year after year, they fail to provide value to students and taxpayers.

Student Loans

As student loans have become an increasingly important part of our higher education system, it has become clear that the repayment system is overly complex, with structural challenges that could put college access at risk for future generations. Meanwhile, too many of the students who most need help continue to struggle with their loans.

Institutional Outcomes

There has been far too little research on how institutions can improve student outcomes, and there are too few incentives for institutions to adopt programs that have been shown to work.

SOLUTIONS TO INCREASE VALUE

Improve the Accuracy and Availability of Data

- Strike the student unit record ban and allow for the creation of a privacy-protected student-level data network to publish program- and institution-level information disaggregated by student demographics.
- Require the Office of Federal Student Aid to publish more granular data on student loans and provide secure access for independent analysis.
- Ensure greater transparency about college costs and outcomes for students and their families through consumer-tested disclosures.

Strengthen Accountability Measures

- Use multiple measures to assess the return on investment that institutions and programs produce and hold them accountable for their role in students' success.

- Secure and strengthen accountability structures, including the gainful employment rule and the borrower defense rule, and promote a strong program integrity triad across states, accrediting agencies, and the Department of Education.
- Close loopholes in and strengthen existing provisions, such as improving the cohort default rate measure that schools have gamed, ensuring oversight of online programs and the companies that help run them, and raising the bar for institutions that access federal student aid.
- Ensure meaningful guardrails for short-term programs seeking to access taxpayer dollars, including a requirement that programs first demonstrate strong employment and wage outcomes for graduates.

Ensure an Effective Student Loan System

- Provide that student loan repayment and forgiveness programs authorized by the Higher Education Act are easily understandable and accessible to borrowers, and that benefits are targeted to those who struggle most to repay their loans.

- Establish reasonable limitations on graduate student and parent borrowing while increasing available aid for high-need students and families and holding institutions accountable to ensure the debt can be repaid.

- Help borrowers to avoid default and its most serious financial consequences by increasing access to a well-designed income-driven repayment plan and limiting wage garnishment and offsets of tax refunds.

- Provide for high-quality customer experiences through the student loan program, including by setting clear expectations and ensuring accountability for student loan servicers.

Identify and Scale Interventions that Increase Student Success and Lower Costs

- Fund a tiered evidence program for higher education to support postsecondary retention and completion efforts that are backed by high-quality evidence.

- Require competitive grant programs to prioritize practices with a strong evidence base.

- Strike the ban on randomized controlled trials in the TRIO programs.

- Continue to provide an evaluation set-aside of at least 0.5 percent for higher education programs and policies, and use those funds to evaluate promising interventions for dissemination to the field.

To learn more, please contact Vice President of Higher Education Kelly McManus at (202) 655-2047 or kmcmanus@arnoldventures.org.