NASDCTEc Recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act
Approved on November 14, 2014

As Congress considers the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315), the challenges facing our nation's economy, most notably the skills shortage, must be central to these debates. Our nation's higher education system needs to become more responsive to the evolving demands of an ever more competitive global economy. Too many employers report a shortage of qualified workers, while university and college graduates burdened with tremendous debt are unable to find work related to their fields of study. This calls for a major realignment of our nation's higher education policies.

The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc), representing the state leadership for secondary, postsecondary and adult Career Technical Education (CTE) in all 50 states and U.S. territories, offers the following recommendations for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA):

Higher Education Is Workforce Development:

- **Strengthen Connections to the Labor Market**: While there are many important purposes for higher education, we must acknowledge and bring to the forefront the system's responsibility and role in preparing the nation's future workforce. The U.S. higher education's system is one of the nation's largest investments in its workforce. Acknowledging this, **NASDCTEc recommends that future HEA legislation more fully reflect and more strongly support preparation of students for high-growth and high-demand professions.**

Eliminate Barriers to Financial Aid Program Access

- **Affirm the Importance of All Postsecondary Credentials:** A large and rapidly increasing portion of all postsecondary students enroll in "noncredit" courses, and this figure is projected to continue to grow. These programs typically lead to a postsecondary credential that often has a more immediate connection to a career skill or competency than most associate or baccalaureate degree programs and are frequently offered at a substantially lower cost to students. Despite this, postsecondary students enrolled in many short-term education and training programs are ineligible to access federal financial aid under current law due to overly burdensome program length requirements. **NASDCTEc recommends reducing current program length requirements for student financial aid eligibility under Title IV of HEA for programs that lead to a recognized postsecondary credential and demonstrate a connection to a high-demand or high-growth professions.**

- **Increase Support for Non-traditional Students to Succeed in Postsecondary Education**: Through the implementation of career pathways systems and CTE programs of study, an increasing number of nontraditional students (those over the age of 24) are

enrolling in postsecondary education to acquire additional skills to stay competitive in the labor market. These adult learners often face barriers to postsecondary completion and federal higher education policy has not kept pace with the additional needs of these students. Where possible, HEA should support programs that afford greater opportunities to earn credit for prior learning — either from experiences on the job or in the classroom. Moreover, to effectively support these nontraditional students, **NASDCTEc recommends that HEA legislation support equitable access to federal financial aid and other wrap-around institution-based support services such as child care, tutoring and job search assistance.**

- **Reinstate Ability-to-Benefit**: Education and training beyond high school is increasingly becoming a prerequisite to entry into today's modern economy. Yet since 2012, students who do not have a high school diploma but have demonstrated the ability to take postsecondary coursework have been prevented from accessing federal financial aid. Students of all ages, experience levels and backgrounds should have the opportunity to accelerate their learning and work towards a postsecondary credential while simultaneously acquiring other necessary academic or basic education and knowledge. The I-BEST program in Washington state, for instance, facilitates this type of learning and new legislation should elevate and promote this concept where possible. To accomplish this, **NASDCTEc recommends reinstating the "Ability-to-Benefit" provisions in Title IV of current law to support low-skilled adults and youth seeking to attain a postsecondary credential and improve their career prospects.**

- **Restore Year-round Pell**: Since 2010, the ability to award two Pell Grants in a single award year, known also as "year-round Pell" has been eliminated. This has prevented students who are continuously enrolled in a program from receiving the necessary financial resources to earn their postsecondary degree or credential at a faster rate. These resources are vital to uninterrupted student learning, increase student persistence and promote program completion rates. As such, **NASDCTEc recommends reinstating year-round Pell as a way to empower students to use aid resources tailored to the pace of their studies.**

Streamline Data Collection and Ensure Cross-systems Alignment

- **Adopt Common Performance Metrics**: Programs supported through federal legislation such as HEA, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), have unique purposes but oftentimes serve overlapping populations. Each statute maintains distinctive accountability and performance metrics that create a reporting burden for states and institutions while decreasing the value and integrity of the data collected. **NASDCTEc recommends the creation of common measures, where practical, to align workforce and education programs as well as the adoption of related common terminology and measurement methods.**

- **Promote Cross-systems Collaboration**: State education systems should support seamless student transitions between the secondary and postsecondary education levels to ensure that

they work together collaboratively rather than in isolation. To build upon existing state efforts, **NASDCTEc recommends that future HEA legislation promote a smooth transition to postsecondary education, and ultimately the workforce, by incentivizing program models such as dual or concurrent enrollment, programs of study and career pathways.**

- **Develop and Expand Statewide Data System Capacity**: The ultimate role of postsecondary education is to prepare students for rewarding careers that promote economic self-sufficiency and align the nation's talent pipeline to economic sectors of high demand and high growth. To achieve this, a newly reauthorized HEA must hold programs and institutions accountable for the employment outcomes of their students. However, current law restricts the collection of the information necessary to do this and prevents adequate program evaluation of other critical student outcomes. To that end, **NASDCTEc recommends repealing the current law's ban on the creation of a student unit record system; future HEA legislation should also incentivize the development of state longitudinal data systems that enable sharing of data within and among states.**

Increase Flexibility for Innovative Educational Models

- **Promote Competency-Based Learning**: Postsecondary CTE programs have been on the forefront of one of the most innovative efforts in modern education— the transition away from seat time in favor of competency-based education that allows students to progress through a program as they master and demonstrate specific skills and competencies. The Experimental Sites Initiative, contained in current law, supports such programs in limited instances and should be expanded to further demonstrate the efficacy of competency-based postsecondary education programs. To build on these efforts, **NASDCTEc recommends greater flexibility be given to states and postsecondary institutions to implement innovative programs and strategies that use a competency-based learning approach.**

- **Expand Career Guidance and Advisement:** Given the changing nature of the workplace, students need greater opportunities to explore various career pathways to familiarize themselves with the career options available — and their related educational and skill requirements — before and during their postsecondary education program of choice. Supplemented with robust guidance and advisement, these activities help students make more informed choices regarding which postsecondary education program will best prepare them to successfully transition into a rewarding career. **NASDCTEc therefore recommends that future HEA legislation support and encourage career exploration, guidance and advisement throughout the entire educational spectrum.**

- **Increase Opportunities for Experiential Learning**: More than ever before, employers are valuing real-world work experiences as a core component of a student's qualifications for employment. Experiential learning opportunities provide students the chance to apply what

they have learned in the classroom to the real world and foster the development of employability skills that enhance their ability to successfully transition into the modern workplace. **NASDCTEc recommends that future HEA legislation encourage and support opportunities for students to participate in experiential learning activities such as internships, mentorships and other forms of real-world work experiences.**

- **Eliminate Distance Learning Ban**: Advancements in technology have enabled education programs and institutions to connect with students virtually rather than through the traditional classroom. These programs typically cost less than traditional classroom-based programs and can help foster closer, personalized connections between instructor and student. They can also provide students access to programs regardless of where they live, a critical component to ensuring equitable access to postsecondary education. Despite this, **current law arbitrarily prohibits area CTE centers from using student aid if a portion of the program is distance learning-based. NASDCTEc recommends lifting this ban on area CTE schools from offering federal student aid**.

Develop and Nurture the CTE Teacher Workforce

- **Prepare and Support Quality CTE Educators**: Across the country, State CTE Directors consistently report a persistent shortage of CTE teachers. To address this shortage and to develop the CTE teacher workforce needed to meet the demand for CTE programs, teacher preparation activities authorized in current law should afford prospective teachers the opportunity to gain relevant technical training in the industry area where they intend to teach. Moreover, greater flexibility should be given to teacher preparation programs to recruit and support mid-career professionals seeking to transition into the classroom. To further support these efforts, **NASDCTEc recommends that future HEA legislation include funding and support services for CTE teacher preparation and related professional development.**

The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) represents state and territory leaders of CTE through leadership and advocacy that supports an innovative and rigorous CTE system that prepares students for both college and careers. CTE State Directors lead the planning and implementation of CTE in their respective states and these recommendations reflect their priorities.

For more information, please contact the
National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium
8484 Georgia Avenue Suite 320, Silver Spring, MD 20910 | 301-588-9630
www.careertech.org