

Grow our Economy by Modernizing Our Nation's Approach to College

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In the 50 years since the Higher Education Act was first signed into law, students, workers, businesses, and our economy have all transformed in response to the technological revolution that has swept the globe. Yet our nation's approach to higher education seems to be stuck in neutral. It's time for our federal education policies to catch up with the reality of today's students, employers, and job seekers in the new economy.

In 2017, the National Federation of Independent Business found that 45% of small businesses in America were unable to find qualified job applicants to fill job openings.

There are more than six million job openings across the U.S. – a record high. Much of this workforce shortage is due to a serious middle-skills gap in growing sectors of our economy like advanced manufacturing, health care, IT, logistics, transportation, construction, infrastructure and others. In nearly every region of the country, lack of trained, skilled workers has hamstrung businesses, and stalled economic growth. At the same time, millions of working people are in low-wage, low-skill jobs without access to the training, skills, and education they need for a career in these fields.

Good jobs in many of these sectors – including a commercial truck driving job at Huey P Stockstill, LLC asphalt paving and construction services right here in Mississippi – don't require a four-year degree, but a certificate, credential, or two-year degree.

As a nation, we've been successful at creating a pipeline of people with four-year degrees.

If we want to grow businesses, get people the skills they need to get their foot in the door, and grow our economy, we've got to put short term certificate programs and industry-recognized credentials on equal footing with traditional, four-year college degrees. The way to do that is by modernizing the Higher Education Act – in particular, the Pell Grant Program.

Since the 1980s, federal education funding like Pell Grants have supported traditional, four-year degrees, but not short term certificate programs.

This Pell Grant model was created before we were introduced to the internet, email, smartphones, or any of the technologies people are using on the job today.

Times have changed. Today's "typical college student" is different.

They are more likely to be full-time employees taking one course at a time at night, or parents taking classes while their kids are in school. Technology has transformed our economy and the labor market and businesses aren't just hiring employees with four-year degrees.

They're in desperate need of workers with specific skillsets and training that doesn't take four years. Our approach to higher education needs to change with the times.

We aren't investing in the students who want to earn the very credentials that are most important to employers.

For instance, Pell grants can be used for four-year degrees in French Literature, but not necessarily for short-term certificates or occupational credentials for in-demand careers like welding or advanced manufacturing.

Our country should invest in both kinds of students. We need philosophers and CNC machinists, central supply technicians, and coders.

We must remove the bias in federal education funding against career-minded students who want to work in the trades or earn a certification for a new, in-demand skill.

There is a bipartisan bill introduced in Congress that could be a game changer.

The JOBS Act (Jumpstart our Businesses by Supporting Students) would amend the Higher Education Act to expand Pell Grants to short-term industry-recognized credentials and make it easier for working part-time students to access aid. This is one of the few ideas in Washington supported by Republicans and Democrats in Congress, along with President Trump. It would allow millions of working adults to seek occupational credentials at community and technical colleges to enhance career prospects.

The future of the American economy is at stake. If we can modernize our federal education policies to better reflect the needs of the current labor market, we can help companies at home grow, bring companies back to the U.S., jumpstart U.S. manufacturing, improve our infrastructure, keep our families healthy, enhance our cyber security and defend our homeland. The time to act is now.