



November 14, 2007

Dear Representative:

We are writing on behalf of the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE), a nonprofit coalition of more than 50 organizations dedicated to improving educational opportunities for women and girls. We respectfully submit this letter to **urge you to support the College Opportunity and Affordability Act, H.R. 4137**, and oppose any weakening amendments. NCWGE believes H.R. 4137 maintains many important programs for college students, and provides some new opportunities to invest in helping all students, particularly women.

In this competitive global economy, *all* Americans should be afforded greater opportunities to attend and finish college, whether they attend school full-time or part-time. It is estimated that, by the year 2014, there will be 12 million new jobs that will most likely require postsecondary education.¹ As the skill requirements of jobs continue to increase, so too should access to postsecondary education for all students.

NCWGE applauds the Senate and House for having already passed the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (H.R. 2669) which will increase Pell grant awards to restore the grant's purchasing power and reduce subsidized student loan interest rates by up to 50 percent. In addition, loan repayment would be capped at 15 percent of an individual's discretionary income, and the bill raises the income protection allowance, which increases the amount of money students can make before it counts against their financial aid package. This legislation also includes loan forgiveness plans for graduates who enter public service, incentives for colleges to control rising tuition costs, and actions to address current lending practices.

Nontraditional College Students

NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 takes steps to acknowledge the growing majority of students – those who are considered nontraditional.² A 2002 report found that nearly 73 percent of undergraduates were considered “nontraditional,” meaning they are older, they may work, or attend school part-time.³

Female college students often face additional challenges that may make college access and retention more difficult. Nontraditional female students, including those who are parenting and pregnant, are often forced to balance attending post-secondary school with work and family care. These women are more likely to attend school part-time, and may face extra expenses such as childcare. There are very few federal programs that recognize the unique needs of nontraditional students and provide appropriate assistance to them. In light of the increasing number of nontraditional and parenting students – the majority of whom are women⁴ – NCWGE supports policies that help these students enter and complete post-

secondary education. NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 has incorporated provisions that will assist these students as they struggle to make their college dreams a reality.

Year-round Pell Grants: NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 allows students to qualify for Pell grants based on a year-round enrollment schedule. Many nontraditional female students attend classes during the summers, and federal Pell grants should be available to all students willing to make a commitment to higher education, even if they have to chip away at that dream one class at a time.⁵

Childcare Funding (CCAMPIS program): NCWGE strongly supports expanding access to higher education for all women and providing support services to help women balance the demands of work, family, and education. NCWGE is very pleased that H.R. 4137 increases the minimum CCAMPIS grant that institutions can receive and expands the type of institutions that are eligible to receive these grants. Currently, campus-based childcare only serves a small percentage of the need and there must be continued investments that will support the increased participation of low-income women in post-secondary education through the provision of campus-based childcare centers. NCWGE believes the bill should also provide incentives for schools to operate CCAMPIS programs at night, when most parenting students take classes.

Expand SMART Grant Eligibility: In the 109th Congress, NCWGE supported the addition of SMART grants for Pell-eligible students in STEM fields or critical foreign languages. However, NCWGE believes current regulations do not reflect the needs of nontraditional students, the majority of whom are women. As the regulations stand today, the SMART grant program denies help to students who are part-time, often as a result of work or family responsibilities they must fulfill while they pursue higher education. NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 expands SMART grants to students who are enrolled at least half-time.

Increasing Opportunities for Women in STEM Fields:

NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 includes provisions to increase the representation of women in STEM fields. As noted in the Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology's publication, "Professional Women and Minorities," women now make up 25 percent of the labor force in science, engineering and technology fields (although that proportion varies widely, with fewer women in occupations that require a high level of math skills, such as engineering).⁶ This means that a significant pool of untapped talent remains. If women and members of other traditionally underrepresented groups joined the STEM workforce in proportion to their representation in the overall labor force, the shortage of STEM professionals would disappear.⁷

NCWGE supports programs in H.R. 4137 that will bolster students' interest in STEM fields and improve teacher training and recruiting of teachers for STEM fields. In addition, NCWGE strongly supports the provision in the legislation that funds a campaign to expand the population of qualified individuals in STEM fields, specifically analyzing factors that limit the participation of women and minorities.

FIPSE Grant for a Study on Gender and Racial Equity:

NCWGE supports the provision in H.R. 4137 for a FIPSE grant to be used for the assessment of the feasibility and potential design of an inter-institution monitoring organization on gender and racial equality in campus faculty and administration. Forming an inter-institutional organization is one of the many recommendations from the National Academies report, “Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering,” which found that women face a lifetime of subtle biases that discourage them from careers in STEM fields. NCWGE believes the goal of this study should be to consider forming a monitoring organization to examine gender and racial equity among senior faculty at colleges and universities, in addition to more rigorous enforcement and adherence to antidiscrimination and civil rights laws. NCWGE is also pleased that the legislation includes a study on gender and other biases present in standardized tests that colleges and universities use in admissions.

Diversifying the Professoriate: Patsy Mink Graduate Fellowship Program:

Minorities make up less than 20 percent of all collegiate faculty.⁸ Further, although women make up 39 percent of full-time collegiate faculty, they tend to be concentrated in less-senior instructional positions and at two-year institutions, as opposed to research universities.⁹ NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 includes the Patsy Mink Graduate Fellowship Program, which would authorize fellowships for students interested in obtaining a doctorate, or other terminal degree, with a specified service requirement to teach at degree-granting institutions of higher education after graduation. Appropriately named in honor of former Congresswoman Patsy Mink (D-HI), a primary force behind the passage of Title IX, the fellowships would be targeted at minorities and women to help diversify the higher education professoriate.

Hate Crimes on Campus:

Every year, more than half a million students endure bias-motivated slurs, vandalism, threats, and physical assaults on college campuses.¹⁰ The FBI typically documents almost 10,000 hate crimes every year, and other estimates range as high as 200,000.¹¹ To increase awareness of hate crimes on college campuses, the 1998 Higher Education Act required all colleges and universities to collect and report hate crime statistics to the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) of the U.S. Department of Education. Currently, colleges must report any crimes involving bodily injury in which the victim was targeted because of his or her race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability. However, there are limitations to the data gathered under HEA, which likely result from discrepancies between the FBI definition of hate crimes and the HEA definition. The FBI definition includes several types of offenses omitted by the HEA definition. These include arson, larceny/theft, intimidation, and destruction/damage/vandalism.¹² The omission of these crimes results in significant gaps in OPE data and substantial inconsistencies between FBI and OPE statistics. Improved data would give parents and students a more accurate sense of campus safety, and education institutions a better picture of their campus climate. NCWGE is pleased that H.R. 4137 amends the HEA hate crime definition to align it with the definition used by the FBI.

NCWGE supports provisions in H.R. 4137 that address the private student loan scandals that have been recently brought to light, encourage colleges to rein in price increases and provide students and their parents with helpful college cost information, provide for

advance information on textbook pricing to help students and families better plan for expenses, and streamline the federal student loan application process.

NCWGE believes that H.R. 4137 takes important steps in modernizing the Higher Education Act to reflect the changing demographics and needs of today's college students, and urges you to support the College Opportunity and Affordability Act, H.R. 4137. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Lisa Maatz at 202-785-7720 or Jocelyn Samuels at 202-588-5180.

Sincerely,



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¹Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Projections and Training Data, 2006-07 Edition. <http://www.bls.gov/emp/optd/optd001.pdf> Accessed December 15, 2006.

² There are numerous definitions for "nontraditional students;" the term includes students who are over 25, work full time, are pregnant or parenting, are displaced homemakers, or attend school part-time or less than part-time. In the context of this letter, we distinguish between "nontraditional students" and students seeking nontraditional education and career paths – though clearly many students fall into both categories.

³ U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. "Special Analysis 2002: Nontraditional Undergraduates." 2002. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2002/analyses/nontraditional/> Accessed December 21, 2005.

⁴ Kerka, Sandra. Financial Aid for Lifelong Learning. ERIC Digest No. 224. 2003

⁵ Most students attend less than half time temporarily, and aid to those students may increase their ability to complete a degree program. "Initiative to Aid Illinois Adult Learners." Springfield, IL: Illinois Student Aid Commission, 2001.

⁶ Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology. *CPST (2006) Professional Women and Minorities: A Total Human Resources Data Compendium. 16th ed.* Washington, D.C.

⁷ Congressional Commission on the Advancement of Women and Minorities in Science, Engineering and Technology Development [CAWMSET], *Land of Plenty: Diversity as America's Competitive Edge in Science, Engineering, and Technology*, (September 2000).

⁸ American Council on Education. *Minorities in Higher Education: 22nd Annual Status Report, 2006.*

⁹ West, Martha S. and John W. Curtis. "AAUP Faculty Gender Equity Indicators 2006." American Association of University Professors. <http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/63396944-44BE-4ABA-9815-5792D93856F1/0/AAUPGenderEquityIndicators2006.pdf> Accessed December 18, 2006.

¹⁰ Southern Poverty Law Center. "10 Ways to Fight Hate on College Campuses." 2004. www.tolerance.org/campus December 14, 2006.

¹¹ Harlow, C.W. "Hate Crime Reported by Victims and Police." Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. November 2005, NCJ 209911. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/hcrvp.pdf>. Accessed December 14, 2006.

¹² FBI. "Hate Crime Statistics 2005: Universal Crime Reporting." <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2005/methodology.htm> Accessed December 14, 2006.